



Under the Bridge: The True Story of the Murder of Reena Virk

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Who were the seemingly ordinary teenagers who beat and killed a girl who longed to be their friend? And how could they hide the murder from their parents and teachers and the police for *eight days*?

Drawing on six years of research -- including interviews with the accused -- acclaimed writer Rebecca Godfrey answers these questions in this stunning account of the notorious "Schoolgirl Murder." Through a skillful blend of hard journalism and riveting narrative, Godfrey takes us into the bedrooms and classrooms of a powerful hip-hop-obsessed clique and the loner-victim who just wanted to belong, then into the police stations and courtrooms where adults -- grieving, devastated -- must reckon with the shocking crime. Highlighting along the way the deeply entrenched social tensions that provoked the murder, *Under the Bridge* is more than a true-crime book -- it is an unforgettable wake-up call.

Under the Bridge: The True Story of the Murder of Reena Virk Details

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From Reader Review Under the Bridge: The True Story of the Murder of Reena Virk for online ebook

Nina says

This was a difficult read for various reasons. Reading a book about the true murder of a teenage girl by her peers is never going to be a walk in the park, but for those who grew up on Vancouver Island it will almost certainly hit closer to home. My family moved to Canada in 1996, just under a year before Reena Virk was killed. My mother would talk constantly about how SAFE Canada was, especially Victoria, compared to where we lived just outside of London, and as an 11 year old this idealistic view was shattered (and from my mother's reaction, this pretty much ended my dream of ever going to public school). It's hard to express just how much this murder shook the community, and not just the View Royal region of the city.

Reading the book 18 years later, it's still raw. A friend of mine was in the same class as some of the teens involved. Another friend's dad is one of the named police officers. In a small city it's hard not to feel a personal connection.

As far as the book goes, it's well researched and well written. There's an appreciated lack of sensationalism, instead focussing on the emotions of witnesses and those involved.

Ali says

I had been meaning to read this book for a long time. It's a horrifying subject and Godfrey does a very good job of relaying the emotions and fears and challenges of troubled teenagers in a small town, while recounting quite clinically the evidence, trials and lives of those involved in the murder of fourteen-year-old Reena Virk. The reader gets to know each of the key players - though Reena remains quite shadowy - and in knowing them, is left still with so many questions as to how this senseless, violent act could have happened.

Stacy Fettters says

Did Not Finish! Got to page 101 and had to leave this book in the dust.

My Saturday nights are simple. I'm in comfy pajamas, dog beside me sleeping, a glass of wine, and some kind of murder mystery blaring on the television.

So I'm no stranger to true crime. I breathe it in like a second air.

Under The Bridge is nothing like any of that. Yes, it's true crime, but not as mysterious and thought provoking.

What captured my attention was the prologue. Searching for the missing body and little by little they find missing articles of clothing. All leading up to the gruesome discovery. After that, you lose me.

Gansta rap, mean girls and jealous pettiness overrun this small town and it leads to a death of a young girl. Very repetitive and immature. Would not recommend any of this book to anyone.

So, did you hear she wanted to bury a girl alive? She wanted to bury a girl alive! Bury a girl alive! Bury her alive!

Aaahhh! Ugh!!! Nope!

Vicki Willis says

This was so depressing, but a great book. It was about a 14 year old girl murdered by her classmates. It makes you think about mob mentality, being able to speak up, parenting, teenagers and socio-economics. If it wasn't true, I wouldn't have believed it could happen.

The one positive thing in the book was the way Reena's parents were able to handle her murder and their ability to forgive. I would not be able to do that and their grace was admirable.

The only thing that kept it from 5 stars was the fact that it didn't wrap it all up at the end. I had to look up on the internet where the murderers ended up, though this could be a publication date issue.

There were little photos at the start of each chapter, but I would have liked a "section" of photos. I don't know if it is because I was reading on my Kindle or because the accused were minors that there was no photo section.

A solid 4 stars and a rec for those who like true crime.

Emily Luba says

Under the Bridge is a grim portrait of teenage life gone seriously wrong. I had heard the story of Reena Virk's murder on the news a few years ago, when it was going on, but this book really showed me a different side of the case. Read for my grade 11 english class, this novel terrified me, but in a good way. It is so raw, full of pure emotion, that I could clearly picture the events as it happened. I've never really been interested in crime books, but Under the Bridge really opened my eyes. The details it went into describing the events showed the youth so realistically that it seemed as though it could happen in my own community- a truly scary idea to grasp, but one of the things that made Under the Bridge so powerful.

