

A REVIEW OF JESSICA MCDIARMID'S *HIGHWAY OF TEARS: A TRUE STORY OF RACISM, INDIFFERENCE AND THE PURSUIT OF JUSTICE FOR MISSING AND MURDERED INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND GIRLS*

How Jessica McDiarmid Tackles and Highlights One of Canada's Darkest Secrets.

Brook Lowery

English 2300, Kwantlen Polytechnic University

In her book *Highway of Tears: A True Story of Racism, Indifference and the Pursuit of Justice for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*, originally published in 2019, Jessica McDiarmid recounts many heartbreaking stories surrounding one of the darkest stains on Canadian history: the countless Indigenous woman and girls who have gone missing, been murdered and found along Northern British Columbia's Highway 16. Dubbed the Highway of Tears, in this book, McDiarmid gives a voice to the victims of these crimes and their families by detailing their lives before they became just another statistic in the eyes of the law. McDiarmid presents the faults of the

Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), the Canadian government and social services. *Highway of Tears* brings to light the frequent mistreatment of Indigenous people whilst challenging the typical idyllic view of Canada as an exposé on the injustice, lack of accountability and systemic racism that plagues the country.

The main takeaway from McDiarmid's book is that the Indigenous victims of the Highway of Tears deserve to be served justice, regardless of the life they lived. As McDiarmid notes, Indigenous women and girls are "six times more likely to be killed than non-Indigenous

women” and yet,¹ when they go missing, it appears that their cases are blatantly dismissed by the RCMP and the media because of their race and backgrounds. Consistently their cases are not taken seriously until it is far too late. Furthermore, the victims are often blamed for their fate based on factors beyond their control.

Fighting to change this view, McDiarmid details the lives of Ramona Wilson, Delphine Nikal, Roxanne Thiara, Alishia Germaine, Lana Derrick, Alberta Williams, Tamara Chipman, Aielah Saric-Auger, Bonnie Joseph, Immaculate “Mackie” Basil, and Beverly Williams, just a few of the countless Indigenous women and girls lost along the Highway of Tears. McDiarmid also discusses the loss of Nicole Hoar, a non-Indigenous victim of the highway and touches on the lives of many other victims. By interviewing victims’ family members, McDiarmid provides a deep and intimate look into the lives of these women and girls, and the never-ending pain their loved ones suffer from their loss. McDiarmid also focuses on the shortcomings and injustices of the RCMP regarding the handling of the Highway of Tears investigations and does not shy away from pointing out systemic racism. Sprinkled throughout the book as well is historical

information and social commentary to provide the reader with a fuller picture of how a place like the Highway of Tears could have ever come to be. At its core, the book is about the families of those lost to the Highway of Tears: how they remember their loved ones, how they honor their memories, and how they fight for justice in hopes of preventing another family from going through the same situation.

McDiarmid’s research for the book is thorough, with a variety of different sources ranging from personal interviews to article clippings. McDiarmid aims to de-stigmatize the victims of these crimes and challenge society’s troubled, stereotypical view of them. They were young women and girls who Canada’s systems and society failed. Some were forced to sell themselves for money to survive, and some were abused, but that was not all they were. They were human beings, some as young as fifteen, who deserve to be remembered and deserve justice.

McDiarmid’s research illuminates some of the blatant issues within Canadian society that disproportionately affect Indigenous peoples at an alarming rate such as over-policing, the targeting of Indigenous youths by social services, and addiction. Another key point within *Highway of Tears* is the systemic racism that weaves its way through every

¹ McDiarmid, *Highway of Tears: A True Story of Racism, Indifference and the Pursuit of Justice for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls* (Anchor Canada, 2019), p. 4.

aspect of these cases, from the RCMP's frequent dismissal of Indigenous missing person cases as runaways, to the media's portrayal of Indigenous victims compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts. McDiarmid brings these issues into the spotlight, showcasing that Canada is not the perfect country it portrays itself to be. It is one whose continued mistreatment of, and lack of resources for, Indigenous peoples is lining the Highway of Tears with the bodies of more and more innocent Indigenous women and girls.

It is important to keep in mind whilst reading *Highway of Tears* that, while prior knowledge of Canada's mistreatment of Indigenous peoples is not required to read the book, it is an asset that will help the reader understand the book and its message better. It is also important to understand that while McDiarmid does attempt to provide both sides of the story, from the family and RCMP's viewpoints, the book has a slight bias towards the stance that the RCMP frequently falls short. Also, while McDiarmid provides many statistics throughout the book to provide the reader with a better understanding of the scope of the issues at hand, the statistics are sprinkled

throughout paragraphs rather than separated into tables and charts which can make them hard to grasp. The book also jumps around frequently between different focuses, from family interviews, descriptions of locations and crimes, and RCMP-centric sections that it can be very confusing to follow at times and comes off slightly disorganized.

In the end, McDiarmid's *Highway of Tears* is a heartbreaking yet necessary read that presents one of the most tragic and darkest aspects of Canadian history. It gives the families of those lost to the Highway of Tears a space to tell their own stories, to express their loss and grief, and to move forward. It is a beautifully written true crime tale that manages to tell the victims' stories in a gut-wrenchingly real way and highlights the blatant issues of racism, injustice, and lack of accountability present throughout the nation. *Highway of Tears* is a must read, one that showcases that these terrible and horrific crimes can happen anywhere, even in the great white north, when the act of serving justice is treated as a privilege for some rather than a right.

REFERENCES

McDiarmid, J. (2019). *Highway of Tears: A True Story of Racism, Indifference and the Pursuit of Justice for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*. Anchor Canada.