

What *Under the Banner of Heaven* Gets Wrong

Craig L. Foster

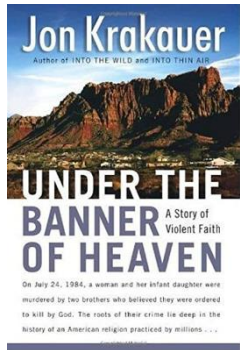
In 2003, Jon Krakauer's *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith* was published. Krakauer, well known for action-adventure books, argued that Mormonism has a history and doctrine deeply seeped in violence. In a review of Krakauer's book titled, "Doing Violence to Journalistic Integrity," I strongly took issue with Krakauer's claims of a violent faith. I ended my review by stating:

In conclusion, Krakauer's *Under the Banner of Heaven* has not lived up to expectations nor to its pre- and post-publication publicity. Moreover, his obvious biases against both religion in general and the Church of Jesus Christ in particular have made the book nothing more than a flawed, sensationalistic work that, it is hoped, will soon be forgotten along with many similar anti-Mormon works of the past.¹



Craig L. Foster
August 2022

Obviously, I am not a prophet. Rather than disappearing, Krakauer's book has become, according to some sources, one of the best-selling books on Mormonism in the twenty-first century. We now have *Under the Banner of Heaven*, the FX series that appeared on Hulu.



Dustin Lance Black, a former member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, spent more than a decade adapting Krakauer's book into a screenplay.² Black proudly announced that he "worked very hard to not just rely on Jon's book, but to dig deeper." He said, "I wanted it to be authentic." Furthermore, he claims to be "one of the most

diligent about trying to stay most close to the truth."³

Black and others associated with the series claimed to have worked to have the most accurate portrayal of the church "in all its forms."⁴ And many members of the media heralded the show's supposed accuracy. TIME had a headline stating, "Black Sticks Close to the Facts" and the Los Angeles Times announced that this series gets church history "right" even "down to the bullet holes."⁵



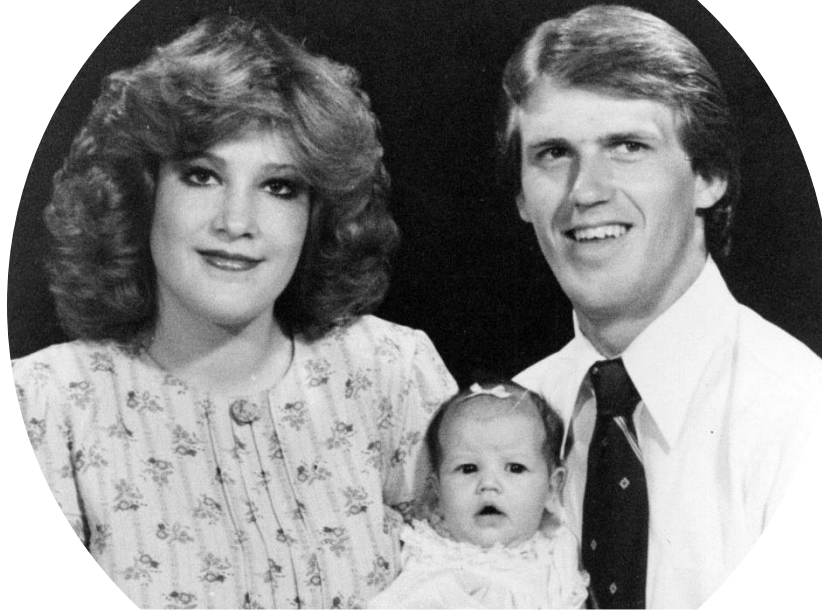
Dustin Lance Black



Krakauer

During an interview about the series, Jon Krakauer enthusiastically said, "They hated my book, and I think they're gonna go crazy about this."⁶ The show, according to Black, helps people feel "less alone in their questions, less alone in their concerns."⁷

Under the Banner of Heaven, which aired as a seven-part television series on Hulu during April and May of this year, ostensibly recounts the 1984 murders of Brenda Lafferty and her infant daughter, Erica Lafferty. The murders were committed by two of Brenda's brothers-in-law, Dan and Ron Lafferty, who claimed they were commanded by God to do so. Both the book and the show address these murders, but the TV series does so in such a tortured, twisted, roundabout way that people have questioned the true purpose of the show itself.



