



Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith

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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.

Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith Details

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From Reader Review Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith for online ebook

Len says

I don't know where to start with this book -- I couldn't put it down. It was enthralling. A quick note about Krakauer: this was the first book I've read by him and I was duly impressed with his story telling ability and his writing style. I will definitely add his other books to my reading list.

Now for the book -- holy shit! Like most people I didn't know much about Mormons beyond the basics. And let it be known right off the bat that I am a devout atheist who thinks all religions are a load of bull. I can certainly understand after reading this book why the church thinks this book was a hatchet job on the religion. All that said, the LDS church is some scary shit. Certainly Krakauer doesn't mean to say that all Mormons are dangerous, pedophiles, rapists and killers -- just the fundamentalist ones (and history proves this point). When he asks one of the main subjects of the book, a man who is serving a life sentence for the brutal slayings of a woman and her 18-month old child, about comparisons to other fundamentalist groups and Osama bin Laden in particular -- the man claims the difference is that he is right. How's that for arrogance?

Again, I think all religions are crap, but Mormonism was basically a nutty story pulled out of Joseph Smith's ass less than 200 year's ago. Krakauer does a great job of weaving the story of the beginnings of the LDS church with modern day stories of fundamentalism. It's easy to see why there are fundamentalist LDS sects today when you follow the history of the religion. I think what makes it so scary for me is the devotion to Smith and his ridiculous story told in the Book of Mormon that flies in the face of fact and common sense. Though the Mormon story is not much stranger than other major religious stories, it certainly is a stretch even by the standards of faith.

But the book is not really about the mainstream LDS church and I certainly don't mean to ridicule these people (at least not any more than other religious people who deny history and scientific fact) -- the book really shows us about what happens when people follow a religion to its "logical" conclusion in an extreme sense. The fundamentalists differ from the mainstream in that they are so devout they take every word as truth and that means damn everyone else in the world -- literally. What makes the LDS fundamentalists so interesting to me is their devotion to one particular tenet of the religion -- plural marriage. The fundamentalists are so caught up in their "right" to have multiple wives that they are willing to die and kill for it. I personally think if you want more than one wife and you can get several women to agree -- good for you. Enjoy. Have a freakin orgy if you want. And that would be fine if not for one thing -- the men in this community do this by force and do it with underage women and in some cases their own daughters. That's criminal.

Living so close to Colorado City means I get plenty of news about what's going on up there, and lately we've read a lot about Warren Jeffs who in my mind is a dangerous criminal. But at least now I have some context for why he and the other fundamentalists are how they are. Frankly, I think it's less about religion than it is about power and greed.

Anyway, what an amazing book. Especially given the fact that some experts think the LDS religion will reach upwards of 300 million members by the end of this century and after almost 200 years of fighting the American government they are potentially one election away from assuming the ultimate power of having the U.S. presidency. Don't think Mitt Romney will let his religion influence his decision-making? Just see George W. Bush for precedent. Not much difference in my mind between LDS fundamentalism and Christian fundamentalism. Not to say Mitt is a fundamentalist -- but what do we really know about his

devotion to Joseph Smith's crazy story of the coming of the end of times?

Perry says

Intriguing and Incisively Iconoclastic

Ron & Dan Lafferty, convicted of vicious 1984 murders of their brother's wife & infant daughter (shown below)

A razor-edged examination of fanaticism in religion, focused primarily on the Mormon Church and its fundamentalist offshoot sects that continue to adhere to the norms the federal government forced the Church to abandon over a century ago: polygamy and the marriage of pubescent females.

Jon Krakauer concentrates on the true story of the 1984 murders of a woman and her infant daughter, immersing the reader in a timeline that shows the violence of some of today's Mormon-offshoot fundamentalists can be traced back, at least in part, to the Church's origins after its leaders were banished by Eastern U.S.' post-Victorian society for polygamy and early marriages. Krakauer's poetic fire seems aimed at:

1) the flimsy nature of the societal line between a man--this seems primarily limited to men--being deemed a lunatic and seen as a religious prophet, when he says, "God told me [to do this] [I must sow my seed] [we must travel West] [I must impregnate your lovely daughter]"; and,

2) how shortly after Joseph Smith's death, the Church leaders' ubiquitous practice of prefacing nearly every decision or action with "God spoke to me," may have precipitated today's fundamentalists' justifying criminal conduct by saying God told him to ignore the laws so that he could marry and rape your daughter, and further, may have ultimately contributed to a fringe fanatic, whose black heart overflowed with resentment and revenge, perpetrating homicidal retribution by reading his demoniac thoughts as God's statement of a divine will.

