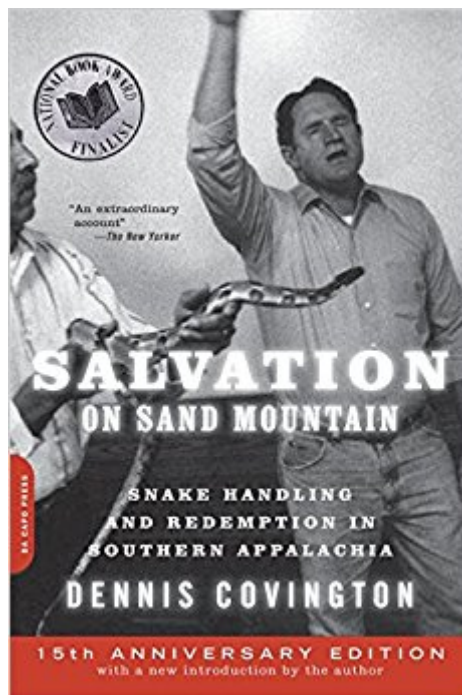




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# Salvation On Sand Mountain: Snake Handling And Redemption In Southern Appalachia



## Synopsis

For New York Times reporter Dennis Covington, what began as a journalistic assignment covering the trial of an Alabama pastor convicted of attempting to murder his wife with poisonous snakes would evolve into a headlong plunge into a bizarre, mysterious, and ultimately irresistible world of unshakable faith: the world of holiness snake handling. Set in the heart of Appalachia, *Salvation on Sand Mountain* is Covington's unsurpassed and chillingly captivating exploration of the nature, power, and extremity of faith; an exploration that gradually turns inward, until Covington finds himself taking up the snakes.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

*Salvation on Sand Mountain* is a story of snake handling and strychnine drinking, of faith healing and speaking in tongues. It is also the story of one man's search for his roots--and, in the end, of his spiritual renewal. Writer Dennis Covington came to this ecstatic form of Christianity as a reporter covering a sensational murder case; Glen Summerford, pastor of the Church of Jesus with Signs Following, had been accused of attempting to kill his wife with rattlesnakes. There, in a courtroom filled with journalists and gawking spectators, Covington felt the pull of a spirituality that was to dominate his life for the next several years. Attending Summerford's church out of curiosity, he soon forged close friendships with some of the worshippers, began attending snake-handling services throughout the South, and eventually took up snakes himself. With subject matter this lurid, *Salvation on Sand Mountain* could have been a Southern-fried curiosity and little more. Covington goes far deeper. Tracing the snake handlers' roots in regional history, in the deep spiritual alienation

of mountain people from the secular modern world they have so recently joined, Covington is more than just sympathetic to the snake handlers; in a profound way, he considers himself one of them. His reasoning is sometimes flawed--when he attempts to find snake handlers in his own family's past, for instance, the result is belabored and unconvincing--but there's no doubt that Covington's heart is in the right place. He's also not without his own brand of sly gallows humor, as in this conversation with the elderly Gracie McAllister: "She'd swore she'd never handle rattlesnakes in July again. She'd been bit the previous two Julys. 'I decided I'd just handle fire and drink strychnine that night,' she said. Good idea, I thought. It always pays to be on the safe side." Covington eventually breaks with the snake handlers, but comes away from the experience a changed man. "Knowing where you come from is one thing, but it's suicide to stay there," he writes. An American Book Award winner and finalist for the National Book Award, *Salvation on Sand Mountain* is a nuanced, compassionate portrait of an unforgettable spiritual journey. --Mary Park --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

After Covington, a writing instructor at the University of Alabama, novelist (Lizard) and freelance journalist, covered the trial of a preacher convicted of attempting to murder his wife with rattlesnakes, he was invited to attend a snake-handling service in Scottsville, Ala. He found the service exhilarating and unsettling; he felt a kinship with the people, for he was only two generations removed from the hill country of Appalachia. Of Scottish-Irish descent, the handlers are religious mystics who believe in demons, drink strychnine and drape rattlesnakes around their bodies. Covington attended other services with Brother Carl Porter; he eventually handled a huge rattlesnake, and recalls that at the time, he felt absolutely no fear. This is a captivating glimpse of an exotic religious sect. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

