Seven Fallen Feathers

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TANYA TALAGA

Tanya Talaga is an Ojibwe writer and journalist with roots in Fort William First Nation in Ontario, Canada. She was raised in Toronto and worked as a journalist for the *Toronto Star* for more than 20 years. In 2011, while writing a feature on Indigenous voter turnout in advance of an upcoming federal election, the tribal leaders Talaga spoke with across Ontario encouraged her to write about a more important issue: the deaths of Indigenous high school students in the Thunder Bay area. The resulting book became *Seven Fallen Feathers: Racism, Death and Hard Truths in a Northern City*. It was released in 2017 to great critical acclaim—it became a national bestseller, and won the RBC Taylor Prize and the Shaughnessy Cohen Prize for Political Writing. Talaga was named the 2017-2018 Atkinson Fellow in Public Policy and delivered the 2018 Massey Lectures. Based on those lectures, she wrote a book entitled *All Our Relations: Finding the Path Forward*, about the crisis of youth suicide in Indigenous communities across Canada. Talaga lives in Toronto.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Seven Fallen Feathers focuses primarily on the first two decades of the 21st century, exploring the social, economic, and political conditions surrounding the deaths of seven Indigenous students in the racially divided city of Thunder Bay, Ontario. But in order to fully understand the hostile climate in Thunder Bay—and how that climate has the power to destroy the lives of Indigenous students who come to the city to seek better educations and futures—one must understand the history of Canada's cultural genocide against its Indigenous population. From the time white settlers arrived in Canada in the 15th century, they began stripping Indigenous people of their land and resources, forcing them onto reservations and conning them into unfair treaties that would define colonial relations for decades to come. When the Canadian government no longer wanted to hold up its end of the bargain on these treaties, it created residential schools. These were state-funded boarding schools that Indigenous children and teenagers were required to attend, with the goal of forcibly assimilating Indigenous children so that they'd eventually blend into white colonial society and render the treaties moot. But the residential schools were rife with abuse, disease, and dysfunction—and the trauma that the 150,000 survivors of the residential schools experienced still has devastating effects on the current generation of Indigenous youth in Canada. With reservations criminally underfunded and lacking in basic resources like electricity and running water, contemporary Indigenous youths are still essentially forced to abandon their homes and families if they want to pursue an education in Canada.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Seven Fallen Feathers is part of a rich tradition of books that explore the history of racism and cultural genocide in Canada. Jesse Thistle's *From the Ashes: My Story of Being Métis, Homeless, and Finding My Way* is a memoir of Thistle's struggles to overcome generational trauma, racism, and poverty in Canada. In Alicia Elliott's *A Mind Spread Out on the Ground*, the author explores the ongoing legacy of colonialism and racism in Canada. Elliott recounts stories from her own life and more broadly examines how structural racism impacts Indigenous Canadian writers fighting to tell their stories. Finally, Michelle Good's *Five Little Indians*, which is told from the alternating viewpoints of five survivors of Canada's residential school system, focuses specifically on the generational trauma created by the Canadian government's re-education and assimilation program.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Seven Fallen Feathers: Racism, Death and Hard Truths in a Northern City
- **When Written:** 2011–2017
- **Where Written:** Ontario, Canada
- **When Published:** 2017
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Nonfiction
- **Setting:** Canada (primarily Thunder Bay, Ontario)
- **Climax:** Following an eight-month-long inquest into the deaths of seven Indigenous high school students who died in Thunder Bay, a jury makes 145 recommendations for how Canada's government should better support its Indigenous people.
- **Antagonist:** Colonialism, racism, Thunder Bay Police
- **Point of View:** First Person, Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Worth 1,000 Words. In 2016, Christian Morrisseau created a painting entitled *Seven Fallen Feathers* after the results of the inquest into the deaths of seven Indigenous teenagers in Ontario—including Christian's own son, Kyle. The painting's title is what inspired the title of Talaga's book. Morrisseau gifted the painting to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau—and to Canada—but sells prints of the striking, emotional painting in

his online store.

PLOT SUMMARY

In *Seven Fallen Feathers*, Ojibwe author and journalist Tanya Talaga reports on the deaths of seven Indigenous Canadian high school students who traveled to Thunder Bay, Ontario to attend boarding school in the city. The seven students, who died between 2000 and 2011, were from remote First Nations reserves. Five of them were found in the city's **rivers, and many had bruises and burns on their bodies that could indicate foul play**. Yet the deaths received scant media coverage, and the Thunder Bay Police insisted that in each of the seven cases, "no foul play" was involved.

Talaga roots the 21st-century tragedies in Canada's long history of colonialism and cultural genocide. French and English settlers colonized Canada from the 15th century onward. But in 1876, with the passage of the Indian Act, the Canadian government enforced laws meant to sequester Indigenous adults on their reservations while forcing Indigenous children 16 and under to attend one of the country's 139 residential schools. The schools were created to assimilate Indigenous children into white Canadian culture—but the schools were hotbeds of violence, physical abuse, sexual assault, malnutrition, disease, and even forced medical experimentation. The 150,000 survivors of the residential school system were forever traumatized by their experiences in the schools—and, Talaga asserts, the generational trauma created up until the schools' closures in the 1970s still affects Indigenous communities in the present day. Alcoholism, cycles of abuse, and the government's punitive lack of funding for Indigenous communities has left hundreds of thousands of people traumatized and isolated.

Because there are few resources on Indigenous reserves, many Indigenous children who want to pursue educations are forced to travel to cities like Thunder Bay to enroll in schools. The Northern Nishnawbe Education Council (or NNEC) was established in the 1970s to give Indigenous people a greater say in their children's educations. In 1999, the NNEC received a government grant to open up a new school for Indigenous students on the site of an old residential school in Thunder Bay. They hoped that having a dedicated place where Indigenous students could go to experience city life, learn, and grow would be a fresh start for many. Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School (DFC) opened its doors in 2000—but within weeks of its opening, grade nine student Jethro Anderson was found dead in the city's Kaministiquia (Kam) River. The police immediately stated that foul play wasn't suspected—but at the funeral home, Jethro's relatives discovered suspicious bruises on his body and what appeared to be cigarette burns on his face.

In September of 2005, Curran Strang—a student who'd struggled with alcohol abuse and suicidal thoughts—was found in the McIntyre River. Again, police immediately alleged that the cause of death was accidental drowning. In 2006, Paul Panacheese collapsed suddenly and died immediately on his mother's kitchen floor in Thunder Bay. She'd recently moved there to be closer to him after he admitted to struggling with school, friends, and peer pressure to experiment with drugs and alcohol. To this day, no explanation for Paul's death has ever been found. A few months later, in January of 2006, Robyn Harper was brought home by NNEC officials after a night of heavy drinking with friends. Her boarding family found her dead in the morning—the cause of death was acute alcohol poisoning. Had Robyn's friends or the NNEC taken her to a hospital, she might have lived.

In October of 2007, brothers Ricki Strang and Reggie Bushie were out drinking with friends when Ricki lost consciousness. When he regained his senses, he was in the ice-cold McIntyre River—and his brother was nowhere to be found. Less than a week later, Reggie Bushie's body was pulled from the river. Again, police immediately insisted that no foul play was involved—even though Ricki insisted that the two of them were experienced swimmers, so Reggie wouldn't have drowned on his own. A couple of years later, in 2009, the body of Kyle Morrisseau—the grandson of Norval Morrisseau, a famed Ojibwe painter and a survivor of the residential schools—was pulled from the McIntyre River. Police determined that Kyle had died of drowning, perhaps fueled by inebriation. In 2011, Jordan Wabasse became the seventh student to die, and the fifth to be recovered from one of the city's rivers.

In May of 2012, Julian Falconer—a prominent Canadian lawyer—demanded that the coroner's office conduct an inquest into the seven deaths on behalf of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation. The inquest was heavily stalled; it finally began in October of 2015 and lasted until June of 2016. Ultimately, the jury released a list of 145 recommendations as to how the Government of Canada could begin to repair relations with the Indigenous communities across the country, provide better funding for reserves, reform the Thunder Bay Police's apathy toward Indigenous deaths, and build a more supportive, watchful education system. But to date, few of those recommendations have been carried out.

In 2017, two more dead teenagers—Tammy Keeash and Josiah Begg—were pulled from different parts of the McIntyre River within two weeks of each other. While small steps continue to be made—Thunder Bay Police now patrols the waterways more carefully at night—Indigenous leaders and community members still struggle to secure funding, attention, and support for housing projects and safety initiatives that could save the lives of young, vulnerable students.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Tanya Talaga – Tanya Talaga is the author and narrator of *Seven Fallen Feathers*. An Ojibwe journalist based in Toronto, Talaga was researching Indigenous voting patterns ahead of the 2011 federal election in Canada when one of her interview subjects, Stan Beardy, asked her why she wasn't writing about a more important Indigenous issue: the seven Indigenous students who'd died in Thunder Bay, Ontario between 2000 and 2011. Five of the seven had been found in Thunder Bay's **rivers** days or weeks after their initial disappearances. Talaga turned her attention to these "seven fallen feathers," and throughout the book, she relates their stories to Canada's long history of racism, violence, and cultural genocide against its Indigenous population. Talaga's book shares the stories of the seven lost students—most of whom were living in boarding houses with distant relatives or strangers while attending schools in Thunder Bay, due to poorly funded education on Indigenous reserves throughout Canada. Talaga also contextualizes the students' stories alongside the history of Canada's oppressive and abusive residential schooling system. Talaga's voice throughout the book is empathetic yet unflinching. An Indigenous woman herself, she becomes invested in the lives of the residential school survivors she meets, as well as the families and acquaintances of the "seven fallen feathers" whose recollections make up much of the book.

Jethro Anderson – Jethro Anderson was the first of the titular "seven fallen feathers" to disappear from the Thunder Bay, Ontario area in October of 2000, when he was 15 years old. Jethro had moved to Thunder Bay to live with his aunt and guardian Dora and attend school at the then-new Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School, a high school for Indigenous kids located in Thunder Bay. When Jethro missed his curfew one night, Dora drove around the city for hours looking for him before calling the police. The Thunder Bay Police told her that Jethro was probably "out there partying like every other Native kid." The police would wait nearly a week before beginning an investigation into Jethro's disappearance. On November 11, Jethro's body was found in the city's Kam **River**. Jethro's death is indicative of how white Canadian institutions discount and disregard Indigenous people due to racism and apathy. Though Dora discovered bruises and cigarette burns on Jethro's body when she viewed it at the local funeral home—and though Jethro's cousin Nathan would, years later, encounter a bar patron who confessed to killing Jethro—the police never investigated any possible foul play. They immediately closed the case on Jethro's death as an accidental drowning.

Curran Strang – Curran Strang was one of the titular "seven fallen feathers," a student at Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School in Thunder Bay, Ontario who went missing in the fall of 2005, at 18 years old. Curran had been struggling in school, abusing alcohol, and facing disciplinary action at DFC for months—but the underfunded and overstretched NNEC could not "catch" Curran and save him from a downward spiral. On September 22, Curran disappeared—and while friends reported that Curran had passed out drunk near one of the city's **rivers**, the police immediately dismissed Curran as a "runaway." On September 26, Curran's body was found in the McIntyre River; police never investigated his death as anything other than an accidental drowning. Again, the Thunder Bay Police's obvious disinterest in determining the facts surrounding Curran's suspicious death indicate how centuries of racism, apathy, and cultural genocide on the part of white Canadians continue to impact Indigenous communities across the nation.

Paul Panacheese – Paul Panacheese was one of the titular "seven fallen feathers" whom author Tanya Talaga writes about in the book. Paul died suddenly in 2006, collapsing on the floor of his mother Maryanne's kitchen after spending the night out with some friends. Many members of Paul's family, including his mother's sister Sarah, passed through the abusive and dangerous residential schooling program in Canada—and so when Paul went away to school in Thunder Bay, Ontario and began struggling to keep up, Maryanne moved to the city to protect and support him. Paul's sudden death—for which the coroner was unable to find any discernable cause—still left Maryanne and the rest of the Panacheese family reeling with grief. Shortly after Paul's death, the coroner's office disposed of all materials that could have been used to identify a cause of death—and so for Maryanne and the rest of Paul's family, there is, tragically, no answer as to why his life was cut short.

Robyn Harper – Robyn Harper was one of the titular "seven fallen feathers." A Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School student, she died in January 2006 after a night of heavy drinking with some new and unfamiliar school friends in Thunder Bay, Ontario. Her boarding parent, Cheyenne Linklater—who also worked with the NNEC—was captured on a security camera helping another NNEC member bring a heavily-inebriated Robyn home from a public bus terminal. The two of them allegedly placed Robyn on the floor of a hall in Cheyenne's home before heading back out on their nighttime patrol, during which they searched for other wayward kids to bring home. But by the next morning, Robyn was dead of acute alcohol poisoning. Cheyenne would later claim that she wasn't at the bus terminal, and that she didn't get home from work until the middle of the night—she claimed that when she checked on Robyn around 4 a.m., Robyn was fine. But by six the next morning, Robyn's other housemates discovered that she was dead. Tanya Talaga suggests that Robyn could still be alive if the NNEC and other support systems at DFC weren't underfunded and overburdened.

Reggie Bushie – Reggie Bushie was one of the titular "seven

fallen feathers" who disappeared and whose body was later found in one of Thunder Bay, Ontario's **rivers**. After a night out drinking with his brother Ricki Strang in October of 2007, Reggie disappeared. Ricki had blacked out and regained consciousness in the middle of the McIntyre River—he had no memory of what happened, but he believed that his brother was in the river. Reggie's family struggled to get the NNEC and the Thunder Bay Police to adequately investigate Reggie's disappearance and death. After Reggie's death, Indigenous elders began calling for an inquest as to why five Indigenous students had died in Thunder Bay in less than a decade.

Kyle Morrisseau – Kyle Morrisseau was one of the titular "seven fallen feathers" who disappeared in Thunder Bay Ontario, and whose body was later pulled from one of the city's **rivers**. Kyle came from a long line of artists—his father, Christian, is a painter, and his grandfather Norval Morrisseau was one of the most prominent Ojibwe artists of the 20th century. Christian had initially moved to Thunder Bay with Kyle when Kyle began attending school in the city—but by his second year in school, Kyle was on his own and living in a boarding house. Kyle's behavior began slipping, and he was arrested by the Thunder Bay Police on two occasions. He was drinking a lot and struggling in school at Dennis Franklin Cromarty—and in October of 2009, he disappeared. Ten days later, police found his body in one of the city's rivers.

Jordan Wabasse – Jordan Wabasse was the last of the titular "seven fallen feathers" who are the subjects of Tanya Talaga's book. Jordan Wabasse disappeared in Thunder Bay, Ontario in February of 2011, but his body wasn't recovered from the city's Kam **River** until 92 days after he was last seen. There were many confusing and suspicious rumors surrounding Jordan's death: one was that two white men had pushed him off a bridge. Two other Indigenous young men, Jordan Waboose and Kenny Wabasse (unrelated to Jordan Wabasse despite their similar names), had conversations online in which they feared that the Native Syndicate might have mistaken Jordan for someone with ties to the gang's activity and killed him accidentally. But the Thunder Bay Police never followed up on any of these leads, immediately declaring that no foul play was involved in Jordan's death.

Norma Kejick – Norma Kejick was one of the first members of the Northern Nishnawbe Education Council (NNEC) board, an organization that was created to run boarding programs and act as an authority for Indigenous students who left their reserves to pursue their educations. Norma and her fellow board members were optimistic when the NNEC began constructing a high school in Thunder Bay, Ontario where Indigenous students could go to learn and experience city life—but within a few years of the school's opening in 2000, Norma would begin to see her and her fellow board members' excitement as naïveté about the problems that Indigenous youth would face as they arrived in the city. Norma struggled to keep her own son, Jonathan, afloat at Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School—she wound up pulling him out of school when he expressed suicidal thoughts while studying there. And as more and more Thunder Bay students began dying and disappearing, Norma herself started to question why the NNEC could not keep so many students from slipping through the cracks. Norma herself contemplated suicide at several points following the losses of the "seven fallen feathers," the seven Indigenous students who died under suspicious circumstances in Thunder Bay in the 2000s and 2010s. But she kept herself alive and committed to fighting for Indigenous youth in spite of her own grief and frustration about the profound challenges that Indigenous students face.

Alvin Fiddler – As of 2021, Alvin Fiddler is the current grand chief of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN). He stepped into the position after the former grand chief, Stan Beardy, stepped down. As such, Fiddler oversees the governance of 45,000 people across the northern half of Ontario. When Tanya Talaga began writing about the disappearances and deaths of seven Indigenous students in Thunder Bay, Ontario, Fiddler encouraged her to start with the story of Chanie Wenjack—an Indigenous student who died after running away from one of Canada's residential schools in the mid-1960s. It was Fiddler who pointed out to Talaga the undeniable connection between the violence and trauma of the residential schools and the uncertainty, loneliness, and hostility that modern-day Indigenous boarding school students face in majority-white communities. Throughout the book, Fiddler emerges as an unrelenting advocate for his people. He repeatedly returned to Thunder Bay each time a student disappeared or died in order to comfort the students' families and advocate for thorough investigations into their deaths. Fiddler ultimately called for a formal inquest into the deaths of the "seven fallen feathers," forcing the office of the supervising coroner in Thunder Bay to formally and publicly answer for their insufficient, neglectful responses to the students' deaths. In spite of all the trauma and grief Fiddler has witnessed, by the end of the book, he insists to Talaga that he remains hopeful about the possibility of truth and reconciliation between Indigenous and white Canadians.

Chanie Wenjack – Chanie Wenjack was a student at the Cecilia Jeffrey residential school in the mid-1960s. In October of 1966, Chanie and two other boys ran away from the school, where students were abused, malnourished, and kept in unsanitary conditions. After staying a couple of nights with the family of one of the boys he escaped with, Chanie no longer felt welcome, so he set out on his own. But Chanie never made it to his destination—he was found dead beside some railroad tracks several days after leaving. Chanie's death led to a formal inquest, after which several recommendations were made as to how schools and support systems for Indigenous children could better function. But few of those recommendations were ever followed up on—and many Indigenous elders draw connections

between Chanie's death decades ago and the deaths of the "seven fallen feathers" in 21st-century Thunder Bay, Ontario.

Nanabijou – Nanabijou is a mythical giant of Ojibwe legend. According to myth, Nanabijou protected the Ojibwe people but warned that if they ever revealed the location of local silver deposits to white settlers, something terrible would happen. When a Sioux infiltrator revealed the location during a night of drinking, Nanabijou collapsed where he stood, forming the rock formation now known to many as the "Sleeping Giant" in Thunder Bay, Ontario.

Stan Beardy – Stan Beardy is the former grand chief of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN). Beardy's son, Daniel, died in 2004 after being beaten severely at a house party while attending Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School in Thunder Bay, Ontario. Beardy was the first person to encourage Tanya Talaga to write about the titular "seven fallen feathers"—seven Indigenous students who'd died while attending boarding school in Thunder Bay between 2000 and 2011.

Maryanne Panacheese – Maryanne Panacheese is the mother of Paul Panacheese, one of the titular "seven fallen feathers," who died suddenly and mysteriously in 2006 while attending school in Thunder Bay, Ontario. Maryanne was home when Paul collapsed on the kitchen floor while making a snack after a night out with friends. He died instantly. The coroner never determined a cause of death, and because all evidence relating to Paul's death was thrown away after a set amount of time, Maryanne never received any answers as to how or why Paul passed so suddenly and unexpectedly.

Cheyenne Linklater – Cheyenne Linklater was Robyn Harper's boarding parent and an on-call member of the NNEC in Thunder Bay, Ontario. On the night of Robyn's death, Cheyenne was on-duty, driving around Thunder Bay in an NNEC van to keep a lookout for any wayward students who needed a ride home. There is security camera footage of Cheyenne and fellow NNEC member David Fox driving Robyn and Skye Kakegamic home from the bus terminal where Skye brought a drunken Robyn—but Cheyenne later insisted that she hadn't picked the girls up and had only returned home at 4 a.m. after the conclusion of her shift. Tanya Talaga implies that had Cheyenne and David done more for the lethally intoxicated Robyn—and had the Thunder Bay police not made themselves so untrustworthy in the eyes of Thunder Bay's Indigenous community—Robyn might have lived.

Cindy Blackstock – Cindy Blackstock is a child protection professional who launched a human rights complaint against the Government of Canada on behalf of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society and the Assembly of First Nations following the death of Robyn Harper. Blackstock's work was important in highlighting how racism is built into the structure of Canadian bureaucracy—and how the Canadian government must do more to protect the country's Indigenous population.

Ricki Strang – Ricki Strang is the brother of Reggie Bushie, who died in Thunder Bay, Ontario in 2008. After a night of drinking with his brother and some friends, Ricki blacked out and came to waist-deep in the freezing water of the McIntyre **River**. When Reggie didn't emerge from the water or come home later that night, Ricki hoped that Reggie was just out partying with friends—but as the days passed, he began to sense that his brother was in the water, near the same place that he himself had stumbled from the river. Sure enough, authorities who dredged the river found Reggie's body in the water. Ricki told authorities that he and his brother had both had backpacks with them on the night Reggie disappeared, and that the backpacks were missing. But regardless of that, as well as the fact that Ricki and Reggie were both strong swimmers, the police immediately ruled out foul play.

Tammy Keeash – Tammy Keeash was just 17 years old when she was found dead in one of Thunder Bay, Ontario's **rivers** in the spring of 2017. Tammy's death made local news and soon sparked a national conversation as to why so many Indigenous youths were dying in Thunder Bay—and why the police force there was doing little to investigate or connect their deaths.

Skye Kakegamic – Skye Kakegamic is a former friend of Robyn Harper's. On the night of Robyn's death, Skye had made a promise to look out for Robyn if Robyn drank too much. Skye dutifully tried to get Robyn home safely after Robyn passed out drunk in public by calling the NNEC for help.

Rhoda King – Rhoda King is the mother of Reggie Bushie and Ricki Strang. Rhoda wasn't told that Reggie was missing until three days following his disappearance. Rhoda, together with Alvin Fiddler, would later call for an inquest not just into Reggie's death but into the deaths of all the Dennis Franklin Cromarty students who'd died suspiciously while studying in Thunder Bay, Ontario.

Darryl Kakekayash – Darryl Kakekayash was viciously attacked and thrown into the McIntyre **River** in Thunder Bay, Ontario by a group of white men in October of 2008, when he was just 16. Darryl survived the attack. At the suggestion of his principal, he brought his story to the Thunder Bay Police soon after—but it would take years for the police to follow up on Darryl's story, and they only did so in support of the larger inquest into the deaths of several other Dennis Franklin Cromarty students. Darryl's story seems to imply that while Thunder Bay Police quickly ruled out foul play in the deaths of five of the book's titular "seven fallen feathers," those youths may have been similarly attacked and thrown in the river to die as part of a larger pattern of assaults against Indigenous people.

Shannen Koostachin – Shannen Koostachin was an Indigenous youth activist who lobbied the Canadian government for more funding for schools on Indigenous reserves. Her pleas were largely met with inaction. Shannen ultimately had to leave her

reserve to pursue an education elsewhere—and while she was away from home studying in a different city, she was killed in a car accident.

Norval Morrisseau – Norval Morrisseau was a famed Ojibwe painter, often called the "Picasso of the North." He was a survivor of the residential school system. Norval was catapulted to fame in the 1960s, but his personal life was blighted by troubles with alcohol abuse. He taught his son Christian how to paint—and, in turn, Christian taught his own son Kyle.

Christian Morrisseau – Christian Morrisseau is the son of famed Ojibwe painter Norval Morrisseau and the father of Kyle Morrisseau, who was found dead in a Thunder Bay, Ontario river in 2008. In response to the results of the inquest into the deaths of Kyle and six other Indigenous youths, Christian created the massive painting *Seven Fallen Feathers* that gave Tanya Talaga's book its title.

Ivan Masakeyash – Ivan Masakeyash is a runner who was with Kyle Morrisseau on the night of Kyle's death. Kyle asked Ivan for help procuring a gun, but Ivan, who didn't really know Kyle, brushed him off. There were rumors that Ivan may have had ties to the Native Syndicate, but Ivan denied any involvement with the gang.

Julian Falconer – Julian Falconer is a Toronto lawyer who helped Reggie Bushie's family push for an inquest that would examine accusations of neglect on the part of the regional supervising coroner in Thunder Bay, Ontario. There were a lot of roadblocks in making the inquest happen and expanding it to cover the deaths of the "seven fallen feathers," seven Indigenous teenagers who'd lost their lives in Thunder Bay. But Falconer was committed to securing justice for the Indigenous families who'd lost their children, and he pushed for an investigation into the unmistakable patterns to the deaths of these students. Ultimately, together with retired Supreme Court Justice Frank Iacobucci, Falconer was able to secure the chief coroner's agreement to open an inquest into the deaths of all students. The inquest stretched on for years, and it resulted in a huge slew of recommendations as to how the Government of Canada and the City of Thunder Bay should better support Canada's Indigenous communities.

Frank Iacobucci – Frank Iacobucci is a former Supreme Court of Canada Justice who worked together with Julian Falconer to review the jury system used in cases concerning Indigenous people. The two of them wanted to ensure that Indigenous people were represented by members of their own communities. Iacobucci's review of the jury system revealed "systemic racism" throughout Canada's courts, and he proposed 17 recommendations for how to better ensure that the courts, prisons, and jury processes could fairly support Indigenous people.

Sam Achneepineskum – Sam Achneepineskum is an Indigenous Elder and a survivor of Canada's residential schools. Chanie Wenjack was one of his cousins, and they attended school together. Sam traveled to Thunder Bay, Ontario during the inquest to offer spiritual guidance to the families of the "seven fallen feathers," the string of seven Indigenous students who died in Thunder Bay.

