

Murder Among the Saints

The unexpected impact the murderer and forger Mark Hoffman had on “Under the Banner of Heaven,” my book about Mormon fundamentalism



Jon Krakauer

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The LDS Oquirrh Mountain Temple, 6 miles from the Utah State Prison where Mark Hofmann and Dan Lafferty were cellmates

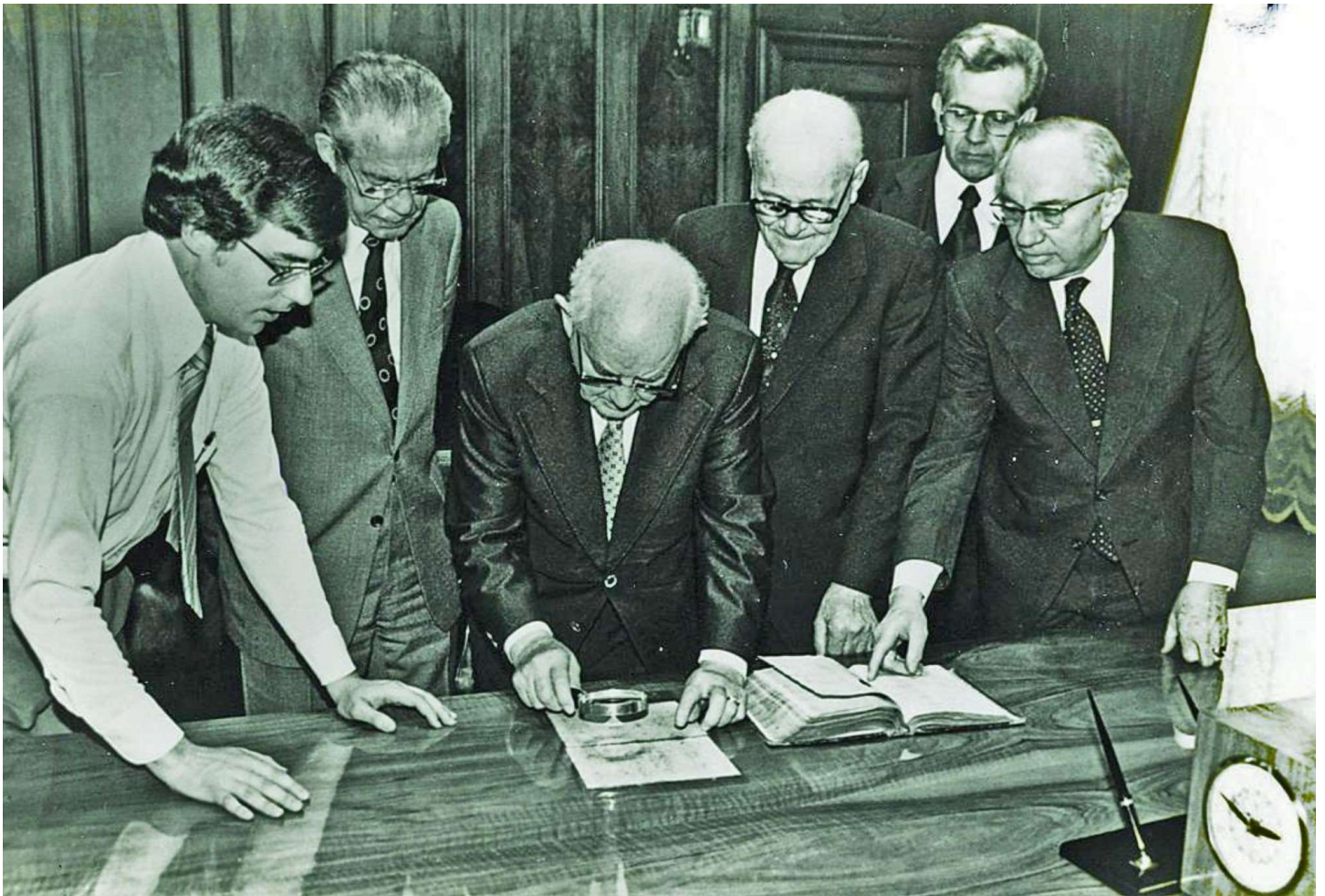
While I was growing up in Corvallis, Oregon, religion was pretty much absent from my life. My mother was descended from protestant Scandinavians, occasionally attended services at the Unitarian Fellowship, and seemed to believe in of some sort of god, but she didn't talk about it. Although my father's ancestors were Jewish, he was an unwavering, life-long atheist.

In 1969, when I was 15 years old, however, I noticed that a number of my classmates and teachers at Western View Junior High School were ardent believers, and I grew curious about their theology. Some were Jehovah's Witnesses. Some were Seventh-day Adventists. Others worshipped at more conventional Lutheran, Episcopalian, Methodist, or Catholic churches. But the most enthusiastically devout, by far, were members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Every Mormon who shared details about their faith with me was certain that when their lives on Earth came to an end, they would be spending eternity in a place called the celestial kingdom, where each of them (if they were male, at least) would become a god, ruling over his own planet.

It was hard for me to wrap my mind around how all of this would actually work, given what I knew about basic scientific principles, but I was fascinated by the intensity of the faith expressed by my Mormon acquaintances, and I envied it.

By 1999, I was working as a freelance writer, had authored three books, and my fascination with religious devotion was stronger than ever. So I decided to indulge my curiosity by making religion the subject of my next book. Because Mormonism was most interesting denomination I'd brushed up against, that was the religion I chose to focus on.

