

# **MURDER IN RENFREW COUNTY**

The predator who left three women dead – and the justice system that failed to stop him

**DEAN BEEBY**

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*So many sisters killed  
Over the years, thousands of years  
Killed by fearful men  
Who wanted to be taller*

*— From the poem “Lost” by Margaret Atwood*



# INTRODUCTION

This book germinated on September 22, 2015, the day an armed killer hunted down and murdered three of his former women partners. I was working quietly in my cubicle at the CBC Parliamentary Bureau in Ottawa that morning when the first news bulletins sounded: A serial killer was headed east toward the city from rural Renfrew County. A trickle of fear rippled through the newsroom. Did he have automatic weapons? Was he killing indiscriminately? Where would his murderous path take him? Why hadn't the cops taken him out?

As details emerged, it became clear the killer was tracking down former partners and slaughtering them. Police officers in Renfrew County, where the bloodbath began, acknowledged they knew the killer well. Basil Borutski had been red-flagged for years as a stalker and violent abuser of women. Borutski eventually put down his weapon and surrendered, babbling incoherently about vengeance and

justice in his text messages and in a handwritten journal containing his justifications for the murders. God had enabled the day's murders, with Borutski his earthly sword of retribution. He likened himself to a zombie, in service to a higher power. He took no personal responsibility. He was simply a dutiful agent of divine justice. It all sounded ludicrous — a man's self-aggrandizing rant.

The police, it turned out, had not actually stopped him. Rather, Borutski ran out of steam — and out of potential victims. He sat morosely in a field, texting his brother about where the cops could find him. A tactical unit, supported by a helicopter and a circling Cessna, eventually located and arrested him without a shot fired. Borutski had contemplated getting drunk and killing himself with his shotgun. He had carried plenty of alcohol into the field for a drunken suicide. But he changed his mind. Suicide would mean killing the innocent, extinguishing his own exemplary life. That was contrary to God's law, which he had parsed in private study of Bible passages. He fancied himself an astute theologian who could teach the priests a thing or two. So he left the booze untouched and waited for a police tactical unit to approach. He kept his distance from the loaded murder weapon, deliberately leaving it lying in a field, so the advancing officers would have no excuse to use their weapons.

In the CBC Ottawa newsroom that day, angst yielded to shock, shock became anger and, for me at least, anger metastasized into outrage. Three women were dead because a justice system that was long aware of Borutski's toxic, brutal misogyny had let him roam free. I knew then this horror story must be told in full, not just as a true-crime narrative but also to hold the justice system accountable for its casual abandonment of three terrified women, each sensing the lethal risk. If so little was done to restrain the high-profile



Basil Borutski, his criminal files bristling with red flags, then terrorized, brutalized women everywhere didn't stand a chance.

Justice-system actors check boxes, follow protocols, train and retrain, carry out policy and abide by legal mandates, including safeguarding the privacy of perpetrators, and abused women somehow get forgotten. A Swiss-cheese bureaucracy gave a determined predator enough space to carry out his slaughter. Front-line workers in women's shelters had seen the same horror show unspool time and time again with other male terrorizers. Borutski's murders may have played out with more drama, but the narrative arc was always the same. At-risk women were given false assurances of protection, assigned panic buttons, awarded no-contact peace bonds, provided with escape plans and promised updates about their attackers. In the end, though, they and their families remained exposed and vulnerable, especially in rural settings where guns were ubiquitous, cellular service was spotty and police help was far away. Restraints on their predators were loose, distorted by notions of rehabilitation, mercy, legal liberties and personal privacy. Potential killers cavalierly flouted court-ordered conditions with minimal accountability. Their traumatized women targets, meanwhile, were left to patch together homespun precautions to protect themselves. Can any system be more ass-backwards?

The story that follows is no murder mystery. Ontario Provincial Police assembled a mountain of incontrovertible evidence pinning the accused to the murders, all of which was meticulously laid out by Crown prosecutors in a six-week trial in Ottawa in 2017. Borutski himself acknowledged to his brother Bunker by text message on the day of the murders, "Yes, I did it." He confessed to the crimes in detail on a police video the following day. He belligerently

declined to participate in any of the legal proceedings. He was snarky and obstructive with court-appointed psychiatrists. He rejected representation by defence lawyers, even though legal aid was ready to pick up the bill. He sat petulantly in the prisoner's dock, rarely showing interest or emotion. He balked at signing court paperwork, including a mandatory victim-restitution form. There was never any doubt or legal challenge about his culpability, nor about the sordid minutiae of the murders. Security cameras, cellphone records, 911 transcripts, witness statements, DNA and physical evidence strewn along the blood-soaked trail all faithfully recorded that morning's dark rampage.

