



How ‘Under the Banner of Heaven’ Took On Murder and the Mormon Church

A new FX mini-series adapts the investigative book by Jon Krakauer. He and the creator, Dustin Lance Black, talked about their efforts to get at the truth.



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Dustin Lance Black grew up in the Mormon faith before leaving it decades ago. His new series, about an infamous double murder, is unsparing in its depiction of the church. Philip Cheung for The New York Times

By Austin Considine

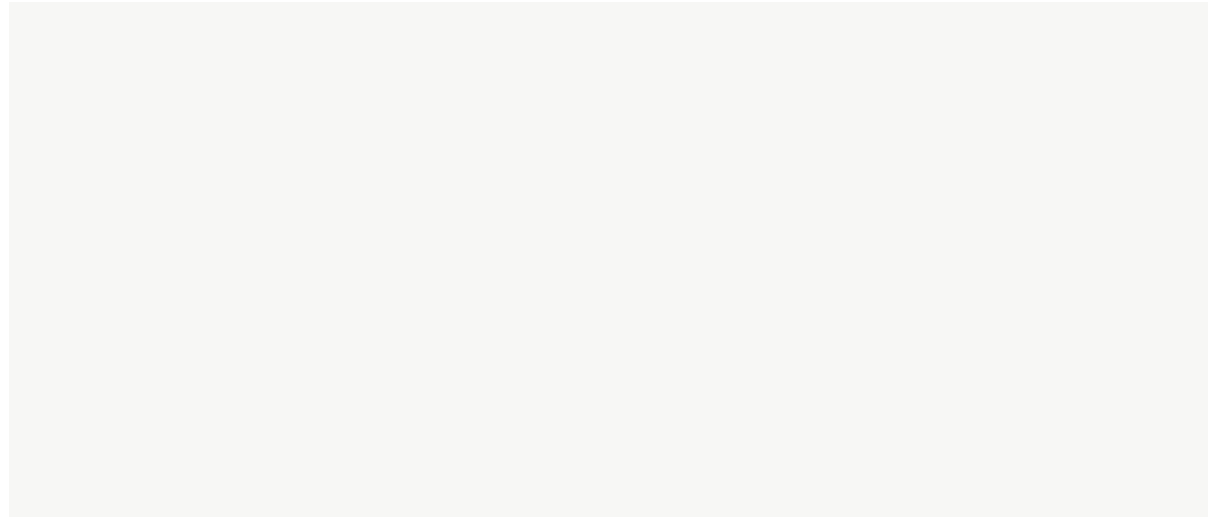
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Dustin Lance Black still gets emotional when he talks about the time he left the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, around three decades ago. It was hard, he said, because he loved the church. But his Mormon father had run off to marry his own first cousin, leaving behind a wife and three children. And when his stepfather [became physically violent](#), local church leaders circled the wagons and told his mother, who was paralyzed from polio, to leave the police out of it.

So he had questions. And eventually, doubts.

He also still recalls when he first read “Under the Banner of Heaven” (2003), a book of investigative journalism by Jon Krakauer that is now the basis of an FX mini-series on Hulu, which Black created. Black had come out as gay by then and was trying to make it as a young screenwriter. “Banner” shined a clarifying light into corners of church practice and history that had always been hidden to him.

“It felt so true to me and then had all of these layers that I hadn’t yet examined about my childhood faith — my family’s faith still — and how I had grown up in it,” Black, 47, said in a three-way video call earlier this month. “It was formative for me.”