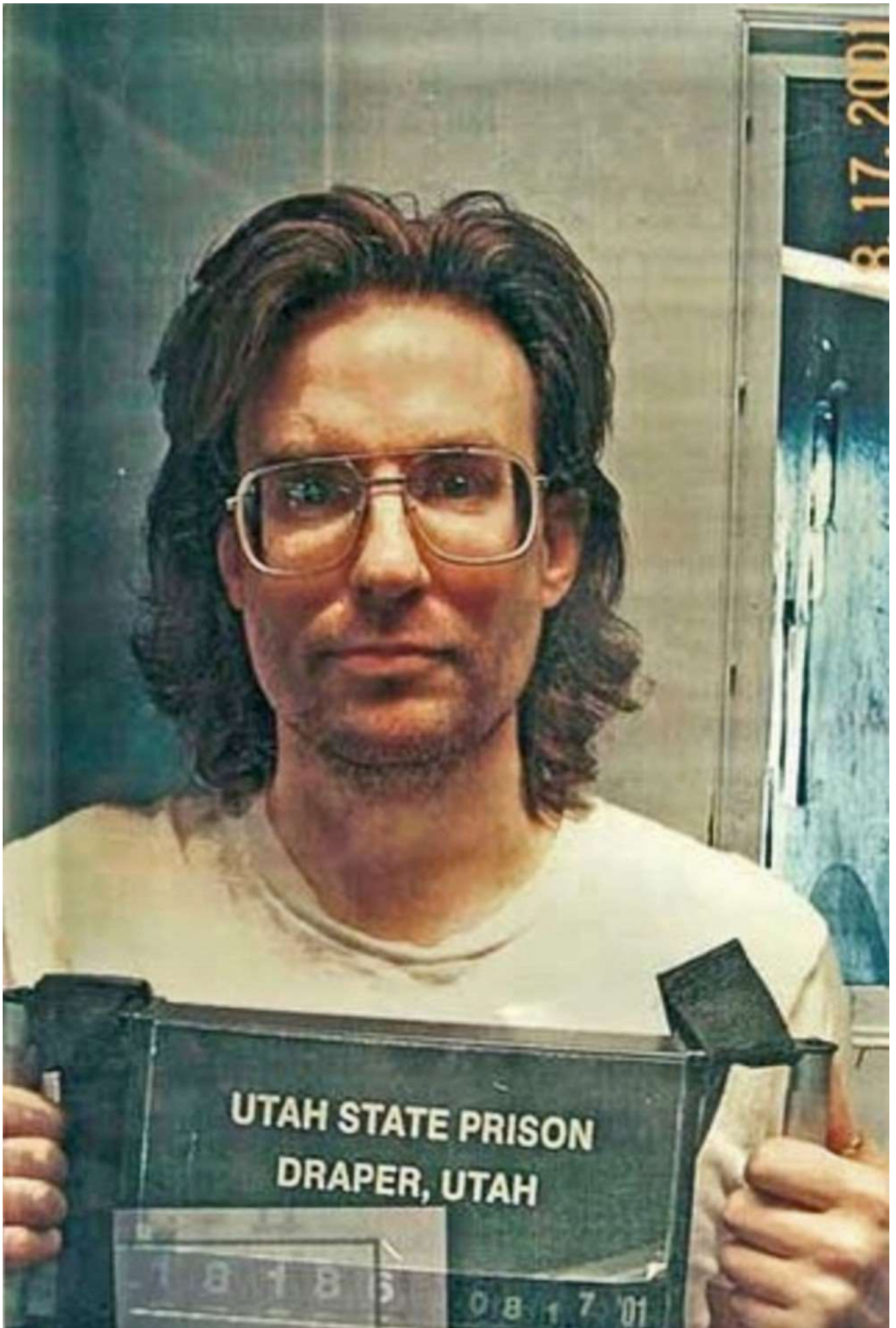
As originally conceived, the book was intended be an exploration of the complicated relationship between faith and doubt. I knew of highly accomplished scientists who were devout Latter-day Saints. How, I wondered, did they reconcile their sincere faith with scientific and historic facts that appeared to blatantly contradict it? As my research led me deeper and deeper down this bottomless rabbit hole, it occurred to me to interview Mark Hofmann, the erstwhile Mormon who had bitterly lost his faith as a teenager, but pretended to remain devout to his parents, his wife, and everyone around him.



Mark Hofmann (left) showing the Anthon Transcript to LDS Church leaders Eldon Tanner, Spencer Kimball, Marion Romney, Boyd Packer, and Gordon Hinckley in 1980

In 1979, Hofmann announced he had discovered a document written in 1828 by a close associate of Joseph Smith, the founding prophet of the Latter-day Saints. According to an eminent religious scholar who examined the document, known as the Anthon Transcript, it appeared to confirm the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. The LDS Church purchased the document from Hofmann for \$20,000.

In fact, Hofmann had meticulously fabricated the Anthon Transcript in his suburban Utah home; it was a brilliant forgery. He began forging hundreds of other historically noteworthy documents soon thereafter. Along the way he discovered that the LDS leadership would pay even more for documents that impugned the credibility of Smith and the LDS Church, in order to keep them from public view. He had discovered an illegal path to great wealth.



Mark Hofmann around the time I wrote to him in prison

Hofmann got greedy, however, and took advance payment of \$150,000 for a large collection documents before he'd gotten around to fabricating them, and when he failed to deliver the documents by the promised date, his scam began to unravel. In a desperate attempt to buy himself more time, he murdered two blameless Saints — Steve Christensen and Kathy Sheets — with pipe bombs, but the diversionary tactic failed. Hofmann was arrested, convicted, and sentenced to spend the remainder of his life behind bars.

When I wrote to Hofmann in 2001, asking if I could visit him in prison to conduct an interview for my book, he'd been locked up since 1987. Two weeks later I got a reply posted from the Utah State Prison, but when I opened the letter I saw that it wasn't from Mark Hofmann. It was from someone designated "INMATE NUMBER 17109," who turned out to be a person named Dan Lafferty, Hofmann's cellmate. Lafferty was serving two life sentences for the ritual murders of his sister-in-law, Brenda Lafferty, and her baby daughter, Erica.

