The Province of the Extreme

Jon Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 372 pp.

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Krakauer's success has come as a writer of narrative nonfiction. He is best known for *Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Mount Everest Disaster* (New York: Villard,1997). In *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith*, he turns his attention to another "province of the extreme," the point where religious belief turns to fanaticism and violence (xxii).

His project is ambitious: With Mormon fundamentalism as his chief illustration, he seeks to understand why religious extremism flourishes in a skeptical, postmodern society. Using the 1984 Utah murders of Brenda Wright Lafferty and her daughter, Erica, and the trials of her brothers-in-law Ron and Dan Lafferty as a framework, Krakauer ranges across many topics in twenty-six chapters including the beginnings of Mormonism and Mormon polygamy, the Mountain Meadows Massacre, the birth of fundamentalism in the 1880s, the politics of contemporary polygamy from Arizona to British Columbia, and the actions of individual fundamentalists such as Brian David Mitchell. The result is a book that is both insightful and flawed.

At the beginning of Part II, Krakauer cites Wallace Stegner: "It is almost impossible to write fiction about the Mormons, for the reasons that Mormon institutions and Mormon society are so peculiar that they call for constant explanation" (94). Substitute "narrative" for "fiction," and Stegner anticipates precisely the weakness of Krakauer's book. In his drive for narrative coherence, Krakauer too often fails to provide—or perhaps even to understand—a full explanation. He provides snapshots with uneven context, journalistic glimpses rather than thorough analysis. Many stories and much analysis remain before the larger questions that underlie *Under the Banner of Heaven* can be answered. But Krakauer's book provides a striking avenue into topics to which both scholarship on Mormon culture and Mormons have paid little attention.

The book's flaws are obvious to anyone even modestly fluent in things Mormon. There are sloppy errors: Mark E. Peterson (sic) was never president of the LDS Church (75), most Church members do not "make a pilgrimage" to the Hill Cumorah (63), and "FLDS" is inaccurate as a generic reference for all fundamentalists with

roots in Mormonism (5). The minimal notes provide little if any documentation for claims such as the one that "official LDS policy" opposes marriage between whites and blacks (331). In June 2003, just before the book's publication, a lengthy "Church Response to Jon Krakauer's Under the Banner of Heaven" appeared on www.lds.org. The Anchor paper edition, published in June 2004, included a twenty-two-page appendix in which the author answered back. Problems persist, however: Krakauer corrected Petersen's title but still misspells the surname. He slightly modified the line about pilgrimage but still overstates his claim.

Krakauer relies heavily on overstatement, a practice that undermines his serious aspirations without good cause. A few examples of many suffice. The family of Watson Lafferty, a right-wing chiropractor working out of a home office, may have been known locally before the murders, but Krakauer's assertion that the "entire family was admired for its industriousness and probity" (xii) doesn't follow from his own evidence. His characterization of Joseph Smith as a man who "remained perpetually and hopelessly smitten by the comeliest female members of his flock" and "kept falling rapturously in love with women not his wife" (118) draws from the scholarly studies of Smith and polygamy listed in the bibliography but discounts much of their analysis. He claims that ordination to the priesthood confers "inestimable status within the church" yet doesn't explain how this could be so, since all males are eligible (156). Perhaps he does suppose that "nobody" at Brigham Young University "would think of attempting to shave a few precious seconds by treading on the manicured grass," but he's wrong (78).

The book is hampered by Krakauer's failure to define his project more clearly. He opens the "Author's Remarks" at the end of the book by explaining that he narrowed his original subject—"the nature of religious belief"—to "a more manageable scope by examining belief more or less exclusively through the lens of Mormonism." He cites his experiences "in the happy company of Latter-day Saints" and reports that he "grew up with Mormons in Corvallis, Oregon, which had (and has) a robust LDS community" (333). Yet this Mormonism—mainstream Mormon culture of the twentieth century—scarcely appears in the body of the book.

In the first chapter, Krakauer explains that mainstream Mormonism and Mormon fundamentalism both trace their origin to nineteenth-century Mormonism. He then turns to fundamentalism and the nineteenth century, leaving the mainstream largely to one side. Given the scope of his subject and his choice of the Lafferty murders as a framework, this is not surprising. But Krakauer errs in not explaining both the divergence and his own focus more explicitly. This leads to odd readings of mainstream Mormonism, such as his citing a fundamentalist raised in rural Canada to explain the upbringing of an af-

fluent Mormon teenager in Salt Lake City thirty years later (45).

It also contributes to weak generalizations. His statement that "many Mormons regard [Salt Lake City] as a sinful, iniquitous place that's been corrupted by outsiders" might be true of Mormons in smaller communities in the western United States—and of fundamentalists—but urban Mormons from New York and Los Angeles might well disagree (78). "Mormon Country" is larger and more complicated than the small territory on the Utah/Arizona border mapped on the book's endpapers.

These limitations notwithstanding, Krakauer has written a book with notable strengths. Much written about Mormon fundamentalism is apologist or sensationalist: Few insiders tell their stories, few journalists attempt to understand the complicated history, and few scholars have treated the subject in depth. Krakauer takes his subject seriously. He provides a clear, readable account of the convoluted history and lineage of Mormon fundamentalism, tracing familial connections, ideological splintering, and affiliations among groups and loners hundreds of mile apart.

