



Seductive Poison: A Jonestown Survivor's Story of Life and Death in the Peoples Temple

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Told by a former high-level member of the Peoples Temple and Jonestown survivor, **Seductive Poison** is the "truly unforgettable" (*Kirkus Review*) story of how one woman was seduced by one of the most notorious cults in recent memory and how she found her way back to sanity.

From Waco to Heaven's Gate, the past decade has seen its share of cult tragedies. But none has been quite so dramatic or compelling as the Jonestown massacre of 1978, in which the Reverend Jim Jones and 913 of his disciples perished. Deborah Layton had been a member of the Peoples Temple for seven years when she departed for Jonestown, Guyana, the promised land nestled deep in the South American jungle. When she arrived, however, Layton saw that something was seriously wrong. Jones constantly spoke of a revolutionary mass suicide, and Layton knew only too well that he had enough control over the minds of the Jonestown residents to carry it out. But her pleas for help--and her sworn affidavit to the U.S. government--fell on skeptical ears. In this very personal account, Layton opens up the shadowy world of cults and shows how anyone can fall under their spell. **Seductive Poison** is both an unflinching historical document and a riveting story of intrigue, power, and murder.

Seductive Poison: A Jonestown Survivor's Story of Life and Death in the Peoples Temple Details

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From Reader Review Seductive Poison: A Jonestown Survivor's Story of Life and Death in the Peoples Temple for online ebook

Dustincecil says

Just finished the audiobook of this.

Jonestown in general is so interesting to me, but I don't know what my take away is going to be from this just yet...

some things I learned about Jonestown from this book:

- men weren't allowed to grow facial hair.they
- they strapped thousands of dollars of cash to elderly people upon entering.
- they took away all medication from its citizens.
- the site of jonestown is still considered a toxic waste area, and grass won't even grow there from the cyanide of that final white night.

Tori says

Possible Spoilers...for anyone who didn't know how it ended:

This book was absolutely creepy, amazing, and so emotional, I wanted to throw it across the room or at least punch some of the characters in the face.

I have long been fascinated about Jonestown everytime it was discussed, but I never realized why I have been fascinated. I finally thought about picking up a book about it after a work lunch conversation about it early last week.

As I read this, I slowly realized the cause of my fascination. Simple misunderstanding. Normal members of society cannot wrap their heads around the thoughts of Jonestown followers. Period.

It's unbelievable and appalling that people actually believed the words coming out of their mouths in defense of Jim Jones and his whack nuts ideas. Even more amazing to me is that there were almost 1k people that lived with torture, prison camp labor, and the dread of white nights. Why didn't someone start a revolt? If one person would have just taken the step of saying, "This is wrong. Let's go", there are so many of the characters in the book that I believe would have gone with him/her. At some point, most were looking for a way to survive.

How can any human being, when faced with death, say "We'll drink the flavoraid. Sure. Everyone form a nice neat line and try to keep the kids calm." I don't care if there were men with guns in the woods. I just can't understand why they didn't run. They all ended up dead anyway (from a very agonizing death and not nearly as nice as being shot) and they couldn't have all been shot. Surely, some of them must have realized this! Hell, the security people probably would have seen everyone bolt and ran right along with them. I'm actually stunned that not a soul in Jonestown "took care of the situation" themselves when they realized the danger to the community and especially to the innocent children. Actually, anyone that held a gun in

Jonestown had a chance at one time to stop this at some point. The fact that they did nothing, even when they themselves were disgusted with Jim Jones, is inconceivable.

Normal, functioning members of society would have acted different or have been willing to die trying to help themselves and others, especially to help the children. THAT is human nature. Layton gives her reasoning for following, but some of Jim Jones's ideas were so against every moral and right thing in the world that I don't understand why so many chose to follow him even when it wasn't a life/death situation.

In a nutshell, this book makes me doubt the human spirit and makes me realize that maybe, just maybe, the human spirit isn't what we thought it was.

Maybe that's why Jonestown fascinated the world.

Regarding Layton's writing, I certainly understand why she wrote this and at the end of the day, I'm glad she did. Her writing is choppy in places at the beginning, but this woman knows how to tell the story of the hell she lived for so long. The reader is on the edge of their seat, even though we know how it turns out.

Mikey B. says

This is an autobiography of a woman who was seduced by and fully inducted into the cult of Jim Jones' People's Temple.