"My cellie showed me a letter he received from you," Lafferty's letter explained,

and although he doesn't do interviews and won't respond, he thought that perhaps I might. Out of respect for his wishes I won't share anything about his opinions or beliefs but it might be of interest to know that because of our common backgrounds we have become best of friends.... and although for many years I rejected requests for interviews and suggestions about writing or participating in a book about my experience of coming thru a religious evolution that ultimately brought me here to prison for — as I believe — taking lives for God; more recently I have thought I should accept some opportunities to discuss some of my beliefs and experiences.

My initial reaction was to decline Lafferty's invitation to interview him instead of Hofmann. But after thinking it over, I made arrangements with prison officials to visit Lafferty, drove to Utah, and spent an afternoon interrogating him in the penitentiary's maximum-security Uinta facility. At the end of the day, when I walked out of the prison doors into the blinding Utah sunlight, I was literally reeling. I was shocked and appalled by the things Lafferty had described to me. But I knew that I had just stumbled upon one of the most important narrative threads of the book that would eventually be published as *Under the Banner of Heaven: A story of violent faith.*

Almost everyone in Utah County was familiar with Dan Lafferty and his brothers. This was largely a function of the lurid murders, but the Lafferty surname had a certain prominence in the county even before Brenda and Erica Lafferty were killed. Watson Lafferty, the patriarch of the clan, was a chiropractor who ran a thriving practice out of his home in downtown Provo's historic quarter. He and his wife, Claudine, had six boys and two girls in whom they instilled an unusually strong work ethic and intense fidelity to the Mormon Church. The entire family was admired for their industriousness and probity.



Brenda Lafferty

Allen — the youngest of the Lafferty children — worked as a tile setter, a trade he had plied since he was a teenager. In the summer of 1984 he was living with his 24-year-old wife and baby daughter in American Fork, a sleepy, white-bread suburb alongside the freeway that runs from Provo to Salt Lake City. Brenda, his spouse, was a one-time beauty queen recognized around town from her tenure as the anchor of a

newsmagazine program on channel 11, the local PBS affiliate. Although she abandoned her nascent broadcasting career to marry Allen and start a family, Brenda had lost none of the exuberance that had endeared her to television viewers. Warm and outgoing, she made a lasting impression.

On the morning of July 24, 1984, Allen left their small duplex apartment before the sun was up and drove eighty miles up the Interstate to work at a construction site east of Ogden. During his lunch break he phoned Brenda, who chatted with him for a minute before putting their 15-month-old daughter, Erica, on the line. Erica gurgled a few words of baby talk, then Brenda told her husband everything was fine and said goodbye.

Allen arrived home around eight that evening. Tired from the long workday, he walked up to the front door and was surprised to find it locked; they almost never locked their doors. He used his key to enter, and then was surprised again by the baseball game blaring from the television in the living room. Neither he nor Brenda liked baseball — they never watched it. After turning off the TV, the apartment seemed preternaturally quiet to him, as though nobody was home. Allen figured Brenda had taken the baby and gone out. “I turned to go and see if maybe she was at the neighbors,” he explained later, “and I noticed some blood near the door on a light switch.” And then he saw Brenda in the kitchen, sprawled on the floor in a lake of blood.

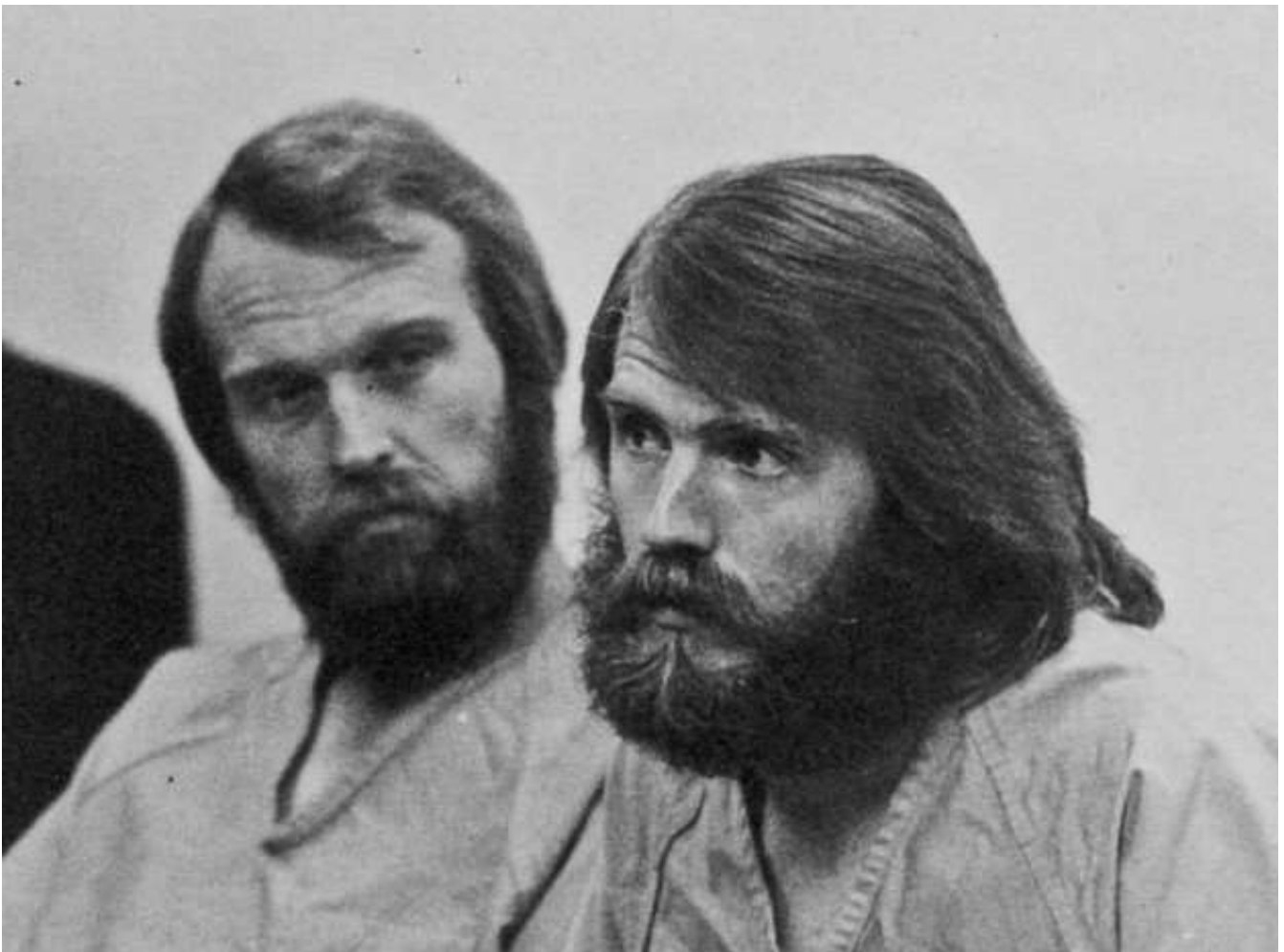
Upon calling Brenda’s name and getting no reply, he knelt beside her and put his hand on her shoulder. “I touched her,” he said, “and her body felt cool.... There was blood on her face and pretty much everywhere.” Allen reached for the kitchen phone, which was resting on the floor next to his wife, and dialed 911 before he realized there was no dial tone. The cord had been yanked from the wall. As he walked to their bedroom to try the extension in there, he glanced in the baby’s room and saw Erica slumped over in her crib in an odd position, motionless. She was wearing nothing but a diaper, which was soaked with blood, as were the blankets surrounding her. Allen hurried to the master bedroom, only to find the phone in there out of order, as well, so he went next door to a neighbor’s apartment, where he was finally able to call for help. He described the carnage to the 911 dispatcher, and then called his mother.