A bit overlong, yet overall worthy of a read if you are fascinated by religious sects.

Karen says

This book makes a lot of big promises, but it suffers from several serious flaws:

1. Lack of focus.
2. Too long.
3. Preposterous claim.
4. Boring

This is a true crime novel--maybe--set against the history of the Mormon Church--but not really--trying to tie in a couple of murders committed by a couple of sickos--all too common--into an historical and political

climate of post-terrorist, millennial religious revival--unsuccessfully.

For true crime, it's shockingly dull, and the crime is committed by the middle of the book, but you already know it's going to happen because it's committed in the prologue, too. The characters aren't interesting, their motivations are the ordinary motivations of religious sickos, and the detail is presented tediously.

The Mormon Church is presented as entirely to blame for the murderers' thoughts and the victims, and for Elizabeth Smart's abduction and captivity. It's crammed full of historical detail that might be interesting but it's presented in such a snide, disrespectful tone that it's just a rip on the Church. At one point the author grudgingly admits that Mormonism is no stranger or objectively odd than any other religion (once you get right down to it) but he nonetheless mocks it and its adherents. He continually harps on its sexism, as if every other religion in the Western World were a paragon of equality and political fairness. Odder still is the fact that his murderers and enablers aren't even Mormon. They invented a religion based on Mormonism, but it's taken to such an extreme that the Mormon Church has disassociated itself with them and is cited frequently by the author as denying that what these guys practice is the same religion.

I made it to page 175 where the murders happened, and then the book jumped to another overly detailed of the history of Joseph Smith and friends and I was only halfway through the book. I guess the rest of it is how the Mormons got to Utah and the court case, but considering everyone knew who committed the murder--they'd told maybe ten people they were going to do it and they confessed immediately and you knew this already from the book--there was no suspense about that. The psychological profile of a religious killer is known already. I can't imagine what you would need to keep writing about.

There are also too many footnotes, on diverse and vaguely interesting tidbits, some of them half a page long. It adds to the lack of focus. It's just a scrambled book about a tragedy.

Everything seems to be coming up polygamy of late, down to the HBO series, *Big Love*. So perhaps this was shocking and provocative and informative a few years ago, but the fundamentalist polygamist sects are very much in the public consciousness now and this book doesn't give any new information. What I found most interesting were the similarities to some of the characters in that television show to some of the fundamentalist profiles in the book. None of them were similar to the point of being "inspired by," I don't think, but things like the Romanian immigrant becoming a plural wife reminded me of Ana, and the daughters of prophets all over the place reminded me of Nikki, and the Mormon wives of Mormon men who adopt polygamy reminded me of Barb. Of course, this is in circumstance only. Bill Paxton's family makes me wish I had a sister wife sometimes. I'd certainly get a lot more done.

Cheryl says

Hmmm...where do I start? First of all, I didn't finish reading this book. It was intriguing in the beginning to learn about the Fundamentalist Mormons and the interestingly odd things they believe and practice. It was also interesting to contemplate the power of faith. Faith in something or someone, regardless of what or whom they are, can make people do unbelievable things. This is true.

I can see how Krakauer would have been frustrated when access to historical documents and interviews with prominent LDS leaders weren't granted to him. In order to tell all sides of a story, you must be able to research all sides. I think in the past 5-10 years, the LDS church has been more forthcoming and open with their history and archives, thanks largely to the prophet Gordon B. Hinckley. So perhaps if Krakauer were to have written this book now, he would not encounter these same road blocks.

Some people may feel that if some aspects of the churches history were to be exposed to the general

membership of the church, it would cause members to lose faith. This may be true of some. But I believe that those who truly have a testimony of the restoration of the gospel, the prophet Joseph Smith, and especially of the Lord Jesus Christ; these people would not sway from their beliefs.

