

TELEVISION

Under the Banner of Heaven Repeats the Book's Fundamental Mistake

The Hulu adaptation of Jon Krakauer's book rebukes Mormon zealots but doesn't fully escape their point of view.

BY MAX PERRY MUELLER

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Andrew Garfield in *Under the Banner of Heaven*. Michelle Faye/FX

In the first 10 minutes of *Under the Banner of Heaven*, detective Jeb Pyre (Andrew Garfield)

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At the station, Jeb and Bill plan how they'll interrogate Allen. Bill glances through the window into the interrogation room, assessing their new suspect. To the veteran cop, the case is clear cut; the husband did it. Bill wants to press Allen hard: "Identify a motive, turn it into a confession, we wrap it up." Jeb suggests a gentler approach. "How about I take the lead with him, Mormon to Mormon?" Bill assents with a smirk: "It's all yours."

This exchange establishes the fundamental shift in perspective between the FX/Hulu series and the Jon Krakauer book upon which it is loosely based. In 2003, Krakauer published his wildly successful and highly divisive true crime account of the radicalization of the Lafferty brothers, the scions of the "Kennedys of Utah," to Mormon fundamentalism. The Laffertys' descent into religious fanaticism culminated when the two oldest brothers, Ron (Sam Worthington) and Dan (Wyatt Russell), slit the throats of their sister-in-law and niece as retribution for the perceived sins Brenda committed against the family. In the book, Krakauer, a non-Mormon and a fierce critic of all religions, serves as the audience's surrogate. In the TV version, the fictional Jeb Pyre, a devout Latter-day Saint, fills that role as well as the role of the series' hero.

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Jeb appears to be a stand-in for the series' writer Dustin Lance Black, who won an Academy Award for the screenplay of *Milk*. Black, who also served as a writer and producer on HBO's polygamist drama *Big Love*, grew up Mormon. But in his twenties, he came out as gay and

left the faith, in large part due to Mormonism's homophobia, which Black says ingrained in him such self-hate that he contemplated suicide.

Black, who spent more than a decade developing *Under the Banner of Heaven*, first as a feature film, attempted to correct what the legions of critics of Krakauer's book perceived as its foundational flaw: its myopic portrait of Mormons—from founder Joseph Smith Jr., his successor Brigham Young, and their present-day spiritual descendants who govern the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, to radicalized fundamentalists like Ron and Dan Lafferty—as irrational religious zealots and sexual deviants, who claim prophetic revelation to amass power, violently dispense with their rivals and enemies, and prey upon women and girls. Krakauer argued that the difference between the mainline church in Salt Lake and Mormon fundamentalism is one of degree of religious despotism, but not of kind. Instead, Black set out to present a more nuanced take on Mormon culture, flesh out the real-life people involved, and provide a more empathetic accounting of much-maligned faith at the center of the tragedy.

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In some ways, Black succeeded. As historian and Latter-day Saint Ben Park has noted, “the show should be applauded for its commitment to depicting multiple versions of Mormonism.” Before their radicalization, the Laffertys are depicted as slightly more palatable versions of the extremist Mormon families who have entered the wider public imagination, like the anti-government crusading Bundys or Tara Westover's survivalist family, about whom she wrote so powerfully in her bestselling memoir *Educated*. Yet the series also depicts sympathetic Mormon characters. There is the beehive of Mormon women (the Relief Society) who swarm into service with one phone call from Jeb, too wrapped up in the case to help his wife set up for his daughters' birthday party. There are Brenda's parents, who worry that their daughter's marriage into the Lafferty clan will thwart her education and career advancement. And there is Jeb himself, earnest and soft-spoken, who cares for his

family and for his widowed and senile mother Josie (Sandra Seacat) with unflagging patience and love.

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In its depiction of Mormon diversity, the series is an improvement on the book. But at its core, *Under the Banner of Heaven* is merely a polished recycling of Krakauer's thesis: that Mormonism is a faith that "breeds dangerous men," and that the level of these men's devotion to their faith can be measured by the level of abuse and violence that they are willing to commit in the name of Heavenly Father. Black's telling, like Krakauer's, does not pose questions about the relationship between Mormonism and violence. Instead, Black and Krakauer put forth an anti-religion polemic that itself verges on fundamentalism: All faiths corrupt. Absolutist faiths like Mormonism—be it the brand based in Temple Square or found in some off-the-grid compound in a remote corner of the West—corrupt absolutely.

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For many viewers, especially ex-Mormons (and especially ex-Mormon women), this fictionalized version of *Under the Banner of Heaven* rings true to their experience. To them, the series erases the bright line between Mormon fundamentalists and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints which the latter has attempted to draw in the last four decades since the Lafferty murders. For others, the series exposes how the church teaches its members to repress reasonable religious questions about the church's history, to dismiss family difficulties as Heavenly Father's "tests of faith," and to turn a blind eye to quotidian domestic violence wrought by Mormon men.

| Wyatt Russell and Daisy Edgar-Jones in *Under the Banner of Heaven*. Michelle Faye/FX

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And yet, with a few exceptions, it's in the series' depiction of Mormon women, especially the Mormon woman (and child) whose unholy death initiates the whole affair, that the series fails the most profoundly. By focusing on the growing bombast of the Laffertys' depravity (symbolized by the relative lengths of their beards)—set against the quiet valor of Jeb Pyre, who struggles with his faith as he learns more about the Lafferty's progression into extremism—the series perpetuates the dangers of patriarchy it purports to expose. By failing to center the life of Brenda Lafferty, the most faithful Latter-day Saint and the true hero of

the story, the series silences her, once again.