Nathan – Nathan is Jethro Anderson's cousin. Years after Jethro's body was pulled from a Thunder Bay, Ontario **river**, a patron at a bar where Nathan was drinking with some friends approached Nathan and seemingly confessed to killing Jethro. But Nathan, having lost his faith in the Thunder Bay Police, didn't report the confession until 10 years after it happened.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Josiah Begg – Josiah Begg was only 14 when he was found dead in one of Thunder Bay, Ontario's **rivers**. Josiah and Tammy Keeash's deaths finally forced the Ontario chief coroner to request the assistance of a regional police force's assistance in investigating the string of nine Indigenous deaths in Thunder Bay.

The Blind Elder – The Blind Elder is an Elder of the Webequie First Nation who had visions of Jordan Wabasse during the search for Jordan's body throughout the winter and spring of 2011.

Clifford and Jessica Wabasse – Clifford and Jessica Wabasse are cousins of Jordan Wabasse. Clifford, Jordan's cousin, and Clifford's wife, Jessica, took Jordan in as a boarder when he moved to Thunder Bay, Ontario to attend Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School.

David Fox – David Fox is a member of the NNEC who helped bring Robyn Harper home to Cheyenne Linklater's house, where Robyn was living, on the night of Robyn's death.

Pearl Wenjack – Pearl Wenjack is one of Chanie Wenjack's older sisters.

Daisy Wenjack – Daisy Wenjack is another of Chanie Wenjack's older sisters.

Shawon Wavy – Shawon Wavy was a close friend of Jethro Anderson's at the time of Jethro's death. He was also friends with Paul Panacheese at the time of Paul's death.

Dora Morris – Dora Morris is Jethro Anderson's aunt. She was his caregiver and boarding parent while he attended Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School in Thunder Bay, Ontario.

Stella – Stella is Jethro Anderson's mother.

James Benson – James Benson is a former school friend of Jethro Anderson who felt powerless to help Jethro escape a downward spiral of alcoholism, depression, and inattentiveness in school in the weeks leading up to his death.

Stephen Harper – Stephen Harper was the prime minister of Canada from 2006 to 2015.

Justin Trudeau – As of 2021, Justin Trudeau is the current prime minister of Canada. He has been in office since 2015.

TERMS

First Nations – The First Nations are groups of Indigenous Canadian people. The First Nations groups are distinct from the Inuit and Métis, two other groups of Indigenous Canadians.

Ojibwe – The Ojibwe are an Indigenous people native to Southern Canada and the Northern Midwestern United States. **Tanya Talaga**, the author of *Seven Fallen Feathers*, is Ojibwe.

Indian Act – The Indian Act, introduced by the Canadian government in 1876, was a piece of legislation designed to "control and tame" Canada's Indigenous population by outlining and defining "every aspect of life for an Indigenous person in Canada," according to author **Tanya Talaga**. The Canadian Government used the Indian Act to create formal policy surrounding residential schools, restrict First Nations people from leaving their reserves, prohibit the formation of Indigenous political organizations, and ban religious or spiritual ceremonies. The Indian Act has, in contemporary times, been described as a form of apartheid (legalized racial segregation)—and white South African leaders actually modeled their system of apartheid on Canada's Indian Act.

Residential Schools – Residential schools were government-funded boarding schools in 19th- and 20th-century Canada where Indigenous children were sent, often against their will. The goal of these schools was to "kill the Indian in the child," or forcibly assimilate the students into white Canadian culture. An 1894 amendment to Canada's 1876 Indian Act made attendance at residential schools (or other forms of state schooling) mandatory for First Nations children and teenagers. Canadian residential schools were notorious for ripping children away from their families, cutting them off from their cultures, and subjecting them to physical and sexual abuse. In *Seven Fallen Feathers*, **Tanya Talaga** suggests that the traumas Indigenous people suffered at residential schools are still felt in later generations.

Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) – The Nishnawbe Aski Nation (abbreviated as NAN) is a political territorial organization representing 49 First Nations communities across Northern Ontario. It was established in 1973. As of 2021, **Alvin Fiddler** is currently the Grand Chief of the NAN. About 45,000 people both on and off reserves belong to the NAN.

Northern Nishnawbe Education Council (NNEC) – The Northern Nishnawbe Education Council (abbreviated as NNEC), headquartered in Thunder Bay, Ontario, is an Indigenous-run education authority established in 1978. Its core belief that Indigenous people should be able to self-determine the educations of their youth. The NNEC oversees boarding programs, schools, and safety for Indigenous students who attend school off of their reserves.

Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) – Formerly known as the Department of Indian Affairs, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (or INAC) was the department of the Government of Canada responsible for policies supporting and relating to Canada's Indigenous people. In 2017, Prime Minister **Justin Trudeau** dissolved INAC and announced a plan to create two new departments: Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, and Indigenous Services Canada.

Robinson-Superior Treaty – The Robinson-Superior treaty was signed in 1850 by the settler William Robinson and Ojibwe Chief Joseph Peau de Chat. The treaty gave the Crown the entire Lake Superior shoreline (over 57,000 square kilometers of land) in exchange for small annual payments and goods, and a reserve of just a few kilometers near Fort William. The treaty was important because it paved the way for the settlement of Thunder Bay, Ontario.

Runner – A runner is a person of legal drinking age who procures alcohol for people under the legal drinking age, often in exchange for money or alcohol for themselves.

First Nations Child and Family Caring Society – The First Nations Child and Family Caring Society is a Canadian non-profit organization. It provides research, policy, professional development and networking to support First Nations child and family service agencies.

Assembly of First Nations (AFN) – The Assembly of First Nations (or AFN), modeled on the United Nations General Assembly, is an assembly of First Nations represented by their chiefs.

Native Syndicate – The Native Syndicate is an Indigenous street gang in Canada involved in organized crime.

Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) – The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (abbreviated as RCMP and sometimes colloquially called Mounties) are Canada's federal police service.

Canadian Human Rights Tribunal (CHRT) – The Canadian Human Rights Tribunal (or CHRT) is an administrative tribunal founded in 1977 and funded by the Parliament of Canada. The CHRT holds hearings to investigate and adjudicate allegations of discrimination.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

COLONIALISM, CULTURAL GENOCIDE, AND RACISM

At the beginning of *Seven Fallen Feathers*, author Tanya Talaga cites a report from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada that defines "cultural genocide" as "the destruction of those structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group." By destroying a cultural, ethnic, or religious group's institutions, seizing their land and artifacts, or barring their languages and traditions, a colonizing force can effectively destroy a colonized group of people. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was created to address the cultural genocide that white Canadian settlers committed against Indigenous Canadians for centuries. As Talaga explores the deaths of seven Indigenous students (the titular "seven fallen feathers") in the Canadian city of Thunder Bay in the early 21st century, she argues that colonialism and cultural genocide aren't relegated to the past. Rather, they're ongoing processes that continue to harm Indigenous Canadians by diminishing their cultures and identities—and even putting their lives at risk.

First, Talaga examines Canada's long history of cultural genocide to show how the white settlers and Canadian government's policies toward Indigenous people were centered on destruction and colonization. Indigenous people were coerced into signing exploitative treaties with the white English and French settlers who sought to take their land. Agreements such as the Robinson-Superior Treaty, signed in 1850, forced Indigenous people to move onto reservations far from their sources of food, water, community, and commerce. White settlers took the best, most fertile land for themselves, depriving Indigenous people of their own resources "so that the nation of Canada could be formed." Canadian settlers also wanted to ensure that Indigenous people wouldn't threaten the developing colonial economy or social order. So, the Canadian government introduced legislation such as the Indian Act in 1876, which sought to systematically destroy Indigenous culture by barring Indigenous religious ceremonies, languages, and political structures. Talaga further argues that because the Canadian government never invested in learning more about the Indigenous people it was colonizing—preferring to ignore and erase the cultures and traditions of the land being settled—white Canadians essentially "built [their] own society" and ignored the struggles they'd created for Indigenous communities, as Indigenous people "powerlessly stood and watched."

Next, Talaga shows how colonialism and cultural genocide continue to define Indigenous life in Canada. Even though the Government of Canada has, throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, sought to make amends for the injustice that took place under colonialism, the damage of the past endures. Contemporary Indigenous communities remain restricted and devastated by past legislation. For example, while no act exists today to physically confine Indigenous people to their reservations, the "oppressive weight" of generational poverty and racist violence (which have historical roots in the way colonists treated the Indigenous population) mean that a lot of Indigenous people are essentially tied to their reservations anyway. While cultural traditions continue and families remain tight-knit on reservations, a lack of funding rooted in the unfair treaties of the past means that reservations often lack basic necessities, like running water and reliable electricity. Schools and community centers on Indigenous reservations—if they exist at all—are often in disrepair. And there are few grocery stores on or near reservations, meaning that Indigenous people face malnutrition and exorbitant prices for food. When Indigenous people do leave the reservations in pursuit of education—as all of the "seven fallen feathers" did—they often face racism and violence. Cities like Thunder Bay, for example, are hotbeds of hate crimes. The cultural legacy of colonialism and cultural genocide still influence Canadian society—Talaga makes clear that many white Canadians see Indigenous people as "dirty" and "unworthy" of having access to spaces that colonial settlers made into traditionally white ones.

Lastly, Talaga explains that colonialism and cultural genocide continue to threaten Indigenous Canadians' health and autonomy. Indigenous people continue to struggle daily against outdated policies, poverty, and pervasive racism, problems that are historically rooted in the way Canada's original white settlers treated the Indigenous population. So, while Canada may have eradicated official restrictions on how Indigenous people can live—both inside and outside their own communities—unofficial limitations remain on what Indigenous Canadians can achieve. Indigenous Canadians experience unequal access to health services, educational resources, and career opportunities compared to white Canadians. These lacks mean that Indigenous people are at a disproportionately high risk of health problems, and they have few avenues to pursue their goals and better their circumstances. And as long as the Government of Canada continues to ignore the "seeds" of structural racism and cultural genocide that were planted long ago, Talaga argues that nothing good or new can grow in Canadian society. Talaga suggests that in order to truly begin healing the wounds of the past, Canada must invest in a new approach to reckoning with the "seeds" planted long ago. Rather than ignore them or continue to "nourish" them with neglect, the Canadian government and descendants of colonials must actively work to plant new seeds of truth and reconciliation.

GENERATIONAL TRAUMA AND CIRCULAR SUFFERING

Canada developed residential schools in order to assimilate Indigenous children into white Canadian society so that the Canadian government wouldn't have to

honor the treaties they'd signed with Canada's First Nations in the 18th and 19th centuries. These schools were notorious sites of abuse. Indigenous students were rounded up from their reservations, cut off from their communities, and placed in schools where they were forced to abandon their identities. The children were used in medical experiments; corporally punished; and sexually abused by teachers and fellow students. Author Tanya Talaga argues that the suffering the residential schools caused didn't just affect the children forced to attend them—this emotional destruction filtered down to affect the families and descendants of these victims, and that such generational trauma can thwart communities from healing the wounds of their past as they unwittingly pass suffering on throughout the years.

Talaga examines the roots of generational trauma by looking at Canada's history of colonialism, forced assimilation, and cultural genocide of Indigenous people. Canada's history is deeply rooted in colonial violence,—from the 16th century onward, white French and British settlers sought to destroy Indigenous communities so that colonial society could flourish. By sequestering Indigenous people on reservations, settlers could keep Indigenous communities out of the way. To then ensure that these communities didn't grow stronger in isolation, the colonists created residential schools in the 1800s to weaken Indigenous children's ties to their own communities. Indigenous children were taken from their homes—often without warning—and brought to schools run by white, Christian colonists whose primary directive was to "kill the Indian within the child." These schools were intended to force the assimilation of Indigenous children into white colonial society. By severing these children from their families, barring them from speaking their native languages, and using corporal punishment and sexual abuse to keep them in line, these schools, which operated into the mid-20th century, attempted to erase Indigenous culture.

The trauma that Indigenous children sustained while living in Canada's residential schools defined many of their lives, as well as their relationships to future generations. Indigenous children who were forced into residential schools were traumatized—they were ripped from their families; placed in schools with children who weren't from their cultures; and subjected to malnutrition, medical experimentation, and sexual assault. The trauma of the residential schools continues to affect people like Pearl and Daisy Wenjack, whose younger brother Chanie Wenjack died attempting to escape the physical punishment and sexual abuse at his residential school. When Pearl Wenjack heard about the "seven fallen feathers"—seven Indigenous students who died while attending school in Thunder Bay between 2000 and 2011—she felt the pain of the past "all over again." Pearl's response to the crisis in Thunder Bay shows that trauma is, in many ways, circular. The traumas inflicted on the older generations are passed down to the newer generation, while the traumas experienced by the new generation dredge up memories of the past for the older generation—and the suffering within Indigenous communities is amplified.

The patterns of the past continue to be inflicted on the present, in large part because that past is difficult to escape. Indigenous students who leave home today aren't forced into residential schools. But due to lack of funding and opportunity on Indigenous reservations that is a result of those residential schools and government policies, current Indigenous students often have little choice but to go away to school and cut themselves off from their communities in the process. This is a similar cycle to the one their parents and grandparents faced as they were ripped from their families and forced into alienating, dangerous schooling situations. On top of that, students who leave home to attend school often come from traumatic environments. Because many of their parents are survivors of the residential schools themselves, many youths have spent their lives dealing with their parents' trauma-related substance abuse and generational poverty. Dealing with these issues at such a young age, Talaga suggests, often means that these students are themselves already traumatized when they arrive at school. Even though modern Canadian schools like Dennis Franklin Cromarty were created to support Indigenous students, students who attend those boarding schools bring "the ghosts of the past with them." In other words, it's hard even for Indigenous students who leave home to escape the circular traumas in their families and their communities. These students frequently turn to substance abuse to numb the pain—and as they struggle with loneliness, homesickness, and the "ghosts" of the past in a new environment, they become more vulnerable to danger. The violence—and, in the cases of the "seven fallen feathers," death—that they suffer then makes its way back to their home communities, retraumatizing their elders and creating an inescapable circle of suffering.

INDIGENOUS YOUTH, EDUCATION REFORM, AND SUPPORT NETWORKS

Throughout the 2000s and 2010s, seven Indigenous Canadian youths (the titular "seven fallen feathers") died while attending Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School in Thunder Bay, Ontario. These youths became boarding school students Dennis Franklin Cromarty in order to try to pursue an education and improve their future prospects. But in going to the school, these children were cut off from their homes and families. Between feeling homesick, being removed from their cultures, and experiencing a "hostile" environment of racism from Thunder Bay's majority-white population, these youths found themselves struggling. Counselors, teachers, and boarding parents could not keep up with the students' needs—and government funding did not offer financial or social support for the adults tasked with

helping these children make a difficult transition. Tanya Talaga argues that until Indigenous youths are given adequate funding for their educations, as well as social and emotional support networks, Indigenous children and their parents will be forced to make a devastating choice between the pursuit of education and personal safety.

Underfunded, overburdened institutions and authority figures struggle to support Indigenous youths who come to unfamiliar cities to pursue their educations. In 1979, Indigenous leaders formed the Northern Nishnawbe Education Council, or the NNEC, to act as an education authority and to run boarding programs for Indigenous students traveling to Canadian cities to pursue their educations. The NNEC's goal was to create new learning opportunities (in the form of all-Indigenous high schools like Dennis Franklin Cromarty) and to provide support networks for the students who'd attend them. By matching Indigenous students with Indigenous boarding "parents," bringing Elders into schools to offer guidance, and creating patrols that would drive the streets looking for any students who were lost, cold, intoxicated, or just in need of a ride home, the NNEC hoped to head off problems with homesickness, isolation, and substance abuse that they predicted students could face in the big city. But boarding parents who worked with the NNEC were often overstretched: they had their own families and jobs, and they weren't required to monitor their boarders' curfews or grades. Many of them simply couldn't handle the load. Because of a lack of funding, the NNEC couldn't pay these individuals enough to help them help their boarders. Due to restrictions on education funding held over from Canada's racist and outdated 19th-century Indian Act, the NNEC simply couldn't cover all their bases. Indigenous students began slipping through the cracks, struggling with alcohol abuse and poor grades. Some of them had to be sent home, unable to cope with city life—and others, like the "seven fallen feathers," became victims of a system that couldn't protect them in spite of its best efforts.

Talaga doesn't lay blame with the NNEC members, teachers, and boarding parents who can't "catch" struggling students as they descend into downward spirals. But she does suggest that more funding and supervision is needed to prevent student deaths. Through the case of Robyn Harper, an Indigenous girl who died of alcohol poisoning after a night out drinking with friends, Talaga shows how inadequate supervision, education, and financial support for students and boarding parents can result in tragedy. When Robyn's friend Skye Kakegamic realized that Robyn was in trouble, she reached out to the NNEC—not the racist Thunder Bay Police. The NNEC responded to Skye's call for help, sending NNEC members Cheyenne Linklater—Robyn's boarding parent—and David Fox to the bus station where the girls were waiting. No one involved in helping Robyn, though, fully understood what alcohol poisoning was, what the telltale signs were, or that it could be fatal. And no one really knew Robyn—she was new in town—so everyone assumed that she knew what she was doing when she decided to drink so much that night. But Robyn wasn't an experienced drinker—she likely didn't know that the alcohol would affect her so intensely. So, Cheyenne and David took Robyn home and laid her in the hallway to sleep it off. By morning, she was dead. Essentially, Robyn died because of the NNEC's neglect. But Talaga suggests that if there were more funding and a more robust support network for the NNEC members and students who have left home for the first time, there might be more effective policies in place for dealing with situations like Robyn's. In Talaga's words, "all the policies in the world do not help if the proper funding and infrastructure are not fully in place." More government funding could be used to train boarding parents and NNEC members to deal with dangerous situations, to provide medical attention when needed, and to form deeper relationships with the students they're looking out for.

Until the Canadian government allocates more resources to Indigenous education, Talaga suggests, Indigenous parents will be forced to make the choice between sending their children to dangerous environments, or not investing in their educations at all. Opportunities for a quality education on Indigenous reservations are few and far between—because of racist policies and treaties formed decades or centuries ago, there's very little funding for Indigenous schools. So Indigenous parents who want better lives for their children are essentially forced to send their students away to bigger cities to attend school, just as Indigenous parents in the past were forced to send their children to residential schools. The authority figures who work with the NNEC often have the best of intentions: they want to be involved in the education of a new generation, look out for vulnerable kids, and help Indigenous communities thrive within large, majority-white cities. But in *Seven Fallen Feathers*, Talaga asserts that these goals simply can't be accomplished without the help of government funding and support. And the lack of such resources is just a continuation of the racist treatment of Indigenous people that has characterized the white-dominated power structures of Canada for centuries.

TRADITION, PROPHECY, SPIRITUALITY, AND HOPE

At the beginning of *Seven Fallen Feathers*, author Tanya Talaga discusses the prophecy of the seven fires, which outlines seven key time periods in the history of North America's Indigenous people. Toward the end of the book, Nishnawbe Aski Nation grand chief Alvin Fiddler speaks of an "eighth fire"—the reconciliation and mutual advancement of white settlers and Indigenous people. Though centuries of cultural genocide and systemic racism have threatened to destroy Indigenous cultures, Talaga explores how traditional

spirituality continues to provide a beacon of hope for Indigenous Canadians. Indigenous people's "cultural values, laws, and ideologies of traditional approaches to conflict resolution" have allowed them to remain resilient and optimistic about the future, even in the midst of great suffering. As a result, Talaga suggests that Indigenous Canadians generally seek to establish "harmony" and "good faith" relations with white Canadians rather than retribution. And it is because of longstanding cultural and spiritual traditions that Indigenous Canadians are able to "hope against hope" that their nation's painful past can still be overcome.

Even though Indigenous culture has been decimated by colonialism, Talaga shows how Indigenous communities continue to draw strength from their cultural legends, spiritual beliefs, and community values. Talaga provides two profound examples of how community care and cultural foundations keep Indigenous people strong—even in the face of great tragedy. Reggie Bushie and Kyle Morrisseau were two of the titular "seven fallen feathers," Indigenous students who lost their lives while attending boarding school in Thunder Bay, Ontario. Both boys' bodies were dredged from the city's McIntyre **River**, several years apart. And both boys were survived by people who loved them intensely and who mourned their deaths: Reggie's brother Ricki and Kyle's father, Christian. In two separate moments in the book, Talaga describes Ricki and Christian's responses to their loved one's deaths: Ricki and Christian both visited the river to drop traditional offerings of tobacco into the water. Christian even went as far as to thank the river for taking his son. These anecdotes illustrate how cultural and spiritual tradition can shape Indigenous people's responses to tragedy. Both Ricki and Christian expressed pain and anger at the deaths of their loved ones—and they continue to suspect that there was foul play involved in Reggie and Kyle's deaths. But both Ricki and Christian's spiritual backgrounds allowed them to focus on gratitude for the time that they had with their loved ones and on healing from their losses, rather than bitterness and retribution.

Talaga illustrates how in spite of assaults on Indigenous Canadians' autonomy and cultural practices, a tradition of peaceful conflict resolution and the pursuit of justice over retribution continues to drive their relations with the majority-white government of Canada. Indigenous people want justice and visibility—but Talaga notes how their fight for those things is rarely tinged with bitterness or a desire for retribution. Even when the government clearly overlooks Indigenous communities' needs, Talaga shows, Indigenous people aren't mired in resentment—instead, they take initiative to improve their communities without outside help. Talaga offers a small example of this when she relays a story from Sam Achneepineskum, an Elder who attended the inquest into the deaths of the "seven fallen feathers" to offer spiritual guidance to the students' families. Sam was a survivor of the residential schools himself—so he knew how much was at stake emotionally for the families attending the inquest. When Sam arrived at the courtroom where the inquest was to be held, he found that the room was insultingly small, and that there weren't nearly enough chairs for all the families and community members whom the government had granted permission to attend. Even though Sam was pained at the way this oversight represented how white Canadians overlook Indigenous people, he got right to work moving chairs in from other courtrooms and making sure that there'd be a seat for anyone who wanted one. As an Elder, Sam recognized the sacred importance of putting his people's needs first rather than becoming mired in hurt or rage. Sam's response was rooted in righting a wrong and looking out for his community above all, rather than creating conflict.

Ultimately, Talaga suggests that it is because of their traditions of community, spirituality, and justice that Indigenous people are able to maintain an optimistic view of their future relations with white Canadians. The "eighth fire" that Alvin Fiddler speaks of toward the end of the book doesn't exist in the original prophecy of the seven fires, which describes seven epochs or phases of relations between Indigenous people and the "light skinned race." It's a new prophecy entirely—and while the other "fires" speak of division and destruction, this eighth fire speaks of hope and reconciliation. Talaga includes the anecdote about Fiddler's eighth fire to illustrate the enduring hope that Indigenous and white Canadians can move forward together from the country's colonial past. Canada's slights against its Indigenous population have been many and severe. But as Indigenous community members across Canada told former Supreme Court justice and legal advocate Frank Iacobucci, there is a "fundamental conflict" between Indigenous approaches to conflict resolution and the Canadian justice system's laws and values. In other words, Talaga's book suggests that the bureaucracy of the Canadian justice system—which is focused on retribution, consequences, and cause and effect—is fundamentally at odds with Indigenous people's approach to conflict resolution. The latter is rooted in balance, harmony, and truth—not hollow, punitive punishments or repayments. The book suggests that Indigenous people's cultural traditions and spiritual practices have actually given them greater hope for authentic, meaningful change. While many Indigenous people do fear that "true reconciliation" is still far-off or unreachable, the pursuit of a more productive, reparative approach to justice rooted in community and peace remains vital to those, like Alvin Fiddler, who hope for true change.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

RIVERS AND BODIES OF WATER

Throughout Tanya Talaga's *Seven Fallen Feathers*, the many rivers and other bodies of water that surround the city of Thunder Bay, Ontario symbolize how Indigenous youths are all too easily swallowed up and destroyed by a racist society that neglects their needs.

Between 2000 and 2011, seven Indigenous Canadian students (the titular "seven fallen feathers") died while attending high school in Thunder Bay. Five of those seven were found dead in the city's rivers—and in all five cases, Thunder Bay Police almost immediately reported that "no foul play" was suspected in their deaths, even though several of the students appeared to have recent bruises and burn marks on their bodies. The students, the book implies, may actually have been victims of racist attacks—many teenagers who travel to Thunder Bay from their home reserves to attend boarding school report facing racist harassment or physical violence while simply walking the city's streets. The city's rivers, then, become a potent symbol of how the system swallows these Indigenous teenagers up, both literally washing away their bodies and figuratively drowning out their stories in favor of narratives that the teens' families and communities believe are false cover-ups.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the House of Anansi Press edition of *Seven Fallen Feathers* published in 2017.

Prologue Quotes

The Kam still draws people to its shores. Teens come down to the river's gummy banks to take cover under bridges or in bushes to drink and party. Here they have privacy, a space of their own, beside the giant pulp and paper mill that spews smelly, yellow, funnel-shaped clouds into the air. Here they are close to nature. They sit on the rocks and listen to the rush of the water, and they are reminded of home.

Related Characters: Tanya Talaga (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Tanya Talaga describes how Indigenous teens seek refuge near the Kam River—a meaningful site in Indigenous Canadian culture that's since been turned into a site of industry in the majority-white city of Thunder Bay, Ontario.

This passage is significant because it's the first major introduction of the book's central symbol: rivers and bodies of water. The Kam River—one of Thunder Bay's many rivers and bodies of water—was once a sacred site for the First Nations people of Ontario. But since white French and British settlers began colonizing the region stretching as far back as the 15th century (with the heyday of British colonialism in the area taking place in the 1800s), Indigenous people in Canada were forced to cede their land through unfair, exploitative treaties. Now, the Kam and many other sacred bodies of water are places of industry, manufacturing, and money-making—their original significance to Canada's Indigenous people corrupted and exploited by the white people in power. Yet in spite of these corruptive forces, this passage shows that Indigenous people have been able to retain their connections to these traditional places, and even come up with new kinds of meaning and significance for them.

