
Tanya Talaga. *Seven Fallen Feathers: Racism, Death and Hard Truths in a Northern City*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press. 361 pp. ISBN: 9781487002268.
<https://houseofanansi.com/products/seven-fallen-feathers>.

In the Prologue to *Seven Fallen Feathers: Racism, Death, and Hard Truths in a Northern City*, Tanya Talaga shares the story of a broken promise between Nanabijou and the Ojibwe. The giant Nanabijou offers protection and peace for the Ojibwe as long as they keep secret the silvery metal found in the rocks near Gichigami, known to the white man as Lake Superior. A Sioux man, taken in and cared for by the Ojibwe, surreptitiously discovers and steals some of the shiny metal. The Sioux man is then caught and, with the aid of alcohol, is persuaded to share the secret of the metal with the white man. As the promise is broken, Nanabijou is “turned from warm flesh and blood to solid stone,” leaving the Ojibwe to fend for themselves (3). Talaga continues in the Prologue to provide a brief history of Thunder Bay, Ontario, “a city of two faces” (3). She explains the stark division between the white and Indigenous communities, Port Arthur and Fort William respectively. As the white community grew and the fur trade diminished, Indian assimilation became a white objective to be carried out through residential schooling. Although more than a century has passed since the first residential school was built in Thunder Bay, mistreatment of Indigenous students persists. Talaga writes with precision, grace, and compassion about contemporary atrocities perpetrated on indigenous youth in Thunder Bay, Ontario. She writes

To understand the stories of the seven lost students who are the subjects of this book, the seven “fallen feathers,” you must understand Thunder Bay’s past, how the seeds of division, of acrimony and distaste, of a lack of cultural understanding and awareness, were planted in those early days, and how they were watered and nourished with misunderstanding and ambivalence. And you must understand how the government of Canada has historically underfunded education and health services for Indigenous children, providing consistently lower levels of support than for non-Indigenous kids, and how it continues to do so to this day. The white face of prosperity built its own society as the red face powerlessly stood and watched. (11)

Talaga’s account of seven children who lost their lives as residential school students is as clear and comprehensive as it is heart-wrenching. Her clarity of prose and journalistic proclivity make this book simultaneously easy and difficult to read. That is, the fluidity of her writing does little to ease the dreadful nature of her subject. Talaga painstakingly recounts the lives and deaths of Jordan Wabasse, Jethro Anderson, Curran Strang, Paul Panacheese, Robyn Harper, Reggie Bushie, Kyle Morrisseau, all killed while attending residential school in Thunder Bay. By pointing to the systemic causes and the lack of governmental funding and involvement that allows deaths such as these to proliferate, Talaga seeks to offer hope that Indigenous students can get the support they need so that these atrocities do not continue.

Talaga highlights those in the community who work tirelessly not only for the safety and well-being of students who attend school there in Thunder Bay, but also for justice for those who have lost their lives there as well. She exposes the aftermath of the families who have lost their loved ones and their resiliency as they continue to move forward in spite of the void in their lives of losing a child.

The book can feel repetitive in places, and Talaga's research has provided a lengthy list of names of those involved that can be overwhelming. In Talaga's defense, the occurrences of these injustices and atrocities *are* repetitive and overwhelming, not to mention sickening and demoralizing. Talaga provides the kind of awareness that precedes action and a staunch and noteworthy optimism in the face of adversity that should embolden her readers. In the *Epilogue*, Talaga writes that Alvin Fiddler, grand chief of Nishnawbe Aski Nation and Thunder Bay resident, continues to work in an effort to provide safety for the Indigenous children of Thunder Bay, but that he knows "time is ticking" (314). Every passing moment is vital to the well-being of these children and, therefore, to the future.

Talaga imagines Fiddler as he prepares for the Canada Day Holiday and country's 150th birthday in 2017:

He will be at a powwow in Grand Council Treaty No. 3 territory with his family. He will be standing in a circle with all the nations surrounding him in ceremonial dance, and he will be thinking of the children before him decked out in their beautiful jingle dresses, their bright-coloured ribbons, and their feathers, and he will wonder about their future and what he can do to make sure they make it to the final prophecy – the eighth fire. Can the settlers and the Indigenous people come together as one and move forward in harmony? Fiddler hopes against hope that the colonial past will be overcome and that for the good of the country we call Canada, the Anishinaabe Nation will rise strong. (315)

The final words of Talaga's important book strike a personal note in the *Acknowledgements* section as she writes to her own children, "you two are the next generation: remember who you are and carry the stories forward" (349). It is only through remembering the fallen and telling the stories that we can ever hope to escape a brutal and unjust past and present. This work is important, and not just for Canada. Talaga's attention to detail and willingness to meet with people and help to tell their stories serves as the kind of vehicle of truth that leads to healing for Indigenous people, not only in Canada, but everywhere Indigenous people are subjected to the injustices of systemic racism and the deleterious aftermath of colonial practices. The "hard truths" that Talaga shares in this book are indeed difficult, but she also shares stories of those who are taking action to prevent further violence against Indigenous youth and stories of those who are beginning to heal. And Talaga reminds us that where there are stories, there is hope.

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