

# Southfield Public Library

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## *Under the Banner of Heaven by Jon Krakauer*

*Discussion Questions used at SPL March -- 2011*

1. Going into this book, what did you know about Mormonism? Do you feel as though you know the religion and the culture a bit better?
2. Do you feel as though the author portrayed the wide range of Mormon believers in a fair way? Did he draw enough distinction between the mainstream believers and the fundamentalists?
3. At the end of the book, the author let us know his religious beliefs. Did he keep those above his writings? Was he respectful of religion in general and of Mormonism in specific?
4. What do you think Mormons might think of this work? Why do you think there were no interviews with mainstream Mormons?
5. How would you compare the Mormons to the Amish that we read about in Plain Secrets? Did you see similarities? Differences?
6. How would you describe the relationship between Mormonism and the U.S. government?
7. On their trek out west in the 1800's, do you think they acted any better – or any worse – than any other pioneers?
8. Did you like how the book was constructed, with alternating chapters on the history of Mormonism, the fundamentalists and then with the murders?
9. Taking into account that this was written by a non-Mormon, what did you think of Joseph Smith, the founder? Could you believe that God told him that having plural wives was necessary? Why do you think that was revealed to him?
10. Would you agree that fundamentalists are fundamentalists? For you, what is the definition of a fundamentalist?
11. On p. 321, the author asked Dan Lafferty if he had considered the parallels between himself and Osama Bin Laden . . . did you see any?
12. How can someone know if they are following a false prophet, as Dan describes bin Laden?
13. Prosecutor David Leavitt argued “that people in the state of Utah simply do not understand and have not understood for fifty years the devastating effects that the practice of polygamy has on young girls in our society (p. 24). What do you think the effect is? What about on boys? Is it pedophilia, as the attorney claims?
14. What do you think our society's fascination with polygamy is? Consider the shows on TV - Big Love and Sister Wives?
15. One interesting point about this religion is that this is one of the few that was born in modern times and that events were documented in contemporary newspapers and books. Does that make a difference in how it is viewed?

16. On to the Lafferty Brothers . . . Do you think they really believed God told them to kill Brenda and the baby? What's your opinion on why they committed that crime?
17. Were they insane because they talked to God and because God talked to them? Would that make most of the world insane?
18. Playing armchair psychiatrist, would you consider the brothers insane? Would agree with the author's belief that Ron, especially, suffers from narcissism? P. 303
19. Many people knew of their "revelation" to kill Brenda and Erica . . . why didn't anyone do something?
20. Why do you think people follow and obey what seems to be an obviously crazy person? What do you think they are looking for?
21. What did you think of the Lafferty brothers' upbringing? Despite admitting to being beaten by their father and seeing their mother abused, they felt that they had a good home. Why would they think that?
22. What do you think of the whole business of Ron trying to kill Dan while in jail? Why would Dan submit to that? What do you think Dan thinks of his brother?
23. Ron, who received the death penalty, is still appealing his case.

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## *General Discussion Questions*

- For the person who chose the book – What made you want to read it? What made you pick it for the book club? Did it live up to your expectations?
- How is the book structured? First person? Third person? Flashbacks? Narrative devices? Do you think the author did a good job with it?
- How would you describe the author's writing style? Concise? Flowery? How is language used in this book? Read aloud a passage that really struck you. How does that passage relate to the book as a whole?
- How effective is the author's use of plot twists? Were you able to predict certain things before they happened? Did the author keep you guessing until the end?
- Did the book hold your interest?
- How important is the setting to the story? Did you feel like you were somewhere else? Did the time setting make a difference in the story? Did the author provide enough background information for you to understand the setting and time placement?
- Which is stronger in the book – the characters or the plots?
- Would you recommend this book to someone else? Why? And to whom?

