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Book Club Kit

Discussion Guide

Seven Fallen Feathers by Tanya Talaga

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Biography

Tanya Talaga is Ojibwe with roots in Fort William First Nation in Ontario, Canada. She worked as a journalist at the Toronto Star for more than twenty years, and has been nominated five times for the Michener Award in public service journalism. Talaga holds an honorary Doctor of Letters from Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, and shares her expertise on the boards of PEN Canada and The Narwal. Tanya is the President and CEO of Makwa Creative, a production company focussed on Indigenous storytelling.

Tanya is the acclaimed author of *Seven Fallen Feathers*, which was the winner of the RBC Taylor Prize, the Shaughnessy Cohen Prize for Political Writing, and First Nation Communities Read: Young Adult/Adult. The book was also a finalist for the Hilary Weston Writers' Trust Nonfiction Prize and the BC National Award for Nonfiction, and it was CBC's Nonfiction Book of the Year, a Globe and Mail Top 100 Book, and a national bestseller.

Tanya was named the 2017–2018 Atkinson Fellow in Public Policy and this series resulted in her new book, *All Our Relations: Finding A Path Forward, T*anya shared the messages of this book through the Massey Lectures 2018 across Canada. This book was a finalist for the Hilary Weston Writer's Trust Prize for Non-Fiction in 2019. *All Our Relations* has also been published and released in the United Kingdom and Australia under the title, *All Our Relations: Indigenous Trauma in the Shadow of Colonialism.* The book will be released in French in 2020.

She lives in Toronto with her two teenage children, but her heart is in northern Ontario. Her great-grandmother, Liz Gauthier, was a residential school survivor. Her great-grandfather, Russell Bowen, was an Ojibwe trapper and labourer. Her grandmother is a member of Fort William First Nation, and her mother was raised in Raith and Graham, Ontario.

Source: **Author's website**

https://www.ttalaga.ca/about-tanya/

Review by Sarah Delvillano

Book Review: Seven Fallen Feathers

July 24, 2018

Seven Fallen Feathers, winner of the Indigenous Literature Award this year, is a powerful account of the deaths of seven Indigenous youths in Thunder Bay. It shines a light on each individual story behind the seven fallen feathers of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation.

Each of the fallen feathers represents young Indigenous students, forced to leave home to pursue education, away from their families – families plagued by the intergenerational trauma resulting from residential schools. Many of these youth were found in rivers, despite being strong swimmers and having lived by the water their whole lives. And all their deaths were deemed accidental by local authorities.

For many settler Canadians, it is very easy to put the legacy of colonialism and the genocidal policy of residential schools behind us, believing these events to be a part of a shameful past in our successful road to reconciliation. The wealth of information presented in this book makes it impossible to deny that systemic and institutional violence, as it relates to colonialism in Canada, are alive and well today. The stories behind each of the seven fallen feathers pick apart these beliefs, slowly but surely, and expose them for what they are. Each child has a family that was failed by the system both before, and after, their passing.

Talaga ends the book with a look at present-day relations. Her work deconstructs the belief that Indigenous peoples and First Nation communities are passive victims of this violence. It is a powerful testament to the resilience of these youth, and a troubling indictment of continued colonial violence in Canada.

Source: **The Catalyst**

Book Review: Seven Fallen Feathers

Delvillano, S. (2018). Seven Fallen Feathers: Racism, Death and Hard Truths in a Northern City by Tanya Talaga [Review of the book *Seven Fallen Feathers: Racism, Death and Hard Truths in a Northern City* by Tanya Talaga]. *The Catalyst, 41*(2), 7. https://cpj.ca/the-catalyst-summer-2018/

Review by claireefairee

Book Review: Seven Fallen Feathers
June 24, 2020

Free copies of this book were given out at a workshop that I attended for my job as a history teacher. The workshop was about the new changes in the History curriculum – teachers are now required to teach students about First Nations, Métis, and Inuit histories, people, and realities throughout the Grade 10 Canadian History course (as opposed to having this content be optional as in the past). This workshop took place about two years ago, but I only read *Seven Fallen Feathers* this year. For a long time, I chose not to read the book because I was scared that it was too sad. I realize now that this was my privilege preventing me from getting uncomfortable. As someone who was born in Canada, whose parents chose to settle in this country, I am able to not have to worry about the issues that the first peoples of Canada face every day. I don't have to worry about access to education, lack of drinking water, being unfairly treated by the police, or feeling the long-term effects of the trauma of my ancestors. After having read *Seven Fallen Feathers*, I am reminded of how important it is to acknowledge, learn about, and strive to understand the difficulties that Indigenous people in Canada face. This is a responsibility that I have – not just as a history teacher, but as a Canadian.

