



Avoiding Intellectual Paralysis, Part III: Revisiting Krakauer's *Under the Banner of Heaven*

By **Ben P** – February 20, 2012

This is a (very loose) continuation of the (very broad) series on reaching a broader audience. See also [here](#) and [here](#).

“Bowman doesn’t shy away from the unsavory aspects of the Mormon faith, including a now-discredited belief in polygamy (as revealed in a revelation to Joseph Smith, the founder of the religion), as well as institutionalized racism. However, the ongoing controversies of the church and the stream of recent media describing Mormonism as a cult—from Jon Krakauer’s scathing non-fiction work *Under the Banner of Heaven* to HBO’s *Big Love*—is left entirely unaddressed in this work, which instead pays occasional attention to the inherently American aspects of the religion.” —[Publisher’s Weekly](#)

“Any discussion of *Big Love*, a complicated recent portrait of polygamy in a Mormon-like community, is left out. Nor is there a mention of Jon Krakauer’s forceful and very critical 2003 book, *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith*.” —Dwight Garner, [New York Times](#)

Many people, correctly, have pointed out the obsession with Krakauer's *Under the Banner of Heaven* as one of the many oddities in these unfortunate reviews of Matt Bowman's recent book. What, we wonder, made Krakauer's caricatured telling of Mormonism's "violent" past so crucial that to avoid it in a historical survey of the LDS Church is worthy of being charged with negligence? Few academics praised the 2003 book, it makes very few lists of "necessary" monographs on Mormon history, and almost anyone with more than a superficial understanding of Mormonism's past recognize the sensationalistic aspects of its thesis. Put simply, it's a shoddy work of history, and should have been destined to be another flash-in-the-pan sensationalist work that soon fell into insignificance. (*The Mormon Murders*, anyone?)

But the book has earned remarkable staying power, as shown by the fact that several reviewers imply that any work on Mormon history *must* engage Krakauer's volume. It has sold better than any other work on Mormonism, and remains a staple on any "LDS Church" bookshelf in nearly every bookstore. Thinking that the book may be worth a revisit, I checked out a copy from the University Library and read it through again this past week. While it would be easy to point out all the flaws and problems in the book—and trust me, there are *many*—I decided to not take that route. Instead, what follows are two general impressions on why *Under the Banner of Heaven* is still popular, and what lessons they hold for authors of Mormon history.

First, Krakauer is a helluva writer. There is a reason he has written a string of best sellers. His prose is phenomenal, riveting, and pitch perfect. In an age where most readers' reading attention is limited to 140 characters, the importance of a fast-moving narrative cannot be emphasized enough. Reviews of *Under the Banner of Heaven* include phrases like "astonishing narrative force," "elegant reportage," "captivating," "engrossing," and "breezy, smooth and vigorously written." And even if Krakauer doesn't deserve a lot of the praise that has been heaped upon it, he certainly deserves accolades for his narrative flair. Even going into the book with the assumption that I would (once again) hate it, and that assumption was never overturned, I found myself engrossed in the text and plowing through it faster than I have nearly any other book this past year.

Needless to say, the field Mormon history does not have a Krakauer. The closest we have had was Fawn Brodie, whose biography of Joseph Smith is, despite its serious flaws, still the most readable account of Mormonism's origins. Sure, we have some *compelling writers* in the field (my vote for best writer would be for Ron Walker), but very few write in a prose that is readable for the general public. Naturally, this is a different type of writing style than most historians go for, but I would hope that Mormon historical studies has progressed to the point that we would

have both academic masterpieces (which we are achieving, and achieving with more regularity) as well as popular bestsellers. Can Mormon historians write in this way and for this type of audience? Can we produce a popularizing historian that can take the lessons from our mountain of formidable scholarship and make something the mainstream public would buy in bulk? Or do we have to rely on journalists and popular writers who have no idea about the nuances of history to fill that void? Surely there are models of historians—like Joseph Ellis and Jill Lepore—who can be academically rigorous while still publicly digestible. Ironically, I would say Matt Bowman’s *The Mormon People*, which the reviewers above ripped for being too tame, comes the closest to reaching this ideal.