Brenda, Erica, and Allen Lafferty

Perhaps anticipating criticism of the series, a woman hired as one of the show's paid consultants because of her "knowledge and experience with Mormon fundamentalist history as well as Mormon and Utah history and culture," wrote, "I know that some Mormons will dismiss the series entirely if they see a word or hair out of place." She continued, "Shortsighted as that seems, that's the reality of our community that uses purity as a rubric for truth. Stories, life and art are a bit messier, and the truth found in the messiness is more interesting to me. ... There are so many instances where we could have been inflammatory or sensational and Lance repeatedly chose not to. He was a fierce advocate for our people."⁸

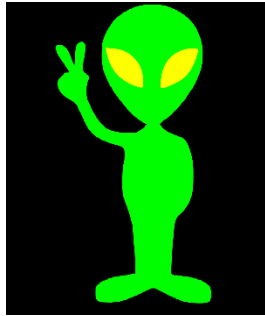
Under the Banner of Heaven television miniseries announces that the televised version was 'inspired' by the book of the same name. It wasn't even 'based on.' It was inspired. And, despite declarations of avoiding the inflammatory and sensational, the series mixes fact and fiction to create a show in which the audience doesn't know when fact stops, and fiction takes over. This shouldn't be surprising given Dustin Lance Black has said "a writer defines their style by how far they can bend history before it snaps."

In the case of *Under the Banner of Heaven*, there was a lot of bending history. In the process, the series gets a lot wrong. We will take a look at just a few examples out of many that *Under the Banner of Heaven* gets wrong.

We'll start first with Stereotyping.

As one reviewer noted, the series "depicts Mormons as bizarre, one-dimensional puppets—conversing in dialogue as foreign to members of the faith as to outsiders."⁹ A viewer also expressed concern about the dialogue. She wrote, "The dialogue uses 'Mormon words' but not in the context that members would use it. I have heard many of the phrases throughout my life, but not in those contexts."¹⁰ Mormon historian Patrick Mason, who had attended the Salt Lake City premier, wrote that "it's a problem for the show that none of the Mormon scholars I was sitting with -- all of whom know full well

how to apply an open, critical gaze to our own culture and tradition -- recognized ourselves or our people in the show.”¹¹



Hollywood portrayals of church members

Watching Hollywood portrayals of church members is often as surreal as watching aliens pretending to be human. This television series was filled with clichéd stereotypes such as the overuse of Heavenly Father, referring to everyone as ‘brother’ and ‘sister’—and that includes police officers canvassing the neighborhood during the criminal investigation—as well as a number of other superficial things.

However, it didn’t stop there. In order to make what the Lafferty brothers did even more shocking than it already was, the show portrayed “a uniquely pathological and apostate family as somehow representative of the faith community as a whole.” In fact, the show went beyond that. During the series were a number of comments about the Lafferty family being the Kennedys of Utah. Marrying into the Lafferty family was like “marrying royalty” as Brenda Lafferty says in episode 2.

There are deeper insinuations such as constant suggestions of women being second-class in the church. For example, during the investigation, when they find out Brenda Lafferty wrote a letter to Church headquarters, Jeb Pyre (the made-up investigator) says, “The living prophet. It’s kind of like writing a letter to Heavenly Father himself. And it’s – it’s hard to imagine an LDS wife doing this to her own family. It’s extreme.”

The stereotyping and misinformation can be found in every episode. And this extends not only to members of the Church of Jesus Christ. While the series did a better job differentiating between members of the LDS Church and Fundamentalist Mormons than Krakauer’s original book, there are still real problems. And once again, there are needless stereotypes and inaccuracies.



Even as LDS Church membership isn’t monolithic, Fundamentalist Mormons are not all the same. The FLDS are probably the best known because they and their leader, Warren Jeffs, have been in the news so much. FLDS women are best known for their prairie dresses, as they are called, and their poofy hair styles. Because of the raid on the Yearning for Zion Ranch down in Texas in 2008 and other events with FLDS in the news, most people envision FLDS when they hear about fundamentalists.