At the same time, the rivers and bodies of water in and around Thunder Bay have come to be dangerous: over five Indigenous youths have turned up dead in rivers like the Kam and the McIntyre, and the Thunder Bay Police have all but refused to investigate these deaths as anything other than accidental drownings. Rivers, throughout the book, symbolize how Indigenous youths who come to Thunder Bay in pursuit of educations and athletic careers are often swallowed up, literally and metaphorically, by systems and institutions that cannot adequately care for them. In this passage, Talaga attempts to represent the complicated meaning of rivers and bodies of water through one short glimpse.

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 awareness and understanding, 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.

Related Characters: Tanya Talaga (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, author Tanya Talaga contextualizes the deaths of seven Indigenous students (the titular "fallen feathers") in Thunder Bay between 2000 and 2011 within Canada's history of racism, colonialism, and cultural genocide.

The deaths of the seven fallen feathers, this passage suggests, weren't random anomalies: instead, they were direct consequences of Canada's colonialist foundation, and its subsequent long history of attempting to erase Indigenous culture and Indigenous lives. Talaga uses the metaphor of "seeds" to make clear that the policies of colonial Canada—which were designed to divide, demean, and separate Indigenous people from their own culture—have only grown over time and continue to exert widespread influence in modern-day Canada. In other words, Talaga is saying that the deaths of the "seven feathers" are not just a product of the present moment, they are instead the modern manifestations of colonial Canadian brutality and prolonged Canadian policy, such as underfunding schools and health services. These "seeds," Talaga asserts, have over time grown such that white society has become rich and powerful while Indigenous people have been shunted to the side.

Chapter 1: Notes from a Blind Man Quotes

❝ By the time of the seventh fire, young people would rise up and begin to follow the trails of the past, seeking help from the Elders, but many of the Elders would have fallen asleep or be otherwise unable to help. The young would have to find their own way, and if they were successful there would be a rebirth of the Anishinaabe nation. But if they were to fail, all would fail.

Related Characters: Tanya Talaga (speaker), Stan Beardy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Tanya Talaga describes the prophecy of the seven fires—a well-known prophecy within Anishinaabe (an Indigenous Canadian group) culture.

The seven fires tell the history of North American Indigenous groups and their relations with white settlers and colonizers over the years. The prophecies foretell of violence and brutality at the hands of these colonizers—and they paint a rather grim portrait of the future that Indigenous children will inherit as the forces of colonialism wash away the lessons of the past. The prophecy illustrates the mixture of mourning and hope that continue to define how Indigenous people think about the colonialist legacy and policies of the government of Canada. On the one hand, the prophecies clearly articulate the way that Indigenous people have been alienated from their own past and culture, and how such alienation could lead to their destruction. At the same time, the prophecies offer a way forward, for the young to "find their own way" in the face of the ravages of colonialism.

The correlation between the number of "fires" and the number of Indigenous youths who died between 2000 and 2011 suggests that the time of the prophecy has come. Talaga argues that this is a decisive moment that will dictate whether these embattled groups will be able to find hope through "rebirth"—rebirth of autonomy, of tradition, and of establishing a new sort of relationship with the colonial forces that have endangered the very existence of the First Nations.

❝ When Stan talked about losing his son, the pain of the lost seven was closely tied to him. The loss of Daniel and the loss of the seven represented the loss of hope, the failure of one generation to take care of the next.

Related Characters: Tanya Talaga (speaker), Stan Beardy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Tanya Talaga reflects on a conversation she had with Stan Beardy, the former grand chief of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation.

Talaga's conversation with Stan was profound—Stan himself lost his young son Daniel when Daniel was living on his own in Thunder Bay. As Talaga states in this quote, Stan didn't just see Daniel's loss as a personal one. He experienced his son's death as a larger symptom of "the failure of one generation to take care of the next." Stan is describing a rupture, how the failure in one generation leads to failure in the next. Put another way, he is describing how trauma

passes from one generation to the next, and how such trauma defines large parts of the contemporary Indigenous experience.

Stan Beardy's generation is comprised of many people who are survivors of Canada's brutal residential schooling system—and many of those people wanted to ensure that the next generation didn't have to suffer the same cruelty and brutality. But the new generation is still often forced to leave home to attend school—and so their parents aren't able to look out for them or care for them in the way they'd hoped.

Chapter 2: Why Chanie Ran Quotes

❝ It is vital that people understand how the utter failure and betrayal of the treaties [...] worked in conjunction with a paternalistic piece of legislation called the Indian Act to isolate Indigenous people on remote reservations and to keep them subservient to Ottawa for more than one hundred years.

Related Characters: Tanya Talaga (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, author Tanya Talaga again makes clear that the present circumstances of Indigenous people in Canada—including the deaths of the "seven feathers" in Thunder Bay—are linked to Canada's historical treatment of Indigenous people. In making this argument, Tanya is rejecting the idea that Canada may have once mistreated Indigenous people but is beyond that now. Instead, Talaga asserts that Canada remains culpable, and that both the legacy of past mistreatment and the continued betrayal of old treaties and existence of old paternalistic laws isolate and decimate Indigenous people in the present day.

In the sections of the book after this quote, Talaga explains how the restrictive, "paternalistic" colonialist laws and the direct betrayal of signed treaties ravaged First Nations groups across the country. The Canadian government stripped away Indigenous people's lands, sequestered them on remote reservations, and opened up sacred sites and fertile lands to industrialization and colonization. As a result, Indigenous people became "subservient" to their new colonial government. And because colonization aimed to weaken Indigenous culture and prevent any financial or political strength within First Nations communities, modern-day Indigenous people still suffer the effects of these treaties in the form of poverty and lack of resources. While the treaties have been dissolved, it's impossible to ignore or erase the damage they did to the health of Indigenous communities and cultures across Canada, and the generational traumas they created.

❝ If every Indigenous child was absorbed into Canadian society, their ties to their language and their culture would be broken. They wouldn't live on reserve lands; they'd live and work among other Canadians and there would no longer be a need for treaties, reserves, or special rights given to Indigenous people. The single purpose, and simple truth, of the residential school system was that it was an act of cultural genocide. If the government of Canada managed to assimilate all Indigenous kids, it would no longer have any financial or legal obligations to Indigenous people.

Related Characters: Tanya Talaga (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 60-61

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, author Tanya Talaga explains why Canada's notoriously abusive and dangerous residential schools were created.

The residential schools were essentially places where Indigenous children would be sent to be stripped of their family ties, their languages, and their cultures. These schools were sites of cultural genocide—the weakening and erasure of a culture's strength and health. The government wanted to assimilate Indigenous children into Canadian society, essentially, so that they wouldn't be forced to honor the treaties they'd signed with Indigenous people—they wanted to escape their "financial [and] legal obligations" to First Nations communities, so they hoped that by destroying these communities' ties within a single generation, they could essentially do away with their duties to the people they'd colonized.

The residential schools didn't succeed in wiping out Indigenous culture in one fell swoop, but they did create indelible patterns of trauma that passed down across generations by tearing apart families and alienating young people from their culture and traditions. By instilling distrust and trauma in an entire generation, the schools arguably made Indigenous communities more isolated and

susceptible to struggles with mental health, malnutrition, generational poverty, and a perpetual lack of access to the same resources as white Canadians.

For the next decade, the children continued to be abused at the school, but now they were far away from home. By the 1940s and 1950s, the government knew the residential school system was an absolute disaster. The Indigenous people were not seamlessly assimilating into Canadian culture and society; in fact, they were actively resisting assimilation.

Regardless, from the 1940s until 1952, Canadian scientists across the country worked with bureaucrats—who were in charge of the care of Indigenous children—and top nutrition experts on what have become notoriously known as starvation experiments using students at six residential schools as their subjects.

Related Characters: Tanya Talaga (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

This passage explores how the white Canadians in charge of running the residential schools knowingly committed egregious human rights abuses in order to attempt to control and assimilate Indigenous Canadian children at any cost.

Even though the Canadian government knew that the residential schools were an "absolute disaster"—rife with abuse and failing in their stated (and dubious) aim of assimilating their students into Canadian culture—they didn't give up on their mission of cultural genocide and try to make amends. Instead, they doubled down on their abuses of Indigenous children. When Indigenous families who heard about the abuses taking place—especially at Cecilia Jeffrey, one of the most notorious schools—didn't want to send their children away any longer, the government just moved the school farther away to reduce those parents' power even further. The missionaries and government officials running the schools knew that even though Indigenous children were "resisting assimilation," they were still profoundly vulnerable—and they exploited that vulnerability to the fullest extent they could. By preying upon Indigenous children, the government did indeed destroy many Indigenous families—so while assimilation within a single generation didn't happen, white Canadian colonizers did create irreparable breaks within First Nations communities across the country.

What the statistics don't tell you is how some of the older children would form their own abusive circles, preying on the younger, more vulnerable kids. The abuse suffered at the hands of adult supervisors took its toll on the students. They became further disengaged from the classroom, angry, and in need of someone to take their rage out on. For some of these kids, the younger children were easy victims.

This is the life Chanie ran from.

Related Characters: Tanya Talaga (speaker), Chanie Wenjack

Related Themes:

Page Number: 80

Explanation and Analysis

This passage explores how trauma and suffering filter down through generations, turning victims into abusers over time.

Throughout this chapter, Tanya Talaga uses the story of Chanie Wenjack—a young Indigenous boy who fled residential school in the mid-1960s—to illustrate the profound abuses that took place within residential schools all over Canada. By showing her readers "the life Chanie ran from," Talaga connects a single story to the thousands upon thousands of stories of abuse, pain, and trauma that resulted from the residential schooling system. By using this passage to highlight how trauma and abuse perpetrated by the government against Indigenous peoples led to trauma and abuse perpetrated by Indigenous peoples against themselves, Talaga unearths the seeds of generational trauma in contemporary Indigenous communities. The residential schools, she'll show as the book goes on, forever traumatized hundreds of thousands of Indigenous children—and the scope of that violence has gone on to affect a new generation of youths who struggle to escape the pain and suffering that their relatives have endured and passed onto them.

"When I am alone at home, I think about my brother. The drive to go home was so strong. I don't want his death to be in vain[.] [...] As a residential school survivor, you can feel it all over again, what these students felt. Yes, you can feel it."

Related Characters: Pearl Wenjack (speaker), Chanie

Wenjack

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Pearl Wenjack—a survivor of the residential school system and the sister of Chanie Wenjack, who died while running away from one of the schools—explains how the later deaths of the "seven fallen feathers" reminded her of her painful past and effectively retraumatized her.

Pearl herself survived the residential school system, though her brother Chanie didn't. Now, when Pearl hears about the violence and cruelty that still affect Indigenous youths today, she must "feel [...] all over again" the pain of the past. What happened in the residential schools didn't stay there, Pearl's words suggest: the students who leave home to attend school in places like Thunder Bay today still feel the isolation and alienation that traumatized their parents' generation. And when terrible things befall the younger generation, the older generation feels their own traumas surface again. In other words, many modern-day Indigenous communities in Canada are affected by patterns of circular suffering that began with the residential schools—but that now have no end in sight. Even though people like Pearl who lost loved ones to the residential schools don't want their friends' and family members' deaths to have been in vain, there is no denying that many of the patterns that defined the residential schools—isolation of Indigenous youths from their communities, racist violence, and a lack of support structures—continue to persist even within modern-day schools for Indigenous children.

Chapter 3: When the Wolf Comes Quotes

❝ Parents sent their children to DFC by choice. It is not a residential school. It is not run by the church, nor is it strictly regulated by Indigenous and Northern Affairs. It is an Indigenous-run private school. But the only other choice parents had was to abandon their children's high school education or pick up and move to a city.

Related Characters: Tanya Talaga (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

Tanya Talaga describes the painful choice that many Indigenous parents must make as they consider how to make sure that their children have access to a quality education.

While the Canadian residential school model as it existed throughout the 19th and 20th centuries no longer exists, Talaga uses this passage to suggest that many of the patterns that defined the residential schools still linger. In the modern day, Canada's long history of ignoring and underfunding educational resources on Indigenous reserves means that there aren't good options for Indigenous kids to pursue quality educations close to home. So while the government is no longer overtly forcing students to leave their families to go to school, the lack of good educational resources still compels parents to send their kids away to boarding schools. This means that schools like Dennis Franklin Cromarty, an all-Indigenous private high school in Thunder Bay, *seem* to promise opportunity and autonomy for Indigenous kids. But in reality, they often perpetuate the structures and issues found in the residential schools. Kids who leave home to attend schools like DFC are still effectively cut off from their communities and families; they live with boarding parents who can be disinterested in or neglectful of them; and they're vulnerable to colonial violence and racism directed at them from residents of the majority-white cities where these schools are often located.

❝ The one problem the educators couldn't foresee was that every single one of those children brought the ghosts of the past with them. Some of the kids were leaving an idyllic family life, but most were not. Many came from homes touched by the horrific trauma of residential school—abuse, addictions, extreme poverty, and confused minds.

Related Characters: Tanya Talaga (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

Tanya Talaga describes here the way that trauma experienced by past generations continues to affect more recent generations in ways that can be initially hard to recognize but are no less real, and have serious consequences.

Talaga makes this point by focusing on the students

attending modern-day Indigenous boarding schools such as DFC. These schools were meant to redress past wrongs and trauma, but the quotation makes clear that the leaders of these schools had not understood the depth of generational trauma created by the residential schools. The survivors of the residential schools, who were often the parents or grandparents of the students attending the modern-day boarding schools, often struggled with mental health and substance abuse issues—and sometimes they even perpetuated the kinds of verbal, physical, and sexual abuse they'd endured in the residential schools. The students coming to the boarding schools, then, were coming from homes that had been deeply impacted by past trauma, and so the students themselves brought those traumas with them to the boarding schools. As Talaga makes clear, the educators at the boarding schools were ill-equipped to support students traumatized in this way, and so the schools were effectively set up to fail their students.

When she comments that every single one of the students at the boarding schools, even those from safe and emotionally stable homes, Talaga suggests that the trauma of the past creates "ghosts" in ways beyond just the direct inheritance of trauma such as abuse, addictions, and poverty. Talaga implies that the knowledge of how colonial violence and cultural genocide impacted—and continue to impact—Indigenous communities is its own kind of trauma, a burden that all of these students bear regardless of individual privilege.

> Police did not start a missing persons investigation until six days after Jethro's disappearance.

Dora continued to call the police to check on any leads, and each time she was treated like a nuisance. "Right away, every time I called there, I got used to somebody answering the phone and hearing, 'There are no leads,' or other comments like, 'He is just out there partying.'"

Related Characters: Tanya Talaga (speaker), Jethro Anderson, Dora Morris

Related Themes:

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Tanya Talaga describes the racism, indifference, and neglect that Dora Morris—Jethro Anderson's aunt and caretaker—faced after she reported him missing just weeks after he started high school in Thunder Bay.

This passage is significant because it shows that from the very first disappearance of the first "fallen feather," the Thunder Bay Police showed no interest in helping uncover what had become of a lost Indigenous youth. This behavior on the part of the police of course suggests that the racism and colonialist violence and apathy that defined relations between Indigenous and white Canadians for centuries continues unabated into the present. White Canadians have little to no interest in the issues that Indigenous people and communities face—and some of them, Talaga suggests, are even willing to overlook violence, brutality, and murder directed at Indigenous people. In this case, Dora Morris found that the police were quick to rely on cruel tropes about Indigenous people and alcoholism rather than look into the disappearance of a child. Dora's experience shows that the colonizing forces in charge of contemporary Canadian society aren't fit to serve their roles—and that as long as they continue to overlook violence against Indigenous people, they never will be.

> Dora remembers looking at Jethro and thinking that he didn't look as bad as the director had made out. But when she looked more closely, she saw a three-inch-wide gash, starting from the top of his forehead and ending at the middle of his head. There were round contusions on his cheek. She immediately thought it looked like someone had extinguished their burning cigarette butts on his face.
>
> She checked his tummy. It wasn't bloated. She looked at his hands, which weren't purple or blown up with water.
>
> Dora took in a sharp breath. She knew she was right: This was no accident.

Related Characters: Tanya Talaga (speaker), Jethro Anderson, Dora Morris

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 123

Explanation and Analysis

After Jethro died the Thunder Bay Police asserted that Jethro had died in an "accidental drowning." In this passage, Talaga describes what Dora Morris saw after demanding to view the body of her nephew before his funeral. Her observations made it obvious that Jethro's body was

covered in contusions and burns that weren't consistent with the Thunder Bay Police's assertion.

This passage is significant because it implies that the Thunder Bay Police were complicit in covering up the true cause of Jethro Anderson's death—as well as the suspicious "accidental" drownings that would claim the lives of four more Indigenous youths over the next decade. The police couldn't even make a show of caring about Jethro's whereabouts—they openly relied on racist tropes throughout his disappearance, claiming they didn't need to send search units out because Jethro was probably "partying" with friends. And when Jethro was found—in one of Thunder Bay's freezing rivers—they immediately cited the cause of death as an accident. But in this passage, as Dora recalls viewing Jethro's body for the first time, a hint of the truth seems to emerge. Jethro's body was covered in marks that seemed to indicate—in spite of the police's declaration of "no foul play"—that Jethro was attacked, and possibly murdered. This passage, then, cloaks the police's immediate refusal to investigate any other cause of death than accidental drowning as suspicious (and perhaps even criminal). Whether Jethro fell into the river or whether someone threw him in remains unclear to this day. But it is clear that not only did the river swallow Jethro—the flawed, colonialist Canadian justice system did, too.

Chapter 4: Hurting from the Before Quotes

❝ Intergenerational trauma from the residential school experience is entrenched in Pikangikum. One hundred years of social exclusion, racism, and colonialism has manifested as addiction, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and lack of knowledge on how to parent a child. Few of the kids discuss the sexual abuse they've suffered, yet more than 80 percent of the children and youth in Indigenous residential treatment centres come from homes where they were sexually abused.

Related Characters: Tanya Talaga (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 138

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Tanya Talaga examines the painful and harmful consequences of the generational trauma caused by Canada's racist and colonialist policies toward Indigenous people.

For many Indigenous people across Canada, generational trauma is profoundly connected to their experiences (or the experiences of their loved ones) in the country's brutal residential school system. In these schools, students were isolated from their families, abused by teachers and staff, and used in medical and nutritional experiments condoned by the government of Canada. And yet the schools are just one manifestation of the "exclusion, racism, and colonialism" that have forever transformed places like the Pikangikum reserve, commonly known as "Pik." In Pik, and places like it, the abuse and trauma that an entire generation suffered because of the residential school system has now trickled down to a new generation—such that an overwhelming number of Indigenous youth in Pik today are victims of abuse themselves. This quotation illustrates how harmful generational trauma and circular suffering can be as they lock vulnerable communities into destructive patterns.

❝ An undercurrent of racism runs through Thunder Bay society. It can be subtle and insidious but it can also be in your face. Ask any Indigenous high school students in Thunder Bay if they have experienced racism and they'll undoubtedly tell you about racial slurs and garbage or rotten eggs being thrown at them from passing cars. Others have been hit on the back of the head with beer bottles by unknown groups of assailants, who leave them bleeding on the side of the road.

Related Characters: Tanya Talaga (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 141

Explanation and Analysis

Tanya Talaga describes the overt racism that Indigenous students in the city of Thunder Bay face constantly.

This passage is significant because it shows that Indigenous students who travel to Thunder Bay to pursue brighter futures, educations, and athletic careers are often the victims of racism. The racism they face often isn't subtle at all—these teens are targeted, attacked, and left for dead. This passage is further important within the larger context of the book because it shows that there is a precedent of racist violence in Thunder Bay. So when the Thunder Bay Police continually wrote off the deaths of five of the "seven fallen feathers" as accidents, they were clearly ignoring many signs that pointed to larger patterns of targeted attacks (and perhaps even homicidal violence) against Indigenous youth in the city.

By highlighting the overt racism that Indigenous students experience in Thunder Bay, Talaga argues that many of the racist and colonialist power structures in Canada, like the Thunder Bay Police, will not look out for Indigenous youth of their own accord. The Canadian government may no longer itself officially follow racist policies in the way it used to, but the negligence and apathy of its institutions such as law enforcement enable continued racist actions against Indigenous people throughout Canada. Indigenous students who travel to cities like Thunder Bay, where hate crimes are unfortunately common, need the government to actively fight for them, invest in their educations, and create support networks that will protect them from racist violence and discrimination—and that active support is lacking.

❝ Curran Strang's body was found in the McIntyre River on September 26, 2005. The Ontario Coroner's Office officially listed his death as accidental, having determined the cause of death was by drowning. Authorities believe he decided to head into the water, alone, on a cold September night. Just like Jethro Anderson, who was afraid of the water.

There is absolutely no evidence that either Jethro or Curran ended up in the river of their own accord.

Related Characters: Tanya Talaga (speaker), Jethro Anderson, Curran Strang

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 153

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, author Tanya Talaga describes the suspicious circumstances of Curran Strang and Jethro Anderson's deaths—deaths that the Thunder Bay Police ruled accidental without any investigation.

Both Jethro and Curran were found dead in Thunder Bay's rivers—and yet rather than admit that there was a pattern to the deaths of young Indigenous students in Thunder Bay, the police instead insisted that both "decided to head into the water" of their own accord. The Ontario Coroner's Office, too, was complicit in writing off both deaths as accidental rather than potential signs of an epidemic of racist violence against Indigenous people in an affluent, majority-white city.

Whether or not Jethro and Curran died of accidental drowning or whether they were murdered, both boys' deaths, Talaga suggests here, were created by Canada's ongoing legacy of colonialism and cultural genocide. Even if both students' deaths were accidental, they were still the products of Canada's long history of overlooking the needs of Indigenous people—and especially those of vulnerable Indigenous youths. There were not adequate support networks in place to help protect Jethro and Curran—so it doesn't matter whether what they needed protection from was racist violence or whether it was simply that they needed more supervision and community. Both boys were failed by a system that could not give them the attention they needed due to a pervasive lack of government resources allocated to Indigenous organizations like the NNEC, the educational authority responsible for First Nations students in Thunder Bay. More support and government oversight is needed, Talaga is suggesting here, to make sure that students like Jethro and Curran don't fall through the cracks—and become victims of a racist, colonialist system that swallows them up and continues to fail them even in death.

Chapter 5: The Hollowness of Not Knowing Quotes

❝ Maryanne is left wondering what happened to Paul, just like she has been left wondering what happened to Sarah. Maryanne has had to live with the crushing emptiness of having two of the most important people in her life taken from her without any explanation why. Living in this state makes it nearly impossible for Maryanne to find peace; she is constantly looking for answers. And after she has exhausted all possibilities, she is left hollow.

Related Characters: Tanya Talaga (speaker), Paul Panacheese, Maryanne Panacheese

Related Themes:

Page Number: 176

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Tanya Talaga shares the story of Maryanne Panacheese—the mother of Paul Panacheese, one of the "seven fallen feathers"—in order to highlight circular suffering in many Indigenous families and communities.

Maryanne, a survivor of the residential school system herself, had suffered a great deal of trauma in her life. Not only did Maryanne attend the notoriously dangerous and abusive residential schools in Canada—her sister, Sarah, suffered so profoundly at the faraway "truancy" school she

attended that she ran away and disappeared, never to be seen again. Maryanne believes—but has never been able to confirm—that Sarah is dead. So when Paul, Maryanne's son, admitted to struggling with mental health and substance abuse while attending school in Thunder Bay, Maryanne rushed to the city to live with him and support him. Because of the trauma she'd faced in her own youth, Maryanne wanted to try to prevent her son from becoming a victim of generational trauma.

And yet Paul died suddenly one night at home in Maryanne's kitchen after an evening out with friends. Maryanne couldn't protect Paul—he died of apparently natural but never-determined causes—and so Maryanne found herself retraumatized in the wake of his death. In this way, Maryanne became a victim of circular suffering—the traumas she watched her child endure became her own, and she was left feeling "hollow" and unsteady. The coroner's office did not thoroughly investigate Paul's death or what might have caused it—leaving Maryanne uncertain, without the closure that might have come from a thorough investigation, and with the additional pain of being aware that such an investigation might have been done if Paul had been white or more privileged. Further, it was this same sort of uncertainty that Maryanne had to endure after the disappearance of her sister. Racism and colonialism constantly traumatized Maryanne, directly, and through the travails of both her sister and her son. As such, Maryanne's experience is a tragic illustration of generational trauma and circular suffering.

Chapter 6: We Speak for the Dead to Protect the Living Quotes

❝ At the inquest, [...] the lawyer for six of the seven families bluntly stated Robyn's death was no accident—he called it a homicide. [...] Homicide, in a coroner's inquest, does not require proof of intention—it is simply the killing of a human being due to the act or omission of another. [...] [The lawyer] stated categorically: "We hold NNEC responsible for what happened to Robyn. There is no question the NNEC is trying its best, and there's not a lot of money, but they did have services they held out to be capable and competent and they were neither.""

Related Characters: Tanya Talaga (speaker), Cheyenne Linklater, David Fox, Skye Kakegamic, Robyn Harper

Related Themes:

Page Number: 198-199

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Tanya Talaga uses the example of the tragic death of Robyn Harper to illustrate how the Northern Nishnawbe Education Council (NNEC)—in spite of having good intentions—often fails to support the Indigenous students it's supposed to look out for.

When Robyn Harper drank too much while out with friends, her new friend Skye Kakegamic—who'd had a frightening run-in with the racist Thunder Bay Police once before—decided to call the NNEC rather than law enforcement for help getting the deeply intoxicated Robyn home. But the NNEC drivers who arrived to help didn't take Robyn to the hospital—and neither did her boarding parents. Reportedly, the NNEC drivers claimed to be unaware that alcohol poisoning could lead to death. This illustrates how the support networks that are in-place to provide help for Indigenous students studying away from home might be well-intended—but due to a lack of government funding as well as a lack of resources for volunteers and boarding parents, they're simply not sufficient. The lawyer quoted here did recognize that the NNEC had done their best—but he was essentially stating that because of governmental neglect, the best the NNEC had to offer was still letting vulnerable Indigenous kids slip through the cracks of the system. By tying a lack of government funding and support to Canada's history of colonialism and violence against Indigenous people, Talaga suggests that many of the structural support issues that result in Indigenous students' suffering (or even their deaths) are a direct result of Canada's history of colonial violence and cultural genocide.