Second, Krakauer used Mormon history to address an immediately relevant and contemporary concern. His preface is frank in explaining his approach to Mormonism as a way to understand how religious zealots “work.” “It is the aim of this book,” he wrote, “to cast some light” on religious extremists. This is an imminently “useful” exercise, he reasoned, because it informs us “about the roots of brutality, perhaps, but even more for what might be learned about the nature of faith” (xxiii). Since it appeared two years after 9/11, we can see the power of this inquisition. Average readers may be cursorily interested in the nuances of the past, but are more intrigued by what it means for the present. They want a history that makes sense of what is currently going on. There are, of course, dangers embedded in this impulse. For one thing, it can lead to presentism, as we try to make historic events square too perfectly with modern presumptions; for another, it can lead to caricatured and deeply problematic accounts of the past that overlook context, nuance, and complexities in order to fit a lesson or thesis, as is the case with Krakauer. But, when done responsibly, the approach can be well-rewarding. Religion scholar Stephen Prothero argued nearly a decade ago that academics shouldn’t be wary from jumping into these types of questions and debates, mostly because the general public yearns for these opinions and, if scholars don’t speak up, they will get their answers from less informed people.* Several recent works have exemplified this approach by looking at historical moments in order to explain broader issues in humanity, including Sophia Rosenfeld’s **outstanding work** on common sense and the origins of democracy, John Fea’s **careful treatment** of religion and the Founding Fathers, Annette Gordon-Reed’s **look** at racism and family dynamics, Amanda Porterfield’s **forthcoming book** on doubt in American politics, or, if we go back two decades, Gordon Woods’s **book** on the foundations of America’s democratic culture.

Mormon historians been very tenuous toward this type of approach. Perhaps a backlash against, on the one hand, devotional works that emphasize too much continuity and, on the other, critical works that seek to condemn the current institution due to problems in the past, practitioners in Mormon studies generally emphasize the distance of the past. The only book that comes to mind

which directly attempts this type of approach is Craig Harline's *Conversions*, which I discussed [here](#). But while we don't have many books that tackle contemporary questions through historical inquiries, we do (fortunately) have many scholars entering into public dialogue through newspapers and online magazines. Scholars like Richard Bushman, Terryl Givens, Laurie Maffly-Kipp, Nate Oman, Matt Bowman, and Max Mueller have provided excellent commentary that is historically informed while still addressing contemporary issues; I hope to see more of this in the future.

So perhaps the continued fascination with Krakauer's *Under the Banner of Heaven* should be seen as a "call to arms" for Mormon writers. Instead of complaining about his continued relevance, we need to write texts that will replace works like his by fitting into this popular history niche. We have often pointed to the "future" of Mormon historical studies (Post New Mormon History, New New Mormon History, Newer Mormon History, etc.) as being able to speak to broader academic issues and a wider academic audience, but maybe it also means finally stepping out into the bigger popular arena as well. I am not, of course, calling for the entire field to turn to this type of writing—heavens no—but I do think there should be more conscious efforts along these lines. For, until we speak to the questions and issues that Krakauer does, and do so in prose that is not jarring for people outside the ivory tower, the general populace will continue to turn to books like *Under the Banner of Heaven*.

Or, to put it another way, we need at least some informed historians and practitioners of Mormon Studies to write books that are just as likely to be sold in airport bookstores as they are in Benchmark Books.

* Stephen Prothero, "Belief Unbracketed: A Case for the Religion Scholar to Reveal More of Where He or She is Coming From," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 32/2. Also see the replies. For some weird reason, I can't find these online anymore.

Another reason for Krakauer's continued relevance, but which is a completely different topic altogether, is the consistent desire to identify Mormonism as the exotic "other" that is separate from the American mainstream and belongs on stage, on film, or in sensationalist nonfiction books—close enough to entertain, but far enough to not indict American culture as a whole. Hence *Big Love* often being used in conjunction with *Under the Banner of Heaven*, as it is in the reviews of Matt's book quoted above. But that issue deserves its own treatment.

