



Cook, Sharon A. and Carson, Margaret. (2022). The Castleton Massacre: Survivors' Stories of the Killins Femicide. Toronto: Dundurn Press.

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The Castleton Massacre is a heartfelt story about a family that was brutally murdered. The perpetrator of this familicide targeted many of the women within this family, thus, this story is expressively about a femicide. Sharon Anne Cook and Margaret Carson developed this book in hopes of sharing this incredibly difficult story with the world. Within their book, Cook and Carson strategically demonstrate a multitude of key sociological themes within the events leading up to, during, and after this tragic event. Common in femicides, there are many sociological factors and patterns that are involved, many of which lead to the unfortunate events of the femicide. Within this story, the role of women within their families, the significance of the time in which this event took place, and how individuals within this family were able to form new familial relationships are three major sociological themes within this tragedy.

Both the Killins family and the Fraser family grew up in a time when males primarily dominated the household. Males dominated the household by supplying the majority, if not all, of the family's income, influencing the rules and regulations of the household, and maintaining overall household authority. However, throughout this book, many women are displayed as being the dominant individual in their homes. These women influenced the majority of their familial

values and dominated most of the household responsibilities. As well, these women were the primary caregivers to their children, influencing their education and success. Annie, Robert's grandmother, is the oldest woman displayed in this book as having dominated her household. Although there is not much said about Annie, Cook and Carson tell the reader that after her husband's death, she became the main caregiver to her family. "She managed to feed the family of three boys and two girls, ranging in age from three to twelve" (p. 13). Rachel, Robert's mother, is another woman who is characterized as having a strong influence on her family. "Robert John [Robert's father] nominally headed this family, but in practice, Rachel set the family values and sought betterment for her children through education" (p. 6). Rachel was a strong independent woman as displayed in the book, she held a teaching career longer than most women at that time, and she continued her passion for education through her children. As inferred by Cook and Carson, "it appears that Rachel ran the family, determining the tone and behaviour of the household" (p. 16). Pearl Viola, Florence's mother, is another woman who displayed strong familial influence within her household. Comparable to the women above, Pearl Viola was a dominant mother who played a major influence on her family's values. Pearl Viola was raised in a higher-class community, which created certain expectations for her future family. When she married Ira, who was from a lower class than her, she often felt that Ira could not live up to her expectations, thus she dominated the household and took care of their children. Her role in the household increased when Ira went to war. Gladys is another individual who displayed strong leadership characteristics. Although she did not have a family, "she had matured into a woman with definite ideas that she felt free to express" (p. 41). Many referred to her as a fierce and bold woman. Lastly, is Florence,

although Robert tried to take control of Florence's life in many ways, Florence made many attempts to protect her children and override the threat of Robert. Strict legislation and poverty made it difficult for Florence to take full control of her family. All five of these women display a powerful sense of leadership and dominance within their families. This is an important theme within this book because it shows the reader that although these women lived in a very patriarchal society, they still had a profound influence on their families. Although society is socially constructed, these women have pushed through societal norms. In addition, the dominance these women displayed may have driven Robert to murder some of these women because he felt he could not possess control over the women in his family and thus live up to the current societal norms.

The time in which this event took place is a major contributor to this femicide. The Killins and the Frasers were born into a time of strong patriarchal values. As well, there were many unanswered questions and stigma surrounding domestic violence and stalking. Throughout this story, Florence is faced with harsh norms and stigmas that encompass her decisions regarding Robert. Primarily, "the primacy of the nuclear family was everywhere evident, including in Robert and Florence's case" (p. 78). When their marriage took a turn for the worse, "there was a high degree of secrecy in the household regarding the marital breakdown" (p. 126). The nuclear family norm kept Florence trapped within her relationship and silenced her suffering. In addition, women during this time were unable to file for divorce unless their partners agreed to it, thus Florence was cornered into continuing her harmful marriage. The nuclear family norm and the legislation in Canada at this time kept Florence and her family in detrimental conditions. These sociological

factors during the 1950s-1960s contributed heavily to the femicide of this family because they allowed Robert to be in constant control and contact with his family. In addition, there was much unknown regarding domestic violence and stalking. In particular, “there was no term to describe what Florence was experiencing” (p.140). Thus, because Florence’s situation with domestic violence and stalking had little awareness, Florence was faced with another systemic barrier. On top of this lack of knowledge, “community norms supported any actions a man chose within his “castle”” (pp.109-110). This would have likely affected Florence if she had gone to the authorities. The lack of knowledge surrounding domestic violence and stalking and the patriarchal community norms are further contributors to the family's inability to escape Robert. Each of these sociological factors that were present during this time contributed heavily to why and how the family could not escape these dangerous conditions.

Although many familial relationships were severed within this family, Cook and Carson reveal the many relationships that were created because of this horrible event. Florence and Gladys are two individuals who created a special bond during this time. “Gladys and Florence had always respected each other, and as the years advanced, they forged a bond” (p. 86). They both sought out protection and comfort in each other when Robert’s actions and demeanour became increasingly frightening. Pearl and A.D. also formed a bond together. Although not much is revealed in the book, there is some evidence that “Pearl considered [A.D.] as her protector” (p.132). As well, he is shown protecting Pearl from Robert’s fury throughout the book. Lastly, after the family tragedy, Margaret and Brian were able to form a special relationship with Harold, Ethel, and their children. Although it took time for them to adjust to their new surroundings in Calgary, slowly they began

to form a relationship. Cook and Carson explain how Margaret formed a significantly close bond with Sharon, their daughter and how Brian formed a relationship with Wesley, their son. In addition, “Ethel worked hard to gently acclimatize the children” (p. 218) and create meaningful relations with them, and Harold encouraged the children and aided them in their hobbies. Margaret and Brian soon developed a meaningful relationship with the family they once feared. All three of these relationships were formed during and after the family tragedy. Florence and Gladys formed a relationship amid Robert’s threatening behaviour, which one can infer made Robert upset. As for Pearl and A.D., A.D. became a father figure to Pearl which she lacked with Robert. Finally, Margaret and Brian were able to obtain new familial relations that aided them with their healing and recovery process after the loss of their family members. All these relationships go against the norms of the nuclear family. These relations are examples of the common sociological theme within this book that suggests that although these two families were surrounded by many societal norms during this time, they created their own definitions of what family was.

I believe that Cook and Carson intended to spread awareness regarding domestic violence and femicide through this sorrowful story. Through the lives of many of these women in this book, the reader gains an understanding of how detrimental domestic violence can be to a family and how such a tragedy can occur. Overall, this book was beautifully written, I enjoyed the use of photographs throughout the book, how the chapters were separated, and how all characters were explored and described. The evidence that was gathered to produce this book proves the immense time that was put in to retrace the family's history. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in social work, psychology, sociology, women’s studies, and/or feminism.