Chapter 7: Brothers Quotes

❝ When he got to the river's edge, Ricki carefully squatted down, resting on his heels. He spent some time thinking before he slowly stretched his arms out over the water, his palms gently skimming the surface. Then he put his hands in the river, his arms spread out as far as possible. His body began to shudder.

It was as if he were reaching out for his brother.

The police were touched into silence. They backed away, giving the boy the time he needed before taking him back to the station.

Related Characters: Tanya Talaga (speaker), Reggie Bushie, Ricki Strang

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 215

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Tanya Talaga describes one of Ricki Strang's emotional visits to the river where he himself narrowly escaped death—and where his brother, Reggie Bushie, disappeared.

In this scene, as Ricki kneels before one of Thunder Bay's rivers and seems to reach out for his brother, "shuddering" with emotion as he does so, Talaga invokes the book's central symbol: rivers and bodies of water. The rivers in Thunder Bay are a symbol of how the insufficient social and educational networks that are meant to support Indigenous students often fail, allowing these vulnerable students to get metaphorically swallowed up.

Rivers in the book also symbolize the racist, colonialist Canadian justice systems that themselves also swallow up any hope of closure for these students and their families after they perish. So not only are the students who've died in Thunder Bay's rivers literally swallowed up by the water—they're devoured by systems that fail to protect them in life or fight for justice on their behalf after they're gone. Ricki's emotional reaction here, then, is rooted in more than just sadness over his brother's loss. It's rooted in pain over the forces of colonialism, generational trauma, and injustice that manifest as inadequate support structures, allowing students like Reggie to slip through the cracks.

> Alvin thought about the abject poverty most of his people lived in and the addictions they suffered in the hopes of making all their misery go away.
>
> Alvin thought about their parents, even his own older brothers and sisters, who had gone to residential school before his family moved to Muskrat Dam. And he thought about the forced schooling of more than 150,000 Indigenous kids and what it had done to the psyche of the people and the impact it had had on the next generation and the next.
>
> And then he thought about the five dead students there in Thunder Bay. A direct line of causation could be drawn from the residential school legacy to the failings in the government-run education system his people were left with.

Related Characters: Tanya Talaga (speaker), Alvin Fiddler

Related Themes:

Page Number: 240

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Tanya Talaga describes the pained thoughts of Alvin Fiddler—the grand chief of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation and a survivor of the residential schools—as he connects the traumas of the residential school system to the contemporary losses of Indigenous students in Thunder Bay.

This passage is significant because it helps draw "a direct line of causation" between the horrors of Canada's residential schools to the modern-day epidemics of generational poverty and failing educational resources that continue to plague Indigenous communities across Canada. Canada was founded on policies of cultural genocide and assimilation aimed at vulnerable Indigenous people who'd been stripped of their land and resources by predatory treaties signed with French and British settlers. Canadian legislation passed in the18th and 19th-century then mandated that Indigenous students attend residential schools, where they were cut off from their cultures and forced to face physical and sexual abuse. The survivors of that system, traumatized by the abuse they faced as children, often perpetuated similar abuses against their own children and other relatives. And now, in the 21st century, Indigenous students are dying in majority-white cities such as Thunder Bay where they're forced to move to pursue an education, since the Canadian government has never really sought to repair the emotional traumas or the structural inequities created by the residential school system.

For Fiddler and for Talaga, the progression of these events is obvious—but for many Canadians, especially white Canadians, the relationship between the traumas of the past and the circular suffering of the present might not be so clear. Spelling out a clear connection between the practical and emotional effects of cultural genocide is important, in Talaga's view, because it forces people to consider the long-lasting, multi-generational effects of racism and colonialism.

Chapter 9: Less Than Worthy Victims Quotes

❝ And yet still the inequities rage. Northern First Nations families are faced with the horrific choice of either sending their children to high school in a community that cannot guarantee their safety, or keeping them at home and hoping distance education will be enough. Families are still being told—more than twenty years after the last residential school was shut down—that they must surrender their children for them to gain an education. Handing over the reins to Indigenous education authorities such as the NNEC without giving them the proper funding tools is another form of colonial control and racism.

Related Characters: Tanya Talaga (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 267

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, author Tanya Talaga describes the painful and fraught choices that Indigenous parents must continue to make as they decide how best to provide their children with quality educations.

Even though the residential schools have been shut down for years, their legacy endures. Here, Talaga suggests that parents are *still* essentially forced to "surrender their children"—thus, in some cases, endangering them—in order to help them pursue an education. The lack of government funding on reservations is egregious and pervasive: few First Nations communities have running water and reliable electricity, let alone quality schools that cater to the needs of Indigenous students. In effect, then, the Canadian government is still upholding the core essential element of the residential schools: forcing Indigenous parents to send their children away from their families, cultures, and support networks and into majority-white spheres where they will be susceptible to racist violence and a lack of structural support.

This passage is significant because it explores how colonialism, cultural genocide, and generational trauma have persisted throughout Canadian society into the 21st century. The Canadian government has the resources to break the cycle and begin creating space for healing and change in Indigenous communities—but they will not allocate the funding and resources these communities need to provide for the next generation. As a result, the bones of the residential school system endure—and as the cases of the "seven fallen feathers" illustrate, Indigenous children continue to lose their lives to a flawed, colonialist system.

❝ After the attack on Darryl Kakekayash, Alvin and Julian saw a clear and disturbing pattern. They could not help but wonder if First Nations kids were being targeted and murdered. It was extremely rare to hear of Indigenous kids drowning on their reserves. Most First Nations people were born and raised on the water. Equally perplexing was how quickly the Thunder Bay Police wrote off investigations into the deaths. For Jethro, Curran, Reggie, and Kyle, police had issued press releases that came to the same conclusion: foul play was not suspected. Each of the deaths was classified as accidental: death by drinking too much and then drowning. To Thunder Bay Police, no one was readily responsible for the deaths of the students.

Related Characters: Tanya Talaga (speaker), Darryl Kakekayash, Kyle Morrisseau, Reggie Bushie, Curran Strang, Jethro Anderson, Julian Falconer, Alvin Fiddler

Related Themes:

Page Number: 267

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Tanya Talaga describes an attack on Indigenous teen Darryl Kakeyash in Thunder Bay—and attack that further suggests that several other of the "fallen feathers" may have been victims of targeted racist violence rather than tragic "accident[s]."

This passage is significant because it shows that there were other victims of racist violence around the time of the deaths of the seven fallen feathers—victims like Darryl. Darryl's assailants pushed him into the river and left him for dead, and five of the seven fallen feathers were found dead in Thunder Bay's rivers. While this isn't concrete proof that five of the seven fallen feathers were murdered, it should have been an enormous red flag for Thunder Bay Police. Yet it took years after Darryl reported his assault for the force to follow up on Darryl's case—and even then, they only did so when the families of five of the fallen students demanded a further inquest into their deaths.

The police's behavior, to Talaga, seems suspicious—and no matter what the truth of the deaths of the "fallen feathers" are, the police's behavior in those cases displays a department corrupted by racism and colonialism, uninterested in pursuing the truth when it pertains to Indigenous people. If they ignored Darryl's report in an attempt to cover up or distract from the truth about the five Indigenous boys' deaths, then they were aware that they were victims of racist violence. And if Darryl's case simply slipped through the cracks, Talaga suggests, that's still evidence of the police force discounting and overlooking

the stories of Indigenous people. Either way, it's evident to Talaga that racism and colonialism continue to create lasting trauma—and even violence—in Canada to this very day.

> Iacobucci wrote that Indigenous people told him there was a fundamental conflict between their cultural values, laws, and ideologies of traditional approaches to conflict resolution and the values and laws that underpin the Canadian justice system. Indigenous people wanted to re-attain harmony and balance—they wanted truth rather than retribution or punishment, he said.

Related Characters: Tanya Talaga (speaker), Frank Iacobucci

Related Themes:

Page Number: 272-273

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Tanya Talaga explores how Indigenous people's traditional approaches to conflict resolution—approaches rooted in restoring justice and balance—clash with the retributive, bureaucratic, colonialist systems of justice within Canada's government.

When family members of the "seven fallen feathers"—the seven deceased Indigenous students who'd died while attending school in Thunder Bay—began calling for an inquest into the deaths of the students, they weren't doing so to secure "retribution or punishment." In other words, these families didn't want to see anyone necessarily punished for the deaths of the students, and they didn't want anything for themselves because of the deaths. Instead, what they wanted to do was "re-attain harmony and balance" by securing closure through truth and transparency.

This passage is significant because it calls attention to the traditional methods of conflict resolution that are important to Indigenous communities. By highlighting how Indigenous communities approach justice from a mindful and peaceful place, Talaga is hammering home just how unnecessarily cruel modern-day vestiges of colonial violence are. When Indigenous families can only secure closure by navigating the labyrinthine colonial structures that have caused so much pain in the first place, it can become difficult to imagine that there will ever be a truly restorative moment for relations between Indigenous people and white Canadians.

> The court system had assigned one of the largest, most complex inquests in Ontario's history to one of the smallest rooms in the building. […] The room allocation was […] a slap in the face to the parents who had waited years for the formal investigation into their children's deaths to begin.
>
> Outraged and insulted, Achneepineskum, Falconer, and NAN staff began moving chairs from other courtrooms and the lobby and jamming them into the tiny box they were allocated.
>
> To the families, this scheduling gaffe was indicative of how the cases of the seven students were handled by authorities from the very start. Real life became a metaphor for how they had always been treated […] by the Canadian justice system.

Related Characters: Tanya Talaga (speaker), Julian Falconer, Sam Achneepineskum

Related Themes:

Page Number: 277

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Tanya Talaga describes the profound and perhaps calculated slight that awaited attendees of the inquest into the deaths of the "seven fallen feathers," illustrating how racism and colonial violence seep into every aspect of relations between the Canadian government and Indigenous people.

When racism and colonialism have defined the relations between white Canadians and Indigenous people for centuries, it's hard not to notice when slights and "gaffe[s]" that affect Indigenous people are allowed to slip through the cracks so easily. So when the hard-won inquest into the deaths of the seven fallen feathers began, it was difficult for Sam Achneepineskum, Julian Falconer, and the other attendees not to read the lack of seating for the families of the deceased as a pointed "slap in the face"—and perhaps even a pointed gesture by the Canadian government to suggest that Indigenous issues simply weren't that important to them.

This passage is also significant because it shows that rather than focus on bitterness, anger, or retribution, Sam and his fellow attendees—many of them Indigenous—immediately turned their focus to what their community needed, and began to take care of it themselves. This is illustrative of the approaches to conflict resolution that are part of Indigenous culture. Rather than focusing on retribution and pettiness, Indigenous approaches to conflict resolution are rooted in restoring balance and harmony, placing the focus on restorative justice rather than a deepening of divides.

Chapter 10: Seven Fallen Feathers Quotes

❝ [Christian] called the painting *Seven Fallen Feathers*. Each feather represents one of the seven dead students. Morrisseau was tired of hearing them being called that, "Seven dead students." People always referred to the kids like that. "The seven dead." As if they weren't anything else in life.

They had their own spirits. They were their own people.

Morrisseau couldn't stand hearing his son Kyle being called "one of the seven dead students" anymore, not by the news media, not by the lawyers, not by the people who meant well but found it easier to lump them all together as one.

Kyle was a fallen feather. They all were.

Related Characters: Tanya Talaga (speaker), Kyle Morrisseau, Christian Morrisseau

Related Themes:

Page Number: 301

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, author Tanya Talaga recalls a discussion with Christian Morrisseau. Christian is the son of famed Ojibwe painter Norval Morrisseau and the father of Kyle Morrisseau, one of the "seven fallen feathers"—a term that Christian himself coined to describe the seven Indigenous students who lost their lives in Thunder Bay between 2000 and 2011.

As Talaga recalls her emotional conversation with Christian about the losses of the "seven fallen feathers," it becomes clear that Christian coined the term as much for others as he did for himself. Christian himself was tired of hearing others refer to the group as "dead," as if their lives only meant something once they had ended. Christian's use of the term "feathers" to define the students sought to humanize the lost Indigenous children to the people who were discussing their deaths over and over again—many of them certainly white Canadians who were quick to "lump them all together" rather than recognize their distinct stories and journeys. This is significant because it shows that people like Christian must constantly work to humanize themselves and their loved ones in the eyes of Canadian society—a society whose foundation and policies toward Indigenous people are rooted in racism, colonialism, and white supremacy. By finding a term for the students that was rooted in his culture, Christian was able to change the way the government, the media, and the public saw and discussed the seven lost children—and he was able to do so in a way that honored the students' traditions and cultures.

Epilogue Quotes

❝ The Canada Day holiday approaches and the country prepares to celebrate its 150th birthday on July 1; for Alvin it will be a day of reflection. He will be at a powwow [...] 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?

Related Characters: Tanya Talaga (speaker), Alvin Fiddler

Related Themes:

Page Number: 314-315

Explanation and Analysis

Toward the end of the book, author Tanya Talaga examines NAN grand chief Alvin Fiddler's concerns about—and tentative hopes for—the future of relations between white Canadians and Indigenous people.

Alvin Fiddler—a survivor of the residential schools and the current leader of a great number of First Nations groups across Ontario—has endured a lot of pain throughout his lifetime. And yet here, as he describes his intentions of reflecting on his people's history and envisioning their future) he remains cautiously optimistic about the arrival of his people at an "eighth" fire—an uncharted yet potential-filled next step in relations between Indigenous and white Canadians.

It's significant that Fiddler tells Talaga he plans to engage in this particular reflection on Canada Day—a day dedicated to celebrating the foundations of modern-day Canada, yet one that purposefully obscures the centuries of Indigenous life that came before British and French colonizers arrived, and proceeded to terrorize and steal from Indigenous groups across the territory. He wants to think of a way to move forward in terms of his people's relations with the descendants of the people who colonized them—and yet he cannot forget the brutal true history of Canadian society. Still, Fiddler is able to envision a brighter future by turning to the traditions and prophecies of the past. Rather than stew in anger or consider all the reasons why an "eighth fire" could yet be impossible, Fiddler communicates to Talaga his focus on his people, their traditions, and their collective motion toward truth and reconciliation.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE

An Ojibwe legend describes the story of a giant named Nanabijou. By stomping around the large **body of water** called Gichigami, Nanabijou created valleys and rock faces from the landscape around him. His stomping also exposed a sparkling metal in the cliffs—silver—and so Nanabijou told the Ojibwe people who lived in his territory not to tell the encroaching white men where the silver was. As long as they kept Nanabijou's secret, Nanabijou promised, he would protect them—but if they didn't, something terrible would happen.

In the opening lines of the book, author Tanya Talaga relays an Ojibwe legend. Her reason for doing this is twofold. First, she's seeking to ground her readers in the traditional legends, prophecies, and spiritual touchstones of the Ojibwe, one of Canada's First Nations. She's also chosen to relay a dark myth about temptation and violence in order to foreshadow the violence, suffering, and loneliness that Canada's Indigenous people have faced throughout centuries of colonialism.

One day, the Ojibwe took in a Sioux man who claimed to be lost and in need of help. In reality, the Sioux man was a spy who'd heard stories about Nanabijou's precious metal and longed to take it for himself. He befriended the Ojibwe and waited patiently until finally he heard some of the Ojibwe talking about where the silver was. The Sioux man stole a canoe and traveled to the silver's hiding place. He filled his pockets with silver, but as he made his escape back down the river, he ran into a group of white men who took him prisoner.

The fact that another Indigenous person from another region betrays the Ojibwe is significant. Silver was something that the (white) colonizers wanted—and the Sioux man's longing for it shows how colonialism and cultural genocide can erode Indigenous cultural traditions, belief systems, and spiritual integrity over time, and turn Indigenous people against themselves. Colonialism is a destructive force, and Talaga wants her readers to see how poisonous it is.

When the Sioux man tried to buy his freedom with silver, the white men demanded to know where he'd gotten it. The Sioux man refused to tell them. So that night, the white men brought out some "firewater" (alcohol) and poured it for the Sioux man until he revealed where the silver was. As soon as the Sioux man betrayed Nanabijou's secret, Nanabijou fell down and turned from flesh and blood to stone. The Ojibwe were on their own from that moment on.

This part of the myth shows white colonizers manipulating an Indigenous man and poisoning him with alcohol. Indigenous people in Canada, the U.S., and other colonized places are often (and unfairly) racially stereotyped as alcoholics. But this myth implies that it was white colonizers who used alcohol purposely to weaken Indigenous people. More broadly, this part of the story implies how colonial influence, manipulation, and greed led colonizers to corrupt and traumatize Indigenous people for their own selfish gain. Talaga uses the story of Nanabijou's fall to suggest that Indigenous culture has suffered and, in some cases, been abandoned as a painful side effect of colonial violence.

Thunder Bay, a city in the Canadian province of Ontario, has always been "a city of two faces"—according to author Tanya Talaga, one face is white, and one is red. The Port Arthur side of the city is the "white" side, and the Fort William side of the city—located on the Ojibwe's traditional lands near the powerful Kaministiquia (or Kam) **River**—is the "red" one.

This passage uses Thunder Bay's division and duality to suggest something larger about the state of Canadian society. Thunder Bay is divided along racial lines—and so is the rest of Canada, since white colonizers took land that was not theirs and built a society on the ruins of the Indigenous communities they destroyed.

For over 10,000 years, many of Canada's Indigenous people lived in a thriving society along the banks of the Kam **River** and the lake called Gichigami, known by most white people today as Lake Superior. The lake creates unpredictable weather around the shoreline, so when French colonizers arrived, they named it Baie de Tonnaire—Thunder Bay. Over the centuries, the colonials who have come to Canada have "marked their territory" by building generating stations on the Kam, turning the surrounding forests into logging centers, and constructing massive government buildings on the banks of the lake. But the Kam still offers Indigenous teenagers privacy and proximity to nature—as they drink, party, and talk on the riverbanks, they can feel close to their faraway homes.

Here, Talaga describes some of the practical, physical effects of Canada's history of colonization. Sites like the Gichigami and the Kam River were (and still are) sacred to Indigenous Canadians. But white colonizers saw them only as places that could be turned into profit centers—and so as Canada has been colonized, its most sacred places have been turned into sites of industry. In spite of all that, though, Talaga shows how Indigenous Canadians have fought to maintain their connections to these sacred places in new ways. So when Indigenous teenagers who live in Thunder Bay go out to drink by the river, they're not just picking a random spot. They're engaging with the cultural and spiritual traditions of their people's pasts, reclaiming a part of their ancestry that colonialism and cultural genocide sought to erase.

There is only one road to the nearby Fort William First Nation, one of the 133 Indigenous reserves in Ontario. A bridge over the Kam used to offer access to the "rez"—but after arsonists set fire to it in 2013, the city, the province, and the federal government have been arguing about who should pay for the repair.

The institutions of white Canada don't want to invest in the improvement of Indigenous properties or resources. White colonizers took hold of Indigenous land by force—and sequestered Indigenous Canadians on small reserves. Now, the present-day government refuses to answer for its past, or to try to right its wrongs by maintaining the faltering infrastructure its predecessors pushed Indigenous Canadians onto in the first place.

Port Arthur, an upscale neighborhood, is the center of business and commerce in Thunder Bay. It is also where "the nation building of Canada" began—this is where the British Army began acquiring land from the Ojibwe, building railroads, and growing the country. As Port Arthur began to flourish, more and more settlers arrived from England, Finland, and France. The thriving fur trade meant that local Indigenous people could make a living—but by the 20th century, the trade had died out, and these Indigenous families were left living in decrepit cabins without heating or plumbing.

Here, Talaga shows how colonial Canadian society "flourish[ed]" while actively working to marginalize and exclude Indigenous Canadians from white spaces. After taking over and radically changing the communities that Indigenous people had called home for centuries, white colonizers then shunted Indigenous people quite literally to the edges of society and left them behind. When white colonizers created the social rules, the economy, and the politics of Canadian society, they purposefully left Indigenous people out of the equation.

British society in Port Arthur had become the dominant one, and Indigenous people did not fit into that society. So white settlers began finding ways to force Indigenous people to become assimilated into Canada's burgeoning colonial society. Through Catholic orphanages and residential schools, colonizers began housing, educating, and Christianizing young Indigenous children—many of whom were abandoned by parents who couldn't care for them (due to poverty induced by colonization). Other parents sent their children to residential schools in the hope that receiving an English education would better equip them to survive in colonial society.

White colonizers created an exclusionary society in which Indigenous people couldn't hope to participate or keep up (because of racism, wealth gaps, and other social byproducts of colonization). Rather than make space for Indigenous people in white society, colonizers decided to find ways to fold Indigenous people into a new colonial social order—and the process of cultural genocide began. The residential schools, introduced here as a term for the first time, were one of the most egregiously violent and cruel colonial structures white Canadians created. The schools would become major sources of trauma and suffering for Indigenous people across Canada. The experience of forced assimilation, physical violence, and cultural erasure became the norm for many Indigenous people.

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police, too, regularly "rounded up" Indigenous children from reserves and communities and delivered them to these institutions. Because many Indigenous children arrived at these schools against their will, many of them tried to run away—but Mounties were always assigned to catch them and bring them back by force.

Some Indigenous children entered the residential schooling system when their parents couldn't care for them, or when their parents were forced to figure out ways to try to protect their children from the pain of being an outsider in the newly dominant white Canadian social order. But as this section of Seven Fallen Feathers *shows, many of the Indigenous children who entered the residential school system were violently forced to do so. While the schools may have been sometimes described as being beneficial for Indigenous people—as being a road to success in Canadian society—this forced school attendance gives the lie to any such idea. The schools were created to destroy Indigenous culture by forcibly removing and reeducating Indigenous youth. The logic of colonization is leads to efforts to erase the traditions and cultures that threaten its dominance.*

In 1966, St. Joseph's Indian Residential School was demolished. Since the school's inception in the early 1900s, six students had lost their lives there, and 16 more are still unaccounted for to this day. Now, a new Catholic elementary school sits on the grounds—no plaque or monument was added to the site until 2017. Indigenous people in Thunder Bay and across Canada commemorate the survivors of Canada's residential schools on Orange Shirt Day, September 30.

This passage shows that the majority of the work that's been done to try to make sense of the residential schooling system (and the cultural genocide it enabled) has been done by Indigenous people themselves. In contrast, Canadian society has never really atoned for its cruelty and violence—and Indigenous people have been left alone, once again, to pick up the pieces of their diminished cultural and spiritual traditions.

Seven Indigenous students who lost their lives in Thunder Bay in the early 2000s are the subject of this book—but to understand their stories, Talaga says, one must understand Thunder Bay's past. In the city's early days, seeds of division and ignorance were sown—and decades of apathy toward Canada's Indigenous population have allowed those seeds to grow. As Nanabijou slept, the "white face of prosperity" flourished, while the "red face" was forced to stand and watch, powerless and ignored.

Here, Talaga highlights the importance of understanding cultural division and generational trauma in order to make sense of the violence that's being perpetrated against Indigenous Canadians in the present day. Without a rigorous understanding of the generations of colonial violence that define Canada's foundation, Talaga argues, one can't comprehend the patterns of suffering, powerlessness, and vulnerability that marks so much of the contemporary Indigenous Canadian experience. In this way, Talaga refuses to let Indigenous people be blamed for the issues they continue to face in Canada. Any such issues, Talaga makes clear, are a legacy of Canada's colonialist and racist past treatment of Indigenous people.

CHAPTER 1: NOTES FROM A BLIND MAN

One must take a drab route, "devoid of charm," to reach the administration office of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation, or NAN—a political organization that represents 49 First Nations communities encompassing two-thirds of Ontario. Tanya Talaga travels to the ill-maintained office on a dreary day in April of 2011 to speak with NAN's grand chief, Stan Beardy. The daughter of a half-European, half-Ojibwe mother and a Polish father, Talaga flies from Toronto to talk with Beardy about the upcoming federal election. The incumbent candidate is the Prime Minister Stephen Harper, whose five-year tenure has seen the stripping of environmental protections and underfunding of Canada's 634 First Nations.

As Talaga travels to meet with the grand chief of the NAN, she describes the decrepit conditions that many First Nations communities across Canada have fallen into after years of neglect on the part of the government, and a resultant lack of resources. When Talaga asks Stan Beardy about Indigenous voter turnout in the upcoming federal election, she's showing that she, too, is in some way a victim of an internalized colonial mindset. Talaga herself is Indigenous, but she is, in this moment, looking at Indigenous involvement in a colonial structure rather than the actual issues facing Indigenous people that are right in front of her: profound poverty and lack of resources.

Talaga tries to talk to Beardy about Indigenous voting statistics, pointing out that Indigenous people have the power to influence the election if they come out in large numbers. But Beardy doesn't want to talk about voting—he wants to know why Talaga isn't instead writing about Jordan Wabasse, a 15-year-old Indigenous boy who has been missing for 71 days. Stan tells Talaga that Jordan is the seventh student since 2000 to go missing or die while at school in Thunder Bay.

Stan Beardy doesn't have any interest in talking to Talaga about how a colonialist issue—an upcoming election—affects Indigenous people. Instead, he wants her to focus on the ways in which the very government she's trying to get Indigenous people to participate in profoundly neglects Indigenous communities—and vulnerable Indigenous children.

Talaga is stricken—seven is a symbolic number in Indigenous culture. The prophecy of the seven fires is important to many First Nations people: the seven "fires" represent important moments in the history of the people on "Turtle Island" (the Indigenous name for North America). The first three fires speak of times before the arrival of Europeans. The fourth fire predicts the arrival of the light-skinned race, and the fifth speaks of war and suffering at the hands of that race. The sixth fire speaks of the "mask of death" worn by white-skinned invaders and the erasure of Indigenous lives and teachings. The seventh fire speaks of young Indigenous people rising up and learning to find their own way through the "trails of the past."