Comments

1

Quick story: I was on my mission in Washington DC when this book came out, and it had a lot of hype. Most bookstores I walked past had a copy in their display windows, but I had no idea it was about Mormonism. It wasn't until I was in the home of someone who was investigating the Church that I saw on their coffee table a copy of *Newsweek*, which featured an article on the book, that I realized it was about violence within the LDS tradition. I'd be lying if I said I didn't consider sneaking that magazine out of their house in hopes that they hadn't read it yet...

Comment by Ben P — February 20, 2012 @ 7:15 am

2

Ben, great commentary regarding the field of Mormon Studies. As undisciplined as his work is, Krakauer is an important lesson in academic relevance. We have seen this same problem within Islamic Studies. With the "9-11 mosque" controversy, we largely saw the equivalent of Krakauer teaching the public how to respond to Islam and their muslim neighbors. I really didn't see many academics brought in to inform the conversation.

Comment by K Smith — February 20, 2012 @ 10:42 am

3

Nice post—it raises a host of good issues. Although I've heard academics recently talk about this type of problem, none of them have acknowledged that there is an entire field of history that specifically engages the public—public history—and that has dealt with such questions for years. As someone with a Ph.D. in public history and a practitioner of it for over ten years, I naturally think it's an important field. A paper I will be giving at the upcoming Organization of American Historians/National Council on Public History is on the question of audience in Mormon history and how to engage a wider audience while also producing scholarly history. Aside from the interesting suggestions above, I would also argue that Mormon history needs more practitioners—especially those who are working outside of academia—that are actually trained in the theory and practice of public history.

Comment by M. Godfrey — February 20, 2012 @ 11:42 am

4

A few thoughts —

First, I recognize that there has long been a field called public history but I am not sure that segregating public history and academic history from each other is a good thing. It creates a false dichotomy. I think all historians need to be publicly engaged and willing to translate their work for larger audiences. This is especially important as the horrendous academic job market pushes more and more traditionally trained students into the public history market. Michigan has recently begun offering courses and practicums in public history for those who are interested.

Second, I wonder about genre here. Krakauer is a journalist and is using history in service of the story he wants to tell, which I agree is a polemical one. What are the rules for when we want to tell such stories? Are they

different from when we create academic history? I am not advocating that we bend truth or fact to fit our needs, but I DO think that we do and should judge books like “Devil in the White City” and “Under the Banner of Heaven” using different standards than Bushman or Givens. I also think it’s helpful to think of “Under the Banner of Heaven” as part of a much larger tradition of activist works like Fanny Stenhouse’s “Expose of Polygamy” and Ann Eliza Young’s “Wife no. 19”

Comment by Amanda HK — February 20, 2012 @ 1:01 pm

5

Amanda, # 4, you said:

Krakauer is a journalist and is using history in service of the story he wants to tell, which I agree is a polemical one. What are the rules for when we want to tell such stories? Are they different from when we create academic history?

Part of the issue is that using a term like “academic history” is also part of the issue. How much do we want to discredit historical research and writing that comes from outside academia? This is an important question for me as a non-academic currently engaged in researching and writing Mormon history. You’ve got folks like Jonathan Stapley who is both a solid researcher, and good writer, producing a string of valuable articles of late about historical Mormon liturgy and ordinances. Yet while I would deem his work scholarly, he really is outside the academy, with a day job and no faculty position to support his history work. Similarly, my wife and I have made a few jokes about my “expensive new hobby.”

The rules are different for a Krakauer or Timothy Egan, another popular historian whose work I have enjoyed. They are terrific writers that know how to sell books and make a living at it. Their work is not generally filtered through reading papers at conferences, and working through peer review. They have agents and editors they need to engage from the first paragraph of their manuscripts, all done from the standpoint of asking the question, “Can we sell this?”