Being a devout member of the LDS (Mormon) faith, I was a bit disturbed to see how the defining line between the FLDS and LDS churches was often blurred and crossed. These religions are completely separate in all but their initial history. Polygamy is not currently being practiced by any member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that is in good standing. If a member were practicing polygamy, they would be excommunicated.

That said, I also did not appreciate the tone with which Krakauer referred to Joseph Smith. I have great respect and admiration for this leader of my church. He was a good man who did the things that God and Jesus Christ asked him to do. I'm sure it wasn't always easy, but he did it anyway.

There are things in the history of the Mormon church that have and still occasionally do disturb me. For instance: polygamy, the priesthood being withheld from black men, the Mountain Meadows massacre, etc. But I also know that I do not understand everything and will be able to gain a complete understanding when I leave this earth.

Most of all, I know that I have a testimony of the truthfulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ. I know that Jesus Christ did restore His church here upon the earth through Joseph Smith. I know that Joseph Smith was a Prophet of God. I also know that if I have Faith, that intense faith that is required for people to do extraordinary and even seemingly ordinary things, I will one day stand before my Lord Jesus Christ, sure in the knowledge of my place as a daughter of God.

Ammar says

An impressive undertaking by Jon Krakauer. A book of history, the tale of a modern religion, an extreme sect and a cold hearted murder.

Those ingredients would attract a vast array of audience: and indeed it did and still do. A nonfiction that narrates a history of the latter day church - the Mormons- their tale, their beginning with Joseph Smith and the story of the Golden plates. Polygamy, and how that tenant in the historical church caused a schism and gave birth to the fundamental LDS, that believes in polygamy, while the main stream LDS, shunned away from polygamy for various political and religious reasons.

The Lafferty brothers... fundamental LDS with a mission.. under a banner of heaven they are fighting for polygamy. Their illegal way of life and how it caused sadness and grief to a community.. and the lost lives of women who wanted to escape this society. This book also praises the women who left the polygamous life which some family trees looked like nuclear power plant blueprints than a normal family tree.

A very informative and I believe controversial book for any one who is a Mormon. Eye opening, interesting and shocking.

Petra X says

This is a hard book for me to review given that I have quite a few Mormon friends and that although my own

philosophy leans more towards existentialism than anything else, I feel its different strokes for different folks. I am led inescapably by this book to view Mormonism as a cult that has changed and adapted as was expedient given the various political currents ebbing and waning.

I've seen, here in the West Indies, how a cult can gain both the practice and the legitimacy of an established religion within a few generations. There are two routes to this. The first is the government is willing to recognise it and allow it tax-exempt status in which case it becomes part of the establishment. The second is that it becomes an issue of political-correctness and people and the media must appear to pay the cult at least the lip-service of respect whether or not it deserves it. I'm talking about Rastafarianism of course. And I've read it here in this book as a cult developed into what would become the FLDS (still a cult) and the mainstream Mormons.

In the first generation, the founder either seeks influence and power as with Mormonism, or is deified, Haile Selassie in Rastafarianism. In the second generation the founding truths and myths and the legends surrounding the founders or the deified one have coalesced into a body of oral and written literature that will form the holy books. This will become the work of sacred reference that will be consulted when laws are changed or introduced and which will be used when moral laws are decided. (As an aside in all cults and religions it seems to be that men will use the holy books to justify their treatment of women). There are no established religions that have been created by women, the development and administration of religion is a man's game). In the third generation, the grandchildren are in the same situation as the children of people belonging to religions thousands of years old - they do not remember a time, nor do their parents when they and their families were not believers and theirs is a history and established pattern of worship and traditions to draw upon.

When the religion is still a cult, the government and courts will not allow the teachings of that cult to be a defence for crimes committed. There is much of this, including a truly unholy massacre in this book. But once the cult has the weight of an established religion, then the religion becomes a legitimate defence to crime, the crime has been committed Under the Banner of Heaven.

