

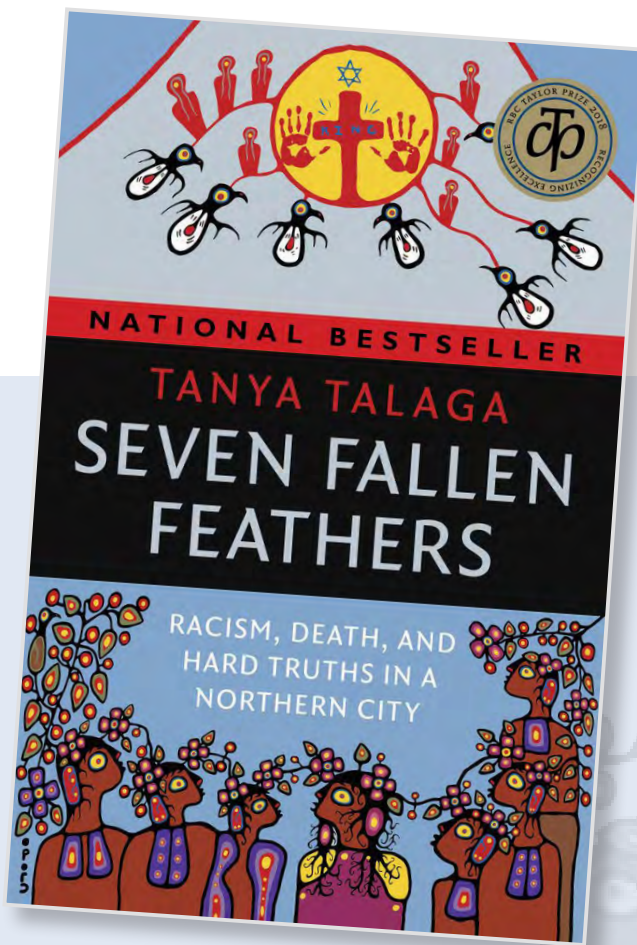


MAY/JUNE 2018

SEVEN FALLEN FEATHERS

BY TANYA TALAGA

RECOMMENDED BY MONIA MAZIGH



Cover of the 2013 re-edition, painted by Rudy Gutierrez



© Steve Russell/Toronto Star

Award-winning investigative journalist Tanya Talaga looks at the disappearances and deaths of seven First Nations high school students in Thunder Bay

We are back with another great book recommendation, one that is making an important contribution to a long overdue national conversation. The Amnesty International Book Club is pleased to announce our May/June title *Seven Fallen Feathers* by Tanya Talaga. This title has been recommended by guest reader Monia Mazigh, with whom you will explore the book and learn more about the racism and discrimination faced by First Nations youth in Thunder Bay, Ontario and the toll it is taking on young lives.

In this guide, you will find Mazigh's reflection on the book, discussion questions, and a special interview with the author Tanya Talaga herself.

Seven Fallen Feathers tells the stories of seven First Nations students who were attending high school in the city far away from their homes and families. In this book, award-winning investigative journalist Tanya Talaga looks at each of their lives and their situations while they were living in Thunder Bay, as well as the circumstances of their disappearances and deaths. Talaga collects stories from their families and communities, as well as details from police and coroner reports, in order to try and understand not only what happened to these youth, but also how Canadian society had failed each of them. Using a sweeping narrative focusing on the lives of the students, Talaga delves into the history of this small northern city that is representative of the long history of human rights violations against Indigenous peoples across Canada.

Thank you for being part of the Amnesty International Book Club. We appreciate your interest and would

love to hear from you with any questions, suggestions or comments you may have. Just send us an email at bookclub@amnesty.ca.

We think you will be moved and inspired by *Seven Fallen Feathers*. We are pleased to be able to be part of this conversation.

About Amnesty International

Amnesty International is a global movement of more than seven million supporters, members and activists in over 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights.

Our vision is for all people to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion, and are funded mainly by our membership.

Until everyone can enjoy all of their rights, we will continue our efforts. We will not stop until everyone can live in dignity; until every person's voice can be heard; until no one is tortured or executed.

Our members are the cornerstone of these efforts. They take up human rights issues through letter-writing, online and off line campaigning, demonstrations, vigils and direct lobbying of those with power and influence.

Locally, nationally and globally, we join together to mobilize public pressure and show international solidarity.

Together, we make a difference.

For more information about Amnesty International visit amnesty.ca or write to us at: Amnesty International, 312 Laurier Ave. E., Ottawa, ON K1N 1H9.