I personally think that we can and should produce more popular histories. Perhaps, even though we are more open to telling accurately our own Church history, there is still a sense of “sacredness” about it that keeps us from “lowering our standards” to write popular history. I haven’t read Bowman’s book yet, but it sounds like a step in the right direction. Until we can produce a few more polished commercial writers publishing “popular history,” we are granting the upper hand to the Krakauer’s of the world. And while I have enjoyed Egan’s other works, I know enough about him not to trust him with a Mormon history. His approach would be just as polemical as Krakauer. We’ve ceded the field to our enemies, and we need to learn to play by their rules to win it back.

Comment by kevinf — February 20, 2012 @ 1:58 pm

6

Sorry about the redundant “part of the issue” in the first sentence of my #5 above. Obviously, I am not yet in Krakauer’s league. Editors needed!

Comment by kevinf — February 20, 2012 @ 2:01 pm

7

Great points. The risks I see it are that a) pro-Mormon stuff written in a zippy style is of zero interest to non-Mormons, and b) neutral stuff doesn't lend itself to zippy writing style. So for a controversial fringe group like Mormonism, zippy style is going to be most susceptible to Krakauer approaches over the long term. That said, Wallace Stegner has nice zip, and John Turner's BY bio is written in good, accessible style.

Comment by smb — February 20, 2012 @ 5:46 pm

8

Neutral stuff doesn't lend itself to zippy writing style.

There's the issue in a nutshell.

Comment by kevinf — February 20, 2012 @ 6:17 pm

9

Good point smb. I just wish we could communicate how sensationalist Krakauer's stuff is. I think the parallels to how Islam gets "understood" are pretty solid. Sadly a lot of members who would be ruffled by Krakauer won't think twice about talking about the dangers of Sharia Law in the US and think all Islam is uniform.

Comment by Clark — February 20, 2012 @ 6:47 pm

10

I wonder where do we place someone like Juanita Brooks in this discussion. I am ashamed to admit that I haven't gotten around to reading any of her books thoroughly, but from what skimming I have done her writing is accessible, zippy and entertaining. The primary focus of her book isn't faith promoting by any means, but I wouldn't place her in the anti-Mormon camp either.

I also wonder if there's a sense of safety in academic writing. Writing in a zippy style requires you put yourself out there in a way that academic style doesn't.

Comment by Amanda HK — February 20, 2012 @ 8:59 pm

11

On a side note, Mormon Enigma is the most accessible book about Mormonism I've ever read. There were times I felt like crying and I respected Emma more after I read it and deeply empathize with her to the point where I have developed a dislike for Eliza R. Snow.

Comment by Amanda HK — February 20, 2012 @ 9:01 pm

12

"academics shouldn't be wary from jumping into these types of questions and debates, mostly because the general public yearns for these opinions and, if scholars don't speak up, they will get their answers from less informed people."

We had this discussion at the Yale conference a few years back, in terms of academic LDS writing for an LDS

audience.

Krakauer remains relevant; a recent convert teaching Priesthood yesterday brought it up.

Comment by Ben S — February 21, 2012 @ 7:58 am

13

Great discussion, everyone; not much to add, as everyone has brought up unassailable points that I agree with.

Let's get writing!

Comment by Ben P — February 21, 2012 @ 8:34 am

14

This seems like a good place to have this discussion regarding “zippy writing.” I am reading a paper at the upcoming Joseph F. Smith Church History/BYU symposium. I did a dry run last night with some friends at our home, and I believe the term “dry” was terribly apt. I can't read the whole paper in 20 minutes, and to arbitrarily jump from place to place only accentuates the potential yawn inducing monotone delivery, with awkward pauses. I am toying with not actually reading the paper, using a powerpoint with good images, and talk in a general conversational tone, and quote from the relevant sources from time to time. As this is my first time presenting at a conference of this type, I'm not sure how this will go over. I guess I am trying for a “zippy” presentation. Is this considered bad conference etiquette? Will I be scorned, ostracized, and banned from commenting at the JI? I know I run the risk of looking foolish as well, but that happens pretty much every time I open my mouth anyway. Any thoughts?

