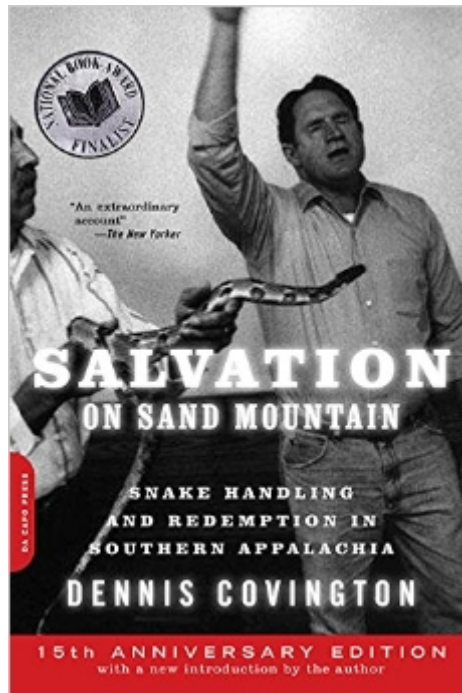


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# Salvation On Sand Mountain: Snake Handling And Redemption In Southern Appalachia



## 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

I found Dennis Covington's book *Salvation on Sand Mountain* to be compelling reading for a number of reasons. First, I was born and raised on Sand Mountain and had heard stories of the snake handlers all of my life, but never had the desire or the inclination to attend one of these churches. Second, having grown up on Sand Mountain I was fascinated to read about the depth of the spiritual commitment of these people. Whether you agree with them or not you have to admit that it either takes a lot of faith, or lack of sense to stick your hand down into a box of rattle snakes! Third, I found this book compelling because as a Baptist pastor and son of a Baptist pastor that has preached all over Sand Mountain, I have to ask myself the question, "How could these people take such a hardline stance on a passage in the book of Mark that scholars argue over whether it was even meant to be included in the original manuscripts of the New Testament?" Of course, I know what the snake handlers would say, "All of his seminary training has ruined a good preacher!" Maybe so, but

I'm not going to be sticking my hand into a box of rattlesnakes anytime soon to prove the validity of a questionable passage of Scripture. Finally, I found the book to be fascinating reading and although I question their theology, I admire someone that can believe in something so strongly that they are willing to risk their lives for that belief. Buy the book! You will find it hard to put down, or as I heard someone say once about rattlesnakes, "They are easy to grab, but hard to let go!"

Salvation on Sand Mountain was a book that truly awed me to feel things that I never felt before when it came to faith and being closer with the Spirit. Covington's book will take readers to parts of Southern Appalachia that is so little understood and appreciated, the world of the snake handling, strychnine drinking, tongue rattling Southerner who has carried this exotic tradition from generation down to generation. The intense faith and passion which these people believe and handle their serpents, is, in a crazy way, admirable and moving. Covington really does have an ear for the core message of what these handlers want to convey: handling snakes (however deadly some of them might be) is to be closer to God. The author writes with a compassionate, freakish warmth, a sacred reverence not just for the people involved but for an act that nobody would fathom themselves participating in. The prose is lush and stimulating and will draw many readers -- however sarcastic or doubtful they may be -- into this unique fire and brimstone subculture before they can sum an opinion of the people who handle snakes in the name of God. Salvation on Sand Mountain is indeed a book that has some of the best writing about the South.

I first read this book while in College. I found it so interesting that I found myself re-reading it over and over. It is an extraordinary look at Southern Appalachia, the culture and lives of its Mountain people. The prologue is as a fine piece of southern literature as I have ever had the privilege to read. Portions of the book are chilling, even more so, when you realize that it is all true. Little did I know that 2 years after first reading the book I would live directly in the middle of the area Covington wrote about. I have had the opportunity to meet and know some of the people he described. When my job forced my wife and I to move to Scottsboro, we used the book as a literal road map when we arrived. I have loaned it out several times. I would encourage anyone, in particular Southerners, to read this fascinating book. The recent and much publicized death of one of the book's characters (John Wayne "Punkin" Brown, who was bitten by a rattle snake and died at a recent church service) led me to re-read the it again. I still could not put it down. It is unlike anything I have ever read. When this book wraps itself around you and sinks in its fangs, there is no letting go.

When I first read this book about five years ago, I was completely absorbed by the whole 'snake-handling' thing. Everything else Covington was trying to say was fine, but in essence I smiled and nodded while transfixed by the ecstasies and agonies of the handlers. When I returned to it a year or so later, I began to understand a little of the personal journey Covington was trying to describe, in which the snakes and their handlers played a central but certainly not exclusive role. I also knew he was trying to make some point about poverty and powerlessness and being from the South, but... whatever. Having rediscovered it recently and finished it for the third time, I've come to relish it far more completely than before. Covington tackles snake-handling, spiritual warfare, Southern culture, and self-analysis--weaving them together in a narrative tapestry that doesn't begin to exhaust any single element but dips into each thoughtfully. Don't look for extensive theology, or a sociological overview of Southern history, or (thank God) anything resembling an altar call when it's all over. Look instead for a moving portrayal of some very real people (who in this case happen to have a spiritual fetish for drinking poison and playing with rattlers) and what they end up meaning to Covington. It's bizarre, to be sure, but it's honest and enlightening in the most unexpected ways.

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