About this month's
featured author,

Tanya Talaga



© Steve Russell/Toronto Star

Tanya Talaga is an Anishinaabe writer who grew up in Toronto but spent part of each year in the area around Thunder Bay, the traditional territory of her mother's family. An investigative reporter for the *Toronto Star*, Talaga has written on many issues of concern to Amnesty International, including the national tragedy of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. Talaga has been part of two investigative teams that each won project of the year National Newspaper Awards. Nominated four times at the Michener Awards for public service journalism, she was named the Atkinson Fellow for public policy in 2017. *Seven Fallen Feathers: Racism, Death and Hard Truths in a Northern City* won the RBC Taylor Prize for non-fiction in 2018.

"I just knew there was a greater story to be told about the land and the water and what First Nations people experience in Thunder Bay. Because that's what my mother lived, that's what my mother's relatives lived."

"So it was important for me to tell the story that I saw, the greater story of the true history of not just the Thunder Bay area, but of all of Canada, a history that people weren't really listening to for a long time."

—Interview with Tanya Talaga page 6

About this month's
guest reader,

Monia Mazigh



© Monia Mazigh

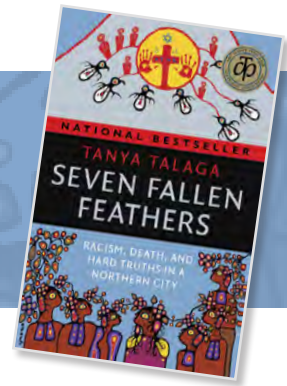
Monia Mazigh is a Canadian author and academic best known for her efforts to free her husband Maher Arar from a Syrian prison. Her memoir *Hope and Despair: My Struggle to Free My Husband, Maher Arar* (McClelland and Stewart 2008, translated by Patricia Claxton and Fred Reed) documents her ordeal after her husband was arrested and how she campaigned to clear his name.

With her latest book, *Hope Has Two Daughters* (Anansi 2017), translated by Fred Reed, Mazigh weaves a bracing and vividly-told story set against the backdrops of the Tunisian Bread Riots in 1984 and the Jasmine Revolution in 2010. Mazigh's other works include *Mirrors and Mirages* (Anansi, 2014), a finalist for the Trillium Book Award in the original French, and *Random Thoughts About Feminism*, a story that appears in *Resilience and Triumph: Immigrant Women Tell Their Stories* (Second Story Press, 2015).

Born and raised in Tunisia, Mazigh immigrated to Canada in 1991. She holds a PhD in finance from McGill University and taught at Thompson Rivers University, Kamloops, BC. Mazigh lives in Ottawa with her husband and two children. She is a regular blogger in English and French on her website <https://moniamazigh.wordpress.com>.



Monia Mazigh's reflections on *Seven Fallen Feathers*



Maya Angelou, poet, singer and Black American civil rights activist once famously said, “there is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you”. One may wonder which agony is she referring to? And how can someone approach or visit death because of untold stories? Reading the book of “Seven Fallen Feathers” by the Canadian journalist, Tanya Talaga, helps us grab better what Maya Angelou was brightly and rightly describing about the power of storytelling.

It is using this process of storytelling, so strong and so powerful in the oral tradition of Indigenous cultures, that Talaga writes about seven young indigenous students who lost their lives...

Talaga's book came out following the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. I am sure that many Canadians have heard about that commission. Some even may have followed it closely. What I personally miss, once the testimonies were given and recommendations written, are the stories and more stories. Stories that would help all Canadians understand the lives of Indigenous people, their daily challenges from being separated from their children, their landscape and their families. Stories that would help mothers heal their wounds and fathers deliver their tears.

It is using this process of storytelling, so strong and so powerful in the oral tradition of Indigenous cultures, that

Talaga writes about seven young indigenous students who lost their lives in very tragic and obscure circumstances in the northern city of Thunder Bay.

Talaga's book alternates between the personal stories of these students who at an early age had to leave their communities, their families and friends and go to live in Thunder Bay to attend high school, and the political, social and historical documentation of Indigenous communities in several northern Ontario communities.

Each story of each student is different: the names, the communities, the relationships, the tragic circumstances and ultimately the death. And yet, many aspects make them so similar. The harsh separation from their siblings and their communities, the fear of the big city, the loneliness, the institutional racism and the total indifference of the general population. What also brought these families together, despite the particularities of each

For centuries, since the establishment of Canada as a federation, there have been stories of Indigenous children forcefully taken to residential schools

case, are the depth of their mourning, their solidarity and the strengths of the stories told by the Elders.