In *Seven Fallen Feathers*, journalist Tanya Talaga tells the story of seven Indigenous high school students who turned up dead in Thunder Bay over the course of a decade. Many of the remote Indigenous communities in northern Ontario are small, underfunded, and only provide schooling up to a certain age. If students want to continue learning, they have to move to other sites (some of which are former residential school sites, which I think is crazy), but many of them end up in Thunder Bay for their final years of high school. Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School (DFC) is a school run by the Northern Nishnawbe Education Council that is specifically for the high school students who come from these remote communities. Students live with "foster" families, and for many, it is their first time being so far away from home.

The victims who died have much in common: they were all Indigenous teenagers, from remote communities, most were DFC students, and many were found in the McIntyre River which runs through Thunder Bay. According to the book, police investigations were almost laughable – the Thunder Bay Police Department took its sweet time getting investigations started once students were reported missing, causing members of the students' home communities to actually fly to Thunder Bay to start searching for the missing students since the police took so long to begin. And once the bodies were found in the river, the police quickly came to the same conclusion: the teenagers were drunk, fell in the river, and drowned. Many of the family members of the seven who died are dissatisfied with the results of the police investigations.

After many years, an inquest was held in an attempt to connect the deaths, to show that the same factors were contributing to the deaths of these students and that they needed to be addressed in order for the deaths to stop. While a few recommendations were made, such as properly vetting boarding

families, not much was accomplished. A few of the causes of death which had been labelled as intoxication and drowning were changed to "undetermined" – a fairly hollow response to the families' years of constantly questioning the police and the city to investigate the reasons behind the deaths.

While the focus of the book is the deaths of these seven teenagers, Talaga interweaves history and current issues throughout – everything is connected. Talaga shares the story of Chanie Wenjack, a young Ojibwe boy who ran away from his residential school in the 1960s and was subsequently found dead beside some railroad tracks. The mistrust of the police, the fear of schooling, and low quality of education in Indigenous communities are all present-day consequences of the residential school system. Residential schools no longer exist in a formal sense, but Indigenous children still need to leave their homes and families in order to receive an education.

Something new that I learned from this book was the tenuous relationship between Indigenous people and the police. Police departments all over North America are in hot water right now due to the movements against police brutality and anti-Black racism. The police have been mistreating Indigenous people in Canada since the creation of this country and it's never seemed to gain much media attention. Talaga highlights the anti-Indigenous bias of the Thunder Bay Police Department by describing the botched missing persons investigations, but also the bias of police all over Canada when she touches on the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, some of whom are relatives of those students who died in Thunder Bay.

At the heart of all of these issues is the Canadian government's attitude towards and relationship with Indigenous people. In Canada, the federal government is in charge of funding Indigenous needs. While other Canadians benefit from municipal and provincial services, Indigenous people who live on-reserve do not – they are subject to the whims of the federal government. Provincial governments are supposed to provide health care, but not for Indigenous people. They are supposed to ensure education for all in the province, but Indigenous people are not included in this. What often ends up happening is arguments over which level of government has jurisdiction over these different services, until Indigenous people simply fall through the cracks and are left with nothing. Canada is a country of apologies – once the government made its first official apology in 1988 (for Japanese-Canadian internment during World War Two), saying sorry hasn't stopped – but a lot of the time, these apologies are followed up with little action.

The issues that Tanya Talaga highlights in *Seven Fallen Feathers* are far from resolved. In 2017, when this book was published, two more DFC students, Tammy Keeash and Josiah Begg, were found dead in the McIntyre River.

