



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

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Sharon Anne Cook and Margaret Carson's book, "The Castleton Massacre: Survivors' Stories of the Killins Femicide", is a riveting true crime family memoir. The data collected for the book came through oral history: "a form of research where the interviewer and respondent work together to tell the respondent's story" (p. 8). Using prompts and the stories of many (including those of the two survivors), Cook and Carson were able to successfully put together an informative piece that honours the victims as well as others affected by the tragedy. The book explores all relevant and available information in a clear and concise manner linked to the murder. This includes the lives of various family members as well. Throughout the carefully crafted book, there is a common theme of control shown through domestic violence, the role of women in society over time, and psychological struggle over time.

In regard to Florence and Robert's relationship (which shifted frequently throughout the book), an unfortunate dominant theme was control through domestic violence. In the end, it is this violence (in combination with stalking) that led to the tragic deaths of Florence Irene and her unborn baby, Pearl Irene and her unborn baby, Patricia Elizabeth Anne, and Ada Gladys. Early on in the book, Robert is described as treating his wife Florence, "like a child, correcting her grammar, telling her where to go and what to see, always the one in charge of the relationship" (p. 65). This

showed Robert's want to control Florence, even at the early stages in their relationship. Perhaps Florence was the only thing in his life that he thought he could control. As time went on, he continued to lose this control over her as she distanced herself further away from him. In a sense, Florence took control of her own life back in trying to keep away from him. Robert's continuous efforts to keep close contact, though, showed his relentlessness in the need to continue to try to keep her under his jurisdiction.

Control is also dominant in the role of women in society during the time period that this book focuses on. During the beginning chapters of the book, the authors mention that Gladys and Florence went into teaching to pursue their own careers. They each achieved a level of education and had somewhat control over their own lives. This changed as they got older. Although second wave feminism was coming into play at the time, it "did not influence rural Ontario hamlets like Castleton for decades to come" (p. 109). The role of becoming a wife was still predominant at the time, and eventually Florence fell into that role. This led to her becoming a mother as well. From there she remained as Robert's wife, even after they separated. Florence had no control over getting a divorce as it was too difficult at the time, and she did not have the correct evidence to do so, leaving her stuck (at least on paper) to Robert. The same lack of control can be found with Florence and Robert's daughter Pearl. As she aged, all she wanted to do was live her own life like Florence and Gladys once did when they were young, but Robert made this impossible. To emphasize the control that Robert had over Pearl, the authors added a quote from Pearl saying, "Sometimes I feel like I'm suffocating. I can hardly breathe or move and I will do anything to get away. My father is a dictator. He'll kill us one day" (p. 132). Later on in her life, just as she was about to fulfill one

of her societal roles as a mother, Robert obliterated her chances of that happening. In doing so he exhibited his control over her one last time.

Readers see the development of Robert's need for control and his psychological struggle at a very young age. Although undiagnosed for anything in particular, he shows many signs of issues in relation to his behaviour around others. Control comes into play in that Robert may have felt the need to control everyone around him when he was with them. This was reflected later in his life through the need to control his wife and family. On the day of the murder there was emphasis around the idea that Robert was about to lose everything including his daughter and his wife in particular. His physical health was also declining. The only way that he would be able to keep them close would be to act now and prevent them from moving away from him once and for all. The one way that he could do this was through murdering them. His oddly positive disposition the day of the murder should have automatically alerted the reader that he was not mentally well. To emphasize this strangeness, the authors include Margaret's perspective of him smiling at her being "an act so unusual that she remembered it for the intervening fifty-nine years" (p. 150). He had reached the peak of his psychological struggle of control, and his need for control won. The end result was the act of murder.

Cook and Carson state their intentions in the prologue of their family memoir through referencing the lives lost in the tragedy: "This book is as much about giving them a voice as it is about understanding a murderous misfit" (p. 7). The four women and two children that lost their lives in Robert's murderous rampage are not only discussed in relation to their murder, but also in relation to the life they lived prior to their final moments. It is important that the victims are

remembered in this way, that is, who they were prior to their tragic deaths. In the commotion of a tragedy, oftentimes the lives of victims are overshadowed by their deaths. The victims of Robert's crime were so much more than just 'victims'. They were mothers, daughters, partners, gardeners, aunts, musicians and many other wonderful things. The way that Cook and Carson wrote about each of them honoured them properly through telling their stories.

Overall, I believe that the book was very well written. It was easy to follow, and the details of each story flowed smoothly. Both Cook and Carson's strenuous strategies of acquiring information from different sources seemed to prove successful throughout the book and I did not notice any notable gaps in their timeline. Of course, one possible limitation is the possibility that some of the information that the authors received from their sources through oral history were not entirely accurate. This is something that both Cook and Carson took credit for in their acknowledgements. As stated, "Despite the sustained and important support we have received from so many, any errors in this book are solely our responsibility" (p. 245). Therefore, it would be redundant of me to state that this is something that could have been improved, because they have already disclosed that they are responsible for any potential errors.

I believe this book would be of interest to many academic audiences. Sociologists, social psychologists, historians, and those involved in women's studies may be intrigued in this book based on the themes of domestic violence and the role of women in society over time. Personality psychologists and health professionals may be interested in the theme of psychological struggle over time as well.

Altogether, Cook and Carson both provide an excellent reiteration of the events that took

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place prior to, during, and after the appalling murders of Florence Irene and her unborn baby, Pearl Irene and her unborn baby, Patricia Elizabeth Anne, and Ada Gladys and her dog Taffy. The author's common themes of domestic violence, the role of women in society over time, and psychological struggle over time in relation to control were well incorporated throughout the book. I would recommend this family memoir to anyone looking for 'close-to-home' Canadian history, as well as those who are looking to understand the minds of murderers and how they come to be murderers over time.