This passage represents the importance of tradition, culture, and spirituality in contemporary Indigenous culture. Even though Talaga is disconnected from certain Indigenous issues—she's a relatively well-to-do reporter and she lives in a big city—she recognizes central cultural touchstones immediately. As Talaga walks her readers through the seven fires, she shows that in spite of all of the pain and violence of colonialism and cultural genocide, Indigenous people remain optimistic that the "trails of the past" will enable the younger generations to find their way to a more peaceful future (and a return to traditional Indigenous values).

Beardy tells Talaga that all of the students who have disappeared or died were from remote communities in Northern Ontario, where there are few high schools. They'd all come to Thunder Bay to pursue an education and escape the poverty of the reservations. On reservations, food insecurity and malnutrition are rampant—so diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, and dental problems plague many Indigenous people. Clean running water is a rarity. Hospitals, fire departments, and schools are few and far between. Even though Canada's government was, until the 1990s, supposed to fund and maintain schools for Indigenous children, this promise has never really been fulfilled.

The government of Canada never fulfilled its promises to fund and support Indigenous communities. As a result, there's a profound lack of resources on many reserves. The trauma of the past, too, plays a role in the state of contemporary reserves—because so many Indigenous Canadians bear the scars of colonial violence, cultural genocide, and the abuses of the residential schooling system, mental health and substance abuse issues abound on reserves in addition to the other health problems caused by generational poverty and government neglect. These are the environments that many Indigenous youth come from when they begin their schooling far away from home in large, unfamiliar cities.

Stan Beardy takes Talaga on a drive. As they drive, he tells her about his son, Daniel, who was 19 years old when he died in 2004 after being beaten badly at a house party. Daniel was close to graduating from Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School (DFC) in Thunder Bay, a school for Indigenous students run by the Northern Nishnawbe Education Council (NNEC). Most of the students who attend DFC come from reserves hundreds of kilometers away and live in boarding houses with local parents. (Six of the seven students Talaga will write about in *Seven Fallen Feathers* attended DFC.) For Stan, the loss of these seven students represents the failure of one generation to properly look out for the next.

As Stan Beardy tells Talaga about the losses of several students in the Thunder Bay area—and at DFC specifically—it becomes clear that he is in mourning for the youth that have been lost to the deep-rooted effects of generational trauma and circular suffering. Beardy's generation was forced into residential schools—and they all bear the trauma of that experience. That trauma made the older generation less able to protect the younger generation—trauma passed from one generation to the next. In addition, the older generation's failure to protect the younger generation from racism, violence, and danger creates a sort of re-traumatization of the older generation, creating circular suffering throughout Indigenous communities across Canada.

Stan parks the car near a bridge crossing the Kam. From that spot, Talaga can see Animikii-wajiw, or Thunder Mountain, a spiritual center for the Ojibwe of Fort William First Nation. Stan tells Talaga that he believes that Jordan was chased into the **river**; searchers recently found one of Jordan's running shoes at this exact spot.

Even though spiritual and sacred places surround Thunder Bay, the city is still a hotbed of racist violence where Indigenous people are particularly vulnerable. This passage represents the first moment in which a body of water is rendered as a symbol for how racism, colonial violence, and lacking support networks can often result in the literal swallowing up or drowning of Indigenous youths struggling to stay alive in a system that doesn't look out for them at any turn.

After the search for Jordan first got under way, a blind Elder of the Webequie First Nation told—the leader of the community search for Jordan in Thunder Bay that he'd had a vision. The vision was of Jordan scuffling with two young people near an industrial warehouse on the banks of the **Kam** on the night that he vanished. The blind man's vision also included an image of Jordan's body lying on the ground, his spirit on top of the river's water. The Elder warned the search leader, "The more you search, the more he vanishes."

Again, this passage demonstrates how Indigenous people often seek to navigate painful, difficult situations—situations that are frequently the results of colonialist violence and neglect—by turning to their spiritual and cultural traditions for guidance. In the absence of any real support from the Canadian institutions that should be helping Indigenous communities, Indigenous people must rely on one another and on their shared cultural beliefs.

Jordan Wabasse arrived in Thunder Bay in September of 2010 to attend the Matawa Learning Centre. Jordan didn't feel he was getting a good enough education at home, so he begged his mother Bernice to send him to Thunder Bay to continue school. Jordan wanted to play hockey—and Bernice wanted to support his dreams. She sent him to Thunder Bay to board with his distant cousin, Clifford Wabasse, and Clifford's wife, Jessica. Boarding parents were paid monthly to host students, but they were not obligated to supervise their boarders, help them with homework, or transport them to or from school and extracurriculars.

Even though the residential schools were abolished in the 20th century, this passage shows that when modern Indigenous youths want to pursue quality higher educations or begin athletic careers, the lack of educational resources on the reserves means that they still must make a choice between staying at home and maintaining their connections to their families and communities or venturing out into a new, dangerous city where there's little structural, educational, or emotional support available to them. The government may no longer force the relocation of Indigenous students, but it's neglect means that Indigenous people are still forced into similar choices and that the pattern of trauma continues.

On the frigid morning of February 7, 2011, Jordan left home for school at his usual time. Jordan had been raised far away from Thunder Bay in the remote, traditional community of Webequie—and though adjusting to the city was a process, Jordan was responsible and punctual. When he didn't come home for dinner before hockey practice that night, Jessica found it strange—and when he didn't call his girlfriend Myda that night at 11, Myda grew worried as well.

Even though Jordan was far away from home, he appeared to be doing well in his new surroundings. Yet his death shows that Indigenous youths are vulnerable in places like Thunder Bay. Having to face disproportionate instances of violence and an absence of support from the educational structures in place for them, Indigenous children are largely on their own.

Jordan was last seen alive getting off of a Thunder Bay Transit bus just a block away from his boarding house. He'd been at the mall—a popular hangout for northern teens like Jordan who grew up in places that didn't have stores or restaurants, let alone a shopping mall. After visiting the mall, he'd gone drinking with a couple of friends. Some of his classmates saw him on the bus around 9:30 p.m., and the last image of Jordan on transit footage was caught at about 10.

Jordan was an ordinary teen who enjoyed doing typical teenage things with his friends—but there were also many unique difficulties that Jordan was facing. He was far from home in an unfamiliar place—and the people who were in charge of looking out for him, his boarding family, weren't able to look out for him as closely as they should have. As the book continues, Talaga will delve more deeply into the unique vulnerabilities that Indigenous youth face as they navigate life away from home.

Clifford called the Thunder Bay Police on February 8 to report Jordan missing. The Detective Constable who came to the house that night didn't seem to realize that Jordan had already been missing for a full 24 hours. A ground search did not begin for another 48 hours—and no Amber Alert was issued, nor were any K-9 units sent out to join the search.

This passage illustrates the negligence with which the Thunder Bay police began their investigation into Jordan's disappearance—a negligence that will be evident in every case described in the book. They didn't employ the full force of the resources they could have—the resources, Talaga implies, they might have if Jordan weren't Indigenous.

Six days after Jordan's disappearance, a search team turned up a ballcap that appeared to have belonged to Jordan, as well as some nearby footprints in the snow. Police called in a dive team to plunge the depths of the icy **river** near where the cap had been found, but nothing turned up. Meanwhile, Indigenous communities from all over the north banded together to fundraise and lead searches.

Here, Talaga illustrates how in the absence of support from white state and government forces, Indigenous people come together in community to look out for and support one another in ways that reflect their own cultural values and traditions.

On March 20, a team from Cat Lake First Nation found Jordan's running shoe after following the map of the blind Elder's vision. When the team notified police about finding the shoe—and drag marks in the snow nearby—the police dismissed the marks as "kids sliding." The team turned up blood and teeth from a nearby site, and while these weren't found to belong to Jordan, DNA profiling of Jordan's mother revealed that the hat was unmistakably his.

Again, as Talaga relays more and more details about the search for Jordan, she highlights the gulf between the Thunder Bay Police's inadequate, lazy measures and the collective, dedicated, almost spiritual approach of the Indigenous community who banded together to look for Jordan.

The Indigenous search team continued to look for Jordan, combing the Kam **riverbanks** and passing out missing person flyers tirelessly. Rumors about Jordan's connections to a gang called the Native Syndicate began flying. Another native boy named Jordan Waboose, who did have connections to the gang, believed that Jordan Wabasse had been killed accidentally, and that the gang was really still after him.

Again, Talaga uses this passage to show how Indigenous people from Jordan's community—and other Indigenous youths living in Thunder Bay—were doing more to search for Jordan than the police were. There were lots of potential leads the police didn't fully follow up on—leads that could have explained Jordan's disappearance.

In early May, as spring began to arrive, boaters called police to report a body floating in the **river** near the swing bridge—the location that the blind Elder had seen in his visions. After 92 days, Jordan's body was pulled from the river; it was badly decomposed, but still clothed in the hoodie and left sneaker Jordan was wearing on the day he disappeared. At 9 p.m. that night, a Thunder Bay Police sergeant went to visit Jordan's mother at the hotel where she was staying. Dental records confirmed that the body was Jordan's.

The police wound up finding Jordan right where the blind Elder's visions led them. This illustrates the profound importance of traditional and spiritual Indigenous practices—and suggests that when it comes to Indigenous issues, Indigenous people know how to help their own far better than white colonizers do.

Three days later, police received a tip from a residence for teenagers—one of the residents heard that two men had pushed Jordan off the bridge. But the resident didn't want to talk to the police—she fled the group home. Police followed up on the lead and tracked down the teenager, Josee, and she gave them the names of the men who'd allegedly pushed Jordan. The police interrogated the men, Austin Millar and Steven Cole, but they denied having anything to do with Jordan. Five years later, a friend of one of the men would admit in a court room that Steven confessed to pushing Jordan. Other loose ends in the case, such as the similarly-named Jordan Waboose (and an acquaintance of his named Kenny Wabasse, who shared Jordan's last name), offered no promising leads.

Here, Talaga explains the many loose ends in Jordan's case that the Thunder Bay Police never fully followed up on. There were many suspicious people who'd heard rumors about Jordan being murdered, and there were people who lived in the area with names similar to his—this implies that Jordan could've been killed by people who were looking to punish someone else. No matter what happened to Jordan, what is clear is that the Thunder Bay police didn't push their investigation as far as they could have—and in the process, they might have let a potential killer slip through the cracks.

To this day, Jordan's death has no explanation. It doesn't make sense that Jordan would've wound up on the swing bridge—it wasn't on his route home. Jordan's death was ultimately marked "Accidental," with the cause of death listed as "cold **water** drowning." But during the inquest into the deaths of the seven Indigenous students, a lawyer would say that she didn't accept that as the cause of Jordan's death for an instant.

Jordan wasn't just swallowed up by the Kam River—he was swallowed up by a flawed education system that couldn't look out for him, and a racist justice system that didn't take the time to fully investigate what happened to him.

CHAPTER 2: WHY CHANIE RAN

Tanya Talaga meets with Alvin Fiddler, the new grand chief of Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN). Fiddler oversees the governance of 45,000 people across the northern half of Ontario—and the youth of his people are committing suicide at an unbelievable rate. Talaga tells Fiddler that she is writing a book about the seven students who died at school in Thunder Bay—a book she's wanted to write since joining the search team for Jordan Wabasse. At that time, Fiddler was traveling with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, or TRC—the Government of Canada's most significant attempt to heal the trauma of the 150,000 Indigenous survivors of the residential school system.

As Talaga meets with Alvin Fiddler, the narrative ties together the epidemic of Indigenous youth suicide, the disappearances of Indigenous youths from Thunder Bay, and the traumatic history of the residential school system. The connection between these three issues plaguing Canada's Indigenous communities is important, because it speaks to the circular nature of trauma and suffering, how trauma passes from one generation to the next. Indigenous leaders like Fiddler are still trying to help their people heal from the wounds of the past—wounds that have created patterns of depression, substance abuse, and hopelessness both in the survivors of the school system and their families and descendants. Meanwhile, there are few governmental support systems in place to help survivors and their families—so problems with isolation and a lack of resources on reserves creates suffering that filters down to young people, and in turn leads to elevated suicide rates that even further traumatize the community.

When Fiddler heard of Jordan's disappearance, he was sad and furious—in 2008, after another student named Reggie Bushie had been found dead in the water, he'd warned NAN that children in Thunder Bay were dying at school. Now, sitting across from Talaga, Fiddler advises her to "start with Chanie Wenjack," a young Indigenous boy who died long ago.

Fiddler here asserts that the answers to how to solve the problems facing today's Indigenous youth must be understand in the context of the past. The traumas and cruelties Indigenous people have faced in the past are directly connected to the epidemics of depression, substance abuse, and suicide that they are often forced to reckon with today.

As Talaga walks along **Lake Superior** in the crisp October air, she considers the boundary between different worlds this place represents. The treaties that Canada's First Nations signed with the British Crown isolated Indigenous people on remote reserves, forcing them to cede their lands to white settlers. The nearby Fort William First Nation falls under the Robinson-Superior treaty, signed in 1850. William Robinson signed the treaty with Chief Joseph Peau de Chat, promising Peau de Chat that it was unlikely the area would be settled. So, Peau de Chat signed the treaty, handing over 57,000 square kilometers of land in exchange for a small yearly payment. In the years that followed, hundreds of thousands more kilometers were taken from Canada's Indigenous people under similarly false pretenses, and white settlers began forming the modern-day province of Ontario.

In this scene, a body of water—Lake Superior—becomes a symbol of how Indigenous people's traditional lands (and thus their autonomy and traditional ways of life) were swallowed up by the forces of colonialism and cultural genocide. The white settlers who took Indigenous land essentially conned First Nations people into unfair deals—and once the settlers began taking things, they never stopped. The losses Indigenous people have faced are so large-scale that they're difficult to fully comprehend—and that's why the symbol of being consumed by the forces of colonialism is so potent

In 1876, the Canadian government introduced the Indian Act, which created extensive rules meant to keep Indigenous people on their reserve land and out of settlers' way. Now, people recognize this act as a form of apartheid—it stripped Indigenous people of their rights, limited their movement, and barred them from the pursuit of education. The Crown used this act, and the various treaties signed by First Nations all over Canada, to create residential schools and begin assimilating the next generation of Indigenous people. The goal was to assimilate these children into Canadian society so that they'd violate the protections of the treaties that had been signed—and essentially end the Canadian government's financial and legal obligations to its Indigenous people.

Once the settlers had colonized the Indigenous people's land, they began the process of cultural genocide. This passage shows how the act of colonization (taking away space) and the act of cultural genocide (taking away traditions and autonomy) work together to erase entire swaths of an Indigenous group's culture. The point of colonization and cultural genocide was always, essentially, to reduce the chance that Indigenous people would be able to remain autonomous, draw on their treaties, or rise up in rebellion.

With the advent of the Indian Act, all children 16 and under were expected to attend and live in one of the country's 139 residential schools. These schools were operated by different Christian religious orders. They were underfunded and overcrowded, and children were often rounded up from their reservations and brought to the schools against their will. The schools were unsanitary, poorly constructed, and infested with vermin. The children were malnourished, far from home, and forbidden from speaking their native dialects. Ultimately, about 6,000 students died of neglect and disease—but the exact figure is unknown, since the federal government destroyed over 200,000 documents and files related to "Indian Affairs" throughout the 20th century.

The residential schools were another tool of colonization and cultural genocide. The colonizers who ran the residential schools attempted to strip young, vulnerable people of their cultural heritages, their languages, and their senses of pride in their people's traditions—with the goal of separating the younger generation from their traditions and in so doing destroy the culture behind those traditions by blocking it from being passed on. By leveraging malnourishment, corporal punishment, and sexual assault against these youths, the colonizers could further reinforce the idea that Indigenous culture was unacceptable. The legacy of the residential schools is profound and ongoing—the traumas that happened there filtered down to the generations that followed, signaling to future generations (even those who weren't forced into the schooling system) that the government of Canada wanted them to be erased.

Talaga pays a visit to the ruins of the Cecilia Jeffrey Indian Residential School, which was operational until 1974. She meets with Elder Thomas White from the Whitefish Bay First Nation, a survivor of a different residential school. He tells Talaga that Cecilia Jeffrey's baseball field was built over a former burial ground as he leads her into his office, a mobile home on the site of the school's former main building. Inside, he offers her a suitcase full of documents related to Chanie Wenjack. Looking through the many photos of Indigenous students inside the suitcase, Talaga finds herself disturbed by the students' cold, uncomfortable gazes.

As White tells Talaga about the former Indigenous burial ground upon which parts of Cecilia Jeffrey were built, he underscores the indifference (and indeed contempt) that white colonizers and white Canadians have always had for Indigenous spirituality and tradition. They built a colonial institution over a sacred Indigenous space to make their point: nothing about Indigenous culture mattered to them.

Cecilia Jeffrey, the secretary in charge of "Indian Work" at Rat Portage's Women's Missionary Society, founded the school in hopes of "sav[ing]" Native children by Christianizing them. At the school, originally located near Shoal Lake First Nation, the students learned, did chores, and attended worship each night (as well as Sunday School on the weekends). Many Indigenous leaders protested the schooling the children were receiving as substandard and even cruel—children were corporally punished for challenging authority—and though abuse claims mounted steadily over the years, nothing was done to improve the school.

In the past, Indigenous people knew that what was happening inside the residential schools was wrong and even dangerous. But there were no support networks available to the students or their parents—Indigenous people had no say in their own lives because of the many restrictive, apartheid-like treaties that had stripped them of their autonomy. This precedent echoes up through the present day—even though Indigenous people are no longer barred from speaking their languages or honoring their traditions, there still aren't many avenues they can take to speak out against the injustices being committed against them. As the book unfolds, Talaga will continue to explore how Indigenous people struggle to secure funding, support, and autonomy when it comes to creating better educational systems for their children.

When a new school opened beside Round Lake outside Kenora in 1929, a lot of Indigenous parents protested because the school was too far away. But many students were rounded up and sent there anyway; some were relocated from schools like the one at Shoal Lake. The children were experimented on, given foods with strange additives, and refused medical treatment for tuberculosis. At Cecilia Jeffrey, an unmarked grave holds at least 14 bodies—the children died from causes that are still unclear.

Students attending residential schools weren't just stripped of their cultural identities—they were used in colonizers' experiments. Again, Talaga is hammering home the degree to which the colonizer who formed Canada viewed Indigenous lives as insignificant and contemptible. This passage also implies that the weight of knowing the terrible things that were done to Indigenous residential school students in the past, some of whom are still alive today and ready to share their stories of outright torture, weighs heavily on the current generation of Indigenous youth—another kind of generational trauma.

In September of 1966, Pearl Wenjack saw several of her siblings—including Chanie—off to school as they departed for the term by pontoon plane. Pearl remembers Chanie asking her to pack his clothes up in a box, a request Pearl thought was strange, since that was what their family did when someone died. Months later, Pearl opened a letter from Cecilia Jeffrey's principal, which reported that all the Wenjack children were doing well. But that afternoon, a plane arrived at the reservation; the principal disembarked with Pearl's siblings and her mother, who'd been at a faraway hospital for cancer treatment. Pearl's sister Daisy told Pearl that Chanie was gone.

As Chanie prepared to head off to Cecilia Jeffrey for what would be his final year, Pearl's recollection seems to show that Chanie perhaps knew he wouldn't make it through the term. By asking his sister to prepare his things for his death according to his cultural tradition, he was perhaps seeking to hold onto a part of his identity that the residential school was actively trying to take away from him.

The Department of Indian Affairs (now known as INAC) knew, from the late 19th century onward, that students were being sexually abused in the residential schools. So, schools like Cecilia Jeffrey were surrounded by barbed wire, and any students who escaped were quickly rounded up and brought back. Over 37,000 cases of sexual abuse have been reported—some children were abused by staff and teachers, and some were abused by older students. This, Talaga writes, is "the life Chanie ran from."

Rather than fixing the severe issues plaguing the residential schools and working to save the lives of Indigenous children, the government of Canada instead focused on containing the disasters that the schools were and keeping students, no matter the cost, from escaping and potentially blowing the whistle on what was really going on. Indigenous children were forced into unimaginably violent and traumatizing situations again and again. They had no autonomy and no say in their own lives.

On October 16, 1966, Chanie ran away along with nine other students. They were headed for Redditt, a small community about 27 kilometers away. Chanie ran away with two other boys, accompanying them to one of their relatives' homes. A man named Charles Kelly took them in, but Chanie didn't feel welcome, as he wasn't related to the Kellys. Chanie left to head for his own home—but after he left the Kelly home, he was never seen alive again.

In this anecdote, Talaga shows how even an Indigenous support network wasn't enough to keep Chanie from slipping through the cracks. Just as modern-day boarding parents in cities like Thunder Bay work to take in students who need support and a place to live, Charles Kelly took in his own relative, as well as Chanie and another boy—but he couldn't support Chanie and look after him in the way Chanie needed to be looked after.

On October 23, 1966, Chanie's body was found beside the railroad tracks just 20 kilometers east of Redditt. The autopsy implied that he'd stumbled on the tracks and fallen on some rocks. Daisy, who was staying with a friend after being kicked out of school, learned from the evening news that her brother had died. A police officer tracked Daisy down and drove her to Kenora to be with her siblings and bring Chanie's body home.

Chanie died trying to escape from the residential schools. He should still be alive today—but when faced with the terrible choice between a stifling, abusive environment and the danger of the unknown, he chose the latter. This pattern continues to echo today, as Indigenous youths are essentially forced to choose between staying on underfunded reserves or taking a leap of faith into the unknown to pursue academic or athletic careers.

Though the Kenora coroner called for an inquest, the Wenjacks weren't told that one was being held. They weren't given the opportunity to attend, and they weren't offered legal counsel. The inquest resulted in several recommendations being made to protect against something like Chanie's death happening again. Experts recommended more teachers be hired at Cecilia Jeffrey to better keep an eye on the students, and that more schools should be built closer to existing reserves so that the students would have an easier time adjusting. The Wenjacks would read about the results of the inquest in a magazine article three months later. Daisy didn't receive the official inquest documents for over 20 years.

Chanie's death should have resulted in a serious look into what was happening in the residential schools that was causing children to risk their lives running away. Instead, the Canadian government decided only that more schools should be built, and that more teachers—teachers who often abused Indigenous students—should be hired. The Wenjack family was totally excluded from the inquest process—their voices weren't considered worthy of being heard, even as the coroner's office picked apart the circumstances of their youngest member's death. The Canadian government's indifference in these matters will mirror the Thunder Bay police department's indifference about the deaths of the "seven fallen feathers" as detailed later in the book.

Daisy's husband, Henry, later admitted to her that he'd been abused by an Anglican priest while at a residential school. Around the same time, Daisy and Pearl learned from a friend of Chanie's that Chanie had been abused, too, by a fellow student. Pearl began to recover repressed memories of witnessing abuse herself.

This passage shows just how many Indigenous children who passed through the residential schooling system had to reckon with their memories of abuse later in life. Even if these students don't remember being abused themselves, they witnessed other children being harmed and betrayed by the people who were supposed to care for them. The traumatic effects of this are unimaginable and profound—and as Talaga delved deeper into a story that appeared to be about Chanie, she learned quickly that no one in Chanie's orbit was spared from similar trauma and suffering.

When Pearl heard about the inquest into the deaths of seven Indigenous students in Thunder Bay, she lamented that nothing had changed for Indigenous students since Chanie's death. The recommendations made at Chanie's inquest hadn't been followed at all. Pearl knew all about the loneliness and anguish students living far from home had to face. As a residential school survivor herself, she felt their pain "all over again."

Pearl's assertion that the pain of the past is unfolding "all over again" in places like Thunder Bay illustrates the circular nature of trauma and suffering. As a result of the things that happened in the residential schools, whole generations of Indigenous people are traumatized—and when they hear about similar things happening in new, different ways, those wounds from the past open up once more.

CHAPTER 3: WHEN THE WOLF COMES

In 1996, Canada's last residential school was finally shut down—over 150,000 children had passed through them, passing down the horrors of their experiences to the next generation. Now, Indigenous families who wanted to send their children to schools had to turn to provincially run schools in urban areas like Thunder Bay. In 1979, as Indigenous people began to demand a greater say in their children's educations, the Northern Nishnawbe Education Council (NNEC) was established to run boarding programs and act as an education authority.

It took many decades, but Indigenous people finally managed to secure greater control over their children's educations in the last gasps of the 20th century. But the trauma of the residential schools couldn't be ignored—and as Indigenous authorities like the NNEC began working to reform how Indigenous children learned, they'd have to reckon with the very real residual traumas that grew out of generations of abuse.

The NNEC started a distance education program, since dropout rates were still high. Through this initiative, students could go to local buildings and essentially "call in" to lectures at schools that were far away. Norma Kejick was one of the first people on the NNEC board, and she was determined to create a real high school for kids in her community. The NNEC received a government grant to open up a new school on the site of an old residential school. There would be a boarding program for nearly 200 students, but over 300 applied to attend. So, the NNEC bid on a satellite building in Thunder Bay—and after winning the bid, they began work on Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School, or DFC.

The NNEC was working hard to innovate new ways for Indigenous students to learn while still remaining connected to their homes and communities. But they also wanted to try to heal the wounds of the past by creating something new altogether: an all-Indigenous school that would actually work to make sure Indigenous students prospered as they left home to pursue their educations. The NNEC's intentions in establishing DFC were noble and pure.

The old building needed many repairs, and the NNEC needed to find prospective boarding parents in the Thunder Bay area. They wanted to make sure that the students coming to the city—many of them from remote reservations—would be well-equipped to thrive in their new environment. DFC was far away, and it presented many challenges for students adjusting to city life. But since local schools for Indigenous students are egregiously underfunded and ill-maintained due to the lack of education standards in the Indian Act, DFC became a beacon of hope for many students who wanted to learn.