Matthew says

I thought the first third of the book was just so-so (I thought the writing felt immature), but then it grabbed me and drug me in. I was thinking maybe it had an immature feel to highlight the immature actions of the kids being discussed. In the end, it was perfect in the way it was written because I went back and forth between thinking I knew exactly what happened to questioning everything.

One of the saddest parts was seeing how these teenagers acted. I have two little kids and it scares me to death that one day they might have classmates like these kids. And, even though many of them realized when they hit their 20s how stupid they were as teenagers, that doesn't help people who they bullied and, in this case, killed.

This book is very interesting and eye opening, but not for the faint of heart. The events will stick with me for a long time.

Rainbow says

Anyone who was living in Victoria in the early 1990s knows all about what happened to Reena Virk. This book attempts to explain a little bit about WHY it happened, who the major players were, and what happened

to them. Unfortunately, the saga of one of the two accused, Kelly Ellard, is still going on as of the date I'm writing this, so that part isn't completely covered in the book.

This book is very difficult emotionally to read. As someone who was bullied throughout my school years, I identify with Reena more than I'd like to.

Heather V ~The Other Heather~ says

This is Reena Virk. She was only a bit younger than I was in 1997, which is when she was murdered on the other side of my country.

I was even closer in age to her tormentors and killers. I remember the case vividly. I watched the news with horror every day, and just when the story would simmer down a bit we'd start hearing about Kelly Ellard, the piece of human garbage who held Reena's head under water after beating her so badly that the autopsy report stated

A bruise in the shape of a sneaker print is on the back of the brain.

Normally I don't call people names in book reviews, but I daresay Ellard's behaviour since the murder (and her multiple trials) alone warrant me calling her "garbage."

Anyway, if you're a reader who feels that true crime can also have "spoilers" - I myself sometimes avoid the details of a case when I'm about to read a book or see a documentary on it - you might want to stop here, as it's nearly impossible to review this book without giving context about why it was written, and how very current the case remains to this day.

If you're still reading - and be warned, this is gonna get wordy - I'll finish my thought about Ellard. Only a few short years would pass before we'd start getting reports again that Ellard's fancy attorneys had wrangled her a new trial, or an appeal for this or that, or a relocation to a more desirable facility. Perhaps that's why most of us remember only her name, and not that of the young man who was also found guilty (second-degree murder), or those of the other girls who took part in the beating before Ellard finished Reena off in the water. Those names should not be forgotten, but for the most part, because none of them went on to commit further assaults and the like, the focus falls on Ellard. My stomach still turns over any time her face pops up on my television. Now that I've read this book and have seen a fuller picture of her I suspect my feelings have only worsened towards her. What a piece of work this woman is. (See the quoted article from Feb. 2017 near the bottom of this review.)

Ellard during one of her court appearances, circa 1997.

Rebecca Godfrey has a somewhat odd writing style, one I found difficult to grasp for the first quarter or so of *UNDER THE BRIDGE*. There's a rhythm to it that I think is meant to convey the way these teenagers were thinking and speaking about Reena and everything that happened, but it took some getting used to. In some ways it reads more like a novel than an account of a crime. I wasn't sure how that was going to sit with me. After a while, though, I realized how effective it was in making me hear the players' voices instead of just seeing words on the page.

As far as research goes...damn. Godfrey brings it. We are privy to everything: the relationships these teenagers had with each other and their families and their community before the murder; the excruciating details of exactly what happened to Reena and why; the way that night irrevocably shaped dozens of lives forever, even for those who weren't there under the bridge; the background on virtually every law enforcement officer, social worker, and member of the various legal teams and Crown prosecutors' offices; and, of course, how things stand now, or at least as currently as the edition I read could manage (which seems to be circa 2009, judging by the afterword). Godfrey comes bearing police interviews, court transcripts, evidence reports, and interviews she presumably conducted herself with Reena's family and some of the key figures in the crime.

