

American Refugees: Turning to Canada for Freedom, by Rita Shelton Deverell (University of Regina Press, 2019), \$21.95 (hardcover), 270 pages, ISBN: 9780889776258

Ever since it won independence from England, America has been described by many people as “the freest, most prosperous, and most egalitarian country in the world”, a place that proves your past does not determine your future, and yet has forced many to question whether they could remain there (7). Rita Deverell’s *American Refugees* explores the historic struggles of individuals’ pursuit of America and the American Dream by detailing American refugees’ personal experiences of fleeing to Canada in search of a better life. This book thoughtfully challenges the myths about the immigration systems of both Canada and the United States, while considering the place of Indigenous peoples in migration discourse. Deverell’s extensive research gives a voice to individuals who have no outlet for self-representation. Her rigorous analysis provokes a sense of urgency to address why America, the self-proclaimed ‘land of the free’, fails in so many instances to provide the opportunities that future citizens dared to dream about. Deverell also asks a provocative question: Is the Canadian dream becoming the new objective for people in search of a better present, and future?

The strength of Deverell’s analysis is rooted in real life accounts that emerge from seminal moments in the history of the Republic, from the Revolutionary War to the Underground Railroad, McCarthyism and the Vietnam War. She sets the tone of the book in the first chapter by recounting her own experience as an “American refugee who escaped the US in 1967” (5). She now offers a new perspective on the immigration experience by providing details of experiences she has had administering the Oath of Canadian Citizenship. She opens the book with a masterful representation of the stark reality that confronted Americans who realized, against all polling predictions, that Donald Trump was going to become the new President. The website for Citizenship and Immigration Canada crashed that night, “presumably overloaded with those seeking information on how to walk in the footsteps of earlier American refugees chasing the Canadian dream” (4).

Deverell uses this occasion as a springboard that allows her to dive into the periodic waves of American immigration to Canada: “On both sides of [the Canada-US border], we go through long periods of pontificating about how much alike the two countries are, what a great friendship we have, how we’re the biggest trading partners, and how dependent we are on each other for defence and peace” (7). She then suggests that this “love-fest” glosses over the reality of American immigration to Canada, which has been triggered over the years by major differences of philosophy and policy. Each personal anecdote and real life account presented throughout the book is thoughtfully placed, and explained in great detail.

In the first sections, Deverell outlines the histories of several Loyalist individuals, beginning with members of ‘the Kennedy clan’, recounting stories of their ancestors’ actions during the Revolutionary War, and the War of 1812. These Kennedys’ were radical, passionate and intensely motivated to defend the interests of marginalized Indigenous peoples and people of colour, no matter the cost. The next section turns to alternative narratives from Afro-Americans who fled after the War of 1812, as well as former slaves who made the trek to Canada through pathways such as the Underground Railway: “There isn’t one tidy reason why these black American immigrants, refugees, fugitives, or freedom seekers crossed the border into Canada. Nor is there one tidy reason why they stayed...Canada seemed to them, a more just society than the United States” (45). These accounts convey a sense of passion and grace, proclaiming that “none of us is too old, too young, too bigoted, or too embarrassed to learn” (59). Deverell’s powerful words can sometimes

feel idealistic, but she consistently bolsters her words with evidence that drives home the views she is expressing.

This section closes with a thoughtful exploration of Indigenous peoples' loyalty to Canada within a broader frame that encompasses the experiences of all American refugees. She also addresses the ongoing issues Canada faces regarding its treatment of Indigenous peoples. Incorporating an account from a personal visit to Thunder Bay, Ontario in 1971, Deverell reveals the mechanisms by which Indigenous peoples come to be literally and figuratively cast onto the margins of Canadian society. I'm not convinced that we have come much further from what Deverell concluded in 1971, that "it remains true today that "Racism" and "Aboriginal people" are not yet terms that can be logically linked together for most folk" (385).