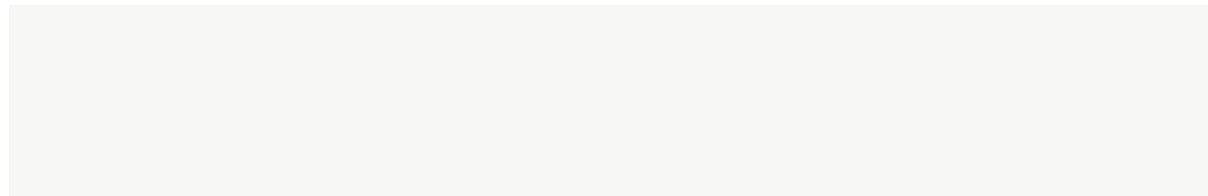
The series is centered on the 1984 murders of Brenda Lafferty (Daisy Edgar-Jones, far right) and her infant daughter in American Fork, Utah. Michelle Faye/FX

Krakauer, who was also on the call, had just seen the first several episodes of Black’s series, which debuts on Thursday. His knowledge of Black’s script was minimal; he had no official role in the series. He could tell, he said, that the show’s depictions of how church leaders encouraged women to stay in abusive relationships was rooted in experience.

“That stuff is such a powerful part of the show, and it clearly comes from your personal experience,” Krakauer told him. “I mean, it really informs it.”

Black paused. “I don’t think those experiences are particular to me at all,” he said. “I saw it happening time and again, and sometimes it would work out just fine. But too often it didn’t. And most often, I saw that it was the women in the church that were suffering most.”

Exhibit A: Brenda Lafferty (played in the series by Daisy Edgar-Jones), a church member who in 1984 had her throat cut, along with that of her 15-month-old daughter, Erica, by a 10-inch boning knife. The killers eventually were revealed to be two of Brenda’s brothers-in-law, fundamentalists who said they were carrying out God’s will — an act of so-called blood atonement for being what the brothers deemed “children of perdition.” As the man who wielded the knife told Krakauer, with no visible remorse, “You don’t want to offend Him by refusing to do His work.”





Gil Birmingham, left, and Andrew Garfield play detectives investigating the crime. Michelle Faye/FX

The murders shocked the small town of American Fork, Utah, where they happened, about 30 miles south of Salt Lake City. They also shocked the church at large. Years later, however, many aspects of the killings remained obscure, and Krakauer wanted to know how that murderer could “kill a blameless woman and her baby so viciously without the barest flicker of emotion,” as he wrote. “Whence did he derive the moral justification?”

Those questions became the engine of his book, which looks deep into the church’s founding and early principles, including its history of polygamy and racism — and of violence, both by and against early members. The book drew intense criticism from church leaders, who in [an official response](#) called it “a decidedly one-sided and negative view of Mormon history.” (Krakauer admitted to a few minor factual errors but rebutted the broader criticisms point-by-point in an appendix to later editions.) Based on the unsparing depictions in the five episodes made available to journalists in advance, the series might inspire similar condemnation.

Black seems prepared. No stranger to complex or controversial subjects — he wrote the Oscar-winning screenplay for “Milk,” about the pioneering gay politician Harvey Milk, and was a writer for the HBO series about a polygamist family, “Big Love” — Black has made the Lafferty murders the heart of his series. An investigation by two fictional detectives, one of whom, Jeb Pyre (Andrew Garfield), is a church member, provides the central narrative device by which Black unpacks big questions of history, faith and dogma.

Given the threats Krakauer said he still received, I asked Black if he was worried.

“I expect that almost anything I do is going to garner some death threats,” he said, adding: “I’m certainly not going to let it change my decision-

making process.”

Black and Krakauer spoke for over an hour — Black from Los Angeles, Krakauer from his home in Boulder, Colo. — about the book and the adaptation, and about why truth, however difficult, is the ultimate kindness. These are edited excerpts from the conversation.



Jon Krakauer’s book “Under the Banner of Heaven” took a hard look at the murders as well as the church’s violent history. Benjamin Rasmussen for The New York Times

Jon, did you find that the accounts of Mormon history in the series held up vis-à-vis your own research?

JON KRAKAUER The history is absolutely accurate. You have to remember that this church [until 2014](#), refused to acknowledge publicly that Joseph Smith [the church’s founder] had more than one wife. The church is going to say, “Blood atonement is nowhere; you’ll never find that term in any of our doctrine,” and they’re right. Except that numerous Mormon leaders have referred to blood atonement, and say how necessary it is. So it’s there, and Lance got that right.