While he waited for the police to show up, Allen returned to his apartment. “I went to Brenda and I prayed,” he said. “And then as I stood, I surveyed the situation a little more, and realized that there had been a grim struggle.” For the first time he noticed that the blood wasn’t confined to the kitchen: it smeared the living room walls, the

floor, the doors, the curtains. It was obvious to him who was responsible. He'd known the moment he'd first seen Brenda on the kitchen floor.

The cops took Allen down to the American Fork police station and grilled him throughout the night. They assumed he was the murderer; the husband usually is. By and by, however, Allen convinced them that the prime suspect was actually the oldest of his five brothers, Ron Lafferty. Ron had just returned to Utah County after spending most of the previous three months traveling around the West with another Lafferty brother, Dan. An APB went out for Ron's car, a pale green 1974 Impala station wagon with Utah plates. The slayings appeared to be ritualistic, which drew uncommon attention from news media and put the public on edge. By the next evening the Lafferty killings led news broadcasts across the state.

On July 30, Ron's dilapidated Impala was spotted parked in front of a house in Cheyenne, Wyoming. When they raided the home, police didn't find the Lafferty brothers, but they did arrest two drifters who had been traveling around the West with the Laffertys since early summer. Information provided by the vagrants led authorities to Reno, Nevada, where, on August 7, the police arrested Ron and Dan as they stood in line for the buffet at the Circus Circus casino.





Ron (left) and Dan Lafferty shortly after their arrest in 1984

From jail, before their trial, the brothers launched an unpersuasive media campaign protesting their innocence. Ron insisted that the charges against them were false, and that the Mormon Church, which “controlled everything in Utah,” would prevent his brother and him from receiving a fair trial. Although he confessed to believing in the righteousness of “plural marriage,” Ron said he had never practiced polygamy or belonged to an extremist sect. He then professed to love the Mormon Church, while at the same time warning that the current LDS leadership had strayed from the sacred doctrines of prophet Joseph Smith.

Four days later Dan Lafferty issued a written statement to the media in which he declared that the brothers were “not guilty of any of the crimes for which we have been accused,” and that “the time is at hand when the true criminals will be made known...”

On December 29, five days before their trial was scheduled to begin in Provo, Lieutenant Jerry Scott, the commander of the Utah County Jail, took Dan from his cell to ask him some questions. When Dan returned, he noticed his older brother suspended by his neck from a towel rack in an adjacent cell, unconscious and no longer breathing; Ron had used a T-shirt to hang himself. “I pushed the intercom button and told them they better get down there,” Dan says. Lieutenant Scott arrived immediately but could detect no pulse in Ron. Although Scott and two other deputies administered mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and CPR, they were unable to revive him. By the time paramedics showed up, said Scott, the inmate “appeared dead.”

Despite the fact that Ron had stopped breathing for an estimated fifteen minutes, the paramedics eventually managed to get his heart beating again, and he was placed on a respirator in the intensive care unit of the Utah Valley Regional Medical Center. After remaining comatose for two days, he regained consciousness — an astonishing recovery that Dan attributes to divine intervention. Although the brothers were slated to be tried together three days after Ron emerged from his coma, Judge J. Robert Bullock ordered that Dan should be tried alone, as scheduled, allowing Ron time to recover and undergo extensive psychiatric evaluation to determine if he’d suffered brain damage.

The court appointed two attorneys to represent Dan, but he insisted on defending himself, relegating them to advisory roles. Five days after the trial began, the jury went into deliberation, and nine hours later found Dan guilty of two counts of first-degree murder. During the subsequent session to determine whether Dan should be put to death for his crimes, Dan assured the jurors, “If I was in your situation, I would impose the death penalty,” and promised not to appeal if they arrived at such a sentence.

“The judge freaked out when I said that,” Dan later explained. “He thought I was expressing a death wish, and warned the jury that they couldn’t vote to execute me just because I had a death wish. But I just wanted them to feel free to follow their conscience. I didn’t want them to worry or feel guilty about giving me a death sentence, if that’s what they thought I deserved. I was willing to take a life for God, so it seemed to me that I should also be willing to give my own life for God. If God wanted me to be executed, I was fine with that.”