The stories brought to us by Talaga are relatively recent – they happened between 2000 and 2011 – and yet very old. For centuries, since the establishment of Canada as a federation, there have been stories of Indigenous

children forcefully taken to residential schools, the latest of them was finally shut down in 1996. When Dr. Peter Brycedoctor advised “Indian Affairs” in 1904 to improve ventilation in residential schools and recommended that children needed proper medical care, he was ignored by the official authorities and the frightening rate of Indigenous children dying of tuberculosis in these schools continued to soar.

In June 2016, the coroner of the inquest into the death of the First Nations students in Thunder Bay ruled that the cause of death of Paul Panacheese, Kyle Morriveau, Jethro Anderson, and Jordan Wabasse were undetermined. The deaths of Robyn Harper, Curran Strang and Reggie Bushie’s deaths were deemed to be an accident.

One of the recommendation of this inquest was to “fund early childhood education, daycare and schools the same as every other Ontario school”. This same

recommendation has been made 20 years earlier when another teenager Selena Sakanee died in 1997 and an inquest held into her death led to similar recommendation. Would the Canadian government finally listen and learn from these stories to stop the hemorrhage?

Social worker and human rights activist Dr. Cindy Blackstock has been fighting the federal government for years to obtain the same funding for child welfare agencies in First Nations communities as is available in the rest of Canada. Whether this would happen soon or not would be something to keep watching for. But for now, the stories of Jethro, Curran, Robyn, Paul, Kyle, Reggie and Jordan should never be forgotten. The Seven Fallen Feathers stories should be told and retold. Talaga brought them to us with rigor, sorrow and courage.

—Monia Mazigh

Discussion questions on *Seven Fallen Feathers*

From guest reader Monia Mazigh and the Amnesty International Book Club

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. A 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?

Q&A



Seven Fallen Feathers places the deaths of seven First Nations youth in the context of the profound inequities that face First Nations, Inuit and Métis families across Canada. The book delves into many themes central to Amnesty International's human rights work in Canada, including the profound disparities in access to basic services in First Nations communities and the all too frequent failure of police and the justice system to treat Indigenous persons with respect and dignity and to uphold their rights to live in safety.

Craig Benjamin coordinates Amnesty International Canada's research and advocacy in collaboration with Indigenous peoples in Canada. In a special interview for this book club, he spoke with Tanya Talaga about *Seven Fallen Feathers*.

INTERVIEW WITH Tanya Talaga

CRAIG BENJAMIN: First of all, congratulations not only on an extremely well-researched and written book, but on all the attention that it has very deservedly attracted.

TANYA TALAGA: Thank you.

CB: What drew you to wanting to tell the stories of Jethro Anderson, Curran Strang, Paul Panacheese, Robyn Harper, Reggie Bushie, Kyle Morrisseau and Jordan Wabasse?

TT: It began for me in 2011 when I went to Thunder Bay to do a story for the *Toronto Star* on Indigenous voting patterns and why it is historically that Indigenous people weren't voting. This is before CBC Indigenous and Idle No More. It was before the TRC recommendations came out. So I went to interview the Grand Chief of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation at the time, Stan Beardy. It was during that interview about voting patterns that he started asking me about why I wasn't writing a story about Jordan Wabasse.

We went back and forth that like for about 10 or 15 minutes. I kept asking about the election and he kept telling me about Jordan. It became apparent that I wasn't going to get anywhere so I put my manic Toronto journalist self aside and remembered

who I was sitting with, the Grand Chief, and he was trying to tell me something and I should really listen. So that's when he told me about Jordan and about six other students who had died in Thunder Bay since 2000.

CB: In the book, you actually recount that story of how you came with one agenda and through that conversation with Grand Chief Beardy actually came to focus instead on this whole other story.

TT: It was important for me to let people know why I felt I had to tell this story.

My grandmother is a member of Fort William First Nation which is right in the centre of Thunder Bay. My mom was raised on the traditional territory of Fort William, honestly out in the bush in the middle of a little place called Raith and another place called Graham. These are little places that really only Indigenous people know about.

From my mom and her upbringing and what she experienced, and what I had seen as a girl – we lived in Toronto but we would always go up for summers – I just knew there was a greater story to be told about the land and the water and what First Nations people experience in Thunder Bay. Because that's what my mother lived, that's what my mother's relatives lived.