Again, this passage shows the NNEC's high hopes for DFC. They wanted it to be a place of refuge for Indigenous students—a place where Indigenous youths wouldn't have to give up their cultural identities in order to pursue their educations. But this passage also foreshadows many of the difficulties that students traveling to DFC, the NNEC, and the network of boarding parents in Thunder Bay would soon face.

Though the school was Indigenous-run and staffed with Indigenous teachers, nurses, and Elders on-site each day, the children who came to DFC "brought the ghosts of the past with them." The traumas of the residential schools created the fractured environments these kids grew up in. The teenagers often came from poverty and had never lived in a city before. Homesickness, lack of supervision, and boredom meant that lots of students reverted to partying and drinking. The staff knew the challenges their students were facing, and they were all on-call 24 hours a day—but within the first month of DFC's opening in October of 2000, a student would be dead.

Here, the book outlines some of the practical effects of generational trauma and circular suffering. Fractured home environments on Indigenous reserves often stemmed from the traumas older Indigenous people had endured throughout their own schooling within the residential school system. So a whole generation of people's lives had been marked by abuse and suffering—and that generation passed on those traumas to their children. While DFC staff recognized these issues, it is clear that they did not understand the full extent of them—and so while the NNEC did their best to prepare support networks for these students, they simply didn't have the resources to do what was needed.

Ninth-grade DFC student Jethro Anderson, from Kasabonika Lake First Nation, was on his own away from home for the first time. Shawon Wavy, Jethro's closest friend, partied with Jethro on October 28—the last night he was seen alive. They were down by the docks of the **Kam**, and Jethro was arguing with some girls. That day, Jethro's mother, Stella, had seen a wolf outside her home on the reservation. A wolf, she knew, always brought a message with it; days later, she would find out that her first-born son was missing.

No one knows how Jethro Anderson disappeared. But this passage relays several significant facts about his disappearance. He was drinking with friends near the Kam River—a symbol of how Indigenous students who travel far away from home for their educations still seek cultural connection to their past, and of how they are often swallowed up by the system. And his mother having seen a wolf—a traditional harbinger of news in Indigenous culture—underscores the role of prophecy and traditional wisdom in Jethro's culture. In other words, Jethro's disappearance seemed to be fraught with meaning. He was the first DFC student to disappear—and he disappeared just weeks after the school opened its doors. His disappearance, then, seemed to foreshadow the many other casualties to come in the next few years.

Dora Morris, Jethro's aunt and boarding parent, was concerned when he didn't come home—he never missed curfew. Dora had known Jethro all his life, and she treated the gentle boy like he was one of her own children. The last time Dora saw Jethro, he and his cousin Nathan (Dora's son) were on their way to the mall. When she got home from work that night and Jethro wasn't there, she was puzzled. Jethro had disappeared for a couple of days years ago with a girlfriend, but since then, he'd adhered to curfew carefully. Nathan confessed that they'd gone to drink instead of going to the mall, employing a "runner" to buy them booze.

Indigenous teens get up to the same shenanigans as their white Canadian counterparts—but because of Canada's history of racism and cultural genocide, Indigenous teens are unfortunately always more vulnerable. So when Dora realized that Jethro wasn't accounted for, her concern was valid. She knew the kinds of terrible things that could happen to a vulnerable Indigenous boy out on his own in a new city.

Dora and her husband, Tom, went out to drive around and look for Jethro. When they couldn't find him, they went home and called the police. The officer who answered retorted that Jethro was probably out partying "like every other Native kid" before hanging up on Dora. Dora called Stella, then the police again—but they said that it was too early to file a missing persons report.

The Thunder Bay Police immediately dismissed Dora's concerns about Jethro. They invoked harmful stereotypes about Indigenous people and alcoholism, and they refused to even entertain the idea that something bad could have happened to Jethro. Their disinterest in helping an Indigenous youth speaks to the deep racism that defines how white Canadians see Indigenous people, and the structural ramifications of racism as well. It also shows how Canada's colonialist and racist legacy toward Indigenous people not only continues to affect Indigenous people, but also continues to affect how white people and government institutions treat Indigenous people as well.

In the morning, Dora and Tom looked for Jethro near the **Kam**, where they learned he'd been out drinking—but there was no sign of him or anyone else. Dora went home and called the police again—and again, they told her that he'd be home later, "when the party was over." That night, as soon as the mandated 24 hours had passed, Dora went to the station and filed a missing persons report. On Monday, Dora went to DFC and reported that Jethro was gone; the school, too, told her that Jethro was probably with friends and that he'd be home soon. But by Tuesday, he still wasn't home, and Dora was still searching for Jethro on her own.

This passage shows that not only were the Thunder Bay Police neglectful when it came to Jethro's case—the staff at DFC were, too. While the Indigenous staff at DFC obviously weren't motivated by racism in the way that the police were, their response was still telling. The support networks in place to oversee the well-being of Indigenous teens in places like Thunder Bay simply weren't sufficient. Teachers and staff were stretched thin, and they had no resources to devote to a single wayward student.

Stella arrived in Thunder Bay to join a team of volunteers searching for Jethro—Alvin Fiddler and his wife, Tesa, were among the team assembled to comb the banks of the **Kam**. The police didn't start an investigation until six days after Jethro's disappearance, and they didn't put a notice in the media until a week after he vanished. Every time Dora called the police to check on any leads, she was dismissed or told that Jethro was "out there partying."

In the absence of real, invested help from the Thunder Bay Police, Indigenous people from Jethro's community and the Thunder Bay area came together to look for Jethro themselves. This shows how Indigenous people often react to miscarriages of justice not with bitterness or retribution, but instead with meaningful collective action in order to protect one another.

A week after Jethro's disappearance, Dora was called to DFC because police had found a pair of boots by the river. The boots weren't Jethro's, and Dora hoped that meant that Jethro was still alive somewhere. But a week later, she got another call—this time, police had found a black cap. The cap was Jethro's—and Dora, hysterical, became determined to get the police to start dragging the **river**. She could not shake the feeling that Jethro was in the water. Each day, she went down to the Kam to search the banks and cast out fishing lines—and on November 10, a police team finally began dredging the river themselves. Their searches turned up nothing, but Dora begged them to keep going. The following day, Jethro's body was recovered from the river.

Dora's (justified) hysteria over the Thunder Bay Police's refusal to dredge the river can be read both literally and symbolically. On a literal level, she was enraged and grieving over the majority-white police force's lukewarm response to Jethro's disappearance, and she wanted them to search every available avenue until Jethro was found. But on a symbolic level, Dora's grief runs much deeper. She knew that Jethro had been lost to a system that didn't have the resources to support him—and that his story was being swallowed up more and more with each passing day.

Dora never received a call from the Thunder Bay Police informing her that the body was found. Instead, she learned of the discovery from a press release. The press release stated that "foul play [was] not suspected." Dora was livid—Jethro had always been afraid of **water**, and she knew that there was no way he'd jumped in of his own accord. Dora drove to the funeral home as soon as the body was released there and demanded to see it. Eventually, the funeral director relented. Dora saw a huge gash on the top of Jethro's forehead, and round contusions (like cigarette burns) on his face. Dora knew for sure that Jethro's death hadn't been an accident.

This passage continues to show the Thunder Bay Police's gross mishandling of Jethro's disappearance and death. By immediately ruling out foul play, the police raised Jethro's family and community member's suspicions—and what Dora discovered when she looked at Jethro's body seemed to confirm that the police were actively trying to ignore the facts in front of them. Whether they were covering something up or whether they simply didn't care to invest time and money in investigating the death of an Indigenous boy, one thing became clear: racism, colonialism, and the echoes of cultural genocide were still the basis of relations between white Canadians and Indigenous people, and always in ways that harmed the Indigenous people.

Two years later, Jethro's cousin Nathan was drinking at a bar when a man began loudly talking about what he'd done to Jethro. The man apologized to Nathan for "kill[ing]" his cousin. Nathan didn't tell the police about the encounter until 10 years later—when asked why he withheld the information, he explained that he had no faith in the Thunder Bay Police.

Nathan's response to the bar patron's apparent confession shows how generational trauma and circular suffering sustain themselves in insidious ways. Nathan was so traumatized by the police's initial disinterest in Jethro's death that he didn't even bother to go to them with new information—he didn't want to retraumatize himself, so he did nothing.

Teachers and staff at DFC were stunned that a student had gone missing within a month of the school's opening. But in hindsight, Norma Kejick now sees how "naïve" she and her fellow educators were. A report released in 2001 suggested that the school become a place for grades 11 and 12 only. A Ministry of Education supervisory officer concluded that younger students were ill-equipped for the pressures of life in a city. The issues that they faced as a result—isolation, drug and alcohol abuse, and more—needed to be "nipped in the bud."

Norma and the NNEC had the best of intentions for Indigenous students who came to Thunder Bay to pursue an education. But they were beginning to realize that perhaps plunging students from remote areas—many with backgrounds tinged by generational trauma, abuse, and poverty—into life in a bustling, majority-white city was more dangerous than they ever anticipated.

CHAPTER 4: HURTING FROM THE BEFORE

By 2004, it was clear even to Canadian government officials that INAC—the branch of government responsible for Indigenous and Northern Affairs—wasn't making any progress in addressing the concerns of Canada's First Nations communities. The NNEC, too, was facing slews of recommendations for how to handle the "profound problems" with the program. By building dedicated residences for students and tiering boarding homes into different levels based on how closely students needed to be cared for and observed, officials hoped that more casualties could be avoided.

The NNEC was facing lots of ignorance and apathy from the Canadian government—and so they took on the burden of improving life in Thunder Bay for Indigenous students on themselves. Rather than rely on the disinterested government for help, the community attempted to rally together to address what was lacking in their support networks for students.

By the early 2000s, waves of suicide were sweeping across First Nations communities throughout Northern Ontario; children as young as 10 were killing themselves. In traditional Indigenous culture, suicide is a rare thing—but from 1986 to 2016, more than 500 suicides swept the Nishnawbe Aski Nation alone. Seventy of those were of children between the ages of 10 and 14. A lack of mental health resources to help Indigenous people of all ages grapple with mental illness, anxiety, grief, and generational trauma had led to a "crisis of immense proportions." Between 2000 and 2011, as many students as went missing from Thunder Bay committed suicide while enrolled at Pelican Falls High School, DFC's sister school.

This passage shows how a profound lack of government resources has worsened the crises associated with generational trauma in Indigenous communities. Not only were students who went away to school struggling and suffering—but those who stayed behind on reserves were too, succumbing to hopelessness in places rife with substance abuse and mental health issues for which there exist few resources due to pervasive governmental neglect.

One night, Norma received a call from her son, Jonathan, a student at DFC. He told her that he was having suicidal thoughts, so Norma immediately called her son's counselor to alert him. But the counselor said that she couldn't go over to Jonathan's boarding house because she "ha[d] a life too." The next morning, Norma drove to Thunder Bay, pulled Jonathan out of DFC, and brought him home, where he could go to Pelican Falls. Still, Norma suffered a wave of grief when her nephew Eric killed himself in 2005. She blamed herself for failing to see the signs.

Norma's experience trying to get help for her son Jonathan illustrates how lacking the support networks in place for Indigenous students can be. Even though Norma herself was an NNEC member, she didn't realize how overstretched the counselors and other staff members at DFC truly were. While the NNEC's intentions in establishing DFC were good, the profound lack of funding and resources available to help support students was evident in this moment.

In 2004, the Chief Coroner for Ontario discovered that 23.5 percent of the province's Indigenous suicides were taking place in Pikangikum First Nation, sometimes called "Pik." In the early 2000s, Pik had no clean water and no jobs. Children were huffing inhalants, and Ottawa was offering aid to foreign countries while ignoring the problems that were literally killing its own people.

Even though Pik was desperately in need of government assistance and resources to help Indigenous people cope with substance abuse and mental health issues (issues that were initially caused by generational trauma associated with colonial violence), the government of Canada overlooked its own people's needs. This again shows how colonialism and cultural genocide have affected relations between white and Indigenous Canadians.

Pik, surrounded by a huge boreal forest that acts as a carbon capture site for many of the Earth's emissions, is one of the largest Ojibwe settlements in the north. It's a very traditional place, and most children grow up speaking Ojibwe as their first language—but it is a place completely lacking life's basic necessities. Most homes have no running water or proper sewage systems, and the reserve isn't connected to a power grid. Pik is blighted by an epidemic of intergenerational trauma from the residential school system—and there is nowhere to go for the new generation to escape the "onslaught" of pain all around them. There are no business or restaurants, no community centers, no libraries, and no movie theaters. Young children abuse alcohol or inhalants, leading to lasting brain damage.

Here, Talaga paints a portrait of how dire conditions can be on many First Nations reserves. Without meaningful government funding or structural support, Indigenous people are often left alone to reckon with the effects of generational trauma, cultural genocide, and colonial violence. As a result, both adults and young children are prone to developing substance abuse and mental health issues—but if the government refuses to even provide clean running water, it's clear that they're not interested in dealing with the problems colonial violence has caused.

Nearly all high-school-age kids in Pik are sent to DFC. In September 2005, 18-year-old Curran Strang returned to DFC for a new school year. He'd been held back, and he was older than most of his classmates. But he was friendly, kind, and close with his fellow students from Pik, who all stuck together in Thunder Bay. Curran befriended James Benson, and James helped Curran adjust to city life. The two of them would sometimes face racist taunts while out in the city—but because so many of their peers had also faced threats and violence (and had their complaints dismissed by police), they'd learned to silently put up with the abuse.

Indigenous students in Canada are often faced with an impossible choice when it comes to pursuing an education. If they remain on their impoverished and dilapidated reserves, they'll remain connected to their communities but they likely won't be able to get anything close to a quality education. If they leave their reserves to pursue better educations, though, they'll likely have to reckon with overt and even violent racism in Canada's bigger cities. That Indigenous students are forced to make such a choice is evidence of the legacy of colonialism, now enacted through negligence rather than overt coercion. That there are few networks of support available to help students navigate either scenario makes that indifference clearer.

By 2005, DFC had lots of plans and protocols in place to help students succeed inside the classroom—but out in the city, there were lots of resources students still struggled to find. 20 to 30 students a year left and returned to their reserves, either of their own volition or after being sent home for bad behavior. The school had protocol for dealing with students who partied too much or missed curfew too often: guidance counselors filled out occurrence reports when an infraction took place, and students had to write papers or face other disciplinary consequences that would force them to reflect on their actions. There were also night watchers on staff now—these employees were on call 24 hours a day, and at night, they drove around the streets of Thunder Bay looking for wayward kids.

DFC was working to try to protect students from racism, violence, and distractions that might harm their capacity to study and succeed. But the NNEC was running everything—and with so many students to look out for, the underfunded support network was stretched thin.

Curran Strang was lonely, and he struggled in school. He began partying with a new group—and though James was worried, he couldn't do anything to help his friend. Curran had faced occurrence reports since 2003, and he faced consequences such as being "grounded" and writing an essay about over-consumption of alcohol. Over the next two years, Curran's file would grow to contain nearly 60 pages of occurrence reports and behavior contracts reminding Curran of his obligations as a student. Curran was always out drinking after curfew—and each time he was picked up, he faced the same consequences. In 2004, one of Curran's counselors noted that his behavior was concerning and that she wanted to send him for a suicide assessment—but one never took place.

Curran Strang was a student who struggled with substance abuse and behavioral incidents again and again—but Talaga has done a good job of explaining the roots of that behavior. Curran came from a devastated and impoverished place; he'd never been on his own in a big city before. There were lots of traumas he'd faced at home, given the enormous suicide rate back in Pik. Talaga has shown that he was likely trying to escape some of those traumas by drinking, partying, and making lots of new friends. The support network at DFC didn't have the resources to address the underlying issues that were causing Curran's behavior—and with so many repeat offenses, he began to slip through the cracks of the system.

Curran's downward spiral continued. The police fined him for drinking in public while underage, and his behavioral reports continued to pile up. One night, he called the school while out one night because he believed that three people were following him and a friend throughout town past curfew. The school told him that if he had been home by curfew, the incident wouldn't have happened. Curran was in free-fall, but the system "couldn't catch him."

Even when Curran did reach out for help—like in the instance when he was followed around and believed his life to be in danger—the support network at DFC didn't work for him as hard as it could or should have.

After Curran attended the funerals of two friends who'd committed suicide back home, he returned to school on September 19, 2005, and his behavior continued to decline. James saw Curran for the last time on the 22nd, when Curran asked James for money to buy alcohol. James refused. The next morning, Curran's boarding parent Patsy Cote reported that Curran hadn't come home the night before. He didn't show up at school, either. Curran's counselor Donna drove around the city looking for him, planning to file a missing persons report if she couldn't find him by nightfall.

Curran's return home likely retraumatized him in a significant way. With so many suicides taking place back home, it's impossible to say what Curran felt exactly—but his behavior indicated that he needed help. Yet no one really made any significant moves to help him until it was too late—and even then, the adults who were supposed to look after Curran and keep him safe were stretched too thin to respond to his disappearance with the urgency that was needed.

A boarding parent to one of Curran's friends, Adam Peters, later testified that Adam had come home dirty and drunk on the 22nd—Adam told his boarding parent that he'd left Curran passed out by a tree near the **river**. The missing persons report stated that Curran was likely a "runaway." Police did not start working Curran's case until two full days after his disappearance—DFC students and community members, though, had already started the search. On September 26, Curran's body was found in the McIntyre River—the coroner's office listed his death as an accidental drowning despite finding no evidence of Curran entering the river of his own will.

Again, Curran's death in the river—whether it was due to accidental drowning or foul play—is meaningful on both a literal and symbolic level. Symbolically, Curran's having slipped into the river represents the ways in which he slipped through the system that was supposed to support him and look out for him. And literally, the fact that his body was found in a Thunder Bay river—just as Jethro Anderson's was—and that his death was immediately blamed on Curran himself illustrates the neglect and apathy with which the Thunder Bay Police handle Indigenous cases.

The year after Curran's death, Pik spiraled into a suicide epidemic of unprecedented proportions. Between 2006 and 2008, 16 youths between the ages of 10 and 19 committed suicide. In 2007, Pik's only school burned down in a fire. All of the young people who died by suicide took their lives by hanging, and none of them were able to access mental health support in the months before their deaths.

This passage shows that in many Indigenous communities, trauma and suffering are circular. Curran's own struggles were the products of generational trauma—but his death circled back to Pik, retraumatizing his relatives and community members and resulting in even more trauma, pain, and loss.

CHAPTER 5: THE HOLLOWNESS OF NOT KNOWING

Talaga travels to Maryanne Panacheese's home on the Mishkeegogamang First Nation reserve—a onetime colonial settlement that is actually two reserves joined into one. The Panacheeses have lived here since the early 1900s, and they still receive the same four-dollar annual payouts that their ancestors did when they signed over their land in a 1905 treaty. Locals often refer to Mish as "Oz"—but this Oz is not a "merry place." A thousand people live on the reservation, yet there are no places of employment or grocery stores. Few people have cars, and though the reserve is surrounded by lakes and streams, the water piped into homes here is tainted and unusable.

Talaga's description of Mish is nearly identical to her description of Pik—both reserves are profoundly lacking in resources and the basic necessities needed to help people not just thrive but even to survive. Talaga uses these descriptions to highlight how colonialism and cultural genocide are ongoing processes that continue to decimate Indigenous communities all across Canada.

After Maryanne's son Paul died in 2006, Maryanne divorced her abusive husband and moved here. Maryanne is a survivor of the residential schools herself—she attended a school in Southern Ontario with children from a completely different cultural group. After her second year at the school, during a visit home, 10-year-old Maryanne watched her older sister Sarah get taken away by police officers who sent her to a special "truancy" school in the south. To this day, none of Sarah's 11 siblings know what became of her—she hasn't been seen since 1995. She is now one of the 1,181 Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls. Maryanne fears that Sarah was a victim of serial killer Robert Pickton, who confessed to murdering 49 Indigenous women and processing their bodies through a meat grinder on his British Columbia property.

This passage highlights the many traumas that Maryanne faced while she herself was in her formative years. Not only was she forced to go to one of Canada's residential schools—she was sent far away from home to go to school with children from a completely different culture than hers, illustrating the government's complete lack of investment in using the residential schools to do anything other than control and assimilate Indigenous children. She watched her sister get violently taken away and slip through the system—to this day, no one knows what happened to Sarah, and so Maryanne is left with no closure, fearing the worst. Maryanne's trauma, this passage suggests, would inform how she brought up her son Paul—and how Paul himself navigated the world.

Not only is Maryanne unsure of what became of her sister—she also has no clue how Paul died. Paul began school at DFC after aging out of Northern Eagle High School in Ear Falls, Ontario. He was behind when he started at DFC—at 17, he was in grade 10—and he bounced between 10 different boarding houses over the course of three years. Maryanne and Paul spoke almost every day. She encouraged him to work hard in school, ignore the racist taunts he faced on the streets, and be true to himself. In 2006, Maryanne moved to Thunder Bay to be near Paul. Paul was sick of being seen as a "goody two-shoes" by his friends, and he'd begun experimenting with drugs and alcohol. Maryanne had had her own struggles with sobriety in the past, and she wanted to be there for Paul.

Maryanne moved to Thunder Bay because she sensed that the support networks that were supposed to be looking out for Paul's well-being weren't sufficient. Having survived the residential schools herself, Maryanne likely realized that if she didn't show up for her son, no one would. This illustrates how circular suffering can emerge within Indigenous communities and families. Paul's own suffering and difficulties while at school in Thunder Bay affected his mother, reactivating the traumas of her past.

On November 10, 2006, Shawon Wavy went to Paul's house for a Friday night poker game. After Jethro Anderson's death, Shawon left the city—but now, he was back to attend college. Paul and Shawon had grown up together in Mish, and they'd been close companions. That night was the last time they'd see each other. Paul went out that night to see some friends; when he came home later that night, Maryanne was asleep. She came downstairs to see if he was okay and then went back to bed.

Paul's death is such a unique tragedy because when he needed help, he reached out for support—and in many ways, he got it. His mother came to Thunder Bay to live with and support him, and he had a network of friends like Shawon who'd experienced loss before and who presumably wanted to look out for him.

Maryanne heard Paul cooking a midnight snack in the kitchen and using the bathroom. Then, she heard a thud. She hurried downstairs—Paul was face down on the floor. She assumed he'd fallen asleep—she tried to wake him up and get him to the bed. She could smell alcohol on him, but he didn't seem drunk. She couldn't find a pulse. Maryanne ran upstairs to wake Richer Keesickquayash, another high school student (and one of Maryanne and Paul's relatives) who was living with them. They called an ambulance together, and Maryanne fetched a pillow to place under Paul's head.

Paul's sudden and bizarre death was something that Maryanne wasn't at all prepared for. Paul hadn't seemed intoxicated or distressed when he'd come in—she'd had no way of knowing that something was profoundly wrong.

On November 11, the coroner performed an autopsy. The post-mortem described Paul as well-nourished with no history of physical trauma or health problems, and it said that there were no indications of homicide. No anatomical or toxicological cause of death was found, and the case was closed. Paul's death was the third at DFC in six years. Alvin Fiddler visited Maryanne's house to comfort her—but with no answer as to why or how her son died, she could not be consoled.

There was no obvious reason for Paul's death—and even the coroner couldn't determine what had caused his sudden passing. But rather than hunt harder for answers, the coroner's office simply closed the case and left it unresolved. The coroner's office's disinterest in Paul's death echoed the Thunder Bay police's apathy toward the deaths of Jethro and Curran. And Paul's unsolved death mirrored, for his mother Maryanne, the lack of closure around her sister's disappearance. This is a major instance of circular suffering. Even though Paul's death and Sarah's disappearance weren't necessarily related, they both followed a pattern of institutional indifference and served to traumatize, confound, and isolate Maryanne.

In 2015, nine years after Paul's death, experts who testified at the inquest into the deaths of the "seven fallen feathers" stated that Paul's death was a "complete mystery." But the testifying authority hadn't been at the scene of Paul's death or examined his body—she was going off of coroner's warrants and pathologist's reports. Some young people with genetic heart disease or other underlying issues collapse and die suddenly—but after the inquest, Maryanne and her family were tested, and no one was found to carry any such abnormality. Not a single medical professional had any clue as to why Paul had died. And because the pathologist ordered the destruction of evidence from Paul's autopsy, there's nothing that can be pulled out and re-examined. Maryanne has to live with the fact that there are no answers to why her son Paul, or her sister Sarah, were taken from her.

Here, Talaga investigates the profoundly sad lack of interest in solving Paul's case. The coroner's office was so quick to close his file and move on that they ordered the destruction of forensic evidence after a certain period of time—so now, years later, even though there's been renewed interest in figuring out what happened to Paul and why, there's nothing available that could provide Maryanne with any kind of closure. Maryanne hoped to save her son from suffering the same lack of support and resulting traumas that she and her family did—but instead, the things that happened to Paul served to create circular suffering that re-traumatized Maryanne.

CHAPTER 6: WE SPEAK FOR THE DEAD TO PROTECT THE LIVING

Tanya Talaga imagines a cold, snowy night in January of 2006. A group of teenagers hurried quietly through the snowy grounds of a park, their bags full of clinking bottles of alcohol. Some of the kids used tree branches to erase their own footprints behind them—they didn't want to get busted for drinking in the International Friendship Gardens in Thunder Bay. One girl, Robyn Harper, was new to the group. She asked her friend Skye Kakegamic to make sure she got home okay if she drank too much, and Skye promised to watch out for her. Robyn, who was from Keewaywin First Nation, had just completed her first week of grade 11 at DFC. Robyn's mother wanted her to stay closer to home at Pelican Falls, but Robyn wanted to go to school near her friend and cousin Karla, so she came to school in the big city.

This passage introduces Robyn Harper—another Indigenous teen from a remote reserve who was struggling to keep up and fit in in a new and unfamiliar city. Talaga places Robyn's story in the context of several of the other "fallen feather" stories by highlighting the similarities in the circumstances of Robyn's death. Like Jethro and Curran, Robyn was out late at night drinking with a group of relatively unfamiliar people. Talaga is implying here that because the NNEC and other educational authority figures in these teens' lives were overstretched, they couldn't do anything about the patterns the teens were falling into as they struggled in the big city.