Jim Jones was the "be-all" and "end-all"; he was called "Father" by the members. He was feeling persecuted by the U.S. government (all levels) and journalists, so he moved his members to a village in Guyana, in South America, which they called Jonestown. In November of 1978 the entire colony of just under 1,000 members (men, women, and children) committed mass suicide by ingesting a poison liquid.

Several commonalities of different cults are brought forth in this book:

Josef Goebbels and his wife killed themselves and their six children rather than face life without their beloved Fuhrer.

Jim Jones wanted to build a socialist utopia in the U.S. and then in Guyana (he was even thinking of bringing his members to the Soviet Union) – beware of those who claim to build a future utopia – look at what Hitler and Stalin did in their quest for utopia.

Jim Jones was a master manipulator (and a sexual predator). He knew the vulnerable and went after them – even better if they had money, like the author's mother.

He sowed constant dissension among his followers – bestowing lavish praise – and then withdrawing it. The author was kept in a constant mental state of flux – not knowing how much "Father" wanted her or rejected her. Some of that was sexual.

Like all cults one was never left alone to collect one's thoughts. The author was underfed and sleep-deprived. She finally started to rebel with the move to Guyana where the so-called utopia was being run like a prison camp; any member who transgressed would be severely punished. All were underfed. There were routine

drills during the night to fight off pseudo-invasions by enemy agents. No relationship or partnership of a sexual nature was permitted. Devotion and allegiance was solely to Jim Jones.

So this book gives an insider's view of a cult experience. I did find the constant use of dialogue to be annoying. How could the author remember all this? It took away from a more introspective analysis of immersion and then self-extrication from the persona of Jim Jones. And over 300 pages on "cult captivity" was too much for me.

We are provided with a unique personal perspective on how difficult it is to remove oneself from the life-paradigm that a cult constructs for its members.

Margaret says

The two events apart from the Vietnam war that impacted me were the Manson murders and the mass murder-suicide of over 900 followers of Jim Jones of Peoples Temple. I remember that day vividly and watching the unbelievable scenes on the television. I have since always been fascinated by cults and why people follow such groups and their leaders. A very good and detailed account written by a survivor, I was on the edge of my seat reading her story, especially of her escape mere months before the actual mass suicide.

Kelsey Hanson says

I had to stop reading this book several times because I was so frustrated. I wanted to scream at the people to run and to stop being so trusting. I do believe that Jim Jones was a master manipulator who targeted people who were lacking something in their lives or were trusting and somewhat naive. He also pulled a bait-and-switch sort of game that promised his members paradise and gave them a nightmare. This book does offer better reasons as to why they didn't leave confirming some of my earlier theories. They were overworked, deprived sleep and nutrients and constantly battered with emotional damage, paranoia and psuedo-religious dogma. To make matters worse they were trapped in a foreign country, convinced that they had partaken in illegal activities and plopped in the middle of a dense jungle miles from civilization in a foreign country with little US involvement. Layton's story is both heartbreaking, moving and as I've said at times incredibly frustrating just because you can feel the helplessness of her situation. As a child who was born in 1989 many years after this event I can see how The Jonetown massacre and other tragedies similar to it have changed the way that parents view the world. I was brought up to have a protective cynical shell that I think some of the Jonestown members didn't have. This story is hard to read at times but Layton provides some incredible insight about a people who were trapped by a madman.

Rachel Kulik says

I posted this review on my blog, Rachel Reading. For more reviews like this, check it out!

So I have this thing about cults. Mostly that I'm obsessed with them, and while I knew the story of where "don't drink the Kool Aid" came from (sort of) before I knew about Jonestown, I honestly had no idea the extent of it. I, like most people, seem to be addicted to Netflix documentaries, and I found some on Jonestown and decided to watch. I was entranced. This was after I watched a crap ton of documentaries on

North Korea, so I was just in the right mind set I think. But, when I got “Going Clear” a book about Scientology, I decided to find books on Jonestown and I’m so glad that this is the one that I found.

“Seductive Poison” follows Deborah Layton, often referred to as Debbie in the book, and her journey through the People’s Temple. She joined fairly early on from what I could tell, and was really active right away. It became clear later in the book that Jim Jones took an interest in attractive young women and got them involved, mostly for his own sexual satisfaction. She ended up pretty high up in the Temple, was trusted with many secrets, which is maybe why I loved this book so much.