Source: **Claire's Life** (personal blog)

Book Review: Seven Fallen Feathers

Claireefairee. (2020, June 24). Book review: Seven Fallen Feathers. *Claire's Life*. https://clairehasalife.wordpress.com/2020/06/24/book-review-seven-fallen-feathers/

Review by Meagan Secord

Seven Fallen Feathers: Canada's hidden history exposed

March 4, 2020

Tanya Talaga's novel, *Seven Fallen Feathers,* brings truth to the surface and shatters the colonial lens many people have when looking at the relationship between Indigenous people and Canadians.

The novel, published in 2017, tells the stories of seven Indigenous youth who died while attending school in Thunder Bay, Ont. and how no one knows the truth about how five of them ended up in the rivers surrounding Lake Superior.

The deaths of Jethro Anderson, Curran Strang, Robyn Harper, Paul Panacheese, Kyle Morisseau, Reggie Bushie and Jordan Wabasse, and the lack of information around them sparked an inquest into the justice system in Thunder Bay.

With each death, there is a string of unfollowed police protocols such as missing persons reports being filed several days after the 24-hour mark, police not contacting families to notify them that their children were missing, interviewing under-aged youth without a parent present and not notifying a family when their children's body had been found.

The stories of Indigenous people being verbally harassed, physically assaulted, terrified to speak to law enforcement and ultimately killed aren't buried by the police like they were for decades prior as stated in the book.

Talaga's novel pulls no punches when it comes to the truth and forces the readers to open their eyes to the horrors of Canada's best-kept secret: Indigenous genocide.

The deaths set the stage for a much deeper conversation and give Talaga an opening to dive into Indigenous history in Canada. A history that many don't know is stained with red.

Residential schools, missing and murdered Indigenous women, suicide epidemics, systematic racism and the blatant ignorance of the justice system, are all brought to light in just 315 pages.

Talaga's book touches on the topics covered in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report released in 2015 and the final report for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls released in June of this year. Both only begin to highlight the injustices Indigenous people in Canada have faced.

Both reports use real anecdotes from Indigenous people to outline the problems plaguing them. Stories of reporting missing sisters and having police laugh as well as detailed accounts of the trauma the residential school system inflicted. *Seven Fallen Feathers* goes into more detail about both

Talaga uses her journalistic skills to weave together a timeline of the horrifying history of Indigenous peoples in Canada starting all the way back with Chanie Wenjack, the youth who died on the train tracks after escaping a residential school in 1966. She uses his story to start the investigation into the seven deaths.

Wenjack fled Cecilia Jeffrey Indian Residential School with nine others after being sexually assaulted by older students. Sexual, physical and mental abuse were common in the residential school system and is a large factor in the Indigenous mental health crisis. The Cheif Talaga interviewed for the book said she had to start with stories of the past, such as Wenjacks, in order to fully understand how devastating the deaths of the seven youth are.

Talaga speaks with family members, friends, chiefs, guidance counselors and more to get the full scope of the seven tragedies the Indigenous people in Thunder Bay have faced and shares the stories in a captivating way that makes the reader feel like they are witnessing them.

The research and dedication Talaga put into *Seven Fallen Feathers* shines through not only the pages of the book but in the countless awards such as the RBC Taylor Prize 2018 and the Indigenous Literature Award, it has won.

Forget Shakespeare and *One Flew over the Cuckoos Nest*, *Seven Fallen Feathers* should be a must in every secondary school curriculum.

Truth and reconciliation starts with an informed public and this book is just the way to accomplish it.

Source: **The Chronicle** (Durham College)

Seven Fallen Feathers: Canada's hidden history exposed

Secord, M. (2020, March 4). *Seven Fallen Feathers: Canada's hidden history exposed*. The Chronicle. https://chronicle.durhamcollege.ca/2020/03/seven-fallen-feathers-canadas-hidden-history-exposed/

Interview with Dafna Izenberg

'The Families Still Have No Answers': Tanya Talaga's New Book On Tragedy In Thunder Bay

October 13 2017

Your mother grew up in Raith, a very small Indigenous settlement about an hour west of Thunder Bay.