I remember feeling when I read the book that it certainly wasn’t intended

to be comfortable reading for Mormons.

KRAKAUER No.

And I don't think the series is intended to be comfortable viewing. But it does seem, Lance, that you take pains to show another side of Mormonism in a thoughtful and touching way. How intentional was that?

DUSTIN LANCE BLACK I think I took a different view of the book, and I bet a lot of Mormons did as well. The P.R. department of the Mormon Church has their response. But there are many Mormons who, I would be willing to bet, read Jon's book and had that lightning strike to their heart of, "I'm going to listen to my doubt for a minute." That hurt is uncomfortable, but it's a growing pain. So I bet more people than not found some comfort in the relief of confusion. Because so much of what's in there, we just aren't taught. It's not that it's even debated; you've just never heard it before.

To me, the television series attempts to do the same. We now just have flesh and blood people standing in for the reader, which is why I wanted one [detective] to be Mormon and one [played by Gil Birmingham] to be an outsider.

You grew up closeted, which must have made you feel like a bit of an outsider given the church's [prohibition against gay "sexual relations."](#)

BLACK I didn't blame the church for that. I thought there was something wrong with me, and I believed that till far too old an age. And I would suppress it. When I watch "The Book of Mormon," the musical, and they get to the light switch song [["Turn It Off"](#)], I'm like, that was me until my early 20s. Turn it off like a light switch.

I've done a lot of L.G.B.T. stuff, and I appreciate you asking that. But that's not where this comes from. This comes from my belief that gender ought not determine destiny. And that flies directly in the face of this faith and frankly, most others. So this has more to do with watching my mother and her sisters in our ward be treated as second-class human beings.

KRAKAUER Lance, before you came on [the call], I brought up the church's attempt in 2003 to preemptively discredit my book. And I was saying, "Wow, you know, if my book pissed them off, this is going to *really* piss them off." And I wonder if you've given thought about how you intend to counter the campaign to smear the show and paint it as something it's not. The show is subtle and nuanced. They're going to say it's [this](#)

[reductionist attack](#), that Lance hates the church and hates Mormons. It's coming.

BLACK I don't doubt the Mormon Church will try to pick this apart. So all I can do is to make sure I am doing my homework. This isn't my story. My experience has brought me to it; it probably helped me understand where to look. But this isn't a projection of my experiences or my opinions onto the screen.

Will the church find faults here or there? Perhaps, and we could debate that. But I can tell you, we have worked diligently to get this as right as humanly possible. And we have many active Mormons contributing to this show. I've heard from Mormon historians, and, surprisingly, there are many who are grateful that we're going to set some of this record straight because they have been having to tie themselves into pretzel-like knots to explain their faith for far too long. And I think part of this is: Let the sun shine in, and maybe at the end of the day, there is some piece of this faith that's worth salvaging.

So much of the book is about secrets and the lengths people take to protect them. Did you ever feel threatened before or after the publication?

KRAKAUER Not by the L.D.S. church. As far as the F.L.D.S. church [the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, [a sect whose members practice polygamy](#)], yeah. To this day, Warren Jeffs, from his prison cell in Texas, still instructs all of his followers — and there's more than 10,000 — to pray for my destruction every Saturday. [Jeffs, an F.L.D.S. leader who was [convicted in 2011](#) of sexually assaulting underage girls, declined to comment for this article.] So, you know, that's given me pause.

Do you worry about receiving similar threats, Lance?

BLACK You know, if it's not life or death, if you're not risking some part of yourself to try and shine light and maybe even move the needle, what the hell are you doing? I don't want to get out of bed unless I think I'm cracking something open that's needed to be cracked open for some time. I'm just not motivated enough to write — I think Jon and I share this — because I love the research, but I am pained by the writing. So I'm not going to do it if it's just to entertain. I wish I could because I would have a lot more money!

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