As with all Karakauer books, its very well-written in quite a journalistic style and is well worth a read even if you totally disagree with my interpretation of it.

read originally Dec 1, 2008

Colleen says

I read this book for the book club at my local library. Afterwards, I felt indignant, confused, intrigued, and disgusted about all forms of faith. So, I sincerely hoped that a Saint or two would show up at the book club meeting, to nullify my extremely negative view of the church. Alas, no LDS believers showed, so I am left to my own conclusions about the book and faith in general. Here are some of my conclusions and questions after reading this sprawling, fascinating account of the history of polygamy and violence within the Church of Later Day Saints:

There is a certain appeal to having no choices. Sometimes religion is comforting because obedience to a provided list of rules removes personal responsibility. Strict adherence to a religion removes personal doubt. When you believe so fully in a church, you are no longer forced to question your own actions-- after all, if you carefully follow the directions of your spiritual leaders, you will gain your own paradise, regardless of what your personal conscious says about right or wrong.

This leads me into my next point. I will never be a Mormon, for many reasons. First, in the Mormon faith, if you realize the highest echelon of Mormonism, you will get your own planet to run after you die. If you're a man, that is. If you're a woman, you can join your man on his planet... if he invites you. No, no, no. Please. I deserve my own planet. Wives and children are property, at least in the fundamentalists sects of Mormonism. I am a person, an event, not chattel. Second, remind me to never join a religion that condones killing. (See "blood atonement," as typified in the Mountain Meadows Massacre.) Third, I don't want to be a believer in a faith that tells me I have to earn love-- least of all, God's. We are all holy, I think. We all have goodness and grace within us, no matter how many veils of earthly existence have descended. Finally, I will never follow a religion that doesn't encourage me to question everything. Information and education are my life-blood. I must be able to use my brain to get closer to God. Otherwise, why the heck would s/he give it to me?

So, now that we have the comments specific to the Mormon faith out of the way, let's move on to the questions about faith in general. I heartily recommend this book to anyone who is going through a personal crisis. It will boil your blood and make you think. (What more could you want?) Here are my questions:

- 1) Why does listening to the divine in each of us produce such different results? It can lead to peace and pacifism, or killing. Who is speaking? God, or ego?
- 2) Is all fundamentalism mired in violence, or do certain faiths promote it?
- 3) Does God always speak in King James' English? (It seems so, according to the Book of Mormon.)
- 4) Would all religions seem this crazy if we were only 200 years out, and had intimate, dirty details of each guru's life?
- 5) Is there anything inherently wrong with polygamy? Do we have a gene for monogomy? (I don't care, as long as no one gets hurt. And marrying 13 year olds, sometimes when they're your own daughter, is inherently hurtful.)
- 6) Is faith the opposite of reason? Is education the cure for religion?
- 7) Is religion a distraction from the humdrum of our everyday lives? (Opposite of Buddhism.)

Ok, y'all, sorry about the long review. But seriously, read the book. It's excellently chilling, and will keep you up late at night writing your comments furiously on post-it notes. At least, that's what it did to me.

Kelli says

Thank God that's over (no pun intended)!

This book may have been confused about what it was or maybe it's just me that's confused, but by the end of this (or, to be more accurate, well before the middle) I felt saturated with history and facts(?) to the point that I could no longer distinguish what was referring to Mormonism and what was FLDS. The crime discussed on the cover doesn't feel central to the book, and I didn't get a true sense of where the author was placing blame...narcissistic personality disorder or FLDS doctrine. I feel a little drained after this. 2 stars

Marissa says

My father's family is obsessed with Mormons, I think it's fair to say. Well..not Mormons. Most of the Mormons I've known have been perfectly regular people. If you're Mormon, please forgive me if that sounds callous. We are, however, obsessed with Mormonism, and have been since my aunt and uncle took a trip to Salt Lake City many years ago and came back with something we call "The Mormon Movie".

"The Mormon Movie" is like the axis point of a fascination that's gone on for years and is easy to explain: we're Lutherans. As Lutheran, in fact, as they come. My grandfather co-founded the church my parents grew up in, and my dad and uncle were both pastors as younger men. My mom's family went to that Lutheran church, too, her mother was the choir director. The story goes on. So for us, the stories of rites and rituals, of Jesus visiting the Americas, of holy underwear, of plural marriage, almost seemed too fantastical to be true.