Comment by kevinf — February 21, 2012 @ 1:16 pm

15

kevin, lots of people do powerpoints at conferences, nothing wrong with that. There are a few powerpoint nos (like not putting too much text on the slides, ie don't just read your paper off the powerpoint) but your ideas sound like they'll work.

Comment by Steve Fleming — February 21, 2012 @ 1:57 pm

16

If you're going to present from an outline or series of images instead of reading a paper, you **have to** practice it several times, maybe 5-8 times all the way through beforehand. Otherwise the experience will be too painful for words for all concerned.

Comment by D. Martin — February 21, 2012 @ 2:42 pm

17

From embarrassing experience, I second D. Martin. I'm very used to presenting informally off an outline+slides (do it every week), but did not realize the compactness of my presentation materials; I would have run to 70 minutes or so, and I was allotted 15. Fortunately, there were not many people at MSH that year. Still embarrassed four years later.

Comment by Ben S — February 21, 2012 @ 2:49 pm

18

Thanks, all, the advice is really appreciated. I've done enough embarrassing things in my life; I don't need to add to the list.

Comment by kevinf — February 21, 2012 @ 3:10 pm

19

Assume 3 min per slide and people like eye candy, not text. Don't love Gould but he's hilarious about reading papers at conferences.

You will have time to make one actual point, at most two. I am embarrassed still that I once read a paper, fast, for 55 straight minutes. Prolly 9000 words. Like an SNL skit or something.

Seriously, 5 slides at most and think about the one point you want your audience to understand.

Comment by smb — February 21, 2012 @ 9:22 pm

20

Yeah, this was Plato's objection to poets: they could make false claims so attractive that they would be believed by readers rather than those dull but enlightening treatises and dialogues penned by mere philosophers. The same dynamic applies to narratives by journalists and historians.

You can't blame Krakauer for writing a gripping narrative. But readers and journalists really ought to understand that if understanding history is your goal, read books written by historians.

I do think the subtitle of Krakauer's book is (unintentionally?) misleading. "A Story of Violent Faith" morphs too easily into "A Story of a Violent Faith," which is glossed to "Mormonism: a Violent Faith." That isn't really what the narrative was arguing but that is what many readers and reviewers took away from the book.

Comment by Dave — February 22, 2012 @ 3:03 pm

21

Ben,

Great post and excellent questions. I think it is important to also remember that *Under the Banner of Heaven* was not Krakauer's first book. He has written a string of well-received generalist tomes as a journalist. I would argue that a lot of people were drawn to UTBOH because they liked Krakauer as an author, and not necessarily because of the subject matter. Mormonism, for Krakauer, is not a topic, but instead the setting for a good story. That is the difference between historians and journalist who write about history. Historians the past is the story, while for journalists the past is the setting for stories.

So what am I saying? I'm not completely sure. I think generalist work on Mormonism can only have the same impact on the general (non-Mormon) public when it comes from authors with the same skills and stature that Krakauer has. I think there are plenty of Mormon studies writers who could develop the skills of Krakauer as has been pointed out, the problem is finding someone with the same stature. Maybe we, as historians, need to encourage journalism students to develop religious sensibilities, or maybe we just need to encourage Mormon authors to publish great books that are not necessarily even related to Mormonism. I think that historians have

taken Richard Bushman's work on Mormonism seriously primarily because his other historical work, that doesn't focus primarily on Mormonism, was so well done.

Comment by [Joel](#) — February 22, 2012 @ 4:19 pm

22

Random follow-up: I just received an email from Amazon saying "if you loved *The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith*, we recommend Jon Krakauer's *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith*." Sigh.

Also, Joel, I somehow missed your comment before now. Very well-said.

Comment by [Ben P](#) — March 7, 2012 @ 7:40 am

23

[...] we get the utter weirdness of objections to Matt Bowman's recent book. As if any portrayal of Mormonism that doesn't bring in Krakauer or Brodie (popular histories [...])

Pingback by [Essentialism disguised as authenticity | A Motley Vision](#) — March 7, 2012 @ 11:36 am

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