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## *Under the Banner of Heaven*

Discussion questions from LitLover.com

<http://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/14-non-fiction/1088-under-the-banner-of-heaven-krakauer>

1. In his prologue, Jon Krakauer writes that the aim of his book is to "cast some light on Lafferty and his ilk," which he concedes is a daunting but useful task for what it may tell us "about the roots of brutality, perhaps, but even more for what might be learned about the nature of faith" [p. XXIII]. What does the book reveal about fanatics such as Ron and Dan Lafferty? What does it reveal about brutality and faith and the connections between them?
2. Why does Krakauer move back and forth between Mormon history and contemporary events? What are the connections between the beliefs and practices of Joseph Smith and his followers in the nineteenth century and the behavior of people like Dan and Ron Lafferty, Brian David Mitchell, and others in the twentieth?
3. Prosecutor David Leavitt argued that "People in the state of Utah simply do not understand, and have not understood for fifty years, the devastating effect that the practice of polygamy has on young girls in our society" [p. 24]. How does polygamy affect young girls? Is it, as Leavitt claims, pedophilia plain and simple?
4. Joseph Smith claimed that the doctrine of polygamy was divinely inspired. What earthly reasons might also explain Smith's attraction to having plural wives?
5. When Krakauer asks Dan Lafferty if he has considered the parallels between himself and Osama bin Laden, Dan asserts that bin Laden is a "child of the Devil" and that the hijackers were "following a false prophet," whereas he is following a true prophet [p. 321]. No doubt, bin Laden would say much the same of Lafferty. How are Dan Lafferty and Osama bin Laden alike? In what ways are all religious fundamentalists alike?
6. Krakauer asks: "if Ron Lafferty were deemed mentally ill because he obeyed the voice of God, isn't everyone who believes in God and seeks guidance through prayer mentally ill as well?" [p. 297] Given the nature of, and motive for, the murders of Brenda Lafferty and her child, should Ron Lafferty be considered mentally ill? If so, should all others who "talk to God" or receive revelations--a central tenant of Mormonism--also be considered mentally ill? What would the legal ramifications be of such a shift in thought?
7. Krakauer begins part III with a quote from Bertrand Russell, who asserts that "every single bit of progress in humane feeling, every improvement in the criminal law, every step toward the diminution of war, every step toward better treatment of the colored races, or every mitigation of slavery, every moral progress that there has been in the world, has been consistently opposed by the organized churches of the world" [p. 191]. Is this a fair and accurate statement? What historical examples support it? What improvements in humane feeling and social justice has the Mormon church opposed?
8. How are mainstream and fundamentalist Mormons likely to react to Krakauer's book?

9. Much of *Under the Banner of Heaven* explores the tensions between freedom of religion and governmental authority. How should these tensions be resolved? How can the state allow religious freedom to those who place obedience to God's will above obedience to secular laws?

10. Joseph Smith called himself "a second Mohammed," and Krakauer quotes George Arbaugh who suggests that Mormonism's "aggressive theocratic claims, political aspirations, and use of force, make it akin to Islam" [p. 102]. What other similarities exist between the Mormon and Islamic faiths?

11. How should Joseph Smith be understood: as a delusional narcissist, a con man, or "an authentic religious genius" [p. 55], as Harold Bloom claims?

12. Krakauer suggests that much of John Wesley Powell's book, *The Exploration of the Colorado River and Its Canyons*, particularly his account of his dealings with the Shivwit Indians, should be regarded with a "healthy dose of skepticism," and that it embellishes and omits important facts [p. 245]. Is Krakauer himself a trustworthy guide to the events he describes in *Under the Banner of Heaven*? Are his writing and his judgments fair and reasonable? What makes them so?

13. What patterns emerge from looking at Mormon history? What do events like the Mountain Meadow massacre and the violence between Mormons and gentiles in Missouri and Illinois suggest about the nature of Mormonism? Have Mormons been more often the perpetrators or the victims of violence?

14. At the very end of the book, former Mormon fundamentalist DeLoy Bateman says that while the Mormon fundamentalists who live within Colorado City may be happier than those who live outside it, he believes that "some things in life are more important than being happy. Like being free to think for yourself" [p. 334]. Why does Krakauer end the book this way? In what ways are Mormons not free to think for themselves? Is such freedom more important than happiness?  
(Questions provided by publisher.)

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## *Under the Banner of Heaven*

**Ron Lafferty during his trial**



**Dan Lafferty during his trial**