Raith is really so tiny, one of those places that, unless you're looking for it, you miss it on the highway. Labourers and trappers lived there when my mother was growing up.

Did you go back there when you were doing your reporting for this book?

I did. My family's not there anymore, but I drove through a couple of times and took my mum there. There's a sign [on the road] that says, "This highway is maintained by Sarah Amirault." That's my aunt; she died about 15 years ago.

You grew up in Toronto, but frequently visited Thunder Bay. What did you know about what life was like for Indigenous people there?

You always heard stories about how it wasn't safe. There were always two different sides to Thunder Bay. Everybody knew there was one hospital where the white people went and another where Indigenous people went. Little things like that; that's just the way it was.

You write about a guidebook that used to be given to students when they first came from small, faraway communities to go to school in Thunder Bay. Many had never seen a streetlight before, and alongside the guidelines for traffic safety, there was also this: "Look confident, walk with your head up as if you know where you are going. The appearance of being lost or being anxious may render you vulnerable to unwanted attention."

I've been going to Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School [where many Indigenous students attend] since 2011, talking to the students, and they'll tell you that they've had garbage thrown at them when they're walking to or from school. They get called names, told to go back home. It's pretty horrible when you hear a 14-year-old tell you, "Oh yeah, that happens, it's happened to me, it's happened to all my friends." It's so heartbreaking to me that this is the state of things in this century.

In another striking passage, you write about the errors in the missing person report on Curran Strang [who died at age 18, in 2005, in what the coroner ruled was an accidental drowning], including the fact that it was filed a full day after he went missing.

There's quite a bit of that, you know — you see it time and time again. Jethro Anderson — he was the

first boy, in 2000. When Dora, his aunt, called the police, she was told, “Well, he’s just out partying like all the other Native kids.” And it’s like, no, you don’t understand, he never does this. And this is not unique to the parents and caregivers of these kids, I hear the same story when I report on murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls. And, again, it’s not just a Thunder Bay story, it’s a Canadian story. I would argue that communication [with police is an] issue across the board — when cases are reported, how seriously they’re taken, what steps are done to look more for missing people, these things that repeat over and over again.

You talked to so many people who were bereft, who were angry, who had huge losses.

I’m so proud of the resiliency of these families. They’ve been through so, so much, and they really want to make sure that this doesn’t happen to any other children.

I think that the hardest interview was possibly with Ricki Strang [younger brother of Reggie Bushie, who died at age 15 in 2007 in what was ruled an accidental drowning]. I met Ricki in Thunder Bay — he doesn’t often come into the city — and we hung out together for a couple of days. We went to the McIntyre River and talked about everything that happened the night Reggie died — where they were in the bush, he showed me where they were drinking, we talked about who he was with. I was amazed at how close the area was to a Shopper’s Drug Mart and a big parking lot — I mean, you’re five feet away from the water’s edge. It was a beautiful sunny day, and I went to the car to get my camera — when I came back, Ricki was putting tobacco down on the water, and kneeling, and his hands were out, embracing his brother.

What was that like for you?

It’s hard, because you’re there, and it’s such an emotional moment, such an intimate moment. One of the last times Ricki was there, his brother was with him — he woke up in the water [he has no idea how he wound up there that night] and he couldn’t find Reggie. To be standing there with him — it was overwhelming, it really was. I’m honoured to be part of that, to be a witness to what he’s going through.

Five of the students were found dead in the water, and three of those five deaths — of Jethro, Kyle, and Jordan — were found to be undetermined by the coroner’s inquest. You write that that the “heavy cloak of racism, of a sinister motivation behind why the kids ended up in the water, seeped into the inquest proceedings and those questions remain to this day.”

It’s still true, isn’t it? The families still, for the most part, have no answers. I hope that the recommendations from the inquest — and there are many of them — are addressed; the jury really did a remarkable job.