It starts off in a way that I could totally understand, she was drawn to the temple because of a charismatic leader, and a revolutionary new church, which made promises to give her a place to be radical. She joined after her brother joined, and even though Jim encouraged his wife to divorce him, that didn’t seem to warn Debbie. Don’t think I’m coming down on her, because I can completely understand how she was thinking, and saw everything at the time, but as a reader you absolutely start to know that things are amiss.

The entire time that you spend in Debbie’s brain is amazing. It truly is interesting to see how things went from what seemed totally normal, to more and more engrossing, and how this happened extremely gradually to where things just didn’t seem that crazy. One of the things that was extremely interesting to me was how Jim Jones brought in white people. He did this by talking extreme amounts about white privilege to the point that white people who could possibly pass as a minority, including Debbie, began to WISH and try to turn into a person of color. I’d never heard of a group where shaming the dominant group who came was there way of attracting that group. It was super interesting, and something that I’d never heard of working in my many Anti Racism/Anti Oppression/Multicultural trainings.

The book was really interesting, but not “harrowing” like I’d expected and been told it was. Until her escape. Oh my goodness her escape. I seriously felt like I was going to have a panic attack. I just wanted to scroll to the next page on my Kindle immediately because I had to know what was going to happen. That part was like a heart attack in two chapters. The way she wrote it made it truly feel like you were there, and all the backstory and the long discussions of before her trip to Jonestown set up the severity of what she was about to do. It was amazing, and it really made the book for me.

Overall, I did give this book five stars, because I found it all so interesting. There really weren’t any parts that I wanted to skip over, or that I wished was over. It was extremely well written, informative, and hungering for more information and books.

Shaun says

People do not knowingly join “cults” that will ultimately destroy and kill them. People join self-help groups, churches, political movements, college campus dinner socials, and the like, in an effort to be a part of something larger than themselves. It is mostly the innocent and naive who find themselves entrapped. In their openhearted endeavor to find meaning in their lives, they walk blindly into the promise of ultimate answers and a higher purpose. It is usually only gradually that a group turns into or reveals itself as a cult, becomes malignant, but by then it is often too late.

This is part of my reading on the tragedy in Jonestown.

It is Deborah Layton's memoir and it recaps her experience as a high ranking member of the People's Temple and her eventual defection from the famous Jonestown only months before the mass murder/suicide.

What makes her story even more interesting is that she (like other members) had a number of family members in the church at the time she left. In fact, it appears the presence of family members assisted Jim in his effort to coerce and manipulate members. He made sure always to keep other family members close to ensure that key members did not defect or defy him when they had to leave Jonestown for official church business.

It turns out, Larry Layton (Debbie's brother) was the only former People's Temple member to be tried (and convicted) in the United States for his participation in the airstrip shooting which included the murder of Senator Ryan. He was also one of the few members to avoid being killed in the mass suicide/murder. He was eventually released on parole in 2002.

This is a unique and riveting look into the process by which someone ends up in a cult. For most members, their relationship with the People's Temple really was like a marriage gone bad, and when the honeymoon ended the members found themselves in an abusive and manipulative relationship. Since most members had been convinced to turn over all their finances and worldly belongings, they were literally dependent upon Jim for everything. Like many others before him, Jim Jones practiced mind control techniques...whether intentionally or not. These techniques became significantly more oppressive and violent as his paranoia grew.

The most fascinating pages of this book come at the end, when Debbie describes her defection. Part of the problem was that no one truly comprehended the threat that was Jim Jones. In fact, Debbie actually wrote and submitted an affidavit via her attorney which warned Americans of Jim's intent to lead his followers into a mass suicide and which described how he routinely forced members of Jonestown to perform dry runs, the most notable in which he had them drink what he described as poison, as a test and later punishing those who had refused to drink.

Millions of dollars in Swiss bank accounts, hundreds of thousands buried with mothballs in the jungle of Guyana (even as the members lived in shacks and literally worked to the bone to gather food), the locking of "naughty" members in hot boxes, the hanging of children by their ankles into a well, nightly (sometimes all night) harangues, group beatings of offending members, and sleep/food deprivation...I would have to say bizarre really is an understatement.

Recommended complimentary reading - [Brainwashing: The Science of Thought Control](#)

Brenna says

With a decisive bent toward the dramatic, Deborah Layton-Blakely pens her memoirs of time spent in Jonestown, and under the influence of the leader of the People's Temple church.