Ten jurors voted for death, but two others refused to go along with the majority. Because unanimity was required to impose a capital sentence, Dan’s life was spared. According to the jury foreman, one of the jurors who balked at executing Dan was a woman whom he had manipulated through “eye-contact, smiles, and other charismatic, nonverbal attachments and psycho-sexual seduction,” causing her to ignore both the evidence and instructions provided by the judge. The foreman, aghast that Dan thereby avoided a death sentence, was furious.

Dan told me that he, too, “was a little disappointed that I wasn’t executed, in a strange sense.”

Addressing the convicted prisoner with undisguised scorn, Judge Bullock reminded Dan that it was “Man’s law, which you disdain, that saved your life.” Then, his disgust getting the better of him, he added, “In my twelve years as a judge, I have never presided over a trial of such a cruel, heinous, pointless and senseless a crime as the murders of Brenda and Erica Lafferty. Nor have I seen an accused who had so little remorse or feeling.” This admonishment came from the same hardened judge who, in 1976, had presided over the notorious, history-making trial of Gary Mark Gilmore, who became the first convict to be executed in the United States in more than a decade

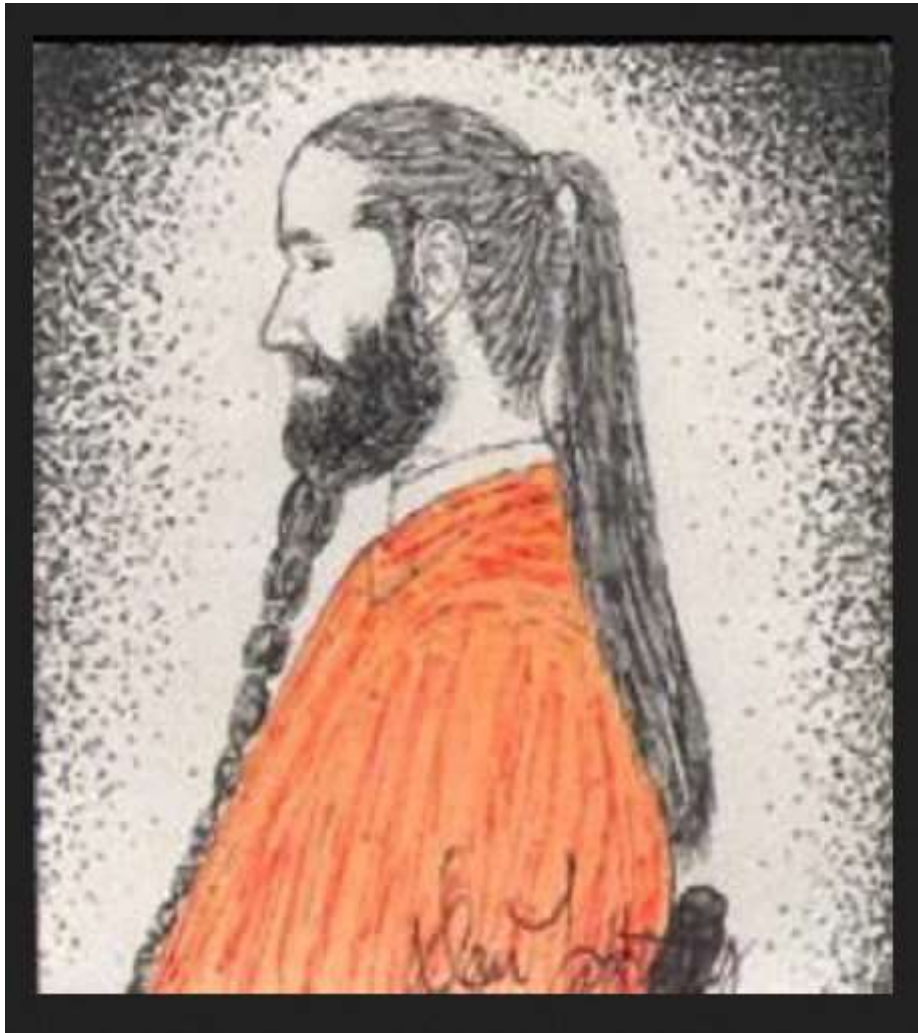
after Judge Bullock sentenced him to death for the unprovoked murders of two young Mormons.

After telling the 1985 court that the jury had been unable to agree on a sentence of death, Judge Bullock turned to Dan and said, “I mean to see that every minute of [your] life is spent behind the bars of the Utah State Prison and I so order.” He sentenced Dan to two life terms.

Ron’s trial began almost four months later, in April 1985, after a battery of psychiatrists and psychologists determined he was mentally competent. His court-appointed attorneys hoped to get the murder charges reduced to manslaughter by arguing that Ron was suffering from mental illness when he and Dan murdered Brenda Lafferty and her baby, but Ron refused to allow them to mount such a defense. “It seems it would be an admission of guilt,” he told Judge Bullock. “I’m not prepared to do that.”

Ron was convicted of first-degree murder, and on this occasion the jury did not balk at imposing capital punishment. They sentenced him to die, either by lethal injection or four bullets through the heart at close range. Ron chose the latter.

On January 15, 1985, immediately after Judge Bullock decreed that the remainder of Dan Lafferty’s life would unfold in captivity, he was taken to the state prison near Point of the Mountain in Draper, Utah, where a corrections officer cut his hair and sheared off his whiskers. When I interviewed Dan in prison a decade and a half later, Dan hadn’t shaved or cut his hair since he was locked up. His beard, wrapped with rubber bands into a stiff gray cable, descended to his belly. His hair had gone white and fanned across the back of his orange prison jumpsuit. Although he was fifty-four years old and crows’ feet furrowed the corners of his eyes, there was something unmistakably boyish about his countenance. His skin was so pale it seemed translucent.



A self-portrait Dan Lafferty sent me from prison

A crude tattoo of a spider web radiated from Dan's left elbow, wrapping the crook of his arm in a jagged indigo lattice. His wrists were bound in handcuffs, and his shackled ankles were chained to a steel ring embedded in the concrete floor. On his otherwise bare feet were cheap rubber flip-flops. A large man, he cheerfully referred to the prison's maximum-security unit as "my monastery."