In Thunder Bay, everyone is talking about this. It’s being debated in the newspapers, in coffee houses… But this is a question for all of Canada, not just Thunder Bay. I think — I hope — that things are changing now, with the MMIW inquiry, the spotlight on police. I think people are becoming more aware of what

has been in front of them in Canada for 150 years but [what they've] oftentimes chosen to ignore.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Source: **Chatelaine**

'The Families Still Have No Answers': Tanya Talaga's New Book on Tragedy in Thunder Bay

Izenberg, D. (2017, October 13). 'The families still have no answers': Tanya Talaga's new book on tragedy in Thunder Bay. *Chatelaine.* https://chatelaine.com/living/tanya-talaga-seven-fallen-feathers-book-interview/

Interview with Rhiannon Johnson

The Interview: Seven Fallen Feathers author Tanya Talaga

November 23, 2017

Tanya Talaga has been working at the Toronto Star for twenty years—first as a city reporter, covering breaking news around Toronto, then joining the national desk in the early 2000s. Today, she's the Star's Indigenous affairs correspondent.

Her first book, *Seven Fallen Feathers,* published Sept. 30, looks into the unexplained deaths of seven First Nations youth in Thunder Bay, Ont. Five of the seven bodies were found from 2000 to 2011 within the rivers that run through and surround Thunder Bay. A 2016 inquest into the deaths ruled that three of the cases were accidental and the other four causes of death were undetermined.

In the book, Talaga looks into the complex legacy left behind by the residential school system and how it has shaped the city of Thunder Bay and the Northern communities that these children all came from. She's been investigating the Thunder Bay deaths since 2011 and since its release, Seven Fallen Feathers has earned critical acclaim: It earned a finalist for the 2017 Hilary Weston Writers' Trust Prize for Nonfiction."There seems to be a lot of awakening as a result of her book…people are really paying close attention," Former Regional Grand Chief of Ontario, Stan Beardy said.

How did you get into journalism?

I grew up in Toronto and I went to the University of Toronto… I was the news editor of the *Varsity*. I was part of Victoria College at the University of Toronto. I started at the *Strand* [Victoria College campus newspaper]. I volunteered and I just learned it. I went from there to the *Varsity*. It was a really, really good spot for me because I never went to journalism school.

Have you always been able to focus on Indigenous issues in your reporting?

There wasn't a lot of appetite for Indigenous news in Canada, other than the stories on the chief that embezzles money. It was like that in Canada for a long time. It wasn't until Idle No More and when the Truth and Reconciliation Commission came out that people started to have more of an appetite, and news organizations started to have more of an appetite for Indigenous news.

I think that the TRC really opened people's eyes to this country's history and the 94 calls to action really did mean something to people. All of a sudden the newsmakers, people that controlled the papers and the TV stations and radio stations, it was in their face. And part of the reason why… was probably [younger people that were] going up and tweeting, asking questions, creating their own space on Twitter and on Facebook. That helped move it.

In cases where a child has been killed or gone missing, how do you approach the situation as a reporter – how do you call that family?

It's really hard. I've done it a lot. When I first started [with the *Star*] I was a city reporter and that sort of gives you the grounding and the basis to be able to do stuff like that often. So that, sadly [is] not a

very good answer, but that kinda helps — but it doesn't because you know it's hard every time you have to do that. Every time you have to pick up the phone, you just never know.

In the north, I usually call somebody else first. Like a band council member or the chief of a community or somebody at NAN (Nishnawbe Aski Nation). I back into it so I'm not cold calling. It's just better that way I think. You can be respectful that way and still get the story.

Do you think it's true that Indigenous journalists bring a shared experience to their work that is unique to their lived history in Canada, accounting for systematic effects of colonization?

That's very true. You have relatives that you never knew you had because they got taken away by Children's Aid and then they're showing up to family reunions. But you feel that weighed history. It's a responsibility. It's like when I was standing in Thunder Bay and realized – you gotta do it. You just have to [start writing about what's happening to Indigenous youth from northern communities in Thunder Bay].

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Source: **Review of Journalism**

The Interview: Seven Fallen Feathers author Tanya Talaga

Johnson, R. (2017, November 23). *The interview: Seven Fallen Feathers author Tanya Talaga*. Review of Journalism. https://rrj.ca/the-interview-seven-fallen-feathers-author-tanya-talaga/

Radio Story Excerpt from CBC Radio Unreserved

The story Tanya Talaga had to tell

Dec 01 2017

When Toronto Star reporter Tanya Talaga went to Thunder Bay in 2011, it was to write a story about why First Nation people were not voting in the federal election.