Seductive Poison begins in a somewhat autobiographical tone, containing Layton-Blakely's early family history – that of her German grandmother meeting her American husband, escaping Nazi Germany, and her sad final days of paranoia and despair. Layton-Blakely's earliest memories are related to the reader, seemingly innocuous and All-American, with her parents treating her magnificently throughout her childhood. There is nothing which differentiates the youngster from any other American child in a loving, compassionate environment save for one critical detail: Young Debbie's rebellion led her into the use of hard drugs (LSD and Speed, amongst others), leading her beleaguered parents to send her off to a boarding

school in England, to live with her unknown aunt.

All of this detail seems superfluous, but it actually serves to set up the sequence of events to follow. As a child “sent away” from her family, the teenaged girl becomes a friend to the so-called “underlings” of society, the poor and overlooked. She feels akin to them, despite her background, because of her unstable emotions and behaviours.

So when she is introduced to the secretly Socialist cause, the People's Temple, in California, she becomes enamoured with the principles involved, and soon becomes inextricably intertwined within the inner workings of the group. Her family members (a brother, Larry, as well as her ailing mother) firmly establish themselves within the organization, leaving her father and two other siblings to wonder about the real purpose of the Church.

Seductive Poison never presents leader Jim Jones as a “normal” man who went astray, but as a raving self-proclaimed “prophet” who sinks progressively into a deepening madness. Since Jones had always seemed somewhat on the periphery of normality, it was his deeds and persuasive indoctrination which spoke for him – not his obtrusive, grotesque personality. Soon, too, even these assets gave way to the deepening chasm of paranoia within the man (and, as a result, his followers). Of course, by the time this became obvious to many, they had already become trapped themselves within the smothering jungle foundation of the Jonestown “concentration camp.”

“In madness,” writes Layton-Blakely, “there is no way to think logically.” Such practices as all-night militant vigils (known as “white nights” to the occupants of Jonestown), food deprivation, and intense, extended punishments for such transgressions as laughing or whispering amongst ranks, dissolved all sense of individuality, safety, and self-preservation. The followers merely followed, despite all evidence that nothing was as it seemed in this pretend “Paradise.”

Layton-Blakely successfully engages the reader throughout the middle and latter portions of her memoir by way of re-creating conversations and encounters, with tension mounting greatly toward the conclusion of her story. As a result, this non-fiction book reads like a novel, relying heavily on the histrionic effects of such a writing style. As with any memoir, there is little by way of verifying the accuracy in what the writer asserts, though in this case the historical significance of the events portrayed stand as sufficient testament to her words.

The book, now over a decade old, contains several outdated “updates” including the fate of her incarcerated brother Larry (who has since been paroled from his prison life), though as a document from a bona fide Peoples Temple / Jonestown survivor, the book itself is of great importance.

Ariela says

Well, cults are pretty weird and cult leaders are bad people. I found it hard to identify and sometimes even empathize with Deb in the beginning because she was so unquestioning and the actions of everyone around here were just completely insane. As she started questioning stuff the book definitely got more gripping until I was really rushing through it. Also, did anyone else thing her reaction to finding out she's half-Jewish was kind of...off?

Debb says

If there is a book on why you should never join a cult, it is this one. Jim Jones managed to gather nearly a 1000 people into his clutches by brainwashing, finding the flaws in people and negating them by using a skill to make them feel more confident. This man is truly scary and very evil. Most people know how the end turns out before reading this book but what we didn't know is how he managed to do what he did.

Maciek says

Even though the horror of Jonestown happened more than three decades ago, it will not fade into oblivion. Over 900 Americans - almost a third of them young children - perished in foreign jungle of distant Guyana, in what was to be one of the largest mass suicides in history - though for many it was a mass murder, one which left a tragic stain on lives of hundreds of people across the nation, some of them mourning their loss to this day. Jonestown remains one of the most gruesome cult tragedies in contemporary history. But how could it happen? What led the people who lost their lives to leave everything they had achieved, sell their possessions and leave family and friends behind, exchanging them for life in a strange and distant land?

Entrance to Jonestown in Guyana.

[image error]

The sign above the entrance.