So it was important for me to tell the story that I saw, the greater story of the true history of not just the Thunder Bay area, but of all of Canada, a history that people weren't really listening to for a long time.

CB: Talking about the deaths of these young people at the heart of your book, as well as the patterns of murder and disappearance of Indigenous women and girls across Canada, you write, "time and again, Indigenous peoples have been getting the message that they are less than worthy victims." Is part of the purpose of your book to hold just a few of these lives up to the Canadian public and to show just how worthy they are?

TT: I wanted the book to honour the lives of the *Seven Fallen Feathers*. These children had families who loved them, they came from communities who loved them. Their lives were just as worthy as anyone else in this

country yet they were denied the right to go to high school in their home communities.

For every other child in this country, if you're non-Indigenous and you live anywhere really, in an urban city or a small town, you have access to high schools. It's remarkable to me that in this day and age, 2018, we don't have proper high schools for all the children in this country. Indigenous people deserve everything that everyone else gets.

CB: I wonder too if part of the way that Canadian society as a whole has failed young Indigenous people like these seven is in the failure to tell these kinds of stories.

TT: For sure. Canadian society has been taught to look away when it comes to Indigenous people. It starts from the very beginning. Look at the Indian Residential School System, and look what Sir John A. Macdonald was saying in the early 1880s: he called us savages and said we needed to be assimilated into the Canadian context in order to live and to survive.

Their lives were just as worthy as anyone else in this country yet they were denied the right to go to high school in their home communities.



The last Indian Residential School only closed in 1996. That's remarkable when you think about. The first ones opened in the mid-1880s and 150,000 Indigenous people went through the system. The aftermath of that and the generations of trauma that have been caused through the loss of identity, the tearing away from the land, your culture, your language and everything you know, the fallout from that has been horrendous. And yet we haven't talked about it. We haven't addressed it.

There can be no reconciliation in this country without basic, fundamental human rights for Indigenous people.... Reconciliation is not about apologies and it's not about hugs. It's about real rights.



We also haven't addressed the blind thievery of the treaties. We haven't been addressing what's been happening in the justice system, which has been very unequal for Indigenous peoples. You just have to look at the number of Indigenous people in the prisons and the lack of Indigenous representation on the jury system to see two examples of how unfair the justice system is for Indigenous people. Then look at education. Then look at health care. I mean, it's everywhere.

There can be no reconciliation in this country without basic, fundamental human rights for Indigenous people. I think if you were to ask any Indigenous person they would agree with that statement.

Reconciliation is not about apologies and it's not about hugs. It's about real rights.

It's about clean drinking water for everyone, clean water to bathe your children in, to cook and to drink. It's about schooling so that every single child in this country gets a proper chance at life and not just some children. It's about Jordan's Principle. It's about having healthcare and social services for Indigenous people that are the same as for anyone else living in this country.

These are basic things. It's remarkable to me that they're just not there in many ways for First Nations.

CB: In five of the deaths described in your book, and in two more that you talk about in an epilogue, young Indigenous women and men have been found drowned in

the rivers and lakes around Thunder Bay. While police have said that there is no evidence of foul play, many community members suspect otherwise. This reminds me of other suspicious death cases across the country. And it leads me to wonder if part of the gulf in perspectives between police and Indigenous communities, is that many police don't fully understand or haven't come to terms with the depths of racism experienced by Indigenous peoples and pervasiveness of hate crimes and other violence all of which informs the belief that these deaths should have been investigated as possible murders.

TT: I think it's true that there's a real divide. It's not every single police officer, and it's not every single police force, but there has been a divide between Indigenous people and authorities.

You can see that divide beginning at the time the Residential School system was being created when RCMP officers were the ones sent into communities to gather up the children, to take them away and send them to residential schools. So there has been an uneasy relationship for a very long while.

And I hear this all the time from families of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, I hear from it from the families of the *Seven Fallen Feathers* that there is a lack of communication, a lack of respect. When people call to say that they think their loved one is missing, sometimes calls aren't returned right away. And the families aren't really being heard. I think there needs to be a reckoning there and I don't know what that's going to look like.

CB: The story of Chanie Wenjack who died in 1966 after running away from residential school, has recently become much better known, in part due to the work of Gord Downie. But you write about an aspect that most people probably haven't heard about, the fact that there was an inquest after Chanie's death.

