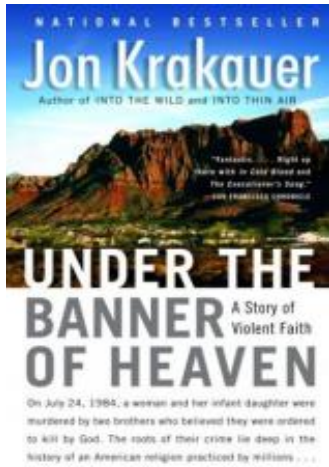


Under the Banner of Heaven

by Jon Krakauer



About the Book

Jon Krakauer's literary reputation rests on insightful chronicles of lives conducted at the outer limits. He now shifts his focus from extremes of physical adventure to extremes of religious belief within our own borders, taking readers inside isolated American communities where some 40,000 Mormon Fundamentalists still practice polygamy. Defying both civil authorities and the Mormon establishment in Salt Lake City, the renegade leaders of these Taliban-like theocracies are zealots who answer only to God.

At the core of Krakauer's book are brothers Ron and Dan Lafferty, who insist they received a commandment from God to kill a blameless woman and her baby girl. Beginning with a meticulously researched account of this appalling double murder, Krakauer constructs a multi-layered, bone-chilling narrative of messianic delusion, polygamy, savage violence, 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.

Discussion Guide

1. In his prologue, Jon Krakauer writes that the aim of his book is to "cast some light on Lafferty and his ilk," which he concedes is a daunting but useful task for what it may tell us "about the roots of brutality, perhaps, but even more for what might be learned about the nature of faith" [p. XXIII]. What does the book reveal about fanatics such as Ron and Dan Lafferty? What does it reveal about brutality and faith and the connections between them?
2. Why does Krakauer move back and forth between Mormon history and contemporary events? What are the connections between the beliefs and practices of Joseph Smith and his followers in the nineteenth century and the behavior of people like Dan and Ron Lafferty, Brian David Mitchell, and others in the twentieth?
3. Prosecutor David Leavitt argued that "People in the state of Utah simply do not understand, and have not understood

for fifty years, the devastating effect that the practice of polygamy has on young girls in our society" [p. 24]. How does polygamy affect young girls? Is it, as Leavitt claims, pedophilia plain and simple?

4. Joseph Smith claimed that the doctrine of polygamy was divinely inspired. What earthly reasons might also explain Smith's attraction to having plural wives?

5. When Krakauer asks Dan Lafferty if he has considered the parallels between himself and Osama bin Laden, Dan asserts that bin Laden is a "child of the Devil" and that the hijackers were "following a false prophet," whereas he is following a true prophet [p. 321]. No doubt, bin Laden would say much the same of Lafferty. How are Dan Lafferty and Osama bin Laden alike? In what ways are all religious fundamentalists alike?

6. Krakauer asks: "if Ron Lafferty were deemed mentally ill because he obeyed the voice of God, isn't everyone who believes in God and seeks guidance through prayer mentally ill as well?" [p. 297] Given the nature of, and motive for, the murders of Brenda Lafferty and her child, should Ron Lafferty be considered mentally ill? If so, should all others who "talk to God" or receive revelations—a central tenant of Mormonism—also be considered mentally ill? What would the legal ramifications be of such a shift in thought?

7. Krakauer begins part III with a quote from Bertrand Russell, who asserts that "every single bit of progress in humane feeling, every improvement in the criminal law, every step toward the diminution of war, every step toward better treatment of the colored races, or every mitigation of slavery, every moral progress that there has been in the world, has been consistently opposed by the organized churches of the world" [p. 191]. Is this a fair and accurate statement? What historical examples support it? What improvements in humane feeling and social justice has the Mormon church opposed?

8. How are mainstream and fundamentalist Mormons likely to react to Krakauer's book?

9. Much of **Under the Banner of Heaven** explores the tensions between freedom of religion and governmental authority. How should these tensions be resolved? How can the state allow religious freedom to those who place obedience to God's will above obedience to secular laws?

10. Joseph Smith called himself "a second Mohammed," and Krakauer quotes George Arbaugh who suggests that Mormonism's "aggressive theocratic claims, political aspirations, and use of force, make it akin to Islam" [p. 102]. What other similarities exist between the Mormon and Islamic faiths?

