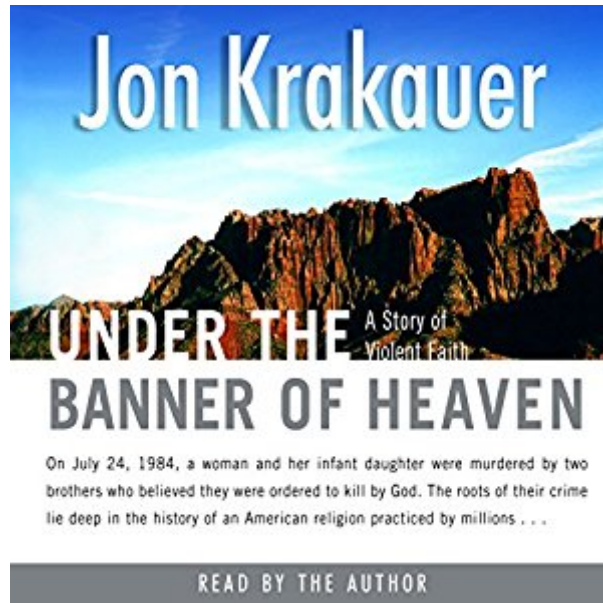


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Under The Banner Of Heaven: A Story Of Violent Faith



Synopsis

At the core of this book is an appalling double murder committed by two Mormon fundamentalist brothers, Ron and Dan Lafferty, who insist they received a revelation from God commanding them to kill their blameless victims. Beginning with a meticulously researched account of this "divinely inspired" crime, Krakauer constructs a multilayered, bone-chilling narrative of messianic delusion, savage violence, polygamy, and unyielding faith. Along the way, he uncovers a shadowy offshoot of America's fastest-growing religion, and raises provocative questions about the nature of religious belief. Krakauer takes readers inside isolated communities in the American West, Canada, and Mexico, where some forty-thousand Mormon fundamentalists believe the mainstream Mormon Church went unforgivably astray when it renounced polygamy. Defying both civil authorities and the Mormon establishment in Salt Lake City, the leaders of these outlaw sects are zealots who answer only to God. Marrying prodigiously and with virtual impunity (the leader of the largest fundamentalist church took seventy-five "plural wives," several of whom were wed to him when they were fourteen or fifteen and he was in his eighties), fundamentalist prophets exercise absolute control over the lives of their followers, and preach that any day now the world will be swept clean in a hurricane of fire, sparing only their most obedient adherents. Weaving the story of the Lafferty brothers and their fanatical brethren with a clear-eyed look at Mormonism's violent past, Krakauer examines the underbelly of the most successful homegrown faith in the United States, and finds a distinctly American brand of religious extremism. The result is vintage Krakauer, an utterly compelling work of nonfiction that illuminates an otherwise confounding realm of human behavior.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Jon Krakauer admits he has become obsessed with extremes. It takes one form of extremism to go on an Everest climb, as he shows with "Into Thin Air." Now he returns to the West of his youth. Yet this is not the book he planned to write. Krakauer admits he wanted to describe how today's LDS Church, with their clean-cut, do-good approach, is at odds with its founding history. Instead, he decided to write about fundamentalist Mormons. While the LDS Church declared polygamy illegal in 1890, it took time for the practice to end in the official church. Those who would not accept the changes continued polygamy, with groups moving to Mexico and Canada. And there are those who continue this practice today. Krakauer is determined to understand how this came to be. In order to do this, he must retell the history of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints. While polygamy is no longer accepted by the current LDS authorities, the average Mormon seems less inclined to stamp it out. Krakauer shows several cases of gung-go district attorneys who go after polygamous families, and how these white knights are subsequently removed from office in the next election. He introduces us to small towns where everything and everyone in it answers to one man, the head of the Fundamentalist LDS church (FLDS). All property is owned by their church's corporation. And the girls are married by age 14. Krakauer finds many of them married to men who are already related to them, and at least a generation older. Women are seen as transferrable property, with marriages cancelled should any church member run afoul of the church leader. And remember Elizabeth Smart? Here was a case of a modern Mormon family running into another FLDS wanna-be.

As an individual raised in the Mormon church who was repeatedly exposed to various Fundamentalist groups operating in and out of the mainstream LDS church I found this book to be invaluable and deeply vindicating. Mormons are wonderful people with a strong and deep commitment to the universal ideals of Christianity. However, they are often reluctant to be self-critical, especially about the more controversial aspects of our history. The reason Fundamentalist groups have continuously splintered from the mainstream LDS church is the simple fact (as beautifully illustrated by Krakauer) that the modern LDS church bears little resemblance to its radical, theocratic and chaotic origins. This fact should be embraced and celebrated by mainstream Mormons, not rejected and vilified. The mainstream church was wise and prescient to change its position on many of the controversial teachings of its early leaders. Just as most

modern Christian faiths have done to balance their responsibility to society and the spiritual needs of it's members. The goal of the Fundamentalists is to return the mainstream church to it's less than noble roots. This is why they are successful at recruiting otherwise devout Saints into their ranks. They preach a twisted, politicized, radical doctrine which (contrary to the vehement protestations of Mormons) are entirely consistent with many of the less-known but nevertheless regrettably true ideas of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young and others. It is this literalist interpretation, along with the mindset that all things must remain unchanged no matter how much society and the role of the church has changed, that breeds Fundamentalism.

This is an extraordinary book, and I cannot recommend it highly enough. Though the Mormon Church has expressed it's hostility toward the book, as with all ostriches, they are simply sticking their head in the sand and asking the rest of us to follow suit. Thank goodness for people outside the Church who look in, and tell us what they see. This is not an anti-mormon book, and the fact that Latter-day Saints and their leaders are so worked up about it seems to me to be a recognition that Krakauer is hitting pretty close to home. Ironically, he handles the modern LDS church with kid gloves, and is very careful to make the distinction between the Mormon Fundamentalists and the Mormons themselves. However, and this is the point that should be lost on no one, both churches hail from the same "common ancestors," and have evolved rather organically from those early prophets, most importantly Joseph Smith, Brigham Young and John Taylor. At the time of Wilford Woodruff the world saw a split, and those familiar with the paradigms of biological evolution will recognize exactly what was going on. Today we see two radically different organizations with radically different messages...but they came from the same place. Here's another juicy item that must drive the Church nuts. The fundamentalists are perfectly justified in their position on polygamy, extreme patriarchy and racism. After all, if those were the "revealed word of God" back in the early days of the church, then who are the modern day leaders to deny that word of God today? Just because wicked governments :-) refuse to cooperate should be no reason to back away from the most important points of doctrine.

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