The fact that the recommendations from that 1967 inquest were never acted on is one of the things in your book that most resonated with me, because this is a pattern we have seen over and over again in Amnesty's work, where tragic events lead to inquests and inquiries but the outrage and the demand for action doesn't last long enough for the results of those inquiries to be put into action.

TT: That's so true. To be honest, we ask these big societal questions at the conclusion of inquests but coroners' inquests and coroners' juries aren't really the place for recommendations to come forward and to be acted on. The recommendations that come out of these inquests aren't binding with anybody. It should be the rule of law that they be implemented but it isn't.

Nice words won't do it. And meaning well doesn't mean it's actually going to happen. We need concrete steps to actually make these things happen.



We had a coroners' jury in the late 1960s in the inquest into Chanie's death saying that there should be schools for First Nations kids that need them. Now we have the TRC saying the same thing. The inquest into the death of the *Seven Fallen Feathers* said the same thing. But there's no political will to fulfill these recommendations.

Nice words won't do it. And meaning well doesn't mean it's actually going to happen. We need concrete steps to actually make these things happen. Maybe there's another way we should be approaching these big societal questions.

Open your eyes and your ears to something that's a little bit different than you. Open your eyes and ears to the cultures of Indigenous people in this country.



CB: You've included a recommended reading list in *Seven Fallen Feathers* that includes books on Indigenous cultures and history in northern Ontario through to the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Obviously, as you've already touched on, there's a lot of learning that needs to be done. For people who have read your book and have been motivated by these stories, I wonder if you have any other suggestions for how they can contribute to a meaningful approach to true reconciliation?

TT: Thanks for asking that question. I think that reading as much as you can about the first peoples of this country is a good thing. There's so much out there right now, so many fiction books and so many non-fiction books. You can even go see movies. You can go see *Indian Horse*, the adaptation of Richard Wagamese's remarkable book.

Open your eyes and your ears to something that's a little bit different than you. Open your eyes and ears to the cultures of Indigenous people in this country.

The TRC put out *94 Calls to Action*. They're not onerous to read. You can even get a little tiny booklet from the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation. Senator Sinclair said that if we each took even one of those Calls to Action and tried to apply it to our own lives, it would make a difference. That's something every single person can do. Take one of the Calls to Action and see how it applies to your life and what you can do. You can make your own reconciliation in that way.





Amnesty International activists participate in the Aboriginal Day of Action on June 28, 2008 in Ottawa.

If you have been inspired to action by reading *Seven Fallen Feathers*, here are five ways you can make a difference.

- 1** Read the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action at <http://nctr.ca/reports.php>
- 2** As Tanya Talaga suggests in our interview with her, make a personal commitment to putting one of those Calls to Action into effect in your own life, whether in your personal relations, at your school or in your workplace.
- 3** Join one of the campaigns for equality and fairness for First Nations children and youth organized by Cindy Blackstock and the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society
<https://fncaringsociety.com/7-free-ways-make-difference>
- 4** Learn more about the work being done by the foundation set up by the Wenjack family and the late Gord Downie: <https://www.downiewenjack.ca/>
- 5** Donate a copy of *Seven Fallen Feathers* to a local library, community centre or youth group.

COMING UP

IN JULY 2018

Scarborough by Catherine Hernandez

Recommended by guest reader
Ahmad Danny Ramadan

Scarborough follows the lives of three children who inhabit Toronto's low-income east end. Bing, who lives under the shadow of his father's mental illness while his mother works tirelessly in a nearby nail salon. Sylvie, who, along with her family, rides the waves of the shelter system and the complications of special-needs education. And Laura, whose history of neglect with her mother is destined to repeat itself with her father.

A sense of community is built once a family reading program is established in the Kingston/Galloway area under the compassionate direction of childhood educator Ms. Hina. The program's goal is to increase literacy on a provincial level. But amidst acute poverty

and rampant drug use, Ms. Hina soon realizes the neighborhood's people would be more interested in learning – if only they had full stomachs. Told over the course of an entire school year, *Scarborough* explores the positive impact of neighbourhood programming amongst Toronto's poor and its devastation when the very governments who established these programs come and go.

The discussion guide will be sent out July 2018.

In the meanwhile, if you have any questions or comments, please contact us at bookclub@amnesty.ca



Share the Amnesty International Book Club online [f](#) [t](#) [i](#) [g](#)

- Check us out on Facebook at **Amnesty International Book Club**, Twitter at **@AmnestyReads**, Instagram at **@AmnestyBookClub** and join our discussion group on **Goodreads.com**