11. How should Joseph Smith be understood: as a delusional narcissist, a con man, or "an authentic religious genius" [p. 55], as Harold Bloom claims?

12. Krakauer suggests that much of John Wesley Powell's book, **The Exploration of the Colorado River and Its Canyons**, particularly his account of his dealings with the Shivwit Indians, should be regarded with a "healthy dose of skepticism," and that it embellishes and omits important facts [p. 245]. Is Krakauer himself a trustworthy guide to the events he describes in *Under the Banner of Heaven*? Are his writing and his judgments fair and reasonable? What makes them so?

13. What patterns emerge from looking at Mormon history? What do events like the Mountain Meadow massacre and

the violence between Mormons and gentiles in Missouri and Illinois suggest about the nature of Mormonism? Have Mormons been more often the perpetrators or the victims of violence?

14. At the very end of the book, former Mormon fundamentalist DeLoy Bateman says that while the Mormon fundamentalists who live within Colorado City may be happier than those who live outside it, he believes that "some things in life are more important than being happy. Like being free to think for yourself" [p. 334]. Why does Krakauer end the book this way? In what ways are Mormons not free to think for themselves? Is such freedom more important than happiness?

Author Bio

Born in 1954, Jon Krakauer grew up in Corvallis, Oregon, where his father introduced him to mountaineering as an eight-year-old. After graduating from Hampshire College in 1976, Krakauer divided his time between Colorado, Alaska, and the Pacific Northwest, supporting himself primarily as a carpenter and commercial salmon fisherman. For the next two decades, however, his life revolved around climbing mountains.

In 1996 Krakauer climbed Mt. Everest, but a storm took the lives of four of the five teammates who reached the summit with him. An analysis of the calamity he wrote for *Outside* magazine received a National Magazine Award. The unsparingly forthright book he subsequently wrote about Everest, INTO THIN AIR, became a #1 *New York Times* bestseller and was translated into more than 25 languages. It was also *Time* magazine's Book of the Year, and was one of three finalists for the Pulitzer Prize.

In 1998, as a tribute to his companions lost on Everest, Krakauer established the Everest '96 Memorial Fund at the Boulder Community Foundation with earnings from INTO THIN AIR. As of 2012, the fund had donated more than \$1.7 million to such charities as the American Himalayan Foundation, Educate the Children, Veterans Helping Veterans Now, the Access Fund, and the Boulder Valley Women's Health Center.

Krakauer's writing has been published by *Outside*, *GQ*, *National Geographic*, *Rolling Stone*, *Architectural Digest*, *Playboy*, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times* and *Byliner.com*. An article he wrote for *Smithsonian* about volcanology received the 1997 Walter Sullivan Award for Excellence in Science Journalism. His 1996 book, INTO THE WILD, remained on the *New York Times* bestseller list for more than two years.

In 1999 Krakauer received an Academy Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, intended "to honor writers of exceptional accomplishment." According to the Academy's citation, "Krakauer combines the tenacity and courage of the finest tradition of investigative journalism with the stylish subtlety and profound insight of the born writer. His account of an ascent of Mount Everest has led to a general reevaluation of climbing and of the commercialization of what was once a romantic, solitary sport; while his account of the life and death of Christopher McCandless, who died of starvation after challenging the Alaskan wilderness, delves even more deeply and disturbingly into the fascination of nature and the devastating effects of its lure on a young and curious mind."

In 2003, Krakauer published UNDER THE BANNER OF HEAVEN: A Story of Violent Faith, about religious fundamentalism in the American West. While researching WHERE MEN WIN GLORY: The Odyssey of Pat Tillman, published in 2009, Krakauer spent five months embedded with combat forces along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. In

2011, he published **THREE CUPS OF DECEIT: How Greg Mortenson, Humanitarian Hero, Lost His Way**. All of his proceeds from this latter work have been donated to the Stop Girl Trafficking program at the American Himalayan Foundation.

Critical Praise

"Illuminating . . . provocative. . . Krakauer is an adept chronicler of extremists [and] the tour guide of choice for secular quests."

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