*Salvation on Sand Mountain*, written by journalist Dennis Covington in a masterly, artistic style, is a cultural expose about religious fundamentalists from southern Appalachia who had come down from the mountains to put their religious stamp on a wider societal milieu, including Covington himself, who inadvertently becomes a parishioner and takes up serpents. I have always held a deep curiosity about these religious snake handlers who test their faith by reaching into a box of coiling, writhing rattlesnakes. Covington's book helped satiate that curiosity. These were the same fringe religionists from the backwoods who, with unshakable faith, speak in tongues, lay hands on the sick, and drink strychnine. Mostly descendants of Scots Irish backwoodsmen, their ancient ancestors

believed in tree spirits and captured their evil spirits in colored glass bottles hung on trees. They worshiped swift and cunning animals like the elk or boar. The hog was an icon or sacred spirit for these ancient tribal people. Covington makes it clear that handling serpents is an exhilarating experience. He should know. Serpent handling is more than a test of faith; it is also about having power over those snakes. The practice must be addictive in some way. Upon the alter of the church, many practice the art for years before finally being bitten that last time that leads to a painful death. This is a fascinating account of a peculiar backwoods religious practice and all the eccentric cultural foibles that accompany it. Covington has created a first class piece of journalism. The author, as a journalist, makes first contact with the snake handling congregation after having been assigned to cover a story about an Appalachian preacher on trial for attempted murder of his wife with the use of snakes. As Covington peers deeper into the church practices and grasps the ethnicity and cultural patterns of these people, he realizes he is one of them. A stark revelation dawns on him: he discovers that he has the same ethnic, geographical, religious, and cultural roots as these primal mountain folk. His ancestors also stemmed from borderland Scotland and eventually, after crossing the ocean and arriving to America in coffin ships, made their way into the Appalachian highlands and ultimately the foothills of that great mountain chain. For Covington, it was not just a search for a news story, not even about redemption and salvation, but also a search for identity, for roots, for a lost past. This book is highly recommended for both religious and non-religious people who may have had even the slightest "wondering" about snake handling holiness and the cultural backdrop that sustains it. Russell Ferrell is the author of *The Bone War of McCurtain County*

Mr. Covington presents a unique insight to this religious subculture's lifestyle. Although the reader may think this is a story about snake handlers, it is Moreton journey of the writer's self-discovery. Through this literary approach the reader understands in greater depth the inner spirituality of these champions of their religious faith. At first I couldn't understand why the story turned inward toward authors own upbringing. But as the book continued, I was riveted as the author finds himself as one of them. I also enjoyed the author's writing style which made the book less a documentary and more of a story of a people committed to their cause.

This is a fascinating explanation of the social and religious aspects of snake handling. I still have trouble with the longer endings of Mark, but I have a bit more understanding now.

It's a very peculiar reading for sure. The gist of it is that there are snake handlers who interpret the bible literally, and they drink poison and act basically like "war soldiers". Their language is rather funny, and their lack of depth is so sad! This journalist slowly tries to empathize with them, and even does some of the things they do. Does he become one of them? You'll have to read to find out! :)

Covington's writing is fluid, lyrical, and in honest synch with the subject, surroundings, and people in this often gripping, braided ethnographic and interrogative work. He is self-reflective in necessary moments and unflinching in his own process of examination and reckoning. Pacing and shifts from tight to wide angle are deft and adept. First rate writing and fascinating subject done with humility and respect for his subject(s).

A fascinating and culturally relevant journey into the world of "mountain religion". The author provides such a unique perspective on the topic as he became personally enmeshed within the social circles of the snake handlers, about whom he set out (initially) to investigate strictly from a journalistic slant. The depictions Covington creates as he describes the "Old South" are spot on, having experienced life myself in the same region. Even readers who understand from the outset what he is so eloquently describing will appreciate his stylistic humor and ability to truly capture the very essence of Appalachia. An excellent read!!! Highly recommended!!!

If the image of hollering, God-fearing folk handling snakes in dingy, isolated church buildings, all against a backdrop of twangy sounds and summer heat attracts you, then this book should be read. For mine, the latter parts of the book, which focus on squabbles amongst the faithful, and the author's own excursion into his personal experiences, move away from what brought me to it in the first place - an examination of the character and life of a unique religious form. (Compare the very short section of snake handling in the novel *Fried Green Tomatoes*, or even the feeling captured in some of the decades old, original, recordings on the CD 'Mountain Music of Kentucky'). However, the book is well written in a 'New Yorker' kind of way, has a good pace and makes a good read.

I found this book fascinating since Sand Mountain is not a long distance from my hometown in Tennessee yet I eons in time from my life in the South and my personal experience. It answered many questions I've had about this particular religion and gave me new insight into the faith of these people.

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