I will have to admit surprise when the series repeatedly made reference to the FLDS. In episode 4 they mention some of the Laffertys visiting Colorado City and then Officer Pyre says, “You know Bill, doing business with the FLDS is kind of like doing it with the Mafia. You don’t just walk away on your own terms. So, if our church finds out that –

that Robin continued to do business with fundamentalists ... Brother, I don’t have to tell you that your excommunication will be right around the corner.” There are also several other references to the FLDS during the series.

Now, the reason why I was surprised (and I can admit, sitting there with open mouth the first time they mentioned the FLDS) was because the FLDS didn’t exist in 1984. While there was certainly what was known as the Johnson Group (named for their leader, Leroy S. Johnson) or Short Creek Group as they were also known (named for Short Creek, now Hildale, Utah and Colorado City, Arizona), the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints wasn’t created until later – 1991, in fact. Apparently, the show’s management ignored their consultant who does have “knowledge and experience with Mormon fundamentalist history,” and any references to FLDS in *Under the Banner of Heaven* are anachronistic.

Another problem is portraying the FLDS to be akin to the Mafia and making reference to anyone doing business with the FLDS risking being excommunicated. There are plenty of people and businesses who do business in one way or another with members of the FLDS. Simply doing business does not make a member of the LDS Church on the verge of some ecclesiastical disciplinary action.

Another problem of stereotyping with how *Under the Banner of Heaven* portrayed Fundamentalists deals with clothing. In just about every scene where Fundamentalist women appeared, they were dressed in some type of pioneer-style clothing. Not all Fundamentalists dress like they just fell out of an episode of *Little House on the Prairie*. With most Fundamentalists back in 1984 and today, you would never know they were Fundamentalists by simply looking at them. As historian Max Perry Mueller wrote in his review of the show, “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.”¹²



Now, the LDS Fear of Learning/Discussing it’s History

One of the themes of the show was the idea of members of the church putting uncomfortable issues and controversial and embarrassing events in church history on the proverbial ‘shelf.’ That phrase was

repeated several times throughout the series. In episode 3, Jeb Pyre is talking with his bishop about troubling questions he has. The bishop says, “Brother Pyre, I’m not an academic or a historian, so I never concern myself with such deep dives. You understand what I’m saying?” Pyre says no. The bishop has a very serious look on his face and says, “I don’t go digging in the past. And neither should you. You place your trust in today’s prophet, Spencer W. Kimball, you leave the things you do not understand on a shelf. Then you trust that the prophet will never lead us astray.”

Perhaps I’ve lived a sheltered life, but I actually had never heard that expression about putting it on a shelf until this show. I have talked with others who have heard something like that, but I haven’t. Nevertheless, this idea of church officials and members being afraid to learn about and discuss their history permeates both the series and many interviews and opinion pieces of Black and others involved.

“The [LDS] church I grew up in encourages members not to dig into the past, to doubt one’s doubts, to put your questions on a shelf,” according to Dustin Black. Black said Krakauer’s book, *Under the Banner of Heaven*, was a revelation. “I was sometimes angry that so much about my own faith had been withheld from me, but I was also heartened I wasn’t insane, that my doubts were legitimate.”¹³

Black admitted he “considers the series a challenge to the dominant narrative church members are taught.” “You can nitpick. But it doesn’t make the problems go away. Until Mormons show the courage to look into their own shadows, the church will not improve.”¹⁴ This attitude is reflected throughout the series.

For example, in episode 4 Allen tells Pyre that he “grew frustrated with the fact that so much of our history seemed to have been purposefully removed from every library in Utah including BYU’s.” That statement is so far from reality that the show’s creators should be embarrassed.

The Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University has probably the second-best collection of anti-Mormon literature in the world. Second only to the Historical Library at Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints headquarters. The Lee Library also has an excellent collection of fundamentalist Mormon literature that has been collected from the various groups who claim ties to the Church. Furthermore, serious scholars of any religious background are allowed to view these publications and historical records. Finally, not only do the church library and BYU’s library have excellent collections of material alluded to in the series, the Marriott Library at University of Utah and what was known as the Merrill Library in 1984, now Merrill-Cazier Library, at Utah State University also have had excellent collections for years. Both of these two latter libraries are at state-owned institutions and, therefore, would not have any vested interest in hiding or destroying Latter-day Saint-related print and manuscript material.

