

Discussion Questions for *Under the Banner of Heaven* by Jon Krakauer

(Most questions taken or adapted from <http://www.randomhouse.com>.)

1. Did you like the book? Why or why not?
2. In his prologue, 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?
3. 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?
4. 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]. Do you feel that polygamy is, as Leavitt claims, pedophilia plain and simple?
5. Joseph Smith claimed that the doctrine of polygamy was divinely inspired. What earthly reasons might also explain Smith’s attraction to having plural wives? Why is American society fascinated with polygamy?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. How would you expect mainstream and fundamentalist Mormons to react to Krakauer’s book?

10. 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?
11. 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?
12. How should Joseph Smith be understood: as a delusional narcissist, a con man, "an authentic religious genius" [p. 55], as Harold Bloom claims, or as something else?
13. 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?
14. 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?
15. 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?
16. Are there questions you would like to ask?