Despite the inaccuracies of some of our perceptions of the LDS, this curiosity definitely added to my interest and enjoyment of this book, which is not so much a criticism of the Mormon Church as a look into how its history led to some very gruesome murders. LDS, of course, was not too thrilled with it, but I thought the book does a pretty evenhanded job of presenting facts more than opinions. I read it for my father's book club, and we had a debate about how fair he was being. But we also argued about how valuable participation in a religious institution is in the first place, or how corrupting it can be (I should add that the murderers in this book were part of a few different sects of Mormonism that were NOT part of the LDS). At any rate, it made us think and debate a lot, and it made us angry. That alone, I think, is a good reason to pick this one up.

Mateo says

You know, I probably shouldn't have read this directly after finishing *In Cold Blood*. I'm not saying the combination brought out the homicidal psychotic in me, but I *did* have to pay for stabbing the hell out of a turkey in the Albertson's meat section the other day.

Is there a stranger sect out there than the Mormons? I mean, golden plates ... lost tribes ... Nephites battling Lamanites ... Orrin Hatch.... Well, yes, I guess one look at Tom Cruise jumping up and down on Oprah's couch suggests that Scientology has a lot to answer for, as well. For that matter, I've never understood how a burning bush speaks to someone. Why a burning *bush*? Why not, say, a burning acacia tree?

But if mainstream Mormonism is a little on the far-out side, then fundamentalist Mormonism--sort of like regular Mormonism with more fanaticism, more racism, more welfare cheating, more taking of wives, and more child rape--is like the spastic uncle that mainstream Mormonism keeps in the wine cellar. "Thumping? What thumping? I didn't hear anything. Did you hear anything, honey? I didn't hear anything."

Krakauer does a fine job of interweaving Mormon history, profiles of fundamentalist breakaway Mormon sects, and the hideous, gruesome story of the two God-soaked fundamentalist brothers who slashed the throats of a young woman and her infant daughter. He attempts to be as fair-minded as possible about all these subjects while never neglecting to call a spade a spade. Personally, I would have used the word "nutjob" and "charlatan" a lot more often, and not just in connection with the fundamentalists, but Krakauer makes a point of not passing judgment on the validity of firmly held religious beliefs. I guess a book called *Is the Entire State of Utah Out of Its Mind?* wouldn't sell.

In sum, though, *Under the Banner of Heaven* is as gripping and hard to put down as Krakauer's other fine books, and offers a valuable insight into a strange, deeply American phenomenon. Recommended.

One small but not unimportant note: Krakauer includes a final "Author's Remarks" section at the end of the book. These remarks chiefly concern Krakauer's own attitudes toward religion and Mormonism, as well as his intent in writing the book. It's unfortunate that he added this postscript, not because it's unwarranted but because a) it's largely superfluous, and b) it rather ruins the picture-perfect way the rest of the book ends. Jon, you had it in the bag, man; all you had to do was dribble out the clock. Everything in that postscript should be said in interviews.

Clif Hostetler says

This 2003 book by Jon Krakauer provides a well crafted interweaving of two histories: the origin and evolution of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church), and a modern double murder committed in the name of God by brothers Ron and Dan Lafferty, who subscribed to a fundamentalist version of Mormonism. These histories are interrelated because the murder was motivated by endeavors of the Lafferty brothers to follow their understanding of the original manifestation of LDS teachings that enabled all believers to receive and interpret messages from God. They believed they were obeying the will of God by committing the murders.

I particularly found interesting the portion near the end of the book that excerpted portions of the trial transcript regarding the sanity of the defendant Ron Lafferty. The defense made the case that the crime was motivated by delusional belief, and since the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th ed. (DSM-IV)* states "false beliefs" by definition are delusions it logically follows that the defendant is innocent due to insanity.

The prosecution countered the defense insanity argument with testimony stating that the beliefs of the Lafferty brothers were religious faith beliefs no more insane than many other well known orthodox religious beliefs such as consubstantiation, virgin birth, and resurrection of the dead. The jury apparently agreed with the prosecution because they voted to convict.