In a commentary published in the Los Angeles Times, one of the show’s consultants explained, “I study Mormon history for a living and am no stranger to its complexities.” She then complained, “The LDS Church remains predictably averse to its own history.”¹⁵

She continued:

Many Latter-day Saints prefer our script to say: We are a persecuted religious minority whose ancestors suffered death and destruction at the hands of an angry world not prepared for God’s truth. Outsiders who don’t extol our virtues join the mobs of history that martyred our founding prophet, Joseph Smith. Which may explain why “Banner,” adapted by former Mormon Dustin Lance Black from Krakauer’s book, led numerous LDS critics to question Black’s qualifications to

tell the story and insist that “no practicing Mormons were consulted on the show.” Translation: any depiction of Mormons or Mormonism in this series is prima facie false and unfair. Pay no attention to it.¹⁶

After insisting that the production consulted several “practicing” Latter-day Saints, current and former temple workers, a sitting LDS bishop, fundamentalist Mormons, scholars, historians, and others, she wrote:

The idea that someone must be “practicing” in order to present a fair story leads in a chilling direction: the belief that Dan Lafferty should have written the script. Warren Jeffs should have written it. Ammon Bundy and his brothers should have written it.¹⁷

No, actually, the reason many people asked if there had been any active Latter-day Saints involved as consultants was not from a fear of having people other than “only ‘practicing’ Mormons...write our stories” as she assumed.¹⁸ Instead, people asked about whether or not active members of the church had been consulted because the production was so over-the-top, blatantly, indeed painfully, one-sided and negative toward the LDS Church and its adherents that the show left many viewers dumbfounded.

Most members are not asking to have the likes of Dan Lafferty or Warren Jeffs write the script. But they



Larry Foster



Sally Gordon



Jan Shipps

are asking for better than what was produced. Could we not have had the likes of Lawrence Foster, Sarah Barringer-Gordon, and Jan Shipps, all non-Mormons, and still excellent Mormon historians? Could we not have had the likes of the late B. Carmon Hardy, a former church member but

still an excellent historian? Could we not have had the likes of my good friend and mentor, Newell G. Bringhurst, who has not been an active, believing member of the church for the last sixty-five years but still writes history that discusses warts and uncomfortable aspects of church history in a fair way that doesn't revel in and embellish real and perceived problems?



Newell G. Bringhurst

We don't need Dan Lafferty or Warren Jeffs acting as script runners, but we also don't need what one reviewer called “unwatchably bad” television.¹⁹

And now to the Mormon Culture of Violence.

In the first episode of the series, the character of Allen Lafferty says, “If you really still believe your God is love, then you don't know who you are, brother. This faith, our faith, breeds dangerous men.” This introduces the main theme of the series—Mormonism is inherently violent.

Max Perry Mueller wrote:

...at its core, *Under the Banner of Heaven* is merely a polished recycle 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 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.²⁰

Public Square Magazine noted how the series, like the book, insists “upon violent socialization within the faith. Taking for granted that men are being encouraged towards aggression in the faith, as a critical backdrop for the murders themselves.”²¹ In an essay, non-Mormon writer David Ives, writes, “... if there’s one thing to be learned from the Hulu miniseries *Under the Banner of Heaven*, it’s that the Mormon church is chock full of homicidal maniacs. ... The implication is that if you go back to the very core teachings, you’ll discover that Mormonism, and all religion in general, is inherently violent in nature. Every believer is a potential killer, a ticking time bomb just waiting for the right moment to go off.”²²

While perhaps not accusing members of the church as ticking time bombs, those involved with the show do push the violence argument. One show consultant stated, “The ugly truth is that there are a lot of violent men in our community ... who use the doctrine to mask or enable their violence.”²³ Dustin Black explained, “I don’t think most Mormons are violent; most are not, thank goodness. But I’m not talking about physical violence. I think if you’re participating in a patriarchal structure that harms women, you might not realize the violence you’re helping perpetuate.”²⁴

Along those same lines, one of the show’s consultants wrote, “Mormonism does have a pattern of violence and patriarchal fundamentalism, regardless of our protestations otherwise. Not every Mormon is violent, but every Mormon has participated in a system of violence whenever upholding doctrines of racism, sexism and homophobia.”²⁵

Of course, the previous statements beg the question: who defines this supposed systemic patriarchalism, racism, sexism, and homophobia? Because I feel very confident in saying my definition of these terms is going to be different than their definition. Who should be arbiter of these terms and why?