Every morning a wake-up alarm echoed through the halls of the unit at 6:30, followed by a head-count. The door to his cell remained locked twenty hours a day. Even when it wasn't locked, Dan said, "I'm almost always in my cell. The only time I leave is to shower or serve food — I have a job serving meals. But I don't really associate with people that much. I try not to leave my cell more often than I absolutely have to. There are so many assholes in here. They get you caught up in their little dramas, and you end up having to fuck somebody up. And the next thing you know your privileges are taken away. I've got too much to lose. I'm in a really comfortable situation right now. I've got a really good cellie, and I don't want to lose him."

The cellmate Lafferty was referring to, of course, was Mark Hofmann. Although Hofmann by then had contempt for religion in general and Mormonism in particular, his atheism didn't seem to be an issue in his friendship with Dan Lafferty — despite the fact that Dan remained, by his own proud characterization, a religious zealot. “My beliefs are irrelevant to my cellie,” Dan confirmed. “We're special brothers all the same. We're bound by the heart.”

Prior to Dan's conviction, and for more than a decade afterwards, he steadfastly maintained that he was innocent of the murders of Brenda and Erica Lafferty. When he was arrested in Reno in August, 1984, he told the arresting officers, “You think I have committed a crime of homicide, but I have not.” Although he still maintained he was innocent of any crime, paradoxically, he no longer denied that he killed Brenda and Erica. When asked to explain how both these apparently contradictory statements can be true, he explained, “I was doing God's will, which is not a crime.”

Lafferty wasn't reticent about describing exactly what happened on July 24, 1984. He said that shortly after noon, he, Ron, and the two drifters who had been traveling with them, Ricky Knapp and Chip Carnes, drove to the apartment of his youngest brother, Allen, in American Fork, twenty minutes down the Interstate from where he is now imprisoned. Inside the brick duplex he found his 15-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.

After dispatching Erica, he calmly walked into the kitchen and used the same knife to kill the baby's mother. When I met with him seventeen years after committing these two murders, he insisted, very convincingly, that he had never felt any regret for the deed, or shame.

Like his older brother, Ron, Dan Lafferty was brought up as a pious Mormon. “I've always been interested in God and the Kingdom of God,” he said. “It's been the center of my focus since I was a young child.” And he was certain God intended for him to kill Brenda and Erica Lafferty: “It was like someone had taken me by the hand that day and led me comfortably through everything that happened. Ron had received a revelation from God that these lives were to be taken. I was the one who was supposed to do it. And if God wants something to be done, it will be done. You don't want to offend Him by refusing to do His work.”



The Utah State Prison South Complex. The maximum security unit where Mark Hofmann and Dan Lafferty were cellmates is near the left edge of this photo

The murders Dan Lafferty committed are shocking for a host of reasons, but no aspect of the crimes is more disturbing than his complete absence of remorse. How could an apparently sane, avowedly pious man kill a wonderful, widely admired woman and her innocent baby so viciously, without the barest flicker of emotion? Whence did he derive the moral justification? What filled him such certitude? Any attempt to answer such questions must plumb those murky sectors of the heart and head that prompt most of us to believe in God — and compel an impassioned few, predictably, to carry that irrational belief to its logical end.

There is a dark side to religious devotion that is too often ignored or denied. As a means of motivating people to be cruel and inhumane — as a means of inciting evil, to borrow the vocabulary of the devout — there may no more potent force than religion. When the subject of religiously inspired bloodshed comes up, Americans immediately think of Islamic fundamentalism, which is to perhaps be expected after the events of September 11, 2001. But men have been committing heinous acts in the name of God ever since mankind began believing in deities, and extremists exist within all religions. Muhammad is not the only prophet whose words have been used to sanction barbarism; history has not lacked for Christians, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, and even

Buddhists who have been motivated by scripture to butcher innocents. Plenty of these religious extremists have been homegrown, corn-fed Americans.

Faith-based violence was present long before Osama bin Laden, and it will no doubt be with us forever after. Religious zealots like bin Laden, David Koresh, Jim Jones, and Dan Lafferty are common to every age, just as zealots of other stripes are. In any human endeavor, some fraction of its practitioners will be motivated to pursue that activity with such concentrated focus and unalloyed passion that it consumes them utterly. One has to look no further than individuals who feel compelled to devote their lives to becoming concert pianists, say, or climbing Mt. Everest. For some, the province of the extreme holds an allure that's irresistible. And a certain percentage of such fanatics will inevitably fixate on matters of the spirit.

The zealot may be outwardly motivated by the anticipation of a great reward at the other end — wealth, fame, eternal salvation — but the real recompense is probably the obsession itself. As a result of his (or her) infatuation, existence overflows with purpose. Ambiguity vanishes from the fanatic's world view, a narcissistic sense of self-assurance displaces all doubt. A delicious rage quickens his pulse, fueled by the sins and shortcomings of lesser mortals, who are soiling the world wherever he looks. His perspective narrows until the last remnants of proportion are shed from his life. Through immoderation, he experiences something akin to rapture.

Faith is the very antithesis of reason. Spiritual devotion defies rational analysis. And when religious fanaticism supplants sound judgment, all bets are suddenly off. Anything can happen. Common sense is no match for the voice of God.

On June 5, 2002, in the middle of the night, fourteen-year-old Elizabeth Smart was abducted at knifepoint from her Salt Lake City bedroom while her parents slept in a nearby part of the house. Smart's abductor — a 49-year-old street preacher named Brian David Mitchell — took her to a secluded campsite in the foothills above her home, where he and his 57-year-old wife held a weird, self-styled wedding ritual in which Smart was “sealed” to Mitchell in “the new and everlasting covenant” — a Mormon euphemism for polygamous marriage. Immediately thereafter the girl was forced to remove her red pajamas, and Mitchell consummated the marriage with an act of rape.

