Canadian Journal of Family and Youth, 13(3), 2021, pp. 290-294
ISSN 1718-9748© University of Alberta
http://ejournals,library,ualberta.ca/index/php/cjfy

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

Reviewed by: Claire Makale, MacEwan University

Joanna Jolly's book, "Red River Girl: The Life and Death of Tina Fontaine", is a powerful account of the events leading up to fifteen year-old Tina Fontaine's 2014 murder and the subsequent investigation that yielded only circumstantial evidence and no conviction. Living on the streets of Winnipeg at fifteen years old and bouncing in and out of Child and Family Services care, Fontaine fell prey to drug and alcohol use, dangerous living conditions, and sexual exploitation. Her story, like those of so many other innocent Indigenous women and girls, culminated in her death; she was found washed up on the banks of the Red River, wrapped in a duvet cover and weighed down with rocks. Despite a gruelling, time-consuming murder investigation, Winnipeg Police could not produce a definitive suspect or gain a conviction. Armed with compelling information gleaned through interviews, police records, and transcripts, Jolly highlights the myriad ways in which Fontaine was failed by a system that was built by those who have oppressed Indigenous people throughout history. By also briefly detailing other Canadian criminal cases in which Indigenous people have been victims, Jolly manages to paint a complete picture of the race-based violence and disadvantages that these individuals are subjected to, often resulting in their deaths.

Jolly describes how, beginning in Fontaine's childhood, she faced a theme of troubling

relational instability. Her father, after developing cancer, left Fontaine in the care of the foster mother who raised him. He was later beaten to death while bingeing on drugs and alcohol, which had profoundly impacted Fontaine's wellbeing: "Tina was no longer the happy girl who would skip down the hall […] her moods remained dark" (p. 42). From there, Fontaine began living with her biological mother, who created an unsafe and abusive environment, apparently "kicking the shit" (p. 81) out of Fontaine and frequently engaging in heavy substance use, eventually leading Fontaine to reside on the streets of Winnipeg. Beyond her sole caregiver, she was largely unsupported by extended family members who were well aware of her risky independence and homelessness, instead choosing to take a "hands-off approach" (p. 83) with the young girl. Fontaine also engaged in unstable relationships with men, most notably her involvement with Raymond Cormier, a "sixty-two-year-old meth user" (p. 94), who was the prime suspect in her murder. In the summer of her death, her and Cormier's relationship was fraught with substance use, abusive tendencies, and suspected sexual exploitation. Here, it is safe to say that Fontaine never truly experienced stable or close relationships, which predisposed her to risky behaviours on the streets.

Fontaine's pattern of high-risk behaviours on the streets came in many forms; she "had used drugs and alcohol and worked in the sex trade (p. 256). Most salient throughout the book was said involvement in drugs. Fontaine had admitted to a friend that she had been "experimenting with meth, crack, and weed" (p. 96). These drugs were often supplied to her by older men, especially Cormier, who admitted to giving Fontaine drugs ranging from Marijuana to crack cocaine. She was also seen frequenting a rooming house that was widely known to be "a crack

shack", whose owners "had connections to the Indian Posse" (p. 87). The use of drugs, risky in itself, also contributed to further harms for Fontaine. For example, Jolly describes how one evening, while using drugs with a friend and "hallucinating", Fontaine got in the car of a man who "was cruising the neighborhood for sex" (p. 97). On another occasion, just days before she was reported missing, she agreed to oral sex with two young men in exchange for twenty dollars. These behaviours, inextricably linked in a relationship in which their dangerousness and consequences exhibited multiplicative effects, were heavily present in the weeks and days leading up to Fontaine's murder. As such, the investigation, trial, and publicity of Fontaine's murder was largely dominated by a focus on these themes. For some, this provided justification for the girl's murder, and victim-blaming was apparent throughout the book.

Jolly describes how "the typical explanation offered by authorities was that runaway girls like Tina were dying because they had chosen to follow a "high-risk" lifestyle" (p. 19). On separate occasions throughout the book, Jolly highlights how this mentality is present at multiple levels of society. As evidenced by the quote above, victim-blaming occurs within law enforcement, as authorities will attribute death to the most salient cause, rather than thoughtfully consider each victim's unique story and circumstances. It is also present among regular members of society. Jolly describes how, when an activist was painting a mural in honour of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, a young man pulled over on his bike and remarked how the women "deserved what they got" (p. 25). Specific to Fontaine's case, several media outlets had published that "Tina had been found with drugs and alcohol in her system" (p. 258), placing blame on the young girl by suggesting that the substances perhaps contributed to her death, rather than

publicizing that through no fault of her own, she was murdered and left in the Red River. It is worth noting, however, that there has been increased awareness surrounding missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. Here, society is beginning to shift from a culture of victim-blaming to one of justice and healing, evidenced by societal concern and federal inquiries into missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls.

Throughout the book, Jolly provides a sense that justice and reparations for Indigenous people are being sought out for years of discriminatory practices rooted in systemic racism and colonialism. She speaks of the residential school survivors who "lodged what became the largest class-action lawsuit in Canadian history, leading to a settlement agreement that included the Truth and Reconciliation Commission" (p. 33). The Commission's report, published a year later, highlighted the overwhelming number of Indigenous women and girls, "many of whom had spent time in residential schools" (p. 33) who were being murdered. Years later, Fontaine's murder contributed to a growing sense of urgency that action needed to be taken to protect these vulnerable women and girls. Indeed, the Canadian Human Rights Commission issued a statement following the discovery of her body that firmly addressed the "chronic cycle of violence that rips Aboriginal women and girls from the fabric of society" (p. 123). Nationwide, Fontaine's death served as a catalyst for greater awareness and calls to action. Within days of Raymond Cormier's arrest, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau formally announced his government's plan for a national inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. Here, countless deaths and disappearances had finally culminated in federal acknowledgement that this crisis must be actively addressed. And, when Fontaine's case resulted in a verdict of not guilty, those who protested the outcome

ensured that her case did not “disappear into the statistics” (p. 123), advocating for her even when the justice system did not.

In writing “Red River Girl”, Jolly provided insight into the pervasive violence and disenfranchisement that Indigenous women face, while also highlighting the positive outcomes of calls to action and inquiries into their disappearances and deaths. Here, Jolly creates a sense of hope that justice will be carried out for these individuals. Though I appreciate her references to statistics to emphasize the degree to which these women are being murdered, Jolly’s inclusion of conversations with Fontaine’s family offers truly compelling accounts of how deeply the girl’s murder affected those who were close to her. While I could not identify any areas for improvement within the book, I found that it evoked emotions of anger and frustration over how Fontaine, and so many other women and girls, are marginalized and relegated to the outskirts of society. Though these features made this a difficult read, these issues must be discussed, which also made it a necessary one. She sought to put a face to the societal tragedy that befalls so many Indigenous women and girls and did so in a breathtaking manner.

Jolly’s targeted academic audience would be those whose disciplines are concerned with social marginalization, systemic racism, racial and gender inequalities, and the present-day consequences of historic colonialism. As such, I believe that this book is especially applicable to sociology and anthropology. Additionally, as Indigenous studies is a newly emerging discipline in many universities, “Red River Girl” would serve as an informative introduction into the topic of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. However, I would recommend Jolly’s book to anyone, regardless of their academic discipline, as being conscious of the dangers that Indigenous women face is a necessary first step to eliminating them.