One of those figures is Ellard's co-defendant for murder. His name is Warren, and I barely remember hearing anything about him at the time this was taking place. Whether that's part of The Homolka Effect or not, I can't say. (I'm referring to another horrifying Canadian case of murder, in which married couple Paul Bernardo and Karla Homolka savagely raped, tortured, and murdered several young girls, including Homolka's own teenage sister. Many at the time made more of a fuss over Homolka because such acts are seen to be more shocking when executed by a woman - a fact that, ironically, Homolka herself admits she played into when luring the girls, as they never thought they were in danger since there was a woman in the car. I digress, but I'll add some links to books about that case at the end of this review for interested parties.) Maybe it was just that much more astonishing to think that a teenage girl could be so brutal, and that stuck in our minds more than hearing about the teenage boy's part in it, because society "expects" that of boys. Maybe it's more because Warren took his sentence, went to prison, never sought appeals or behaved in a combatant manner with the media, didn't get into any trouble during his incarceration...while Kelly Ellard was quite the opposite.

Any which way, I was surprised to find that a huge majority of the first half, maybe even three quarters, of *UNDER THE BRIDGE* is devoted to Warren's story and his involvement. Godfrey uses some tricksy methods to surprise us along the way in terms of just how involved Warren was, or wasn't, in Reena's actual murder; I have to admit I murmured, "Oh, no..." more than once when it became clear that I was about to learn something potentially terrible about this boy, who is illustrated throughout the book as being so young, so naive, a romantic who loved his girlfriend and who just wanted a family to love him. (A great many of the teens in this case were from horrible homes, were in foster care, or were in facilities for "troubled youth," which is another difference between five of "The Shoreline Six" and Kelly Ellard.) It's rare for me to sympathize with someone who could participate in something so heinous, but if getting the reader to feel sorrow for Warren was among Godfrey's goals, she accomplished it with me.

UNDER THE BRIDGE isn't really about Reena Virk. We catch glimpses of her, here and there, and I appreciated that Godfrey didn't sanitize Reena's life in an attempt to make her murder that much more despicable; it wasn't necessary, because nobody deserves to suffer what Reena did, regardless of however

many poor choices she made at the young age of 14. And seeing her flaws gave context to her murder, too; before reading this book I couldn't have told you for certain why anyone would want to beat her up. The reasons for what happened to her are pathetic, of course, and utterly inexcusable, but it painted a clearer picture of why these girls (and boy) somehow felt entitled to visit such cruelty on a young classmate. I suppose, in the broken mind of a deranged teenager, petty jealousy and pride were reason enough.

It's really more about the kids who hurt her, and one further social ring outside of that. We're given a lot of time to spend with Warren's girlfriend, Syreeta, and I must say it was her I thought about most when I put the book down for the night. As richly painted as the figures are of the "killer kids" - Josephine, Kelly, Maya, Laila, Dusty, Willow, and Eve* - I felt that Godfrey did her best illustrating work with Syreeta and Warren. Reading so much of it from Syreeta's perspective is perhaps what helped me get into the groove of the storytelling, and it worked to use her sympathetic (and sometimes complicated) POV as the throughline for the entire book.

I'd recommend this book for anyone who is into true crime, or who is interested in grappling with philosophical questions about whether kids should ever be tried as adults, whether the Canadian justice system is harsh enough (or too harsh) on young offenders, and how to properly memorialize victims rather than mostly remembering the names* of their killers.

I'll leave this February 2017 article from the Vancouver Sun here. (Put behind a spoiler cut simply for length.) It's an interesting (and ongoing) footnote to the part of *UNDER THE BRIDGE* that touches on whether justice has been, or ever could be, served for Reena. And it's something of a callback to my mention of Karla Homolka, too: another Canadian murderer who is now able to grow up and have boyfriends and babies, while their victims never got old enough to have that chance.

Killer Kelly Ellard gets temporary prison leaves with baby

ABBOTSFORD — Notorious killer Kelly Ellard will be allowed to take her young son to appointments and activities in the community, the Parole Board of Canada decided Monday. Board members Alex Dantzer and Jim Hart said that while Ellard continues to minimize her role in the 1997 murder of teen Reena Virk, she has taken responsibility and her risk in the community can be managed.

(view spoiler)

Ellard has been in prison or pre-trial custody for about 15 years. In 2005, she was sentenced to life in prison with no parole eligibility for seven years. She now lives in a minimum security unit and is part of Correctional Service Canada's mother and child program.

The Wikipedia article about Reena's murder indicates that UNDER THE BRIDGE is in development to be made into a film. I wonder how much more will have changed in Ellard's circumstances by the time that comes to fruition. I wonder how Reena's parents, siblings, uncle and grandparents feel about their girl's death getting the Hollywood treatment.