Details of the audacious kidnapping were reported breathlessly and without pause by the news media, leaving much of the country aghast and riveted. When a massive investigation failed to locate Smart or her then-unidentified abductor by summer's end, people assumed the worst: that she had been subjected to some unspeakable ordeal and murdered. Then, nine months after she disappeared, she turned up alive, surprising almost everyone.

THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

My
Story

Elizabeth
Smart

with Chris Stewart

WITH A
NEW CHAPTER
BY THE
AUTHOR

The astonishing reappearance of Elizabeth Smart occurred in the jittery days immediately before the invasion of Iraq in March 2003. Most Americans, made fretful by the uncertainties of the impending war and a sputtering economy, were desperate for some good news, any good news, and rejoiced with commensurate intensity when the girl was reunited with her family.

Like so many of his countrymen, Dan Lafferty was spellbound by the Elizabeth Smart saga, which he monitored from a cheap television in a cramped cell, deep in the bowels of the Utah State Prison, where he is serving two life sentences for murdering a young mother and her baby in 1984. Within hours of the Smart's rescue, the media disclosed that her abductor was an excommunicated Mormon. "With that small piece of information," Lafferty boasts, "I immediately guessed that he was probably a fundamentalist, and that Elizabeth was somehow involved in a polygamy situation."

Lafferty was soon proven correct. Brian David Mitchell was indeed a Mormon Fundamentalist, a religious zealot who believed the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had made a ruinous blunder when, in 1890, its leaders renounced polygamy, which until then had been promoted as "the most holy and important doctrine ever revealed to man on earth." Nineteen months before snatching Elizabeth Smart, Mitchell received a divine revelation in which the Lord explained that he had been placed on earth to serve as God's mouthpiece on earth during the Last Days. God also commanded Mitchell to take seven additional wives, of whom Elizabeth had the misfortune to be the first.

None of Mitchell's behavior struck Dan Lafferty as surprising or particularly outlandish, because he, too, was a polygamist and self-described religious zealot who received frequent communiqués from God. As Lafferty has explained on numerous occasions, it was God who commanded him to commit the murders that landed him behind bars for life.

Balanced atop the highest spire of the Salt Lake Temple, gleaming in the Utah sun, a statue of the Angel Moroni stands watch over downtown Salt Lake City with his golden trumpet raised. This massive granite edifice is the spiritual and temporal nexus of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which presents itself as the world's only true religion. At last count there were more than 16 million Saints

the world over, and Mormonism is among the fastest growing religions in the Western Hemisphere. Presently in the United States there are more Mormons than Presbyterians or Episcopalians. On the planet as a whole, there are now more Mormons than Jews.

From the beginning, Joseph Smith had preached that if Mormons lived piously and obeyed God's commandments, He would communicate with each of them directly, one-on-one. Mormons were instructed to seek "impressions from the Lord" to guide them in every aspect of their lives, and the concept proved to be immensely popular. Many people were drawn to the new religion because it gave them an uncommonly intimate relationship with God. It was like nothing they had experienced before, and it stirred their religious passions.

These days, the affairs of the Latter-day Saints are directed by a cadre of elderly white males in dark suits who carry out both their holy and corporate duties from a 26-story office tower beside Temple Square. To a man, the LDS leadership adamantly insists that Lafferty should under no circumstances be considered Mormon — a religion with a membership that has earned a reputation for being chaste, optimistic, outgoing, dutiful, and law abiding. Although the faith that moved Lafferty to slay his niece and sister-in-law is Mormon Fundamentalism, LDS leaders bristle visibly when Mormons and Mormon Fundamentalists are even mentioned in the same breath.

Nevertheless, Mormons and those who call themselves Mormon Fundamentalists (or FLDS) believe in the same holy texts and the same sacred history. Both believe that Joseph Smith, who founded Mormonism in 1830, played a vital role in God's plan for mankind; both LDS and FLDS consider him to be a prophet comparable in stature to Moses and Isaiah. Mormons and Mormon Fundamentalists are each convinced God regards them, and them alone, as his favored children: "a peculiar treasure unto me above all people." But if both proudly refer to themselves as the Lord's chosen, they diverge on one especially inflammatory point of religious doctrine: Unlike their present-day Mormon compatriots, Mormon Fundamentalists passionately believe that Saints have a divine obligation to take multiple wives. Followers of the FLDS faith engage in polygamy, they explain, as a matter of religious duty.

There are more than 30,000 FLDS polygamists living in Canada, Mexico, and throughout the American West. Some experts estimate there may be as many as 100,000. Even this larger number amounts to far less than 1% of the membership in the LDS Church, but all the same, leaders of the mainstream church are extremely

discomfited by these legions of polygamous brethren. The LDS leadership has worked very hard to persuade both the modern church membership and the American public that polygamy was a quaint, long-abandoned idiosyncrasy practiced by a mere handful of 19th-century Mormons. The religious literature handed out by the earnest young missionaries in Temple Square makes no mention of the fact that Joseph Smith — still the religion’s focal personage — married at least thirty-three women, and probably as many as forty-eight. Nor does it mention that the youngest of these wives was just 14 years old when Joseph explained to her that God had commanded that she marry him or face eternal damnation.

In fact polygamy was arguably the most sacred credo of Joseph’s church — a tenet important enough to be canonized for the ages in *The Doctrine and Covenants*, one of Mormonism’s primary scriptural texts. The revered prophet taught that a man needed at least three wives to attain the “fulness of exaltation” in the afterlife. He warned that God had explicitly commanded, “all those who have this law revealed unto them must obey the same... and if ye abide not that covenant, then are ye damned; for no one can reject this covenant and be permitted to enter into my glory.”