Deborah Layton was a member of the Peoples Temple for seven years before moving to Jonestown, and is one of only a handful of people who have lived in the settlement in Guyana and were not there on November 18, 1978, the day of the massacre. Her memoir is not only a unique insiders perspective of Jonestown - it's also a document on how an individual is recruited into cult, and how far people can be stripped of their personal freedoms by being manipulated into complete trust and obedience of a single individual.

Jim Jones with his signature sunglasses.

Jim Jones started as a preacher in Indiana and later in San Francisco, where he performed many faith healings and turned water into wine - all staged events. But by the early 70's he began to deride Christianity as a "fly away" religion, rejecting the Bible as a document used to subjugate people of color, and by late 70's later began openly admitting that he did not believe in a God even to outsiders. He preached to his followers the gospel of self reliance, famously saying: "You're gonna help yourself, or you'll get no help! There's only one hope of glory; that's within you! Nobody's gonna come out of the sky! There's no heaven up there! We'll have to make heaven down here!". Jones feared the IRS investigating the religious tax exemption of the Peoples Temple and he moved several times - from Indiana to Northern California, finally leaving the country altogether for Guyana, where he created a settlement named after himself. Despite not believing in a God, Jones based his ideology on religious principles with which he became familiar - cult of the individual, having his followers believe in his almost supernatural powers, total infallibility of judgment.

"What you need to believe in is what you can see ...If you see me as your friend, I'll be your friend. As you see me as your father, I'll be your father, for those of you that don't have a father ... If you see me as your savior, I'll be your savior. If you see me as your God, I'll be your God."

Reverend Jim Jones preaching to his flock.

From his photographs Jim Jones looks like a wannabe Elvis impersonator - the resemblance is uncanny! - but through Deborah's eyes Jones emerges as an incredible megalomaniac and expert manipulator, forcing his followers to go through innumerable tests of loyalty, which included public shaming and vicious punishments, culminating in "white nights", where he gathered all the inhabitants of Jonestown and told them that their enemies are near and want to destroy their community, ordering them to drink poison and wait for it to kill them. It wasn't until the poison was supposed to start to work that Jones exclaimed that it was just a rehearsal, a test of will and devotion to him and his ideas. Such mass suicide rehearsals were frequent in Jonestown. Jones convinced people that he could read their minds and knew their intimate thoughts, and that he couldn't be lied to. He told them that he was their only friend and that without him they would be worth nothing. Jones had hours of propaganda speeches recorded, and his voice boomed through speakers across Jonestown all day long, even in the middle of the night. Through physical isolation and many years of psychological conditioning Jones created a cult of personality around himself, similar to the one surrounding the Kim dynasty in North Korea.

Deborah Layton at the age of 17, when she was first introduced to the Peoples Temple.

Deborah recounts how Jones told his followers that every man was a homosexual and that every woman was a lesbian, that sexual acts were selfish and that he was the only heterosexual man on the planet - and how he raped her in a Temple Bus during one of their trips, convincing her that he did it for her own good. Only later did she learn that she wasn't the only woman that he did that to, and all of them were exposed in front of other members and made guilty of using Jones, who claimed that women begged him to have sex with them. One man claimed that Jones offered to rape him as well. Although to the outside Jones maintained that any member could leave Jonestown at any time, he maintained a strict emigration policy of a totalitarian regime - those expressing a wish to leave were publicly humiliated and denigrated, with Jones angrily treating them as traitors to his cause. Those who were making trouble were sent to learning centers, which were nothing else than torture chambers - put in solitary confinement, mentally and physically abused. Jones invented bizarre punishments: hanging children upside down a dark well and having others grab and scare them in the dark, or wrapping a boa constrictor around the neck of "sinners". The biggest troublemakers were simply drugged down and kept comatose, away from others. Leaving Jonestown without Jones's knowledge and approval was not possible - thick Guyanese jungle surrounding the settlement made it impossible to find an escape route without careful planning, and to prevent escapes Jones employed a simple but devastatingly successful tactic for finding out potential deserters: he announced now and then that he sent out a group of people who will pretend that they want to leave the compound and would try to convince others to go with them - and that they need to be turned in as a proof of loyalty. Brother turned against brother, children turned in their parents - in perfectly good faith.