** - The names of many of the girls who were prosecuted for the beating of Reena were changed in the book because of the ban on publishing names of minor children under the Young Offenders Act. The only one whose identity I know for certain is that of "Josephine," who has since been identified as Nicole Cook.*

Further reading for interested parties, particularly about Homolka but also about Reena:

Jessica says

I did not care for the writing of the book, I wouldn't say she is a good author at all but the story was good. I did get a little confused when she kept adding more characters and then jumping through their stories to much, I felt like I was constantly waiting for the connection. I do remember when this happened and feel more knowledgeable now. I have been in Reena's shoes through high school and I am greatful that I was able to overcome any obstacles. Kids can be cruel and I just hope that I am able to raise my own children in such a way as they will be smart and be able to make the right choices.

Darby says

I never heard anything about this crime and it was a shocking one, a gang of girls beating up a fourteen year old schoolmate and then drowning her. I usually enjoy reading true crime books, the putting of all the pieces together. I finished this book, but I will agree with other reviewers that there was something awkward in the way the book was put together, even just the writing. Only one 'awkward family photo' of the victim and the author kept referring to her as fat or unflattering. It was just a little weird. And then the cover- a picture of a sexy back tattoo of a butterfly. The writing was flowery and over the top, leaving me wishing Ann Rule had gotten to this crime scene first.

Christina says

I really can't stand the cover of this edition of the book, but since we aren't supposed to judge books by their covers, I'll try to focus on its insides. The book's topic is very appealing to high school students, so last year I had a lot of students select it as their literature circle book. However, of those students, I don't think any of them loved it. I think a lot of them liked it, but just kind of in a "ho hum, it's okay" kind of way. My personal problem with it is that I just don't think it's very well-written (but that might bother me more than most other people since I'm an English teacher), and frankly I think it could be about 100 pages shorter and be a much better book. Don't get me wrong, I liked it, which is why it is a literature circle book option, it's just that the end seemed to drag on as it focused a lot on the investigation and courtroom proceedings. Ultimately, it was still an interesting book about a very tragic event that greatly changed the lives of a lot of teenagers.

The Hunter says

1-terrible-horrible-awful-star

I've read a lot of true crime back in the days. And I believe there is a specific professional format that you have to follow as a true crime writer. But today I guess every murder deserves a book. Because why not? I wonder who bought copies of this book. Mostly Vancouver Island residents I bet.

Well, where do I start? Do I start with the point that this book had NOT enough actual case files? Or should I rage first that every other chapter was a filler? I mean, really? I believe that making an innocent angel from a victim is a usual strategy in true crime, but do I really have to read every single detail about victims grandfather, grandmother and parents, etc?

I was battling with this book for quite a while. I was really trying not to put it down. But every page was a struggle. The language used to write this monstrosity is mostly immature. Sentences are blank and hold no information. Frequently author just stomps all over the place and doesn't really follow any particular line of thought. I understand that this book was dedicated to Reena Virk. And author tried to explain why the girl was murdered. I believe that many can feel for Reena and even associate themselves with her. But if this book can ever be called a true crime the author definitely has to work on her style of writing and research. I wish this book had more of concrete information rather than assumptions and prejudice.

Tara says

Very sad story of betrayal and murder however, it was poorly written. I found it tedious which had me wanting to get to the end from the very beginning.

Jackie Marrs says

This was my first nonfiction true crime book. After I finished it, I looked up the "main characters" on google and I think that really made it real to me. It wasn't just a story, but was actually true. In 1998, a bunch of young teenage girls got together and beat up another girl so badly that she died. All to teach her a lesson. Many participated in the beatings, but did stop at a certain point. However, in the end, one girl and one boy followed the beat up girl and drowned her. It is still unbelievable to me how the boy even ended up in the situation. It had nothing to do with him at all, he happened by it, and ran to the confrontation and became involved.

The girl who was involved in the murder hired the best defense attorneys who almost got her off from all charges. She had absolutely no remorse whatsoever and felt that the world owed her everything. She brutally murdered another girl and never thought about it again. Somehow, it wasn't her fault.

In the end she was convicted of first degree murder and from what I can tell is thankfully still in jail. It was intense!

♥ Marlene♥ says

On Saturday, June 30, 2007 I wrote about this book:

I completed this 2 days ago. Really a good read indeed. Shocking story how teens kill a young girl.

Very well written and a book you can't put down once you start reading.

9I see I gave it a 9 out of a 10)