The (re)silencing of Brenda Lafferty did not have to come to pass. Black interviewed many people connected with the story, including not only Dan Lafferty, who is still serving life in prison—Ron died awaiting execution in 2019—and Brenda’s family, the Wrights, who entrusted Black with Brenda’s journals and letters from the period before her death, invaluable sources to which Krakauer did not have access.

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Black also hired two historical consultants who, like him, are former members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Troy Williams, the head of Equality Utah, and Lindsay Hansen Park, the executive director of the Sunstone Education Foundation. As Hansen Park wrote before the show was released, her mandate was to present the most accurate portrayal of Mormonism in all its forms, while also helping “to translate things that seem second nature to me [and others reared in the faith], and not to someone with no contact with Mormonism.” Even so, she admitted, “some Mormons will dismiss the series entirely if they see a word or hair out of place.”

As she predicted, some Latter-day Saints have created laundry lists of what the series gets wrong about the Mormon past and present. The series is loaded with what one writer called Mormon “shibboleths”: “Family Home Evening,” “Choose the Right” rings, sacred garments, and constant talk of “Heavenly Father.” Yet for some, these cultural references are so clumsily deployed as to make the series “unwatchably bad.” Many critics focused on how the opening scene of the series finds the Pyres’ twin daughters wearing prairie dresses as part of a Pioneer Day celebration, then just a few scenes later at a Lafferty family picnic, women and girls are dressed in a similar manner. To some faithful Mormons, the use of such sartorial iconography, which many Americans associate with the infamously abusive FLDS, formerly run by the convicted child rapist Warren Jeffs, is to collapse the distance between the church

in Salt Lake in its black sheep fundamentalist “sister” churches. Yet Cristina Rosetti, among the leading experts on Mormon fundamentalism has suggested, most Mormon fundamentalists are less like the Laffertys and the FLDS, and more like the characters on TLC’s *Sister Wives* and the polygamist family on *Big Love*. They dress in modern clothes, live in suburbs, and have business and social ties with their local communities. Many have relatives who are still members of the mainline church.

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This continuity of Mormon culture from the present all the way back to the church’s foundation period in the 1800s is the central conceit of the series (and Krakauer’s book). As he told the Hollywood Reporter, Black set out to utilize “the history of the church as clues to solve this case in 1984.” The series frequently splices moments of violence committed both against and by early Mormons with images from the murder scene, implying it was inevitable that in a faith born out of blood in the mid-19th century—both the blood of the persecuted Mormons and the blood of their enemies—the truly faithful would remain willing to spill blood of those who get in the way of the building of Heavenly Father’s kingdom.

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And in the present, as in the past, it is women who get in the way. When Mormon women challenge the authority of “priesthood holders,” Mormon men feel justified in their use of verbal and physical abuse, or worse, to put them back in their place. There is a straight line between the patriarchal system Joseph Smith Jr. built in the 1830s and 1840s and the abuse Mormon men inflict in the present. After piecing together the history of Joseph Smith’s polygamy—Smith had as many as 40 wives, at least one he married when she was only 14—Dan Lafferty tries to convince his wife Matilda (Chloe Pirrie) that he should take her daughters, his own stepdaughters, as his first plural wives. Still, the series gives less attention to the way modern Mormon women follow the matrilineal precedent established by Joseph’s first wife, Emma Hale Smith, to prevent Mormon men from abusing their “priesthood” to satisfy their own desires for sex and power. Matilda visibly revolts at the suggestion that her husband bed her 12- and 14-year-old daughters. That night, Matilda has sex with Dan to distract him as her daughters make their escape.

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For all its criticism of patriarchal structures, the series seems obsessed with Mormon men, be they dangerous or admirable. Jeb Pyre is unfailingly affectionate with his family, cares for his coworkers, and even demonstrates empathy for the people he interacts with as a cop. But when he tells his wife Rebecca (Adelaide Clemens) that he wants to change the date of their girls' baptism because he's overwhelmed with work—a desire to which his wife objects—he asserts his priesthood authority in a manner that feels uncomfortably close to the Lafferty brothers'. Jeb eventually stands up to the police superiors and church officials who want to leave the Laffertys' belief out of the investigation, and he pays a price for it: He and his family get the cold shoulder at church, and are even warned that his “confusion” about the Laffertys' motives might place his soul in eternal jeopardy. But Brenda Lafferty's heroism costs her her life.

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Under the Banner of Heaven's greatest weakness is that it fails to center Brenda's heroism: to tell the story from her point of view (which Black, who had access to her journals, not only could have done but in fact promised Brenda's family he would). I hope (pray?) that Brenda gets her turn in the final two episodes. She embodies a lot of Mormon women in the present and the past—the backbone and moral compasses of their families, the people who do the most labor in the church. “Well-behaved women seldom made history,” as my mentor, the

great historian (feminist icon and Latter-day Saint) Laurel Thatcher Ulrich famously wrote about women like Brenda Lafferty, “pious matrons” who serve as guardians of their faiths, and protectors of their families. The series’ Brenda is not a historical subject who wields the agency to “choose the right” by standing up to injustice and abuse. She is an object of the basest instincts of men: lust, jealousy, the desire to exert control, even with, if necessary, a 10-inch boning knife.

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According to her sister, Sharon Wright Weeks, the real Brenda Wright Lafferty was a beauty queen who wanted to be the next Diane Sawyer. She was also a card, who “could burp the alphabet,” Weeks recently told the Deseret News. “The whole alphabet.” Brenda loved her faith and her family and stood up to bullies, Mormon or not. Her life story, Weeks, suggests embodied the richness and complexity of what it means to be a Mormon woman. But instead, in *Under the Banner of Heaven*, her death is used to once again tell the story of what it means to be a Mormon man. ■

| Update, May 20, 2022: This article has been updated to clarify Lindsay Hansen Park’s relationship to Mormonism.

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