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Jon Krakauer



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An interview with Jon Krakauer

Jon Krakauer replies to the Church of Jesus

Christ of Latter-Day Saints' official response to his latest book *'Under The Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith.*

At the end of June 2003, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints issued an official "response" to my new book, *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith*. Disseminated nationwide more than two weeks before my book was scheduled to appear on bookstore shelves, this preemptive attack was authored by Richard E. Turley, Jr., a high-ranking church official who serves as managing director of the LDS Family and Church History Department. In his lengthy, carefully worded screed, Elder Turley characterized *Under the Banner of Heaven* as "a decidedly one-sided and negative view of Mormon history." According to his assessment, my book was written as "a condemnation of religion generally," and the Mormon faith in particular.

It saddens me that Elder Turley, speaking for the LDS leadership (and by extension for the church as a whole), elected to regard my book in such a reductionist light. Other reviewers have assessed *Under the Banner of Heaven* quite differently. As critic Edward Morris wrote in the July issue of *Bookpage*, "Raised among Mormons he greatly admired, Krakauer treats their religion--in all its theological shades--quite seriously. There's never a snide remark or sarcastic aside. But the studiously balanced reporting can't soften the savagery of the [Lafferty murders]."

In fact it is impossible to comprehend the actions of the murderous Lafferty brothers, or any other Mormon Fundamentalist, without first making a serious effort to plumb their theological beliefs, and that requires some understanding of LDS history, along with an understanding of the complex and highly fluid teachings of the religion's remarkable founder, Joseph Smith. The life of Smith and the history of his church may be considered from myriad perspectives, of course. And therein lies the basis for the Mormon leadership's profound unhappiness with my book.

The leaders of the modern LDS Church deem the history of their religion to be sacred, and have long endeavored to retain tight proprietary control over how that history is presented to the world. Indeed, LDS leaders have explicitly stated that they believe accounts of Mormon history should be, above all else, "faith promoting"--that is to say, accounts of Mormon history should be celebratory rather than critical, and should downplay, omit, or deny sensitive or unsavory aspects of that history. As Apostle Boyd Packer (presently second in line to become LDS President and Prophet) declared in a notorious 1981 speech, "There is a temptation... to want to tell everything, whether it is worthy

or faith-promoting or not. Some things that are true are not very useful.... In an effort to be objective, impartial, and scholarly, a writer or a teacher may unwittingly be giving equal time to the adversary... . In the Church we are not neutral. We are one-sided. There is a war going on, and we are engaged in it." That war is for the minds and souls of the earth's human population--a war that Latter-day Saints wage with all the resources at their disposal.

Dissent from official church teachings is not tolerated in the LDS faith. Because of this obsession to rigidly control how the Mormon past is interpreted and presented, histories sanctioned by the LDS Church tend to be exceedingly partisan and notably incomplete. For example, in 1997 the church released a manual (published in 22 languages, and designated as required reading for virtually every Mormon adult) titled the *Teaching of the Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young*, in which this great Mormon leader was intentionally portrayed as being monogamous--despite the fact that few scholars, Mormon or otherwise, would dispute that Young actually was married to at least twenty women, and was probably married to more than fifty. Even a cursory survey of other LDS sanctioned publications will reveal a similarly disturbing sanitization of the historical record.

According to the eminent Mormon historian D. Michael Quinn, "The tragic reality is that there have been occasions when Church leaders, teachers, and writers have not told the truth they knew about difficulties of the Mormon past, but have offered to the Saints instead a mixture of platitudes, half-truths, omissions, and plausible denials." As I wrote in *Under the Banner of Heaven*, Dr. Quinn argued that a "so-called 'faith-promoting' Church history which conceals controversies and difficulties of the Mormon past actually undermines the faith of Latter-day Saints who eventually learn about the problems from other sources. One of the most painful demonstrations of that fact has been the continued spread of unauthorized polygamy among the Latter-day Saints during the last seventy-five years, despite the concerted efforts of Church leaders to stop it." Quinn pointed out that after officially renouncing the doctrine of plural marriage in 1890, the highest leaders in fact continued to sanction polygamy, covertly, for many years. And this casuistry, he insisted, has driven many Mormons into the embrace of fundamentalism.

"The central argument of the enemies of the LDS Church," Quinn said, "is historical, and if we seek to build the Kingdom of God by ignoring or denying the problem areas of our past, we are leaving the Saints unprotected." For his part, Quinn possesses what he describes as 'a complex testimony.' As he explains, "Instead of a black/white view of Mormonism, I have an *Old Testament* sort of faith. The

writers of the *Old Testament* presented the prophets as very human vessels, warts and all. Yet God still chose them to be His leaders on earth. That's how I see Mormonism: It is not a perfect church. It has huge flaws, in both the institution and the people who lead it. They are only human. And I have no trouble accepting that. It's all part of my faith.

"On the very first page of *The Book of Mormon*," Quinn continues, "Joseph Smith wrote that if it contained mistakes or faults, 'it be the mistakes of men.' And this same thing is stated in various ways throughout the text that follows--that errors in this sacred book are possible, even likely. I have always believed that Mormonism was the one true church, but I don't think it has ever been infallible. And I certainly don't believe it has a monopoly on the truth."

I happen to share Dr. Quinn's perspective. The LDS Church aggressively asserts that it is mankind's "one true church," and currently has more than 60,000 missionaries roaming the globe, intent on converting the world to the teachings of Joseph Smith. It seems to me that if Mormons are willing to make such a strong assertion--if Mormons aspire to convince non-believers that their religion is more valid than other faiths, and that the doctrines of Joseph Smith are truly handed down from God--Mormons should be equally willing to open the archives of the LDS Church to all interested parties, and to actively encourage a vigorous, unfettered examination of the church's rich and fascinating past.

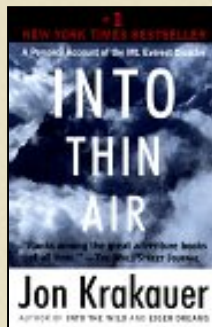
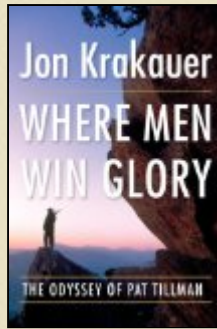
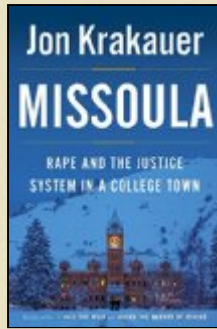
I am therefore disappointed that the men who direct the LDS Church and its twelve million members adamantly believe otherwise. I am disappointed that they continue to do everything in their considerable power to keep important aspects of the church's past hidden in the shadows. And I am especially disappointed that they feel such an urgent need to attack writers, like me, who present balanced, carefully researched accounts of Mormon history that happen to diverge from the official, highly expurgated church version.

Jon Krakauer
July 3, 2003

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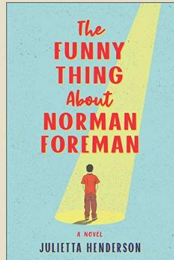


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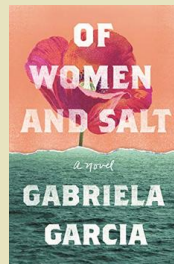
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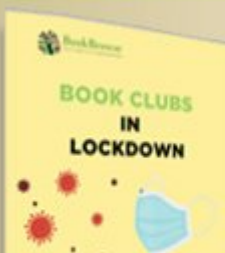
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