This is also not a story about the making of a murderer. Borutski's childhood, his addictions, his medical and mental problems and his escalating crimes against women are outlined here, but only insofar as they became ever-louder signals to the justice system of a nascent killer at work. Others can psychologize him and grapple with how to raise generations of young men who respect, honour and support women. The project to change entrenched male attitudes toward women is a noble one, but not my purpose.

Instead, this book is focused on how to preserve and safeguard the lives of women — especially those in crisis this day, this very hour. They live with existential fear, next door, down the street, at the mall, in the office. Hiding their bruises, terrified for their children, coping with a daily nightmare of violence and threats. Ashamed of the dark hole they have slipped down, waking each morning with a target on their backs, walking on glass shards. We need to immobilize predators with steadfast purpose, consistency and force. The system needs to be flipped right side up, so the default is the incapacitation of serial assaulters, not the cocooning of women against their attacks. The Borutski case makes clear

that no woman can ever be protected as long as predators enjoy the benefit of the doubt, as long as they thumb their noses at judges, at police, at probation and parole officers. Family lawyer and women's advocate Leighann Burns said after Borutski's trial, "If we couldn't stop somebody who was so visible and so dangerous, really, what does that say about this system at all?"

Femicides are rarely subject to the microscopic scrutiny of the Borutski murders. Ontario Provincial Police investigators collected enormous amounts of evidence for the 2017 trial, which laid out the killings in minute detail. In 2019, Ontario's Domestic Violence Death Review Committee investigated the circumstances leading to the triple femicide, drawing on a range of police and other records normally kept under lock and key. The 2022 inquest in Pembroke, Ontario, put even more information into the public record. Investigative journalism by diligent reporters also filled gaps. The 2015 triple femicides thus present an extraordinary, even unique, opportunity to peer behind the veil and understand why the justice system keeps screwing up in the brutalization of women by men.

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The subject of this book has been dismal to research, but I found respite in drawing on the exemplary work of fellow journalists. Whatever your views about the so-called "mainstream media," or about the public broadcaster, or about Canada's legacy newsrooms, the strong public-interest work of individual journalists, producers and editors is to be celebrated. I was not able to attend Borutski's 2017 trial and have relied heavily on the accounts of hard-working reporters who sat for long hours on hard benches. Kristy Nease of

CBC Ottawa did superb online reporting of the trial, which was especially helpful to me, as was Aedan Helmer's work for Postmedia newspapers. I also drew on the enterprise of *Ottawa Citizen* journalists, who deservedly won a National Newspaper Award for team coverage of the 2015 murders under then-city editor Joanne Chianello. Stories by the *Citizen's* Gary Dimmock, Andrew Duffy and Joanne Laucius were especially helpful. Nease and Helmer also did some fine ancillary reporting, including charts and timelines that laid groundwork. I also drew on crime specialist Molly Hayes's first-class reporting for *The Globe and Mail*. Thanks also to Ruth Zowdu, senior managing director for CBC Ontario, for much helpful input over the years.

I closely followed the June 2022 coroner's inquest into the murders, which was held in Pembroke, Ontario, after several years' delay because of the COVID-19 pandemic. I attended some sessions in person and watched others via live webcasts. The Ontario chief coroner's office is to be commended for providing citizens and news media with a digital avenue for viewing witness testimony, as well as for dutifully distributing each day's exhibits. Sarah Boesveld wrote a probing article on the murders for *Chatelaine* in November 2017, a piece that served as an inspiration to me for pursuing this book research. Boesveld also attended or remotely monitored the 2022 coroner's inquest. Her Twitter feed was a vital check on my own understanding of the witness testimony and a backstop for the fidelity of my quotes. Daily inquest reports from CBC's Guy Quenneville were also useful in disciplining my notes for accuracy. I filed freedom-of-information requests to Ontario government ministries and agencies and to federal agencies under the Access to Information Act, with generally poor results. Much information was withheld to protect privacy or to safeguard policing techniques and

advice given to ministers and senior officials. Only a few requests yielded any useful data, an all-too-common experience for journalists and others using freedom-of-information laws in Canada. Citizens deserve better.