A likely but unverified photo of Joseph Smith in 1843, the year before his death

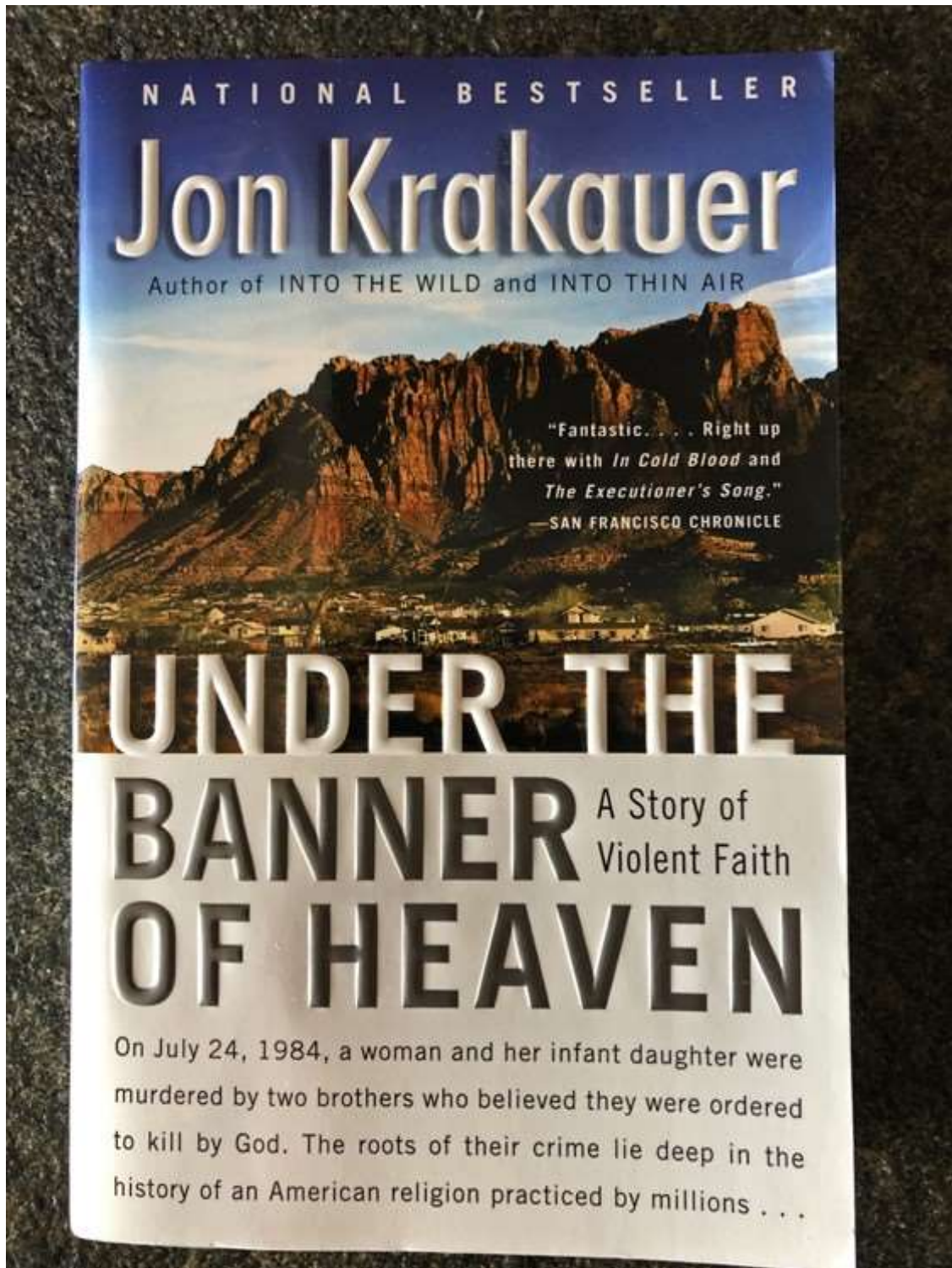
In 1844, Joseph was murdered by a mob of Mormon-haters in Illinois. Brigham Young assumed leadership of the church and led the Saints to the barren wilds of the Great Basin, where in short order they established a remarkable empire and unabashedly embraced the covenant of “spiritual wifery.” This both titillated and shocked the

sensibilities of Victorian-era Americans, who tended to regard polygamy as a brutish practice on a par with slavery. In 1856, recognizing the strength of the anti-polygamy vote, Republican candidate John C. Frémont ran for president on a platform that pledged to “prohibit in the territories those twin relics of barbarism — Polygamy and Slavery.” Indeed, it’s likely that in the nineteenth century, polygamy was actually abhorrent to many more Americans than slavery was. The latter, after all, had a multitude of proponents in numerous states, whereas it was hard to find advocates for polygamy outside of Utah.

Frémont lost the 1856 election, but a year later the man who did win, President James Buchanan, sent the U.S. Army to invade Utah, dismantle Brigham Young’s theocracy, and eradicate polygamy. The so-called “Utah War,” however, neither removed Brigham from power nor ended the doctrine of plural marriage, to the annoyance and bafflement of a whole series of American presidents. An escalating sequence of judicial and legislative challenges to polygamy ensued, culminating in the Edmunds-Tucker Act of 1887, which disincorporated the LDS Church and forfeited to the federal government all church property worth more than \$50,000. With their feet held fast to the fire, the Saints publicly renounced polygamy in 1890, but continued to condone it secretly for another twenty years or more.

But if LDS leaders were initially loath to abandon plural marriage, eventually they adopted a more pragmatic approach to American politics, emphatically rejected the practice, and actually began urging government agencies to prosecute polygamists. It was this single change in ecclesiastical policy, more than anything else, which transformed the LDS Church into its astonishingly successful present-day iteration. Having jettisoned polygamy, Mormons gradually ceased to be regarded as a crackpot sect. The LDS Church acquired the trappings of a conventional faith so successfully that it is now widely considered to be the quintessential American religion.

Mormon Fundamentalists, however, believe that acceptance into the American mainstream came at way too high a price. They insist that the church sold them out — that the LDS leadership abandoned one of the religion’s most crucial theological tenets for the sake of political expediency. These present-day polygamists therefore consider themselves to be the keepers of the flame — the only true and righteous Mormons.



This piece was adapted from my book, [Under the Banner of Heaven: A story of violent faith](#)

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