Meagan Kohler published an opinion piece in the Deseret News titled, “The church was my escape from misogyny and violence,” where she gave her opinion of how misogyny and violence are defined:

It doesn’t even matter that there’s plenty of evidence to suggest otherwise [regarding supposed violence in the church]. The point is that for some influential voices, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its practicing members are guilty of a kind of cultural violence and misogyny for not more fully embracing progressive ideas regarding gender and sexuality.²⁶

Whether or not Black and others involved with *Under the Banner of Heaven* would fall into that category can certainly be debated. But that is only one aspect of the claims Mormonism breeds violence and dangerous men.

Throughout the series, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its members are portrayed as uniquely violent. Indeed, their doctrines, history, and even culture are portrayed being entrenched in violence to one degree or another. “This will not be the first time that the Church has been connected to violence in popular culture,” historian Patrick Q. Mason noted in advance of the series. “The biggest problem with *Under the Banner of Heaven*—in book form, and what will probably be the case in television form as well—is that it confuses the exception for the norm.”²⁷

While there is certainly a history of violence among early Latter-day Saints, Mason notes, “It would be convenient in a way to say that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is uniquely violent. Unfortunately, it is not. Every religion, every political system, every ideology, and every nation-state have blood on their hands. Whatever group you identify with, I guarantee you can find your equivalent of the Lafferty brothers.”²⁸

“Mormonism was a violent subculture within a violent national culture.”

D. Michael Quinn, “The Culture of Violence in Joseph Smith’s Mormonism,” *Sunstone* 164 (October 2011), 18.



It has been suggested that “Mormonism was a violent subculture within a violent national culture.”²⁹ The reality is that despite some famous events in Latter-day Saint history such as Missouri’s Mormon War, the problems in Illinois and martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith, the Utah War and Mountain Meadows Massacre, as well as various acts of extralegal justice in Utah Territory, historically the LDS Church and its members tended to be less violent than those around them.

David T. Cartwright in *Violent Land: Single Men and Social Disorder from the Frontier to the Inner City*:

American society, or at any rate a conspicuous part of it, has been tumultuous from the very beginning of European colonization. Seventeenth-century Virginia was a disorderly place, though the Massachusetts Bay Colony was not. Violence in America has long manifested this uneven quality. Some regions, such as the South and the frontier and urban ghettos, have experienced very high levels of violence and disorder, while others, such as rural New England or Mormon Utah, have been far more tranquil places.”³⁰

Patrick Mason referenced Scott K. Thomas’ important work, “*Violence across the Land: Vigilantism and Extralegal Justice in the Utah Territory*,” which shows that Utah was not more violent than other western states and territories. He wrote:

The remarkable fact that historians can name virtually every instance of violence by Latter-day Saints against their opponents in the religion’s early decades suggests the relative infrequency of such episodes. By contrast, scholars who study the genocide of Native Americans or the

lynching of African Americans admit that their estimates of how much violence actually occurred will always be imprecise given the overwhelming number of deaths and relative lack of documentation.³¹

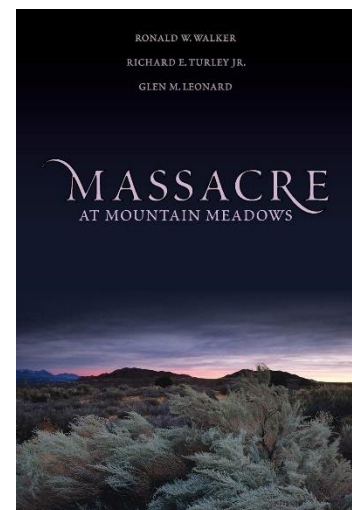
For over twenty years I have researched and written about extralegal justice in Utah and other parts of the United States, and I would strongly agree with Mason, Thomas, and others who have found less violence among early Latter-day Saints. Like Mason and others, I neither condone, nor do I ignore examples of violence in Utah. I am just putting these examples in historical and social context and comparing them to what was going on in other parts of the country.



