

Salvation on sand mountain: snake handling and redemption in southern appalachia ...

[Family](#)



Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia by Dennis Covington: Book Report. The book *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia* was published in 2009 by Da Capo Press and it is a factual retelling of a journalist Dennis Covington's investigation into a branch of Christianity that celebrates some of the more exotic worship practices available. In the book's short prologue there is a clear linkage between extreme religious practice, symbolized by snake handling, and the peculiar nature of the South in American history, explained as a struggle against industrialization and loss of autonomy. As the narrative begins, it emerges that Covington is himself a Christian although he has been through many years of doubt due to his experiences in war torn Central America. He is also a Southerner, whose wife is a committed Christian. Covington decides to cover the case of Glenn Summerford, who was arrested 1992 in connection with snake attacks on his wife, which the authorities construed as murder attempts. Although sceptical of Summerford's church at first, Covington gradually comes to appreciate it and he even trace his own direct ancestral connections to the people he visits and studies. The account becomes more and more personal, as he wrestles with faith and reason, and with the excitement that he discovers in the religious gatherings that he increasingly attends as a participant rather than an observer. The book ends with the author's decision to leave the community behind and return his previous life – without the snakes and speaking in tongues that he had discovered during this investigation. One of the most interesting attributes of this book is the openness and honesty of the author, which some might categorize as naivety. Covington approaches

his subject in a frame of mind that allows some of the notions that he encounters to capture his imagination. An example of this is way he describes a real church community as the embodiment of a story he had himself written at the age of nineteen called “ Salvation on Sand Mountain.” (Covington, p. 174) He appears to believe that there are invisible and mysterious ties between his own past and his new experiences, perhaps even some element of prophecy. This reveals that he has a religious disposition which makes him susceptible to the rhetoric of the preachers. Snakes feature very prominently in the text, and they symbolize both danger and faith. They are used by believers as a way of demonstrating faith in God. Being bitten by a rattlesnake and overcoming the poison is also a way of showing one’s faith, although it is clear from the case of Glenn Summerford that this can go badly wrong. At first Covington struggles to understand the concept that Darlene Summerford drank poison as a matter of routine: “ When she was really living right, she drank poison. What a peculiar idea, the journalist in me thought.” (Covington, p. 42) He accepts this, in a non-judgemental fashion, but the rest of the book is an exploration of what this strange behaviour means. Later in the book the death of Charles Prince from a rattlesnake bite is related. The event is classified as just another of the tragic twists of fate that occur in the South: “ Firefights, mining accidents, snakebites. It’s all the same.” (Covington, p. 183) The victim continued to drink poison and handle snakes, even as he lay dying, and the church congregation carried on the next day, leaving him to die. Covington observes that this is not callousness, but rather a way of coping with dreadful events. His analysis is like a summary of the whole book’s message: “ The tragedy is

not the death of a particular snake handler but the failure of the world to accept the gospel that the handler risked his life to confirm.” (Covington, p. 184) During his a long exploration of the snake handling believers and their community, Covington sinks into their mind-set, and experiences their adrenalin rush, participating in healing services where people testify, speak in tongues and perform feats of endurance. Ultimately, however, he reviews his position and comes to a stark realization: “ I had found my people. But I had also discovered that I could not be one of them, after all. Knowing where you come from is one thing, but it is suicide to stay there.” (Covington, p. 236) The trigger for this thought was a discussion on the role of women in the church (i. e. a subordinate one) which conflicted with the views that Covington, and particularly his wife, had thus far lived by. In the end the snake handling church was too far removed from modern values and lifestyles, and this is what prompts him to reject their beliefs. What remains, however, is a sympathetic account of this beleaguered group, and a deep reflection on how the experience of religion and history in the South can still today be very different from mainstream American experience. Reference Covington, Dennis. *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia*. New York: Penguin, 1996.