Deborah presents her story from the start, beginning with her all-American childhood with rich and compassionate parents and her troubled youth, a stint at the boarding school in England and her subsequent return to America and introduction to the Peoples Temple, her emigration to Jonestown and her dramatic escape plan. To succeed, she had to prove cunning and courageous, as Jones had the entire commune an Guyanese official under his influence; she also had to leave her mother and brother, also members of Jonestown, behind. In the U.S. she worked tirelessly to attract the attention of the government officials to the suffering and imprisonment of American citizens in Jonestown, which eventually resulted in the U.S. congressman Leo Ryan taking and interest. The rest is well known and dark history - after his visit in Jonestown he left with several residents who wished to leave. While attempting to board the plane back in Guyana's Port Kaituma, Ryan and several members of his crew were shot down by a group of Jones's men. Jim Jones realized that he has finally gone too far: in a final white night he urged his followers to take a stance against the oppression which would undoubtedly descend on them after the murder of an American

congressman by taking a "revolutionary suicide", claiming that death was just "stepping onto another plane". His followers would willingly drink poisoned flavor-aide and inject poison into their children, parents and friends, who might not have been so willing. Jones himself died from a shot to the head, most probably having ordered someone else to shot him. He was a megalomaniac to the very end, unable to bear the fact that Jonestown might have continued to exist and evolve even without him and his leadership, he had to destroy it all in an act of incredibly pointless waste. Jim Jones made sure that his activities were well documented, and there are hundreds of hours of recorded audio tapes of him speaking in Jonestown and at Peoples Temple, starting from the early 70's and culminating in a final death tape, on which his orders are mixed with excruciating screams of children slowly dying from cyanide poisoning, in horrible pain.

Deborah Layton is a brave woman who was seduced by Jones's charm and promises like many others, who thought of him as "father", who fought him and got away; her story is a tragic story, as her involvement in the Peoples Temple led to the destruction of her parents' marriage, the death of her mother and the imprisonment of her brother. Her mother died in Jonestown a short time before the mass suicide, never seeing freedom again. Her brother Lawrence was one of the shooters directly involved in the assassination of congressman Ryan, and was the only person persecuted for the murders; her father Laurence, a distinguished scientist, retired after the massacre as he was unable to work, living in severe depression resulting in loss from his wife. His only wish was to see his soon released from prison, but died before he could see it happen. While reading *Seductive Poison* I could not help but feel that Deborah was carrying an immense burden all these years, and the book - published in 1998, a year before her father's death - was an attempt to exorcise the demons and deal with the legacy of incredible and tragic loss for which she felt responsible. Her work is an important testament to destructive danger of cult mentality, which can ensnare any mind and keep it under its control, dragging people deeper and deeper into a black hole with manipulation and deceit. It is a deeply personal, honest, moving and ultimately tragic book - but one which is important and needs to be read, with hopes of preventing any future Jonestowns from ever taking place.

melissa says

oh so *fantastic* was this book that I held off reading the last 80 or so pages because I didn't want it to end. I've long been fascinated by Jim Jones and Jonestown (I think this has something to do with not having been allowed to watch the movie as a kid. See, parents? If you forbid your kids to do something they will end up knee-deep in strange cult fascination) but this book revealed so many things that I never knew before. Like, Peoples Temple was actually socialist organization? And Jonestown wasn't just horrible but, rather, the worst nightmare imaginable? And Jim Jones was so batshit-crazy far gone off his rocker *insane* that he didn't know from anything? Okay, yeah, you probably knew that.

Good lord, Deborah Layton wrote this book so well that I wished it was a billion pages in length. Or that it was a Time-Life series where I would receive a new volume every month. Seriously, it's that amazing.

Katie says

DAMN Jonestown was FUCKED UP. I felt like this memoir was slow until she decided she was going to leave, and that's when it got really interesting and hard to put down. Unfortunately that comes pretty late in the narrative.

Sharon says

This book should be required reading. Those who remember the horror of Jonestown remember mostly the bloated bodies piled upon each other, the stories of murder and mayhem that followed in the wake of the media hullabaloo. All too often I have heard the Jonestown cult members referred to as "crazies" or "mindless zombies". This book shows the slow and in many cases understandable development: how the initially benevolent aims and dreams of Jones' followers slowly turn to dependency on their leader, until they finally found themselves trapped in a jungle prison, a web of deceit and terror with a madman at its centre. As Layton so eloquently makes clear, the beginning of a cult is often innocuous. The followers believe they are doing the right thing; they innocently hand over money, free will, affection, to a leader unworthy of such. Jim Jones was at first not the devil he turned out to be; he did a lot of good. But the adulation went to his head; and thus the horrific outcome.