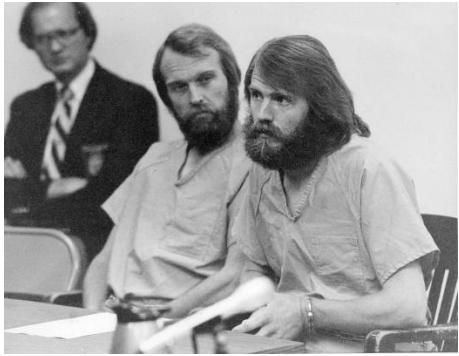
Despite accusations of “ignoring the dark aspects of our past, culture, and doctrine,”³² the LDS Church and its historians have attempted to acknowledge and understand past events involving violence. For example, the Gospel Topics Essay, “Peace and Violence among 19th-Century Latter-day Saints.” Another example being *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* by Ronald W. Walker, Richard E. Turley, Jr., and Glenn M. Leonard.

Naturally, the Mountain Meadows Massacre was covered in *Under the Banner of Heaven*. In fact, it was in the last episode as a culmination of the Mormon violence theme. Black later explained that from the beginning, he knew he was going to end the series with the Mountain Meadows Massacre.³³ The version portrayed in the show is rather uneven, simplistic and one-dimensional. However, according to Black, his version is better than what has been previously presented. He explained to a Slate reporter, “Unfortunately, I guess, for the LDS church historians, there were witnesses and people who wrote down their accounts, and we now know better what happened.”³⁴

Dustin Black knows better than LDS historians who worked on *Massacre at Mountain Meadows*? I doubt it. I feel fairly comfortable – believe me, very comfortable - in asserting that there has never been and probably never will be such intense and extensive research about the Mountain Meadows Massacre as there was researching the book published by Oxford University Press.



Of course, the Mountain Meadows Massacre was not the only aspect of violence covered in the series.



The reason for the series was the tragic murders of Brenda and Erica Lafferty which was claimed to be and portrayed as a result of religious zealotry. The Lafferty brothers blood atoned their sister-in-law and niece.

But were the murders really blood atonement? According to Randy Johnson, former American Fork Chief of Police, the murders were not blood atonement. Johnson explained that during his professional career he was an expert on the occult—Satanism, witchcraft, Voodoo, ritualistic killing. With the Lafferty

killing, he says:

There was no ceremony type of thing about the crime scene. The only thing that puts a religious tinge on this is that revelation that Ron had about dedicating that instrument and removing people that occurred two or three months before the homicide. I don't remember seeing anything that would have caused me to consider that to be a ritualistic killing. ... They beat her because she resisted. They strangled her with the [vacuum] cord in hopes to kill her. ... When she continued to fight and scream, they smothered her and apparently, that did not kill her. And so, they had brought that knife (which was not the instrument that they wanted to dedicate), it was a knife of convenience that they had purchased just the day or two before. That knife was not 'set apart.' It was not consecrated; it was not dedicated. It was simply a way to make sure that she was dead.³⁵

Johnson was not alone in declaring the murders to not be religiously-oriented. "Creighton Horton, who prosecuted Ron in the 1996 retrial (after the first trial was thrown out due to a question of mental competency), does not believe that Ron was a religious zealot. Though the so-called 'removal revelation' was in scriptural language, Horton says, it was about taking revenge on Brenda and those who helped his ex-wife. ... Dan may have been driven by his religious fanaticism, Horton says, but Ron simply had a vendetta against the women who defied him." And Sharon Wright Weeks, Brenda's sister, "called it a classic case of domestic violence, wrapped in religious rhetoric."³⁶

The show's creators didn't get this wrong so much as they over emphasized the one possible motivation for murder to the detriment of the other because the possible religious connection fit their narrative. Their need to create a drama that would undermine and attack a religion ultimately meant the series gets a number of things wrong. We've discussed a few things in this presentation. I'm going to take just a minute or so to list some other things they get wrong and to highly recommend you go to ["Under the Banner of Heaven: Fact vs Fiction"](#) located at the FAIR website. It includes interviews with experts, questions and answers about each episode, and other information.

Here are just a few other examples, among many, that *Under the Banner of Heaven* gets wrong:

The show's Allen Lafferty not knowing who committed the crime and going on about strange men with beards that he didn't know.

Depicting “the founding of the faith, from the beginning, [with] two lovestruck teenagers with vivid imaginations.”³⁷ This, despite the fact that Joseph Smith didn’t meet Emma Hale until he was 19 and she was 21.

