



**Jolly, Joanna. (2019). Red River Girl: The Life and Death of Tina Fontaine
Toronto, Canada: Viking Press.**

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Joanna Jolly's book, "Red River Girl," chronicles the life and death of the Indigenous murder victim, Tina Fontaine. Jolly describes the intricate and exhaustive investigative processes used by the Winnipeg Police Services in hopes of finding Tina's killer. "Red River Girl" is not just a book that focuses on the murder of a young and vulnerable teenage girl, but the broader context of injustice within the Indigenous community; violence against Indigenous women. By documenting the story of Tina Fontaine, a vulnerable and exploited teenager, Jolly produces a way for non-Indigenous individuals to understand the epidemic of violence against this minority. The book primarily highlights issues of sexual exploitation, drugs, and violence towards Indigenous women. Throughout Jolly's book, she indirectly describes the vulnerability of Indigenous youth by increasing concern, urging compassion, and demanding reform from the non-Indigenous population. Jolly also offers a unique guide-like insight into how homicide detectives go about solving cases like Tina's, providing fascinating facts about police investigative tactics. Through a precise chronological compilation of the life and death of Tina Fontaine, Jolly promotes justice for Tina as well as the rest of the forgotten and lost Indigenous population.

The book begins by briefly describing Joanna Jolly's journalist background, focusing on

sexually exploited women across the globe. As Jolly navigated her research towards Canadian violence against Indigenous women, she “began to grasp the extent of the violence and its connection to poverty, historical racism, and marginalization” (p. 3). Jolly’s interest peaked when in August of 2014, Tina Fontaine was found floating lifelessly in the Red River of Winnipeg. The book’s research methods are based on “extensive face-to-face interviews, police notes, transcripts of recordings, and trial testimonies” from Tina’s murder investigation (p. 5). Jolly takes the reader through what feels like a tangible and up-close experience following the weeks prior to Tina’s death.

The book is a true-crime genre written in a police procedural narrative, describing detective O’Donovan’s private investigation of Tina Fontaine’s murder. As the book progresses, Jolly mentions a multitude of individuals involved with Tina near the time of her death; family members, boyfriends, and predatory friendships. Raymond Cormier was the prime suspect of Tina’s murder case, a newly acquired “friend” of the teenager who further involved the fifteen-year-old with drugs, criminal behaviors, and most likely a sexually exploitative relationship. The latter half of the book primarily focuses on the intense investigative processes of trying to convict Cormier for the murder of Tina Fontaine, desperately attempting to bring Tina the justice she deserves. Jolly includes intricate details of every aspect of the investigation, all the way up until Cormier’s final trial with the emotional and shocking verdict of the jury when Cormier was found not guilty.

“Red River Girl” acts as a voice for Indigenous women. Domestic violence and sexual assaults are prominent in the Indigenous community. Many have suffered the terrible repercuss-

ions due to years of government neglect. Jolly emphasizes an undeniable lack of cultural respect for the life of Indigenous women:

74% of non-Indigenous women murdered between 1980 and 2012 were killed by a partner or close family member, for indigenous women the figure was only 60%. Indigenous women were more likely to be killed outside the home by strangers or “casual acquaintances,” a term often used to describe the sex worker and client relationship. When indigenous women left their reserves and moved into cities, they were falling prey to random predators (p. 24).

The book touches on the dangers of North End Winnipeg where Tina spent her last few weeks, describing the area as the “complicated, colourful, and dangerous world of the inner city” (p.76). The book discusses how the North End was “notorious for sexual exploitation,” split into two prostitution districts; the “high track” and “low track.” Jolly describes Tina’s experience working the “low track” where life was “rougher, riskier and cheaper” (p.77). Ninety percent of women selling sex on the streets of North End Winnipeg were Indigenous, Tina was a prime susceptible candidate for being coerced into the life of sexual exploitation and drugs (p.78). Jolly indirectly uses Tina’s experiences to advocate for attention towards the defenselessness of Indigenous youth.

