



## Krakauer responds to criticism

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By Jonathan Kirkham

Jon Krakauer responded Friday night, July 18, to criticisms that his new book, "Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith," is insensitive, inaccurate and anti-Mormon.

For an hour, Krakauer fielded questions from a standing room only audience packed into a Trolley Corners movie theater in Salt Lake and signed hundreds of copies of his book afterward.

He said the book is an "inquiry into the nature of faith," focusing on the history of Mormonism and how extreme faith turned fundamentalists Ron and Dan Lafferty to extreme violence.

Krakauer has been criticized by some members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who say the book confuses fundamentalism with orthodoxy.

"Jon Krakauer's portrayal of the church is utterly at odds with what I and millions like me have come to know of the church, its goodness and the decency of its people," wrote Mike Otterson, director of media relations for the Church of Jesus Christ. "He is a storyteller who cuts corners to make the story sound good."

Krakauer told The Daily Universe the negative reaction to his book was not totally unexpected.

"Belief is a profound thing, and any time someone like me, an outsider, raises questions, I understand why it makes some people uncomfortable or angry," he said.

But he said he didn't mean to agitate members of the Church of Jesus Christ.

“I didn’t think the church would go out and tell everyone to read this book, but in all seriousness, in my naiveté, I thought I was pretty clear in my distinction between fundamentalist Mormons and mainstream Mormons,” Krakauer said Friday night.

Nathan Tingey, 24, a sophomore at the University of Utah, majoring in business, said Krakauer’s critics have taken things out of context.

“If people get up in arms, I think they’re just looking for something to get upset about,” he said. “It’s an interesting topic. It’s just kind of a hotbed (in Utah).”

Betsy Burton, co-owner of The King’s English bookstore, which presented the event, said Krakauer’s book made an absolutely clear distinction between fundamentalist Mormons and the mainstream church.

“He said it in no uncertain terms,” she said. “Many of his critics have not read the book.”

Burton said Krakauer’s message about fundamentalism and violence is timely and necessary.

“It’s not just a problem here in this community, but all over the world. People need to think about it, and they need to be aware of the dangers of fundamentalism,” she said.

Much of the criticism has been directed at Krakauer’s portrayal of the church’s past.

Richard Turley, managing director of the Church’s Family and Church History department, issued a five-page rebuttal to Krakauer’s book, citing and correcting a variety of inaccuracies found in the book. Turley capped his review with a more positive version of the past.

“The vast majority of Latter-day Saints in the 19th century, like today’s Saints, were peace-loving people who wished to practice their religion in a spirit of nonviolence,” Turley wrote.

Shellie Bower, 27, a BYU alumna from Logandale, Nev., was skeptical of Krakauer before attending the question and answer session Friday, July 18. Afterward, however, she said she was impressed with his sincerity and his knowledge of church history and doctrine.

“Having listened to him, I think he’s very forthright,” Bower said. “I don’t think he had any agenda whatsoever.”

Krakauer said during the discussion he wishes the church would be more open about its history instead of sanitizing it or sweeping it under the rug.

“This is a religion that is aggressively asserting it is the one true church, which is fine,” he said. “But if you’re going to do that, you should expect to be challenged, and you should be willing to open up your archives, and say, ”Look at our history, look at everything, and decide for yourself.””

His challenge to the church brought applause from the audience.

Despite his critique of the church’s management, Krakauer had only good things to say about current church president Gordon B. Hinckley.

“I think you have a remarkable president and prophet right now,” Krakauer told The Daily Universe. “He’s done wonders and wonderful things.”

When asked what he thinks about church founder Joseph Smith, Krakauer said he is fascinated by Smith, calling him amazing, admirable, a true religious genius and one of the great Americans.

“Someone like that is a very rare, gifted, very special person,” he said. “I don’t think he was calculating or a fraud. I think he was a remarkable man.”

Krakauer said he really likes Mormons, and there’s much he admires about the faith.

“I’ve been the recipient of incredible generosity from Mormons over the years,” he told The Daily Universe. “I have a lot to be grateful for. There are a lot of values in this religion that all Americans would do well to emulate.”

Krakauer said he always knew he would write this book through the lens of Mormonism because he is most familiar with the Mormon culture and theology.

“I’ve spent more time around Mormons than I have around members of other religions, so it seemed natural,” he said. “But the book has evolved over the last few years into something that I didn’t know it would turn into.”



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