Deverell then turns to the stories of those that fled life under US Senator Joseph McCarthy, which in many cases echo the sentiments of those who have decided to flee on account of the current Trump administration. Deverell includes experiences of those who fled during the McCarthy Era because the pursuit of those who fled the US at that time epitomizes the resilience of those who were in search of the American dream. Ironically, however, that very struggle to fulfill this Dream is what pushed them out of the United States, and into Canada. We experience the incredible story of Florence James, for example, who immigrated to Saskatchewan in the 1950s. James's obituary contains sentiments that capture the very essence of why some US citizens have chosen to move to Canada: "The fallout from McCarthyism does seem to crystallize problems in the United States that have been reinforced and reinvented until the present day: racism; [and the] opposition to the socialist philosophy of caring for all citizens" (108-109). The power of narratives like this one is that it captures the sentiments of American refugees who refuse to give up, because they believe that working hard will ultimately allow them to achieve their dreams. Deverell complements such narratives with diverse references to the arts, and these images and scripts play over-and-over again in the reader's mind.

One of the largest politically-motivated exoduses from the US was comprised of roughly 40,000 Americans who fled conscription during the Vietnam War. Because of their numbers, these individuals remain in the lived experiences and memories of many Canadians who were around during that time. Echoing the work of Jessica Squires, John Hagan and Mary Jo Leddy, Deverell uses their stories to demonstrate that the narrative Canadians love to tell themselves about Canada as a safe haven for war resisters is not entirely accurate. Canada was not completely welcoming to the resisters, either in the context of the Vietnam War or, more recently, during the multiple engagements of the US in Iraq and Afghanistan. One individual summed up the shortfall of the Canadian response by saying: "I guess what we have here is an instance of Canada failing American refugees. (And the country has had over ten years not to fail them)" (207). It seems that the individuals presented here collectively felt, and continue to feel, called to action, and many of them pursue political social activism today. Deverell cleverly presents these stories to make the reader believe in their persistence and drive, and she draws striking comparisons of the struggles of the war resisters to those of refugees.

In the final chapters, Deverell touches on recent asylum seekers who are unable to claim refugee status in Trump's America. The essence of this struggle is captured in a 2017 *Globe and Mail* article: "This recent wave of refugee claimants did not choose Canada; rather, the United States aggressively unchose them" (Dhillon 2017). The final section of this book entitled, "Build on It", ultimately issues a call to action. Deverell notes that "all of the "American refugees" profiled in this book fear for their lives, or political freedom, or the brutal destruction of their most cherished values and work, and therefore chose Canada for a better present and better future"

(235). It is evident that these American “refugees” chose to flee because the America of their Dream had failed to provide the promised ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’.

If the dominant American discourse continues to describe those who reach the US border as undeserving criminals needing to be ‘managed’ and removed, the American Dream may soon become an obsolete historical concept. Deverell’s text fuels a sense of urgency to build on this historical compilation, and to inform an analysis of the current American refugees fleeing to Canada in the Trump era. At the same time, Deverell’s message is that although Canada has provided safe haven to many, it’s still far from ‘the land of opportunity’ for all. This book ultimately leaves a key question unsolved: what is the solution for the current international refugees who continuously look to the United States for freedom? This is where this book concludes, and where the work of academics, policy makers, and lawyers begins.

Works Cited

- “Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21.” *Give Peace a Chance / Pier 21*, 19 Oct. 2014, <https://pier21.ca/canadian-stories/give-peace-a-chance>
- Deverell, Rita Shelton. “Slavery Endangers the Masters’ Health, but Please Don’t Shoot the Messenger,” in *Cultivating Canada: Reconciliation through the Lens of Cultural Diversity, Aboriginal Healing Foundation Research Series 3*, ed. Ashok Mathur, Jonathan Dewar, and Mike DeGagne (Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2011), 385-86.
- Dhillon, Sunny and Fine, Sean. “Quebec and Manitoba See Influx of Asylum Seekers Crossing U.S. Border,” *Globe and Mail*, February 12, 2017, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/quebec-and-manitoba-see-influx-of-asylum-seekers-crossing-us-border/article33995516>
- Hagan, John. “For Iraq War Resisters, It’s Vietnam All Over Again: Why Trudeau Must Act Now to Reserve Harper’s Prosecution of U.S. Objectors in Canada.” *NOW*, November 11, 2015. <https://nowtoronto.com/news/for-iraq-war-resisters-it%E2%80%99s-vietnam-all-over-again>.
- Leddy, Mary Jo. “Why Are We Here? A Meditation on Canada.” Paper presented at the Catholic Health Alliance Conference, Charlottetown, May 10, 2017. www.chac.ca/conference/pastconferences/2017/docs/Mary_Jo_Leddy.
- Squires, Jessica. *Building Sanctuary: The Movement to Support Vietnam War Resisters in Canada, 1965-73*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013.