I have some experience with religious groups and cults; I would say there are three traps their leaders fall into. It might be sex, it might be money, and it might be power. In Jim Jones's case, it was all three, which made the outcome triply horrific.

Jo says

Engaging and pretty well written for this type of memoir, but I thought it was a bit too long, and was disappointed she never went outside her own perspective. Since she wasn't actually at Jonestown in the last days, this section was less than satisfying. I think she could have included what actually happened with the ambassador etc if she had learned it later even if she hadn't known at the time, because their actions during the escape were a bit incomprehensible without their perspective/more context. The first part was very similar to the novel *The Girls*, I am interested in how people join cults and found it interesting. I wonder if Emma Cline read this book.

Lesley Harvey says

Even if you are not the extreme Jonestown obsessive that I am, this autobiography of a woman who escaped Guyana is fucking badass. You can't not be interested, as far as I'm concerned.

Alyssa Danielson says

Heartbreaking doesn't even begin to describe this story. I know it will stay with me for a long time.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

For some reason, my 8th grade social studies teacher taught us about Jonestown. The images of the almost one thousand dead bodies will forever be embedded into my memory (not sure what she was thinking or what the point was but I certainly remember). Still, how people "drink the koolaid" - joining cults and giving

up their selfhood is endlessly fascinating to me.

Deborah Layton was actually in the jungle, in Guyana, with Jim Jones and the People's Temple, and got out before the mass suicide. How she got away is a nail-biting adventure, but the book also includes more about her story, what set her up to be open to The People's Temple, and how she got into the inner circle. There is also some commentary read by the author at the beginning and end, with the personal reasons she finally decided to write her story, almost twenty years after the events.

The audiobook narrator does a good job and just gets out of the way of the story. I'm glad it was her version of Jim Jones' voice and that I didn't have to hear his actual voice. It's creepy enough just hearing what he used to say to people.

Audrey says

The famous Jonestown mass suicide happened in 1978. This was written around 1998. Nearly 40 years later, this event is still fascinating.

This accounts shows the psychology of falling into a cult. There's the flattery: help fight poverty and racism; we can't do this without you; do something meaningful. Once in the trap, it's nearly impossible to escape. Family relationships and friendships are torn apart; everybody is told to inform on everyone else for any infraction so there is no trust between members. Then there's public shaming, beatings, sleep deprivation, other abuse, and the constant harangues of indoctrination. It was really fascinating from a psychological standpoint.

Whenever something tragic happens, we blame the victims. ("She shouldn't have gone there dressed like that; if only they'd passed that law like I told them.") Sometimes victims are stupid and cause their own deaths. (You tried to shoot a cop? Not sorry they took you out first.) But a lot of times we're just trying to rationalize how we could not also end up as victims in a similar situation.

The chapters when Debbie is trying to escape were so suspenseful! Just terrifying. Even knowing she was going to get away from the beginning, my palms were sweating through that whole sequence.

The details of the actual mass suicide are sparse since few survived. A journalist who was shot at by Jonestown soldiers gives his account in the prologue. Debbie's brother was sentenced to life in prison for shooting (nonfatally) two people. She laments his harsh sentence. For the record, he was released in 2002.

Overall, a great account of the history and inner workings of the Peoples Temple. I didn't know much about it before.

Rebecca McNutt says

Seductive Poison is a chilling book to read through, mostly because it's such an odd yet true story that seems to be something that never could have realistically happened - yet it did. A first-hand account from a woman who lived it, this book takes readers up close and personal with a charismatic yet notoriously unstable cult leader and life isolated in the jungles of Guyana in an increasingly dangerous situation. Reading it is an eerie experience; how a man like Jim Jones ever got so powerful isn't entirely clear but he did know how to get everybody jumping on the bandwagon and blindly following him.

Layton recalls in striking detail what it was like to watch the Peoples' Temple dissolve into madness, from Jones holding suicide drills to the escalating amount of restriction and control placed on each member. Survival chances were shaky at best, and it was with sheer luck and determination that she herself lived through the worst of it. It's not too hard to believe these days, what with light being shed on polygamist villages, Heaven's Gate and Scientology, but still it's creepy to think it happened. With both emotion and tact, Layton shares her voice as one of only roughly eighty survivors who made it out of Jonestown unscathed, and it's a warning bell to all groups in society which seem too good to be true.
