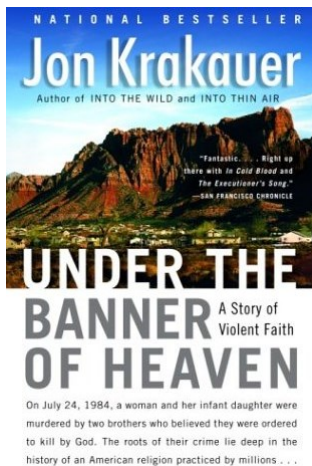




# Discussion Guide

## About the Book



Book Title: *Under the Banner of Heaven*

Author: Jon Krakauer

Published by Random House/Anchor Books, New York, 2004

Author Website: <https://www.facebook.com/jonkrakauer>, <http://knopfdoubleday.com/krakauer/>

Book Website: <http://www.randomhouse.com/features/krakauer/>

## Questions for Discussion

1. What were your general impressions of the book?
2. Krakauer says that his original goal was to write about Science and Religion, but the book took on a life of its own. How does the debate between science and religion play in the book, and how did the theme change as he did his research?
3. The Mormon Church was very critical of this book. Krakauer says that they choose to not tell the whole truth. Do you think the book was unfair to the Mormon Church? Why or why not?
4. An interesting part of the history of the Mormon Church is the practice of polygamy. What did you learn about polygamy in this novel? What surprised you? Why do you think the mainstream church does not endorse this practice?
5. The book outlines the journey of the fundamentalists who believed that God called them to take violent action against others. Do you think their action was justified in any way? Do you believe violent action based on religious belief is justified? If so, in what situations?
6. Did this book change your thoughts about the Mormons in any way? Explain.
7. Read over the MAMs comments. Which of the MAMs do you most agree with and why?
8. Would you recommend this book for other Book Clubs? Why or why not?
9. In what ways, if any, will this book change your life or perspective?

## Nancy and the MAMs discuss the book...



**NANCY:** Once again, it took me a long time to get invested in this book. I found it difficult to read about these fundamentalists who chose to take a violent path based on a perceived call from God. But once past the first 100 pages, I found the story very engaging. Although I know I studied about the Mormon Church in the past, I really didn't know the whole story. I am grateful to Krakauer for taking the time to do the research, reading available history and interviewing family members and even the criminals involved to give us a full account of why the Mormon fundamentalists chose to kill a young mother and her baby. He incorporates so much history of the Mormon church while also giving us an inside view of the fundamentalist fringe groups that choose to continue to practice polygamy.

As a Christian, who believes God still speaks to us, to me, I found the debate and trial concerning Dan Lafferty very interesting. Are people who claim to hear God speak, crazy? I appreciated that the court found the answer to be "No" to that question! And I enjoyed Krakauer's reflections on this subject. He summarized well the dilemma within religion—if each religion is right to its followers and every other religion is wrong, how can that be?

I have never thought very much about polygamy, but Krakauer certainly exposed the underside of the practice. While there may be benevolent polygamists, it's certainly clear that domestic violence and underage sex pose many issues from a woman's perspective.

I can understand why the Mormon Church wasn't very happy with this book. Yet, I agree with Krakauer that they should be more honest about their history, and explain their divergence from some of the former practices.



**SALLIE:** Whenever I had Mormons in my classes, I was impressed with the two parent intact families. Although the Mormon Church today is rather traditional and conservative, the children flourish in this environment for the most part. I think Krakauer left the mainstream out of his book, except for a few references. I understand that some children are abused, but that's not just among Mormons. Certainly raping young girls should be addressed.



**MOLLY:** I didn't realize the original teachings of Joseph Smith were racist. Fortunately, the Mormon Church has done away with that, as well as polygamy. But they still keep the women down, like many religions. I, of course, question the validity of these beliefs because of this. Was Joseph Smith just a charlatan, creating lies to sell to the people? Because he was so charismatic he succeeded? Krakauer suggested that the American religious scene at the time created an opening for his brand of faith and Smith's personality helped spread the news. What a story!



**PRISCILLA:** This book made me think. I've always thought that being a fundamentalist is good. I want things to be black and white. I want to believe the truth and not be wishy washy. But the fundamentalists were the villains here. It made me realize how important it is to get our truth right.



**KATHARINE:** I appreciated Krakauer's scholarship in this book. Very well researched. I teach about the Christian church, and most of that occurred without the benefit of the modern publishing movement. Krakauer makes that point that the Mormon story happened after the invention of the printing press and is well documented. We spend a lot of time trying to fill in the blanks of the early spiritual history when we are going back 2000 years and more! Kudos to Jon for his good work.



**JANE:** What a story! Brigham Young's got a university named after him, and he thought that polygamy could help men stay moral? Please! Dirty old men allowed to just keep taking more wives so they can have whatever they want sexually without restraint? Thank you Jon Krakauer for exposing some seriously abusive practices. Dan and Ron Lafferty may not be crazy, but they are certainly religion run amuck. How dare they believe God is calling them to kill Brenda who stood up for their wives and the women suffering at the hands of these men?



**ABIGAIL:** A very sad story, indeed. I found it very interesting that Dan Lafferty said that "Organized religion is hate masquerading as love." It seems he was condemning himself, but no he was really only condemning everyone else who is wrong. Yet, isn't this part of our problem today, that in judging and condemning others, organized religion often doesn't have anything to do with love?