



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

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Sharon Anne Cook and Margaret Carson's Book "The Castleton Massacre: Survivor's Stories of the Killins Femicide" tells the tragic story of a familicide that took place on May 2nd, 1963. In rural Castleton, Ontario, Robert Killins murdered his estranged wife, Florence, her daughter, Pearl, Florence's sister, Gladys, and Florence's young daughter, Patsy. Included in the murder was the unborn child of Pearl. The two survivors of this massacre, young Margaret and Brian, narrowly escaped the event and were taken in by their aunt and uncle in Calgary, Alberta. This book explores the traumas acquired by Margaret and Brian, highlighting the effects of domestic violence and the societal norms that failed to protect Florence and her family.

This book places a large emphasis on trauma and resilience. Margaret and Brian, who were children at the time that their family was murdered, faced an enormous amount of trauma. Brian reported experiencing immediate reactions, including nightmares and insomnia. He explained, "Initially, I was given a bed in the basement. There were strange noises in the house... I would often jolt awake and lay in my bed in a cold sweat, my heart pounding, fearing for my safety from Harold [Brian's uncle], only because he resembled Robert" (pp. 213-214). This fear and anxiety that the children experienced revealed their ongoing trauma. Brian recalls a time when he hid in

the closet due to his visceral fear, and Margaret's insomnia became so severe that she required medical help.

Despite the deep-seated trauma in the face of experiencing such a horrific act, the two survivors displayed remarkable resilience in their slow adaptation to their new environment. Although the familial environment they entered was reserved and formal, Ethel and Harold (Margaret and Brian's aunt and uncle) provided the children with a stable environment. Specifically, their consistency in parenting allowed the two children to address their traumas and navigate the rest of their lives despite facing such a tragedy. Their shared bond was essential for their resilience and recovery from their trauma. It is explained that "Brian became a medical doctor: Margaret was a college-level instructor and administrator. Both are retired now, with loving families and grandchildren" (p. 229).

Although the children showed a great deal of resilience, the lingering effects of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) followed them into adulthood. These long-term effects can be seen when Brian explains, "Does PTSD ever go away? The simple answer is no. The traumatic events of one's life never change. The intense initial response to those events does dull with time" (p. 229). Margaret acknowledges her ongoing struggle despite her deep sense of resilience. When faced with the event, Margaret developed survivor guilt. She explained, "I think I still have it at times. The 'what if I had done this or that' was there for years" (p. 176). The author of this book managed to underscore the lasting impact of trauma but also showcase the children's ability to adapt to the severe changes in their lives and move toward a brighter future.

Florence endured years of abuse from her husband, Robert. Including both physical and

psychological violence, this book describes the very persistent nature of the abuse taking place. The author explains, “Florence suffered physical and psychological harm from her estranged husband for years, including ongoing threats to her safety and that of her children” (p. 232). Florence did seek refuge, moving away from Robert. However, “[Florence] fled halfway across Canada only to have Robert track her down” (p. 232).

The societal norms at the time of the murders show an apparent lack of support for abused women and their families. There was no community intervention at the time, meaning there was no structured support system for women in abusive situations needing to escape. “There were no safe houses for abused women and their children in [Florence’s] day... Even today, shelters for such women are frequently full, leaving victims with no alternative.” (p. 232). For example, Florence’s neighbor told the press, “She had not been in Florence’s house in the years she had lived there” (pp. 232-233). This quote is a testament to the level of loneliness she must have felt in the horrific situation she found herself in at the hands of her estranged husband.

The public perception of domestic violence was different in the 1960s. For example, “In 1982, when MP Margaret Mitchel tried to encourage a discussion in the House of Commons on the topic by noting that one in ten husbands regularly beat their wives, she was met with jeers, laughter, and shouting” (p. 233). This book highlights that the public perception of abuse at the time, combined with Roberts' former status as a clergyman, created a dangerous situation for Florence and her family. Florence was left at the hands of her husband’s violent whim, with no clear support around her in any direction.

Robert showcased typical characteristics of abusive partners. The book states, “Robert

possibly had other psychiatric disorders that, combined with depression, would have made him unstable... He presented as a noisy know-it-all, unable to listen to others” (p. 235). Robert’s obsession with Florence drove the tragic event that took place. Robert monitored Florence’s every move despite their separation. The book mentions, “He did not control her every move, but he charted it” (p. 234). Robert’s behaviour was severely obsessive, indicating that even though Florence had tried to separate from him, Robert’s influence loomed over her, restricting her freedom and creating an environment of constant fear.

Robert’s behaviour, marked by an intense and obsessive need for control, catalyzed the tragic murders that shattered his family. His deep-seated insecurities, jealousy issues, and long-standing history of intimidation created an environment of violence. The escalation from psychological manipulation to brutal physical assaults and, ultimately, to familicide/femicide reflects a pattern where unchecked power and isolation within families can result in devastating consequences. The events of that night were not an impulsive decision made by Robert but rather the culmination of years of dominance, control, and an extreme refusal to relinquish power.

This book employs theories related to trauma and domestic violence in an attempt to contextualize the brutal events that took place. The author uses psychological and sociological perspectives to deconstruct the motivations behind Robert’s actions and the impact on the survivors. For example, the book references PTSD as a way to frame the long-term effects that Margaret and Brian experienced as a result of their traumatic experiences. Brian noted how “PTSD wasn’t a term invented, let alone applied to children” (p. 223). However, the symptoms of PTSD clearly applied to their situation.

This book uses historical reconstruction and detailed case studies to gather information on the events discussed. This approach allows for an in-depth analysis of the family's history and the cumulative events that lead up to the murders. Using personal accounts, public records, and historical data, the authors piece together information that had been lost. This method assists the reader in grasping the complex relationship between individual behaviour and societal factors. The comprehensive use of survivor testimony in this book gave voice to the silenced victims of this event. These first-hand accounts enriched the narrative, allowing the reader to more deeply understand the victims personally. A limitation of this approach involves dependence on recollections that may be deeply affected by trauma. Although retrospective accounts are very powerful, they could be influenced by the passage of time and the intense trauma experienced by the victims. Perhaps incorporating more perspectives from law enforcement at the time of the event would provide a fuller picture of the response to domestic violence.

Sharon Anne Cook and Margaret Carson's objective in writing this book was to shed light on the far-reaching impacts of domestic violence, the complex nature of trauma and resilience, and the societal norms that allowed the abuses to continue completely unchallenged. The author also aimed to honor the memory of the victims, namely Florence, Patsy, Pearl, Gladys, and Pearl's unborn child. In the epilogue, the author states, "Florence's children well remember her sterling qualities as a loving mother, a resilient woman who kept Robert at bay for years" (p. 237). This book would be of particular interest to those studying criminology and social work, as it delves into risk factors of domestic violence and societal failures that perpetuate it.