Jolly mentions how “O’Donovan knew how easy it was for women to become mired into sexual exploitation, especially if they had been groomed from a young age” (p. 78). The vulnerability of Indigenous youth often stems from chaotic home lives. O’Donovan describes multiple stories where young Indigenous girls were physically and sexually assaulted from a young age, usually stemming from alcoholic or drug addicted parents. O’Donovan describes how

abuse on the streets was nothing compared to the abuse at home some had to face, “the sex ring became a place of safety” for many (p. 78). Jolly uses Tina’s story as a reminder of the vulnerability of Indigenous youth, displaying just how easy it can be slipping into the dangers of street life consumed by prostitution, drugs, and predatory relationships. Jolly documents Tina’s story to represent an unfortunate stepping-stone towards gaining national attention, advocating for Indigenous women’s rights and government reform.

Jolly describes O’Donovan’s experiences and investigative techniques throughout the entirety of the novel. The most intriguing tactic was used near the end of Tina Fontaine’s murder investigation; Project Styx. This elaborate operation was also known as a “Mr. Big” investigation where undercover cops fabricated the majority of Cormier’s life for months prior to his final trial, ultimately aiming to contrive a confession from the suspect. Jolly effectively describes the multitude of medical reports, DNA tests, and forensic analyses throughout the entirety of the book, displaying the time, energy, and money that contribute towards a homicide investigation (p. 257). True crime fanatics would be fully engrossed with the intricate and elaborate lengths the police and investigative unit go through trying to find compelling evidence.

Ultimately, it is evident that Jolly demands compassion and attention from the non-Indigenous community, protesting violence against Indigenous women. The Epilogue of the book focuses on the aftermath following the acquittal of Cormier’s trial, along with the devastating rejection of the appeal. Jolly describes the emotional toll the investigation had on Tina’s family, the Winnipeg Police Service, and the Indigenous community. She describes, “the reaction to the not guilty verdict was one of sadness, frustration, deflation, and anger” (p. 274).

The Homicide Unit believed they “did everything they possibly could to bring him (Cormier) to justice” (p. 274). Jolly promotes national reform when mentioning that;

Tina's killing has had a significant impact on the policy and practice surrounding Canada's treatment of its indigenous peoples. Her case was instrumental in the establishment of a National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls...The inquiry put forward more than 200 calls for justice to the police, government, and Canadian public as a whole (p. 275).

It is clear that “Red River Girl” was not written for the basis of entertainment, but a book based on the tragedy of a real-life child who experienced an inconceivable murder. Jolly advocates for justice by incorporating the political reforms made after the death of Tina Fontaine:

The Manitoba government began the process of shifting control of child welfare services to indigenous bodies, in an effort to reduce the number of indigenous children in care. In 2019, it announced proposed changes in the way Child and Family Services is funded...It is hoped the move will encourage a stronger focus on prevention and early intervention (pp. 275-276).

Jolly completes the book by ending with a heartbreaking quote from Tina's caretaker, Thelma; “I don't want to hear any more stories about kids being found murdered like that anymore” (p. 277).

“Red River Girl” would appeal to an audience interested in true crime stories or real-life homicide cases. The book may also act as a primary source for Indigenous rights activists, those pursuing a career in the police force, or anyone looking to further their knowledge about injustice surrounding Indigenous peoples. Jolly does an excellent job providing an abundance of information about everyone involved from start to finish. I specifically enjoyed how the book

provided a thorough and in-depth background of O'Donovan, informing the reader why he became the strong-willed and determined detective he was. Overall, I feel that the book was very well-written, providing exceptional organization that held a somber, yet hopeful tone throughout its entirety. Jolly brilliantly depicts the joys and sorrows of the life of Tina Fontaine, the stresses O'Donovan faced, and the pain Thelma endured. I personally would not change any aspect of the book; I loved its entirety.

Joanna Jolly uses Tina Fontaine's story to project the epidemic of violence against Indigenous women. This is a consistent and ongoing theme throughout the entirety of the book, along with raising awareness for the vulnerability of Indigenous youth. "Red River Girl" also offers excellent insight into the life of a homicide detective, providing intricate details into the investigative processes that accompany a murder case. Primarily, Jolly brings awareness to the problems Canada faces with "poverty, historical racism, and marginalization," ultimately increasing concern, urging compassion, and demanding reform from the non-Indigenous community. Despite the difficult and disturbing content, all individuals would benefit from taking time to learn about the story of Tina Fontaine and the important scar her story has left on Canada.