Robyn was staying with her cousin Bryan Kakegamic. Skye, whom she knew from home, helped her learn her way around the city, navigate the bus system, and meet some new friends. On this night, Robyn and Skye had joined some other kids in pooling their money to secure some alcohol from a runner. In the park, Skye and Robyn and their friends consumed part of a 60-ounce bottle of vodka, Smirnoff Ice coolers, and six 40-ounce bottles of beer.

Robyn was close to several family members—she had more support than most. And yet even the family and community members she did have around her couldn't watch her as closely as she needed to be watched or keep her safe from the realities of lonely city life.

When it was time to leave, Robyn took a couple of hits off a bowl of cannabis. After inhaling, she struggled to walk and began slurring her words. Skye, remembering her promise, helped Robyn leave the park, trailing behind the other kids. But Robyn was large and tall, and she could hardly move, so Skye began dragging her through the snow. When the two of them reached the road, their friends were nowhere to be seen. Robyn vomited. Skye tried to flag down a passing car, but the passengers threw food at them and, calling them "Indians," told them to "go home."

That Robyn and Skye faced racist taunts as they struggled to make their way home, drunk, in the late-night snow illustrates how hostile and racist an environment Thunder Bay is. It further suggests that beneath the veneer of a fun and laid-back night out, there was real danger lurking around every corner of the city—and that this lurking danger is something that all of the Indigenous students in Thunder Bay must navigate, both psychologically and practically, on a day-to-day basis.

Finally, Skye saw another member of their group, Vanessa, in the distance. Vanessa helped Skye walk the nearly unconscious Robyn to the bus. They rode together to the Brodie Street bus terminal, where they ran into another friend. As they waited for more of their group, Robyn fell to the floor. A terminal employee approached Skye and began asking what was wrong with Robyn. Skye was afraid of getting in trouble with the racist Thunder Pay police, who'd once locked Skye up overnight and taunted her the whole time. So, she insisted that everything was fine and called a counselor from the NNEC.

Skye had had a traumatic experience with the racist Thunder Bay Police in the past. So even though she might have suspected that Robyn needed more than a ride home, she called the NNEC. It's impossible to know what Skye's motivations were, but Talaga is using this moment to illustrate how Indigenous people must often make difficult or inadvisable choices because of the continual racism and violence they face at the hands of white Canadians. Colonialism and racism continue to define daily life for countless Indigenous Canadians—especially those who live in majority-white places like Thunder Bay—in ways that make them make perfectly logical decisions that the white power structure will then criticize them for.

David Fox, a counselor from the NNEC, arrived and helped Robyn into his van. Cheyenne Linklater, who was Robyn's boarding parent and an NNEC on-call member, arrived and offered Skye a ride home. They stopped at Cheyenne's home first, where David and Cheyenne helped Robyn into the house. Then, Cheyenne took Skye home. While Skye says that this is what happened, Cheyenne denies that she was at the bus terminal or at the house with Robyn. According to her, she didn't return home from work until 4 a.m., at which point she checked on Robyn before going up to bed. But video footage confirms that Cheyenne wasn't telling the truth.

In spite of their best intentions, many NNEC members and boarding parents were simply unequipped to provide the level of care that many boarding students need. Robyn was deeply intoxicated—she needed medical attention. But no one around her, perhaps out of fear of involving the authorities (or being singled out for neglect), helped Robyn get the care she needed. In this sense, Robyn's death is indeed the responsibility of the overstretched and underfunded NNEC.

It was 10:30 p.m. when David and Cheyenne brought Robyn into Cheyenne's house and laid her on her side in the hallway. At 2 a.m., when Cheyenne's husband (and Robyn's cousin) Bryan, woke up for his newspaper route, he found Robyn lying on the hall floor. But she moved when he nudged her, so he left for work. When he returned home at 6:30 a.m., he went straight to bed—but as he was laying down, his brother knocked on his door to tell him that Robyn was dead.

Again, no one gave Robyn the help she needed—she slipped through the cracks of the very system that was supposed to protect her. Talaga suggests that , without dedicated resources in place to really monitor and look out for Indigenous students' well-being, every Indigenous student who chooses to leave home and pursue their education may very well be putting their life at risk.

An ambulance was dispatched to Bryan and Cheyenne's home on January 12, 2007, at 8:59 a.m. Robyn wasn't breathing, and her skin was blue. Rigor mortis had already begun setting into her limbs. The coroner was busy with an emergency (coroners in this part of the province often work as physicians, too), so the police gathered all the information needed for the post-mortem. Guidelines for investigations of deaths by coroners suggest coroners respond to urgent cases within 30 minutes and follow a careful set of protocols once they do. But in Robyn's case, the coroner's office followed none of the guidelines or protocols in place. No one called Robyn's mother or kept her informed about the investigation into Robyn's death. The coroner in Robyn's case would, years later, dismiss his inaction as part of the reality of working in the northwest.

The NNEC and Robyn's boarding family weren't the only people who neglected her and let her slip through the cracks. The coroner's office simply didn't care to make time to investigate her death—so the Thunder Bay Police, who'd many times over proven their disinterest in helping Indigenous people, reported on Robyn's death for them. The individuals and institutions that should have been helping Robyn—and helping to secure justice for her even in death—failed her at every level.

The pathologist who performed Robyn's autopsy described the state of her body: rigor mortis had set in, but decomposition had not begun. She had a contusion on her forehead and a mark on her cheek. She had multiple "slash-like scars" on her left forearm and round scars on her right forearm. It took three months for the toxicity report to come back—when it did, it suggested that Robyn had died of alcohol poisoning. Her death was ruled an accident. Robyn wasn't an experienced drinker, and no one in Thunder Bay really knew her or had gotten drunk with her before; they assumed that Robyn knew what she was doing. But Robyn was binge-drinking to fit in and make friends, and she didn't know when to stop.

The scarring on Robyn's body was never confirmed to be evidence of self-harm or abuse, even though slash marks and cigarette burns certainly indicate that Robyn may have needed mental health support or other kinds of advocacy. Again, she slipped through the system at every level—no one was looking out for warning signs of trauma, self-harm, or abuse; no one knew her well enough to know when she'd had too much to drink; no one got her the medical help she needed; and after she died, local officials did a shoddy job of investigating her death.

No one who attended to Robyn that night, a further inquest revealed, knew that alcohol poisoning could lead to death. And a lawyer arguing on behalf of Robyn's case years later suggested that she was a victim of homicide—if she'd gotten to a hospital, her case might not have been fatal. The lawyer held the NNEC responsible for Robyn's death—they had the capacity to help her, but they did not.

The NNEC, though full of people with good intentions, simply didn't have the structural support or expertise needed to help Robyn. Perhaps, with better funding and more governmental support, the NNEC would better be able to care for its students on every step of their journey and help them before it's too late.

In February of 2017, the chief coroner of Ontario sent a memo to all coroners in the province, reprimanding them for neglecting to follow protocol and reminding them of the guidelines for death investigations—and the meticulous reports that should accompany them. But two months after the memo went out, newly revised guidelines were released. The chief coroner's office was relaxing the guidelines around death scenes, stating that timely arrival at the scene of a death was "dependent upon an Investigative Coroner's ability to free him/herself of other activities within a reasonable period of time."

Robyn's death didn't create any structural change—instead, the coroner's office insisted that they were well within their rights to determine which deaths were most important to investigate in a timely manner. Again, this is indicative of how racist, colonialist policies continue to seep into many levels of Canadian government and public health infrastructure, almost always to the detriment of Indigenous people.

CHAPTER 7: BROTHERS

A month after Robyn's death, Cindy Blackstock—an experienced child protection professional—launched a human rights complaint against the government of Canada on behalf of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society and the Assembly of First Nations, which represents 634 First Nations communities across Canada. The complaint alleged that the Government of Canada was racially discriminating against Indigenous children by failing to provide equitable levels of welfare funding to Indigenous families. This lack, the complaint suggested, had ripple effects throughout Indigenous children's entire lives.

At last, with Blackstock's complaint, someone was taking major legal action to bring awareness to the systemic neglect of Indigenous children on the part of the Canadian government. The history of relations between white Canadians and Indigenous people is marked by racism and violence—but many people, especially those in Canada's government, might have preferred to pretend those things were in the past. However, in reality, Blackstock argued, colonial violence and cultural genocide were phenomena that still affected Indigenous children throughout their lives.

The same year, in September of 2007, the UN held a General Assembly on the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous people. This document called on all United Nations countries to sign a document declaring that Indigenous people had rights to equality, the right to live free from discrimination, the right to protection from acts of genocide or violence, and the right to establish and control their own educational systems. Canada, Australia, the United States, and New Zealand voted against the declaration, claiming that it went against existing protections in their own constitutions.

This passage shows that Canada is not the only country that has a problem admitting to the enduring effects of its history of colonial violence. Colonialism and cultural genocide continue to motivate structural racism in places all over the world, creating patterns of generational trauma and circular suffering in Indigenous communities across the globe.

One night in late October of 2007, Ricki Strang suddenly gained consciousness in waist-deep water—he had no idea how he'd wound up in the **river**, or where his brother Reggie was. Ricki dragged himself from the water, calling for Reggie, but there was no answer. He headed back to his boarding house, drunk and wet; one of the adult boarders called the NNEC to tell them that Reggie had missed his curfew, and that Rickie was inebriated. But the report the NNEC filed was incorrect: it stated that Reggie was the one who had come home.

Again, this passage illustrates how oversights and miscommunications within the NNEC reveal structural failures within the organization. The NNEC simply can't do everything itself—but with even people like Cindy Blackstock struggling to secure wider government recognition of how racism affects Indigenous youths, it's nearly impossible for the NNEC to secure the funding and support it needs to adequately care for all the Indigenous teens it's responsible for.

On November 1, less than a week after he was last seen, Reggie Bushie's body was pulled from the McIntyre River. He was the third boy to have been pulled from a Thunder Bay **river**, the fifth DFC student to die since 2000, and the fifth Indigenous boy whose case was egregiously mishandled by the police. Reggie's mother, Rhoda, wasn't told that her son was missing until three days after his disappearance. Like the other four students, Reggie was unfamiliar with the Thunder Bay Area, a non-native speaker of English, and struggling to keep up in school. Reggie, like Robyn, wasn't cared for or known well by the NNEC members in charge of monitoring him. Cheyenne Linklater, Robyn Harper's boarding parent, was the one to report Reggie missing, but she didn't get his name right—and she didn't even know that Ricki was his brother.

Reggie's death was, staggeringly, the third in which a young Indigenous boy drowned in one of Thunder Bay's rivers. A clear pattern had emerged: vulnerable Indigenous youths who turned to substance abuse to cope with stress and trauma were turning up dead, literally and symbolically swallowed by systems that couldn't support their needs.

Just as in the cases of Jethro Anderson and Curran Strang, police almost immediately determined that "no foul play" had been involved in Reggie's death without conducting a thorough investigation. All three statements imply that the boys fell into the **water** due to inebriation. But both Reggie and Ricki were experienced swimmers, and Ricki alleged that there was no way Reggie would have allowed himself to drown, even if he was drunk.

The Indigenous youths' deaths weren't just tragic—they were starting to look suspicious. In all three cases the Thunder Bay Police—an organization with a history of racism and cruelty toward Indigenous people—immediately ruled out foul play. Even though Reggie was an experienced swimmer and even though Jethro Anderson's body was covered in contusions and burns, police simply wouldn't even consider investigating the idea that these boys were being killed.

When Ricki learned the next morning that Reggie wasn't home, he wasn't immediately alarmed—he assumed that Reggie was at another friend's house. But that afternoon, when Reggie still hadn't come home, Ricki headed out with his boarding parents to look around the city for him. When they still couldn't find Reggie, the group contacted Cheyenne, who called the police later that night. The police brought Ricki in for questioning several times over the next few days—one day, he was questioned three separate times. Yet still the police did not notify the boys' parents that Reggie was missing.

The Thunder Bay Police seem to have questioned Ricki multiple times, retraumatizing him over and over again, while overlooking fundamental steps in their investigation—like compassionately notifying the missing child's parents. This is evidence of structural racism and indeed a new form of colonialist violence in action.

Ricki told police that he had a feeling his brother was in the **water**, since he himself had regained consciousness in the icy water. He admitted to worrying that they'd been mugged—they were wearing backpacks that night, and both backpacks were missing. Ricki took police to the underpass where he last remembered being with Reggie—they'd gone there to drink with some friends, even though they weren't particularly big drinkers. At one point in the night, Ricki's memory began to fade—but though he wasn't feeling well, he stayed with his brother. At the river's edge, as the police watched, Ricki knelt before the water and spread his arms out as if he were reaching for his brother.

Even though Ricki told the police that he suspected something bad had happened to him and to Reggie—and though he pointed out the spot where he seemed to believe Reggie might be in the river—the police did not take Ricki's statements seriously. Again, the clear implication is that the police were neglecting Reggie's disappearance because he was Indigenous. In the absence of any support from the police, this passage shows, Ricki began turning to his culture and his spirituality for answers and for comfort, reaching out to the river to try to commune with his brother.


On October 29, Norma Kejick was at lunch with her NNEC colleague Lydia Big George when she got the call about Reggie's disappearance. The two of them immediately left the restaurant and began the eight-hour drive down to Thunder Bay. The two of them joined the search effort—headquarters had been established at DFC, but there were few search parties heading out. The police were dragging the **river**, but they couldn't find anything. By the next day, the community's frustration was mounting. Norma got a group together to head down to the river in the late afternoon. There, she encountered two boys who admitted to being with Reggie the night that he went missing.

Here, Talaga shows how members of the NNEC do genuinely care about the students they're charged with protecting—and how painful it is for them when these children slip through the cracks. Meanwhile, the Thunder Bay Police's response to Reggie's disappearance was, as in the cases of Jethro and Curran, lukewarm at best. So Norma and other Indigenous people rallied together to support one another, joining in tradition and community.


The boys told Norma that they'd been sitting around drinking lots of alcohol, and that at one point in the evening, Ricki and Reggie had broken off from the rest of the group. Norma decided that she needed to talk to Ricki, and he agreed to meet with her at DFC. When he walked into the room, he was withdrawn and sullen. But when Norma started talking about the night of Reggie's disappearance, Ricki asked her if she'd accompany him down to the **river** the next day. Norma said that she would. She'd heard that Ricki had been placed on suicide watch at his boarding house—so she handed him her card and urged him to call her anytime, day or night, if he was feeling low.

Students were suffering and dying in Thunder Bay, and people like Norma were determined to stop them from falling through the cracks and disappearing or dying. The police weren't taking care of Ricki—and neither, ostensibly, was the boarding family he lived with. Norma decided to take his well-being into her own hands and to try to impress upon him that there was support available to him—even if it hadn't seemed that way so far.

The next day, Norma accompanied Ricki, an Elder, several students from the brothers' community of Poplar Hill, and a Thunder Bay Police constable down to the **river**. There, a dive team was searching the river. Ricki ran down to the water's edge, collapsed, and began to cry. Norma asked Ricki if this was the place he'd emerged from the water. Then she asked if he'd gone into the river because he was looking for his brother. Ricki nodded and pointed into the middle of the river.

Again, Ricki showed the police, Norma, and everyone who accompanied him to the river that day that he already knew, on some level, what had happened to his brother. Ricki might not have been able to remember large swaths of the night his brother disappeared, but he had a sense of what had happened to Reggie nonetheless.

That afternoon, Norma called the police to tell them that they were dredging the **river** in the wrong spot—they needed to be searching on the opposite shore and under a nearby bridge. Norma took the boys back to school. Later that afternoon, one of her colleagues received a call from Alvin Fiddler—the police had found Reggie's body. Norma retrieved Ricki from the gym, where he was playing hockey with his friends, and led him down to the office. His parents, who'd finally gotten a flight to Thunder Bay from their reservation, had just arrived. They all sat together as Alvin and Chief Eli Moose arrived to tell the group that Reggie's body had been found.

Ricki's instinct was right—the police found Reggie's body exactly where Ricki told them to look. This is significant and even profound—as soon as the Thunder Bay Police actually began listening to and honoring the wishes of Indigenous people, they were able to recover Ricki's body.

Reggie's mother Rhoda, Alvin Fiddler, and the other members of the Poplar Hill community wanted answers. They couldn't understand why so many students were dying, why parents weren't being notified about students who'd gone missing, and why the police were immediately ruling out foul play as a potential cause of death. Together, Rhoda and Fiddler began calling for an inquest—not just into Reggie's death, but the deaths of all the DFC students who'd been turning up dead. With the help of Toronto lawyer Julian Falconer—who'd successfully argued many cases on behalf of Indigenous and Black people—Reggie's family pushed for an inquest. This began with accusations of neglect on the part of the regional supervising coroner in Thunder Bay.

Some people had finally had enough—children were dying in Thunder Bay, and the deaths were too eerily similar to ignore. In neglecting the suspicious circumstances around and the patterns to the deaths, the inquest argued, the coroner's office was essentially allowing more and more Indigenous youths to remain vulnerable to harm.

In mid-June of 2008, the coroner's office issued a press release announcing their intent to begin an inquest into Reggie's death in January of 2009—but they neglected to mention beginning inquests into any of the other deaths. Fiddler and Rhoda were upset and worried that white Canadians were going to be in charge of making the decisions about how to save Indigenous kids.

When the coroner's office refused to honor the request to hold an inquest into all *the deaths, they were essentially stating that Indigenous people didn't deserve to have a say in the investigations of their own murders. White Canadians were once again behaving as if they knew best what was right for Indigenous people and doing so in a way that seemed to make it clear that the goal was to actually deny any voice to those Indigenous people.*

But Falconer told them to stay strong—he was representing two other cases concerning representational juries in Indigenous trials, trying to ensure that Indigenous people were not excluded from the justice process in their own battles. These cases were important and meaningful in shifting precedents regarding First Nations people's right to a trial by a jury of their peers. But they'd also put a halt to the inquest into the deaths of the DFC students for years.

By fighting to ensure that Indigenous cases would be heard by Indigenous juries, Falconer was fighting to help Indigenous people keep at least parts of their own traditions. Having white Canadians—many of whom, the events of the book have shown, are overtly racist and disinterested in Indigenous issues—hear Indigenous cases would be yet another form of colonial oppression.

Meanwhile, yet another student was attacked one night near the McIntyre **River**. On October 28, 2008, 16-year-old Darryl Kakekayash was beaten and thrown into the Neebing river. Just like Jethro, Reggie, and Curran, Darryl was an Indigenous student living far from home and attending DFC. While heading home from a movie in order to meet curfew, three white men approached him, accused him of being in the Native Syndicate, and began to beat him with their fists and wooden two-by-fours. They called him racist, derogatory names and heaved him in and out of the ice-cold river repeatedly.

Darryl's story reveals the deep, ingrained racism and colonial violence that still exist in Thunder Bay. Darryl was alone and vulnerable on the streets of Thunder Bay when white men attacked him because of his race—and threw him in the river. Given that three male Indigenous students died and were found in the rivers of Thunder Bay, this passage seems to imply that the boys' deaths might not have been accidents at all. And yet the Thunder Bay Police had been quick to state, in each case, that no foul play was involved. So, the text seems to posit, the police might have been actively covering something up—or they were simply patently uninterested in securing justice for Indigenous children in such a way that they negligently enabled racist violence in Thunder Bay.

After the men threw him in the river one final time and left him for dead, Darryl managed to pull himself out and drag himself along the ground toward the road. He was able to flag down an out-of-service bus and convince the driver to take him to a stop near his house. He ran straight home. The next day at school, he told the principal, Jonathan Kakegamic, what had happened. Kakaegamic urged Darryl to tell the police his story, and he relented—but it would take years for the police to follow up on Darryl's story. Even then, they only did so in support of the larger inquest into the fates of the other DFC students. No one was ever charged for Darryl's assault.

Even when Darryl brought his story to the police, they never followed up on the information he provided—information that was clearly relevant to three recent deaths in the city. This reveals the racism that defines how white Canadians in positions of power respond to Indigenous issues. The Thunder Bay Police never took any real action in Darryl's defense—and in the meantime, more students continued to die.

On May 29, 2008, the Assembly of First Nations held a National Day of Action for Indigenous People in Ottawa, and Shannen Koostachin traveled with her class to the rally to ask the government for a new school. The school on their reservation, made entirely of portables, was a replacement for an old building that had been condemned back in 1979. Shannen and her class met with the government's Indian Affairs minister, Chuck Strahl—but it was clear that Strahl didn't take the meeting seriously. He told the students that building a school on their reservation simply wasn't on the government's list of priorities.

Just as the Thunder Bay police ignored Darryl's story in a moment of need, so too did Canadian government official Chuch Strahl ignore Shannen and her classmates as they asked for nothing more than attention and equity. White apathy and negligence toward Indigenous issues, the book suggests, is just a new form of colonial violence and cultural genocide aimed at weakening and erasing Indigenous communities.

On the steps of the Parliament building, Shannen delivered a scathing speech, reminding government officials that "school should be a time for dreams"—and that Indigenous children shouldn't be excluded from the opportunity to dream, too. Shannen's speech gained national media attention, and, two weeks later, Prime Minister Stephen Harper offered a public apology to the 80,000 living survivors of the residential schools. Harper admitted, on national television, that the mission of the schools had been "to kill the Indian in the child," and that it was high time for the Canadian Government to assume responsibility for its crimes and failings.

When Shannen couldn't affect change through direct communication or a diplomatic channel, she took a different approach. She didn't give into bitterness—rather, she found solidarity in her community and rooted her response to the cruelty in hope. As Shannen reminded her audience that school was a "time for dreams," she even hinted at the struggles the students in Thunder Bay were facing. Rather than having time to focus on their dreams or educations, they were enduring very real threats of violence and death. Shannen's approach, rooted in her culture's traditional approaches to conflict resolution, resulted in the Prime Minister speaking out on the failings of his government.

As Alvin Fiddler watched Harper's speech, all he could think about was the abject poverty that still defined life for the children of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation and other First Nations communities around the country. He thought about the generational trauma the schools had created and about the five dead students in Thunder Bay—they were direct casualties of the residential schools' legacy.

Here, Fiddler directly connects the trauma of the residential schools to the enduring struggles with depression, substance abuse, and isolation that define life for many Indigenous teens. This is significant because it shows that while generational trauma shows up in many different ways, its existence (and its connection to the residential schools) is undeniable.

On January 14, 2009, Rhoda King and her husband Berenson requested standing at the inquest into Reggie's death. So did Julian Falconer, on behalf of NAN; and so did the NNEC, the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, and INAC. NAN and Rhoda King filed motions questioning the validity of the five-member jury. It was clear that Indigenous people didn't trust the justice system—at no level did it protect their people or their interests. Thus, they didn't participate in the jury system—and as a result, their cases were heard by white judges and tried by white juries. The Bushie family was making a stand, demanding that representational juries for Indigenous cases became the standard.

By arguing for Indigenous representation on juries dealing with, Falconer was making a stand. He was saying, on behalf of his clients, that Indigenous people would no longer allow white Canadians—who'd time and time again proven a complete disinterest in the issues facing Indigenous communities—to determine the fates of Indigenous people when it came to justice.

CHAPTER 8: RIVER, GIVE ME MY SON BACK

Within two years, Keewaywin First Nation—a community of 350 people—lost two teenagers at DFC: Robyn Harper in 2007, and Kyle Morrisseau in 2009. Kyle was the grandson of Ojibwe painter Norval Morrisseau, often called the "Picasso of the North." Norval was a survivor of the residential school system. Norval supported his family through his painting—and he taught his youngest son, Christian, how to paint as well. In 1962, after an exhibition in Toronto, Norval's career began to take off—he was soon an international sensation. But at Norval's artistic success grew, so did his troubles with excess and alcohol. It was only after suffering a stroke in 1994—two years after Kyle was born to Christian and his wife—that Norval was forced to slow down.

The beginning of this chapter introduces a number of new characters—the Morriseaus, a prominent Ojibwe family. In spite of his family's success and renown, Kyle too lost his life in Thunder Bay. Kyle's story isn't just about Indigenous youths' vulnerability, though. It's about how the generational trauma of the residential school system affects entire families over decades and decades.

Norval died in December of 2007. Christian stopped painting for a while—but the sensitive, artistic Kyle was just starting to paint and draw. Kyle initially wanted to remain close to home rather than transferring to DFC, but after all his friends left for Thunder Bay, Kyle begged Christian to let him join them. Together, Christian, Kyle, and Kyle's younger brother Josh moved to an apartment in Thunder Bay with Christian's brother Eugene. But DFC only let students attend the school if they lived in a boarding home, so Kyle enrolled in a different school nearby.

Kyle arrived in Thunder Bay with a large support network—some of his closest families were there with him as he began his education. Kyle was privileged in this regard—even though it was a big move for Christian and Josh, and though they had to double up with Christian's brother, their family was able to make it work and show up for Kyle as he began his journey.

After their first year in Thunder Bay, Christian, Kyle, and Josh moved to a bigger apartment where Christian, who'd resumed painting, could have an art studio. After a successful school year, Kyle went home for the summer—a loophole once he arrived back on the reserve meant that he was eligible for the DFC waitlist. When a spot opened up, Kyle begged to go to the school with his friends and live in a boarding house. Christian agreed to this. Money was tight, so Christian moved back home to the reserve, believing that Kyle would be okay on his own.

Having spent a year with Kyle in Thunder Bay and seen him thriving, Christian perhaps moved home from Thunder Bay believing that Kyle had a good foundation and support system in place. But as the book has shown, loneliness and homesickness play a big part in the re-activation of generational trauma and circular suffering.