The viciousness of the crime as described in this book took my breath away. Much of the Mormon history and the behavior of the fundamentalists' attempts to follow that early history were also shocking. The LDS is especially handicapped with a tradition that encourages all believers to think they can be prophets capable of receiving commands from God. All religions have some history and beliefs that don't holdup well under the scrutiny of twenty-first century sensibilities. Mormons are particularly burdened because its embarrassing history is less than two hundred years old and occurred during the age of the printing press. Thus it's well documented.

Snotchochez says

I don't know if I can write an unbiased review of *Under the Banner of Heaven*. I'll say this: Krakauer's well-researched, exceedingly well-written 2003 book, which is 1/3rd a true crime examination of the brutal 1984 murders of Brenda Lafferty and her young daughter Erika by two Fundamentalist (i.e. polygamous) Mormons Dan and Ron Lafferty (her brothers-in-law) and 2/3rds an exhaustive examination of the Mormon religion (particularly its violent foment), is a fascinating read.

What I have some trouble with is: I can't get over the idea that Krakauer had a gigantic axe to grind with religion/faith in general, and Mormonism in particular. He's such a talented writer that you don't (or at least I didn't, anyway) realize the spin he's thrown on his account until you've been convinced that all religions are ridiculous, and none more so than the hucksterism opportunely ideated by the likes of Messrs. Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, John Taylor, et al. While I agree with much Krakauer had to say, his message in hindsight feels almost like reverse-proselytizing, which is almost as discomfiting as entertaining the efforts of those men in white shirts, clip-on ties, and black pants trying to meet their two-conversions-per-annum quota here in the middle of the (Baptist) Bible Belt. Still, Krakauer's points are persuasive enough to give anyone pause about the Fundamentalist Mormon faith (if not its still-strong ties to mainstream Mormonism), which is why

I give a book four stars that made me so uncomfortable while reading it.

John says

I really enjoyed Into Thin Air, but now I wonder if it is poorly done as this book was. As a Mormon I was amazed at Krakauer's complete naivete that he's trying to pass off as expertise and a well-researched book. I'd be scared of Mormonism too if I read this and didn't know better. The logic leaps he makes are simply massive. For a story about the Lafferty's, this is a nicely told yarn. For understanding its extrapolation into a story about Mormonism it is foolishness at its finest.

Gwen says

This book is fantastic. Krakauer looks at the history of violence in the Mormon religion (both against them and perpetrated by them) and how this violence, romanticized by modern fundamentalist Mormon polygamists, led two men to kill their sister-in-law and her baby because they said God told them to. These men felt, and continued to feel, no remorse because of their doctrine that "killing for the Lord" is entirely acceptable if it is necessary to do God's will.

Krakauer's greater point is to look at American religions and fundamentalist religions and how the leadership of fundamentalist religions that emphasize direct revelations from God is unstable, because followers inevitably believe they are receiving revelations and need to overthrow the current leadership. As a result, these religions tend to split into sub-groups quite regularly. Using this lens he looks at how fundamentalist Mormon groups emerged once the mainstream Mormon church abandoned polygamy and how the polygamist movement has split into different groups over time.

Krakauer does not attack religion or the Mormons per se. He provides a balanced look at the history of Mormons, emphasizing violence and prejudice against them as much as violence done by them to others. However, he insists on a historically accurate account based on the best evidence available (legal documents, etc.), rather than accepting the LDS church's official version of events.

He also discusses how mainstream culture defines certain groups as "delusional" while allowing other groups to hold equally non-rational ideas without judgment. The trial of the Laffertys provides an excellent case to show how the mental health profession defines "crazy" and "delusional" in a way that could technically be used to diagnose all religious people as crazy; but of course, we define only some groups as crazy for their religious beliefs.

Not surprisingly, because Krakauer does not portray Joseph Smith and Brigham Young as angelic saints who never did anything wrong in their entire lives, the LDS leadership attacked the book, instructing members to avoid it. At the end of the book Krakauer includes a long essay written by Elder Turley, a member of the top leadership, criticizing his essay and then responds to it point-by-point.

I absolutely loved the book and could barely put it down.