I reached out to Basil Borutski, now serving life in prison, for an interview but received no response. The CBC's *The Fifth Estate* talked to Borutski on the telephone briefly from the Ottawa-Carleton Detention Centre months after the murders but well before his trial. Speaking to Gillian Findlay, he repeated farcical claims made in his September 23, 2015, police confession that he was the true victim, blaming the police and his women partners. He refused to acknowledge any guilt to Findlay, demanding instead an "investigation" into his own grievances of twenty years' standing.

The Ottawa Public Library, especially its online service, allowed me to dip into deep wells of information; its staff have been as helpful as they were cheerful. My partner, Elizabeth Sheehy, steered me to important research, advised me on many issues arising from this tragic story and wrote a seminal paper that I have also mined. She has been an anchor and a guide for this project, just as she has been for my life.

While conducting the research, I was respectful of the trauma still afflicting victims' families and community members, and asked but did not press for interviews. Some responded, many did not, and I acknowledge their absolute right to privacy. In any case, the crimes were already meticulously documented, in court and elsewhere. The facts of the killings were scattered and haphazard, however, and needed a coherent narrative, a thread to draw together the many episodes of the murders. The early chapters here aim to provide that structure, while preserving as best I could the humanity and dignity of the murdered women. They are the "yellow roses," the flowers laid for them at an early

Renfrew County memorial by friends and supporters to commemorate bright lives so brutally extinguished.

My overriding goal has been to learn why Borutski had the freedom to kill. I wanted to parse the fumbled efforts to restrain him over many years. Answers are urgently needed to help curb an epidemic of intimate-partner femicide. The story of the Renfrew County massacre can be an opportunity to honour their deaths by building public pressure to shift law enforcement and justice systems away from piecemeal, haphazard and frankly token efforts to protect terrorized women. Rehabilitating violent tormenters can only ever be a secondary concern in these dangerous cases. First the predators must be contained, neutralized and incapacitated. We owe Carol, Stasia and Nathalie no less.

Dean Beeby  
Ottawa, September 2023

# A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

The term *femicide* is relatively recent in the English-speaking world, though it was coined more than two centuries ago. Modern usage dates from the feminist movement in the 1970s. Among the first to promote the term was Diana Russell, whose 1976 definition — “the killing of females by males because they are female” — I have generally adopted for this project. (Russell altered this definition slightly in 2012 to “the killing of one or more females by one or more males because they are female.”) There are other, often broader, definitions used internationally and in other cultural and social contexts. The Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability, for example, defines femicide as “the killing of all women and girls primarily by, but not exclusively, men,” in part to facilitate international comparisons of data. The Mass Casualty Commission, which examined the 2020 killings of twenty-two people in Nova Scotia, defined it as “the killing of a woman or a girl by a man on account of her gender.”

*Intimate-partner femicide*, another phrase I employ, refers to the killing of a woman by a boyfriend, lover or husband (including common-law), whether current or former. I also draw on a common and somewhat dated term, *domestic violence*, to refer to violence arising from marriage, cohabitation or other living arrangement with a partner, whether current or former. Such violence can range from emotional to physical, with a wide spectrum in between. Ontario's Domestic Violence Death Review Committee has gradually shifted away from its founding label *domestic violence* to refer to *intimate partner violence deaths*, which it defines as "all homicides that involve the death of a person, and/or his or her child(ren) committed by the person's partner or ex-partner from an intimate relationship." Although the definition avoids referring to women, the committee acknowledges that the overwhelming majority of such deaths result from a male killing a female.

The Femicide Observatory defines other types of femicide: armed conflict femicide; associated/connected femicide (collateral killing); culturally-framed femicide, of which there are subtypes — dowry-related, 'honour'-based; and nine others. My research focuses almost exclusively on the largest, most persistent category, intimate-partner femicide, as other factors were not in play in 2015 in Renfrew County.

Nathalie Warmerdam's youngest child testified at the 2022 inquest as "Valerie" but later transitioned to "Malcolm," the name that will be used throughout this account.