That Lilburn Boggs was shot and killed by a Mormon “destroying angel” while serving as governor of Missouri.

That Emma disbelieved in both Joseph Smith’s prophetic calling and the authenticity of the Book of Mormon.

That Emma acted as sole scribe while Joseph dictated every word of the Book of Mormon.

That members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints consider writing the President of the Church as being like writing to God.

That Emma Smith aligned herself with the Nauvoo Expositor.

That Brigham Young conspired to have Joseph Smith killed so he could take over the church.

That Brigham Young lied to the early saints to convince them to leave United States territory and travel west to Utah.

That Brigham Young needed to leave United States territory so that he could then marry as many wives as he wanted.

That Brenda Lafferty received a blessing from General Authorities of the Church appointing her “to shepherd the Laffertys back to the fold. Not only Allen, every Lafferty [with] their eternal salvation [in her] hands.”

That church members strive to “live precisely by the example of Joseph Smith” rather than Jesus Christ.

That after being married in the temple, a person needs to get permission from the Church in order to get a divorce.

That upon arriving in the Salt Lake Valley, Brigham Young said, “It is enough. From this valley we will never run. And if they attempt to throw us over again, in the name of God we will lift the sword and slay them.”

The list could go on for quite a while. Unfortunately, as Barbara Jones Brown, former executive director of the Mormon History Association, said, “My concern is, I think a lot of people will see (“*Under the Banner of Heaven*”) and see it as actual history when it has the contours of history, but there’s a lot of departures from actual history.” I have seen comments by people not understanding fact vs fiction all over social media.

In Conclusion

Jon Krakauer described the show as “subtle and nuanced” and “warned the church will smear the show and paint it as something it’s not.”³⁸

Dustin Black said, "If the Mormon Church is unhappy with me for doing this, they have themselves to blame."³⁹ Black insists he's not angry when it comes to the church but it appears his "disdain for this particular faith runs deep" as he "rarely misses an opportunity to make a dig against Mormons."⁴⁰ Making sure everyone knows where he stands regarding the church, Black said, "...if you do a deep dive into any religion, but I think particularly the Mormon religion, there's only two ways to go. It is either going to become a musical comedy or it's going to turn to terror and horror."⁴¹

Well, we had no song and dance routines in *Under the Banner of Heaven*. Unfortunately, while the show was inspired by Krakauer's book, "all the stories [in the show] — take a backseat to the invented one: Jeb Pyre questioning his own faith."⁴² Others also noted the bitter irony that a story supposedly about Brenda Lafferty actually relegates her to the background for a large portion of the series.

So intent was Dustin Lance Black on producing every peccadillo, problem, and misdeed in Mormon history that the real Brenda Lafferty was lost in the story. Describing the series as "absolute fiction," Brenda's sister, Sharon Wright Weeks said, "I'm frustrated with how [the show] leads people. It doesn't lead people to the truth or the reality of what happened."⁴³



As the staff of Public Square Magazine wrote, "...in this telling of Brenda Lafferty's story, even misrepresented as it is, it only amounts to a secondary plotline to the real focus of the show, the contrived psychodrama of an imaginary male character. Black's approach to screenwriting seems to have been to read Krakauer's book, then ask 'how can I turn this into a story about me?'"⁴⁴ Another reviewer explained how Brenda Lafferty's life story "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."⁴⁵

One of the show's consultants wrote how "the Laffertys' victims, Brenda Lafferty and her infant daughter Erica, were victims of various aspects of Mormonism. And all are silenced if we allow only 'practicing' Mormons to write our stories."⁴⁶ The story as presented in *Under the Banner of Heaven* wasn't written by a "practicing" Mormon but, as a reviewer rightfully lamented, "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."⁴⁷



Ultimately, of the numerous things Hulu's *Under the Banner of Heaven* got wrong, perhaps the most bitterly painful and inexcusable was taking a real woman who loved life, her faith, her family, and who died in part because she refused to be a pawn in the Lafferty brothers' warped agenda, and then making her a pawn in another's warped portrayal with an agenda.



The author would like to thank Suzanne L. Foster and Steven L. Mayfield for their help with this paper.

Endnotes

- ¹ Foster, Craig L., "Doing Violence to Journalistic Integrity," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 1989–2011: Vol. 16 : No. 1 (2004), 174.
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