By October, Kyle's calls home had become sporadic. Kyle was racking up occurrence reports—he'd been missing curfew, drinking, and struggling in school. He'd gotten arrested twice. On October 26, Kyle didn't come home. The next day, Christian received a call from his cousin Robbie (who was also Kyle's school counselor) telling him that Kyle was still nowhere to be found. Next, Robbie called Norma, now the NNEC director of education. She was devastated that yet another boy was missing. On Wednesday, Robbie filed a missing persons report. Kyle's disappearance confirmed Alvin Fiddler's worst suspicions: Indigenous kids who moved to the city to attend DFC just couldn't be kept safe. There wasn't enough support, no matter how hard the school and the NNEC worked to help them cope with life in a "hostile" new city—without proper funding and infrastructure from the government, they were in over their heads.

Without the support of his family, Kyle began slipping through the cracks—and, as in the cases of the other fallen feathers, the systems in place in Thunder Bay couldn't support him. This outcome once again illustrates the book's argument that until there is more funding and support in place in cities like Thunder Bay, Indigenous students will continue to face difficulties and danger. While tthe residential schools were closed down, the vestiges of the system remain: as long as the government refuses to provide funding and support for Indigenous students, these students will always have to make a choice between the familiar and the dangerous.

On October 26th, Kyle left school and may or may not have visited his uncle Eugene before heading to the mall. From there, he went drinking with a couple of friends at the McIntyre **River**. Kyle apparently asked one of his drinking buddies, a runner named Ivan Masakeyash, if Ivan knew where he could get a gun—he said he needed it for "protection." Ivan brushed Kyle off. Kyle and Ivan stayed under the bridge drinking after two of their other friends went home, and Kyle called his mother, Lorene, at 10 that evening. He told her that he was at home—but she thought he sounded high or drunk. Kyle asked his mother for some money and told her that he loved her. Christian deposited some money in Kyle's bank account, but Kyle never accessed the funds.

The circumstances surrounding Kyle's death were inconclusive and yet also suspicious. He communicated feeling unsafe and he asked his parents for money. He was intoxicated in the presence of strangers. Just as in several of the other deaths, Kyle was vulnerable and away from friends on the night of his disappearance. The system had not protected him from ending up in such a vulnerable position.

Police waited two whole weeks before interviewing Ivan Masakeyash, whom some other DFC students described as "shady." Ivan was arrested for an attempted break-in on the night of Kyle's disappearance. Police noted that Kyle's familiarity with Ivan Masakeyash led to "concerns that Kyle may be involved with Native Syndicate." Even Robbie worried that Kyle might've been mixed up with the gang—he appeared to owe some debts. But Christian refused to believe that Kyle was involved with the Syndicate. Ivan would later testify that he wasn't involved with the gang, either, and that he'd met Kyle for the first time on the night of his disappearance.

Again, it's not clear whether Kyle was indeed involved in some "shady" business with Ivan, whether he was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time, or whether his death was truly an accident. But what is clear is that no one paid any meaningful attention to Kyle over the course of several weeks during which he was acting out, suffering, and spiraling.

Ten days into the search for Kyle, Christian suffered a breakdown. He got drunk and went down to the **river** to curse Nanabijou; he begged the rock formation to give him his son back. Police picked him up and brought him home, where he slept all afternoon and dreamed about Kyle. When he woke up, his son Josh was shaking him and telling him that they had to go down to DFC—police had found Kyle's body. Kyle had burn holes and tears in his pants and abrasions on his shins. He had an extremely high blood ethanol level. Police determined that Kyle died of drowning, and that alcohol was a contributing factor in his death.

Christian's rage, confusion, and anger as described in this passage speak to the circular suffering that's created when trauma filters endlessly backward and forward through generations. Kyle, the book suggests, fell into a downward spiral in part because of the effects of generational trauma; but Kyle's death then created trauma and suffering for Christian, and for the rest of his family and community as well. Christian's curse against the mythical Nanabijou locates the seeds of this trauma all the way back to colonial times.

Christian was enraged. But nevertheless, after identifying the body, he picked up some tobacco and took Josh on a walk down to the **river**. They laid the tobacco down at the river's edge, and Christian thanked the river for taking his son.

Rather than giving in to his rage again, Christian turned to his spirituality. He found solace in tradition and ritual; like Ricki, he did not blame the river for the loss of a loved one.

CHAPTER 9: LESS THAN WORTHY VICTIMS

In March of 2011, the Court of Appeal judgement in Reggie Bushie's case came out: the Court was concerned with the representation in the coroner jury rolls in Thunder Bay. An inquiry as to how the Thunder Bay jury rolls were formed was going to begin—but this meant that the legal "wrangling" to follow would delay movement on the inquest for many years. While the case was stalled, the NAN lost another student, Jordan Wabasse, in May of 2011. He was the seventh student to die and the fifth whose body was recovered in one of Thunder Bay's **rivers**. The Government of Canada was failing to take any meaningful action to stop Indigenous students from dying.

This passage illustrates the very different approaches to justice in white Canadian bureaucracy and Indigenous communities. The Indigenous families of the seven fallen feathers simply wanted justice and understanding so that their community's children could be better protected in the future. But the labyrinthine bureaucracy of the Canadian government felt no urgency or genuine desire for understanding and change—and in the meantime, yet another student was allowed to slip through the cracks and lose their life.

Shannen Koostachin would never live to see a new school built in her community—on June 1, 2010, she died from injuries sustained in a car accident after leaving her reserve to attend high school somewhere else. Northern First Nations families must choose between sending their children away to a place where their safety can't be assured and keeping them at home, where there aren't enough resources to ensure that they're getting good educations and opportunities for the future. Essentially, Indigenous families must still surrender their students to the education system, decades after the closure of the residential schools. The NNEC doesn't have proper funding or infrastructure—and so putting children in their care, Talaga argues, is just "another form of colonial control and racism."

Even though Shannen's death was accidental, she was yet another student who became a victim of the system in place for Indigenous education. She was forced to make a choice between the inadequate educational resources on her reservation or taking the risk of moving away to attend school—and like so many other Indigenous students, she died far away from home. This passage represents the crux of Talaga's book-length argument about the state of Indigenous education initiatives: they don't protect Indigenous students who are leaving home for the first time and entering new environments. And until they do, or until Indigenous people are granted the resources they need so that their children don't have to move away to get a good education, there will be devastating casualties.

In 2013, Statistics Canada named Thunder Bay the "hate crime capital of Canada," with more reported hate crimes than any other city in the entire country. The executive officer of Thunder Bay Police tried to downplay the statistics—but Talaga recounts a number of incidents in which members of the police force themselves engaged in racist behavior.

Even though Thunder Bay was officially recognized as a place where hate crimes were particularly rampant and violent, the police did not reconsider the possibility of foul play in the deaths of five of the "seven fallen feathers." The report made clear that racism continued to be a significant problem in Thunder Bay, yet the government and police did nothing to stop the violence and protect Indigenous people.

In May of 2012, Julian Falconer wrote to the coroner on behalf of the NAN, reminding them that there were now seven dead students who needed to be included in the inquest. Six of the students went to DFC, and five drowned; Falconer cited unmistakable "patterns to the deaths" that needed to be investigated. Alvin Fiddler and Julian believed that First Nations kids were being targeted and murdered. Too many kids were dying in the same way, and the Thunder Bay Police were writing them all off as accidents immediately, pinning the blame on the kids for having alcohol in their systems.

Even though Falconer and several members of the Indigenous communities from which the seven fallen feathers came believed that there was overwhelming circumstantial evidence of foul play, they struggled to get any Canadian government or state institutions to admit to the patterns to the death. Instead of admitting the possibility of racist violence unfolding on a large scale in one of Canada's cities, the authorities were continuing to push racist tropes about alcoholism in order to distract from what seemed to be the truth.

Falconer and retired Supreme Court Justice Frank Iacobucci, working together to review the jury system, visited all of the communities where the seven deceased kids had been raised. The more Iacobucci learned, the more he wanted to dig up about "the truth of what [was] going on." The parents whose children had died had few answers from the police or other authorities about their children's deaths—and those who hadn't yet sent their children away to school were faced with an impossible decision.

This passage shows how the things that happened in Thunder Bay didn't just affect the devastated families of the seven fallen feathers—they affected these larger communities as a whole. Indigenous parents now knew that Thunder Bay wasn't a safe place for their children—and yet they also knew that their kids would never be able to secure a truly quality education at home on their reserves. By examining the profound struggle this impossible situation creates for parents, Talaga hammers home how essential it is that more government funding and resources be allotted to these communities, so that parents don't have to make such devastating choices (choices that echo the cruelty of the colonial residential school system).

At last, the chief coroner granted NAN the inquest into the deaths of all seven students. While the families waited for the details of the inquest to be announced, Iacobucci released his report. It determined that there was "systemic racism" all throughout the court, justice, and policing systems of the North. All the Indigenous people wanted, Iacobucci reported, was the truth—and if they didn't get it, the mistrust between Canada and its First Nations would worsen. Any hope of reconciliation, Iacobucci warned, could soon be lost. He proposed 17 recommendations for how to fix the courts, prisons, and jury process through the creation of new committees and government positions that would oversee Indigenous issues.

Even though the government of Canada wasn't particularly concerned with investigating the seven fallen feathers' deaths or securing justice for the Indigenous communities across Ontario, Iacobucci's report in many ways forced them to recognize and answer for the ongoing miscarriages of justice against Canada's First Nations communities. Iacobucci's report indicates widespread "systemic racism"—an obvious holdover from centuries of colonial practice. Iacobucci's work on behalf of the First Nations communities is noble, but it is also worth noting that the creation of such a report required the participation of a powerful white Canadian.

The inquest began on October 5, 2015, in the Thunder Bay Courthouse. Dr. David Eden, the coroner originally assigned to preside over the Reggie Bushie inquest, oversaw the proceedings. He rejected Alvin Fiddler's proposal to expand the scope of the inquest to include racism and the actions of the Thunder Bay Police. Eleven parties were granted standing at the inquest; it was expected to last eight months and include testimony from almost 200 witnesses.

Even as the inquest began, Canadian officials continued to deny Indigenous communities the chance to stand up and speak out against institutional racism at all levels of the justice and government systems.

Alvin asked Elder Sam Achneepineskum to attend the inquest in order to offer spiritual guidance to the families of the seven students. Sam was a survivor of the residential schools himself—and he was sexually abused while in the system. He is also a cousin of Chanie Wenjack, and he remembers attending school with Chanie and fantasizing together with their classmates about where they'd go if they ran away.

This passage hammers home the circular nature of generational trauma and suffering. The residential schools may have been closed—but the survivors of the system (and the relatives of those who did not survive its ravages) continue to carry the burdens of the past with them. At the same time, Sam Achneepineskum highlights the ways that the elder generations still can offer protection and support to the younger generation, and help to build a connection to the community's spiritual past..

Sam arrived early on the first day of the inquest and found that the courtroom was insultingly small, considering all the parents and family members who were sure to arrive. He began moving furniture into the room to make sure there was enough seating for everyone. But Sam and the families couldn't help but feel that the "scheduling gaffe" that had resulted in the tiny room was representative of how thoughtlessly the authorities had handled these seven delicate cases.

Sam's response to the government's clear disregard for Indigenous people's ability to access the inquest—or sit comfortably during it—isn't one that's rooted in anger or bitterness or hopelessness. Instead, Sam focused on righting a wrong and delivering to his community the care they deserved. This is indicative of how Indigenous culture is rooted in a focus on justice and balance rather than retribution.

Two weeks after the inquest began, the body of a middle-aged Indigenous man was pulled from the McIntyre **River** on October 19, 2015. Less than 24 hours after the body was discovered, police declared the man's death "non-criminal" and said there'd be no further investigation. Hours later, someone used his debit card. The police remained unconcerned and continued to state that the death was an accidental drowning. This death revealed beyond any shadow of a doubt that there was a clear pattern—after Indigenous bodies were found, Thunder Bay Police immediately declared the deaths unsuspicious. The police seem, to Talaga, profoundly uninterested in investigating these cases.

Even as the inquest began, more and more Indigenous people continued to die suspiciously in Thunder Bay's rivers. The students weren't the only ones being literally swallowed up and erased by a brutal, racist place and system that did not care about them. At this point, Talaga suggests, it seems likely that the deaths of the seven fallen feathers weren't just accidents—they were instances of racist, colonialist violence, and the Canadian state had no interest in stopping such cruelty or standing up for Indigenous people.

As the inquest unfolded, Falconer pressed Thunder Bay staff sergeant Allan Shorrock to answer for these "knee-jerk" calls the force was making regarding Indigenous deaths. Shorrock couldn't come up with any excuse, nor could he explain why it took more than six days for police to launch an investigation into Jethro Anderson's disappearance. As Falconer continued to question Shorrock, Shorrock admitted that declaring "no foul play" in cases like Jethro's without even investigating the deaths created "tunnel vision" in the police force—and that this was an ongoing pattern.

Even though Falconer forced individuals who worked for the Canadian state to admit that there was a problem with how Thunder Bay Police officers were investigating Indigenous deaths, the staff sergeant still wouldn't speak to the deeper meaning behind the police's lack of interest in solving cases involving Indigenous deaths.

In his closing statements on May 26, 2016, Falconer alleged that police were purposefully claiming these deaths were accidents because the investigations were bungled from the start due to apathy and racism. By immediately claiming "no foul play" in spite of cuts and abrasions being found on several of the dead students' bodies, the police could ignore the pattern that was unfolding before their eyes. "You can't…make it an accident by calling it an accident," Falconer stated. He claimed that no one made enough space for these kids in life—and now, no one was making enough space for them in death, either. They died of neglect, and they continued to be neglected afterward.

In his closing statements Falconer sought to call out the police and the coroner's office's neglect and malfeasance. He called attention to the connection between racism and lack of support for Indigenous youth, putting the Thunder Bay Police, the coroner's office, and the Canadian government on the spot for their unchecked prejudice and apathy toward Indigenous people.

On June 28, 2016, the inquest ended. The jury made 145 recommendations that took over two hours to read aloud—but still, the families of the seven students had no answers. Four of the seven deaths were still ruled as undetermined. To date, Talaga writes, few of those many recommendations have been carried out. Many Indigenous children are still without schools, running water, and working sewers—and when they come to cities like Thunder Bay, they still contend with racist speech and violence. Falconer contended that "an evil out there" was throwing kids into the river, targeting vulnerable, intoxicated teens who were already victims of the systems that had failed them, but little has been done to address that evil.

Even though the inquest promised to result in meaningful change for Indigenous communities, Talaga asserts that because of the larger Canadian government's refusal to reckon with the racism that underlies modern negligence toward Indigenous people just as it motivated the more overt violence and coercion in earlier times , there still hasn't been any real change in the wake of the inquest. Racism, Talaga contends, is nothing short of "evil"—and the evils of the past must be called out and acknowledged if Indigenous people are to secure justice in the future.

CHAPTER 10: SEVEN FALLEN FEATHERS

On January 26, 2016, the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal (or CHRT) ruled that the Government of Canada had racially discriminated against the country's 163,000 Indigenous children. Justin Trudeau—the new Prime Minister—accepted the ruling and soon announced a new $71 million budget for child welfare. It seemed like a big step—but the First Nations Caring Society had estimated that at least $216 million would be necessary to begin making the changes that needed to be made. Over a year later, those children were still waiting for action.

Even when the government of Canada does take action on behalf of its Indigenous people, that action is rarely sufficient. Giving Indigenous communities less than half of what they asked for in terms of a budget to support out for vulnerable youth is essentially a slap in the face—and yet another instance of colonial violence in the form of profound neglect.

People like Cindy Blackstock allege that because racism is built into the structure of Canadian bureaucracy, the solutions to Indigenous people's problems are still "not designed for anything other than colonialism." Throughout Canada's history, whistleblowers—both white and Indigenous—have tried to point out the systemic racism and inequity that blight the country. But they are always silenced or ignored.

Tagala and others assert that modern-day Canada is built on the erasure and extermination of its Indigenous people. And until there is some kind of meaningful reckoning with that fact—and an effort to eradicate colonial violence and racism—Indigenous people will struggle to receive the justice they deserve.

After the conclusion of the inquest in 2016, the Office of the Independent Police Review Director promised to carry out a review of racism and discrimination within the Thunder Bay Police. While people like Falconer consider this an important step and a big win, the review is just one step in a larger process of reckoning with racism, colonialism, and systemic apathy toward Indigenous people.

Starting with the institutions that perpetuate racism and colonial violence is important. But the police aren't the only ones who ignore and overlook Indigenous issues, or whose actions make them complicit in the perpetuation of colonial violence. Structural change needs to happen at every level of Canadian society.

Norma Kejick stayed in Thunder Bay for the duration of the eight-month inquest. By the end of the inquest, her marriage had disintegrated, and her husband, who felt that the NNEC was more important to Norma than her own family, had left her. The devastated Norma decided to kill herself. But as she took a rope out into the woods, she asked the Creator for a sign to keep going. A mallard duck flew past, and Norma drove home. Though her suicidal thoughts returned over the next several months, she stayed alive and remained with the NNEC, committed to building a better future for Indigenous kids.

This passage shows how generational trauma and circular suffering threaten the lives of even the most devoted and optimistic members of Indigenous support networks. Watching so many students die—and watching their deaths receive little attention—had a palpable effect on Norma's well-being. Her fight to stay alive, though, illustrates her profound investment in securing a better future for Indigenous youth, fighting tirelessly against the ravages of racism and colonialism.

Meanwhile, Maryanne Panacheese's grandson Rule began high school at Pelican Falls—she refused to send him to DFC. Even though Rule struggled throughout his first year of school, Maryanne worked constantly to remind herself that Rule wasn't Paul—he was only a few hours away, and he was safe. She was careful not to push Rule too hard while still encouraging him to tough out the hard parts of school. Still, she continually feared that the cycles of pain and loss that had defined her life would never end.

Maryanne, too, faced circular suffering in the wake of her son Paul's death. She had to work hard to remain optimistic, just like Norma. Again, Maryanne's trauma illustrates the circular, all-consuming nature of colonial violence and generational trauma.

When Tina Harper returned to Keewaywin from Thunder Bay with her daughter Robyn's remains, she learned that a couple in her extended family had had a baby girl—and they'd named it Julia Robyn. When the young parents couldn't care for the baby, Tina adopted the child as her own. Though her husband passed two years ago, Tina felt that caring for Julia Robyn "rescue[d]" her.

This passage shows how individuals and communities in pain can find solace in the idea that the next generation can still be spared the pain of the previous ones. At the same time, the book has made clear that a parent or guardian's love by itself is not enough to guarantee the safety of the younger generation.

Ricki Strang got a tattoo of his favorite random number, 71; Reggie had a similar tattoo of *his* favorite random number. Strang settled down with a partner and had a son, whom he named Reggie. He moved to Poplar Hill, but he agreed to meet Tanya Talaga at the McIntyre River to show her where he last saw his brother. As the two of them approached the swollen, rushing **river**, Talaga watched as Ricki tossed some tobacco into the water—an offering to his brother—before bending down and holding his arms out over the water.

Just as Christian Morrisseau humbled himself before the river in the wake of his son's death, here, Ricki makes an offering to the river that took Reggie from him. This again highlights how Indigenous traditions and spiritual practices can offer solace and understanding in the absence of real structural change from the Canadian government.

Christian Morrisseau moved to Toronto, where he made a living selling his paintings. Morrisseau created a massive, brightly colored canvas called *Seven Fallen Feathers* in the middle of the night just after the end of the inquest. Disappointed by the results of the inquest, Christian felt empty—but he heard Kyle's voice in his head, begging his father not to forget him. So Christian painted *Seven Fallen Feathers* to commemorate the bright, individual spirits of the lost Indigenous students. In the painting, the seven students, in profile, wait to move on to the next world. Norval, painted in red, is connected to Kyle by a thick red line—he guides his grandson on into the afterlife.

Christian's creation of the painting called Seven Fallen Feathers *is yet another instance that highlights how, in the absence of any real structural justice, Indigenous people are forced to find their own solace in the traditions of their past and in their spiritual lives. Christian's painting commemorates the "seven fallen feathers" as individuals—as people—which in itself is a rebuke to the way that Canadian history, policy, and institutions have refused to see Indigenous people in general and these seven students in particular. In the absence of answers from the government or authorities, people like Christian must create closure and meaning for themselves.*

EPILOGUE

At a record store in downtown Toronto, Tanya Talaga watches as Alvin Fiddler flips through some old country music albums. Every Saturday morning, he posts a melancholy country song to his Facebook—the posts are a "respite" from recent events. On the night of May 6, 2017, two teens disappeared in Thunder Bay on the same night—and their bodies were found within two weeks of their disappearance.

The death of these two Indigenous youth suggest that the racist violence—a legacy of colonial thinking on the part of white Canadians—along with lacking support networks continue to operate throughout Thunder Bay despite the inquest into the deaths of the "seven fallen feathers." In this environment, Indigenous leaders like Alvin Fiddler look for small ways to boost their people's spirits, but that they must go to such efforts is itself a signal that the Canadian powers that be are themselves not doing enough .

The students' names are Tammy Keeash and Josiah Begg; they were 17 and 14 when they died. Tammy was a student, but Josiah was just visiting the city with his father for some medical appointments. Tammy's body was found quickly, but the NAN had to organize their own search command center to "turn Thunder Bay upside down" until Josiah was found at last. Alvin Fiddler and NAN'S Deputy Grand Chief Anna Betty Achneepineskum made it clear to their search teams that they were to check the **rivers**.

Years after the deaths of the "seven fallen feathers," the Thunder Bay Police had not changed. It is not just the pattern of Indigenous youth dying and their bodies showing up in local rivers that repeats over and over. It is also the shockingly indifferent and irresponsible response of the police that recurs again and again, which in turn forces already-overburdened Indigenous communities and their leaders to attempt to investigate these deaths.

Tammy's death was immediately listed as "consistent with drowning"—again, police quickly claimed that there was "no evidence to indicate criminality." Fiddler couldn't believe his ears when he heard the news—though Tammy was the sixth Indigenous youth found in the **water**, police still weren't taking the patterns before them seriously.

Indigenous youths continue to be swallowed up by a Canadian system that doesn't look out for them at any level, and a racist state that continues to neglect them even in death. The egregiousness of the police force's oversight is, at this point, impossible to ignore.

But Tammy's death marked a change: it made the national news, and Indigenous people began taking to social media to tell their stories of experiencing violence and assault in Thunder Bay. Local and national pressure to finally address targeted racism and violence against Indigenous people in Thunder Bay mounted.

Indigenous people were forced to take on the burden of securing justice themselves. They had to kick up a lot of noise about Tammy's death in order to make any kind of small change, since the state and government authorities that should have protected them failed. But it is meaningful that they were able to make their voices heard, and that a different sort of national response began to take shape.

On May 31, Alvin Fiddler held a press conference alongside other Indigenous leaders and Julian Falconer. He called for the federal Royal Canadian Mounted Police to be called in to investigate the deaths in Thunder Bay, since the local police could not be trusted to "fix" the problem there. But because of bureaucratic strictures, the RCMP could only be brought in if Thunder Bay Police requested assistance themselves. On June 23, the Ontario chief coroner stepped in to request the assistance of the York Regional Police to investigate Tammy and Josiah's deaths. It wasn't the RCMP, but it did offer "a bit of hope."

This passage shows, on the one hand, the way that Canadian bureaucracy and red tape continue to thwart the most vulnerable. At the same time, it also shows small changes. These changes aren't enough, and it would be too optimistic to say that they will continue down a path in a way that will eventually become enough. But at the same time it does seem as if there is at least some shift in the response of Canadian authorities to the needs and desires of Indigenous people.

At the time of Talaga's writing, more than a year has passed since the end of the inquest—and while there is still much to be done, some signs of improvement have begun to emerge. The City of Thunder Bay carried out a safety audit of problem areas along the riverbanks. The Thunder Bay Police began conducting daily foot patrols of these areas. They also requested descriptors and identifiers for all First Nations students from the north attending Thunder Bay schools.

Even though the structural changes that have taken place are small, they are at last focusing on preventative measures to help protect the lives of Indigenous students who find themselves alone and struggling in Thunder Bay.

NAN took many steps to create more community and youth leadership activities for teens, to keep them busy—but funding, at the time of the book's publication, still hadn't been approved, making NAN chiefs question the Government of Canada's commitment to following through with the inquest's recommendations.

While some strides have been made, large and meaningful structural change remains out of reach for many Indigenous communities and individuals. The baby steps should be acknowledge as real steps, but at the same time should not be taken as being enough to redress or alleviate the issues facing Indigenous communities in Canada.

Alvin Fiddler began working to fund and build a safe student residence for northern children who come to Thunder Bay for school. But, again, the Government of Canada refused to comply with the CHRT ruling to provide funding. Fiddler, concerned that time was "ticking" for Indigenous youth in Thunder Bay, called for an emergency NAN meeting to discuss the crisis of how to keep students safe throughout the school year, and whether arrangements should be made with local public schools to take in NAN kids. Fiddler didn't want parents to feel forced to send their children to dangerous Thunder Bay.

In the absence of substantial enough help from the government, Indigenous leaders and community members were, once again, forced to take matters into their own hands to try to cobble together a plan that would help save their children—without the promised funding and support from the government. The Indigenous community, in other words, is being forced to heal the wounds of the past themselves—even though the government of Canada itself is responsible for the existence of many of those wounds in the first place.

As Canada Day approaches and the country prepares to celebrate its 150th birthday on July 1, 2017, Fiddler tells Talaga that he plans to spend the day in reflection at a powwow with his family. He wants to use the day to figure out what he can do to make sure his people make it to the final prophecy, or the eighth fire—the prophecy in which the settlers and the Indigenous people learn to come together and look forward in harmony.

In the final lines of the book, Talaga shows how people like Alvin Fiddler remain optimistic in the face of outright neglect and racism. Fiddler has had to invent a new prophecy to optimistically complete the prophecy of the seven fires. And in spite of everything he's seen and experienced, he's turned to his own spiritual practice for hope about the future of relations between white Canadians and First Nations people. The obvious question raised by Fiddler's efforts is whether white Canadian society will similarly invest in the effort to create an "eighth fire" that ushers in a new era of the relationship between Canada and its Indigenous people.

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