He is at his best with interview materials and anecdotes. In the tradition of the travel writer who seeks to understand an unfamiliar culture yet lacks the language to do so, he has many of his subjects tell their own stories. They are impressive for their immediacy and their juxtaposition of the banal and the extreme. Debbie Palmer recounts an abusive childhood in an isolated polygamist enclave in Canada—and the day she set her house on fire and decided to leave. Krakauer's most reflective informant is DeLoy Bateman, whose story he uses to frame the body of the book. A high school science teacher born into fundamentalism, Bateman had two wives and seventeen children when Rulon Jeffs, head of the Colorado City group, confronted him over "scurrilous rumors." Bateman stood up to Jeffs and "decided to leave the Work, even though I knew it would mean the end of my life as I knew it" (14). It did—and it didn't. Jeffs declared that Bateman's wives and children were forfeit and tried to evict him from his home. Bateman decided he was an atheist who could no longer justify polygamy; he took his children to the Las Vegas Strip to usher in the new millennium and disabuse them of fundamentalist myths about the end of the world. Yet he continues to live in Colorado City, wearing the fundamentalist undergarment even in summer heat: "I try not to wear it, but I just can't seem to leave it off. . . . For some reason not wearing it just doesn't feel right. . . . That ought to tell you something about the power of this religion" (328).

Krakauer asks difficult, perhaps unanswerable questions. They are questions that Mormons and scholarship on Mormonism and Mormons have been reluctant to tackle head on—and questions worth asking. He doesn't always have answers; and when he does readers may well dis-

agree, but asking them is a beginning. Why has fundamentalism survived into the twenty-first century? How do beliefs and practices so literal-minded, so archaic, persist in a cynical postmodern society? Krakauer speculates that mainstream Mormonism's troubled relationship with its nineteenth-century history is part of the problem: The "distinctively ironic component" of the mainstream Church's accommodation to "middle America" and its dismissal of history, he writes, may be that it has allowed fundamentalism "to win adherents from among the most fervent Saints, because there will always be Mormons who yearn to recapture the spirit and all-consuming passion of the founding prophet's vision" (322). Readers will be as disturbed as Krakauer by his conversation with Emmylou Coronado, a shy fundamentalist girl who designs a home for her polygamous future online: "I did it on the Internet, according to the Principle" (325).

Krakauer pays particular attention to the recurring connections between extreme beliefs and extreme action. Most fundamentalists are not violent, of course, and surely some of the violence of the Laffertys, Mitchell, and others can be attributed to paranoid or delusional states. Yet as Krakauer explains in detail, the medical experts who were witnesses at Ron Lafferty's trial disagreed on a diagnosis, and a psychiatrist testified that he was not psychotic but might have narcissistic personality disorder (303). Whatever the mental conditions of these individuals, fundamentalism and its literalism obviously contributed to the forms they took. Do delusional atheists hear God telling them to kill? Are all founders of religions narcissists? Why do some narcissists turn to violence, and others do not? Krakauer raises all of these questions but finds no clear answers.

At the beginning of the book, Krakauer juxtaposes two images: the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, "emblematic of the Mormons as a people: chaste, optimistic, outgoing, dutiful," and Dan Lafferty, a fundamentalist who murdered in the name of God. The contrast, he writes, "is so incongruous as to seem surreal" (4). He thus raises a question that he intermittently sets aside, returns to, and finally cannot escape: How are the stories he tells pertinent for understanding contemporary mainstream Mormonism? Given his decision to leave the mainstream aside, Krakauer is wise not to attempt to answer this question directly. But he invites his readers to do so, and scholars of Mormonism and Mormons will find the invitation difficult to decline.

Most of fundamentalism is anathema to mainstream Mormons, who find it disturbing, aberrant, incomprehensible. It is here that the tragic story of Brenda Wright Lafferty matters. One of the most compelling of Krakauer's interview subjects is her sister, Betty Wright McEntire, who draws upon conversations and journals to tell the story of an outgoing BYU communications major who wanted to become a television news

anchor. Brenda, a mainstream Mormon, who married Allen, the youngest of six Lafferty brothers, was dismayed as she gradually learned of her husband's right-wing beliefs and his brothers' intense fundamentalism. What might otherwise be a typical narrative of marital conflict—his refusal to stand up to his family, her refusal to acquiesce to them—crosses from the ordinary to the extreme when Ron and Dan Lafferty decide that God commands the ritual murder of Brenda and her baby daughter. Krakauer doesn't ask directly whether the culture of mainstream Mormonism compounded the situation, whether someone could have foreseen the brothers' horrific actions, or how such tragedies might be prevented. Betty does. Readers will as well, and they should.

The flaws in *Under the Banner of Heaven* disappoint precisely because of its aspirations. Krakauer makes too many missteps. He also raises difficult questions that bear scrutiny, questions that seldom are asked this compellingly, questions that will persist rather than vanish. For that, his book merits careful reading.

Not a Coveyesque Self-Help Book

Ronald W. Walker, *Qualities That Count: Heber J. Grant as Businessman, Missionary, and Apostle.* Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2004; special issue of *BYU Studies* 43, no. 1; 299 pp. $18.95.

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Collections of scholarly articles often display their strengths in their parts rather than in their functioning as a unified whole. After all, the structure of such volumes invites readers to pick and choose and, if read linearly, present multiple repetitions and a narrative that is often, at best, digressive and tangential. Nevertheless, festschrifts and other themed collections continue to be produced by university presses because, in their scattershot way, they meet the needs of specialists needing easy access to research generally related to their topics.

Ronald W. Walker sets himself quite a task, then, in *Qualities That Count: Heber J. Grant as Businessman, Missionary, and Apostle.* Walker, a senior research associate in the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History, had access to Grant's papers in the early years of this project. He has published on the sixth president of the Church and his family in venues that range from regional history journals to the *Ensign* to *Dialogue* and *Sunstone. Qualities That Count* is a lightly edited representation of those articles—along with one previously un-