But instead, she came across a more compelling, and important story: the deaths of seven First Nation students who were living in Thunder Bay to attend high school.

"I went to interview Stan Beardy, who was then the grand chief of Nishnawbe Aski Nation … and I asked him about Indigenous voting patterns."

"While I was asking questions, he would look at me and ask me, 'Why is it you aren't writing a story about Jordan Wabasse?'"

After asking her question again, Beardy replied, "Jordan's been missing for 70 days," — prompting Talaga to change the story she was chasing.

"When [Beardy] told me that Jordan was the seventh student to die or go missing while in Thunder Bay, I couldn't believe it … because there were no proper schools for them in their home communities," said Talaga.

"It was then that I realized that I couldn't believe that this wasn't a bigger story, I mean why wasn't it having national media attention?"

Talaga started her research in the building where families from across northern Ontario were meeting to help coordinate the search for Jordan Wabasse.

"I was amazed because there were all these northern searchers were there, there were searchers from Cat Lake, there were searchers from his home community in Webequie, and they had put the flags up of their nations all over the inside of the office," said Talaga.

"There were grandmas in the corner making food for the searchers … I was just overwhelmed by the sense of community and love."

After doing a bit of research into Wabasse, Talaga realized that there was not enough room in a standard 800-word article to cover the complexity of the issue, which is why she decided to write the book, Seven Fallen Feathers.

"I just felt that people needed to know that this just wasn't a story about these seven kids, that this is a story about Canada … this is a story about so many things, about the legacy of the residential school system, of the fact that there are no schools for kids in northern communities," said Talaga.

Chanie's story rings true today

Included in Seven Fallen Feathers is the story of Chanie Wenjack, the young boy who ran away from Cecilia Jeffrey Indian Residential school in Kenora, Ont. in the fall of 1966, and later died of exposure along the railway tracks.

An inquest was held into Wenjack's death, and Talaga said that the jury asked, "Why is it that we have residential schools and we don't have schools in the community for the kids where they live?"

That question, Talaga said, still rings true in 2017.

"The story of Thunder Bay is really the story of Canada … broken treaties, residential schools, intergenerational trauma, and the failure to have equity for [First Nation] kids," said Talaga.

"Inside Thunder Bay you can see it's a microcosm of Canada, there's an undercurrent of subtle racism that runs through."

Source: **CBC Radio Unreserved**

Seven Fallen Feathers: The story Tanya Talaga had to tell

Seven Fallen Feathers: The story Tanya Talaga had to tell. (2017, December 1). CBC Radio. https://www.cbc.ca/radio/unreserved/taking-action-elementary-schools-universities-play-active-role-in-reconciliation-1.4426316/seven-fallen-feathers-the-story-tanya-talaga-had-to-tell-1.4426317

Discussion Questions

1. What did you think of Seven Fallen Feathers?

2. What did you like the most about Seven Fallen Feathers? And what aspects of the book did you find challenging?

3. How do you see the racism embedded in public institutions adding to the problems of Indigenous youth in Northern communities?

4. What more should the federal government be doing to support Indigenous communities across Canada?

5. What role can we play as individuals in promoting justice and equality for First Nations youth?

6. Talaga asks in the Epilogue: "Can the settlers and the Indigenous people come together as one and move forward in harmony?" What are your thoughts on this?

7. What do you think Talaga intended to convey by giving readers intimate portraits of the youths' lives?

8. How did this book influence your thoughts on the institutional racism faced by Indigenous peoples in Canada, as well as the legacy of the terrible harms done by the residential schools?

Source: **Amnesty International Book Club *Seven Fallen Feathers* Discussion Guide** (Questions developed by Monia Mazigh)

Amnesty International Book Club: Seven Fallen Feathers

Discussion Themes

Colonialism | *Cultural Genocide* | *Racism* | *Generational Trauma and Circular Suffering*
Indigenous Youth | *Education Reform* | *Support Networks* | *Tradition* | *Prophecy, Spirituality, and Hope*