

An evening with Author, Tanya Talaga at the Opera House

Written By CONSTANCE SCRAFIELD

Seven Fallen Feathers, written by Tanya Talaga, describes the events surrounding the unsolved mysteries of the deaths of seven Indigenous young people in Thunder Bay. The extended title is : Racism, Death and the Hard Truth in a Northern City, this is a story or stories, as Ms Talaga pointed out, "Not about a northern city; it's a story about Canada."

Long term writer, journalist, political journalist for the Toronto Star, Ms Talaga, having completed her run at the CBC Massey Lectures this year, came to Orangeville to give this audience a talk about her book and the many issues it deals with.

Her journey writing this book did not begin with the inspiration to write these stories about which she knew nothing. She went to Thunder Bay, in 2011, to talk about why the Indigenous people don't vote, as there was a federal election coming up.

She asked for an interview with the Grand Chief of Nishnawbe Aski Nation, Stan Beardy, and she wanted to begin her research by asking him. However, he did not answer any of her questions about voting; he answered her with questions of his own about the last one of the seven recently dead Indigenous young people, students in Thunder Bay.

Before too much of this, Ms Talaga realized that she was there, not to discuss voting but something else completely. They went for a drive and arrived at the very spot which the last place one of the victims had been seen. Then, she learned about them : Jordan Wabasse, Kyle Morrisseau, Curran Strang, Robyn Harper, Paul Panacheese, Reggie Bushie and Jethro Anderson.

They had died, five of them drowned in river water, two otherwise but these deaths had not been in the news, on the CBC or the CBS or Global. Their several deaths had not headlined the papers, not even her own Toronto Star. It was outrageous.

These young people were in Thunder Bay to go to high school, some 500 kilometres from their homes.

Ms Talaga explained it this way: from the 1870's until the 1990's, we took children away from their families, their language, their culture and brought them south to residential schools where they were punished for speaking their own language to each other, where they were stripped of their identity so they could be integrated into this society; where they were abused. The Canadian government paid for the schools and they were run by the churches, Presbyterian, United and the Catholic Church. The last residential school was closed in 1996.

She noted as an aside, "In the 1940's, when South Africa was instituting Apartheid, they sent delegates here to Canada to observe how we handled our Indigenous people."

Back to the issue of schooling, she pointed out, "And, even now, we are still doing this. We are taking young people away from their families, their home in the north ? their language and culture and bringing them south to go to high school. So, they're coming from their homes in the north to the condos and big buildings of a large city."

She said, "We're still doing this."

The story was headlined in the Star then but the deaths were still mysteries and it was some time until the body of the last of them, Jordan Wabasse. However, she knew this was much more than seven stories of seven deaths, that they stories that needed telling in a book and it was hers to write.

"I wasn't ready," she told the Orangeville audience that had packed the Opera House. "Life was in the way. I had children and was working full time for the Star. There wasn't much time left for a book."

The time did come, as she told all of us, "I started it the day after the inquest into the deaths of the seven teens. That was the end of June, 2016. It took me a year to write it."

Between writing and publishing , serious soul searching told her and her publisher that some of the individuals belonging to those dead teens had the right to see some of the manuscript. In a few cases, there were errors. In one case, a person insisted on changes. Normally, this never happens but Ms Talaga made the changes this time

Seven Fallen Feathers deals with so much more than the tragic issue of providing education to Indigenous children, the right of all Canadian children. It follows the injustice of the medical system; the racism, the purposeful neglect of the police who failed to investigate and attempt to solve the deaths.

The book presents Canada with a clear view of the on going wrongs and shows ways forward.

She put it to us, "Begin by knowing the Indigenous people in your area. Go to their pow wows. Read their literature. See their art."

Seven Fallen Feathers and Ms Talaga's recent published series of Massey Lectures, All Our Relations, are both for sale at BookLore, some signed copies are available. BookLore is in the mall across from the Orangeville Mall on First Street.