Stephen says

4.0 to 4.5 stars. For non-fiction, this book had me absolutely riveted from the very beginning. This true crime narrative has three main themes, all of which I think Krakauer accomplishes extremely well. First, this is a true crime story of the brutal double murder of Brenda Lafferty and her 15 month old baby girl at the hands Ron and Dan Lafferty (the older brothers of Brenda's husband). Second, is a survey of the origin and early history of Mormonism and the basic doctrines of the Mormon faith. Third, the book details the deep divide and animosity between the Mormon church and the various fundamentalist Mormon sects, including the one to which the murderers belonged. These three story-lines are not broken down into sections but are interwoven throughout the book. However, for simplicity I will address each separately.

THE MURDERS

On July 24, 1984, Brenda and Eric Lafferty, wife and daughter of Allen Lafferty, were brutally murdered by Allen's older brothers Ronald and Dan Lafferty. The book begins with an account of the murders and several of the newspaper articles that covered it and then layers in the story of Ron and Dan and the events leading up to the killing throughout the rest of the book. One quote from the book that still haunts me occurs in the first few pages when Dan describes the murder of his 15 months old niece:

He [describes] how he found his fifteen-month-old niece, Erica, standing in her crib, smiling up at him. 'I spoke to her for a minute,' Lafferty recalls. 'I told her, I'm not sure what this is all about, but apparently it's God's will that you leave this world; perhaps we can talk about it later.' And then he ended her life with a ten-inch boning knife.

For me, as a father of two little girls, this is one of the most disturbing passages I have ever read.

THE HISTORY OF MORMONISM

The second component of the book is a fairly detailed overview of the founding and early history of the Mormon church. I am not joking when I say that before I began reading this book, almost everything I knew about the Mormon faith came from watching South Park.

I thought the early history of the church was fascinating, especially the descriptions of the tension and actual armed conflicts between LDS supporters and (1) Missouri residents and militia in 1838 (aka the Missouri Mormon War), (2) the Illinois Militia in 1844 (aka Illinois Mormon War) and (3) the U.S. Government in 1857-58 (aka the Utah War). For those not familiar with these conflicts or this period of American History, I think you will find it very interesting.

FUNDAMENTALIST MORMONISM

The most compelling aspect of the book for me was the description of various fundamentalist Mormon sects, including their basic beliefs and the amount of influence and control they maintain over their followers. Krakauer goes on to describe the deep animosity that the fundamentalists have for the mainstream Mormon church (and vice versa). While there are many points of contention between the two, the major theological difference is over polygamy which the fundamentalists believe is a sacred duty required by God. He states in the Prologue of the book:

Mormon authorities treat the fundamentalists as they would a crazy uncle - they try to keep the "polygs" hidden in the attic, safely out of sight, but the fundamentalists always seem to be sneaking out in public at inopportune moment to create unsavory scenes, embarrassing the entire LDS clan.

Krakauer also describes how the fundamentalist Mormons view the U.S. Government as Satan and believe that stealing from the government (either in the form of educational grants for cities which they control or in the form of welfare for their numerous wives and children) is their sacred duty. He says, "Fundamentalists call defrauding the government 'bleeding the beast' and regard it as a virtuous act."

For example, the largest fundamentalist sect is the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, also known as the United Effort Plan (UEP). At the time the book was written, the UEP was run by Rulon T. Jeffs (aka Uncle Rulon) out of the town of Colorado City, AZ on the border between Arizona and Utah. Colorado City has a population of about 5000 all of which belong to the UEP and the town gets between \$4Million and \$6Million a year in public education funding and other grants. The power base of the town stems from Uncle Rulon who had approximately 75 wives (many as young as 13-14) and over 65 children. BTW, no member of the town is able to watch TV, read a newspaper or have any interaction with the outside world.

FINAL THOUGHTS

I thought this was a compelling read. Krakauer does a great job of layering in a ton of interesting background while keeping the narrative of the events leading up the brutal murders moving forward. I was impressed with how well Krakauer avoided letting the narrative get bogged down although that could just be my fascination with the subject matter. **HIGHLY RECOMMENDED!!**
