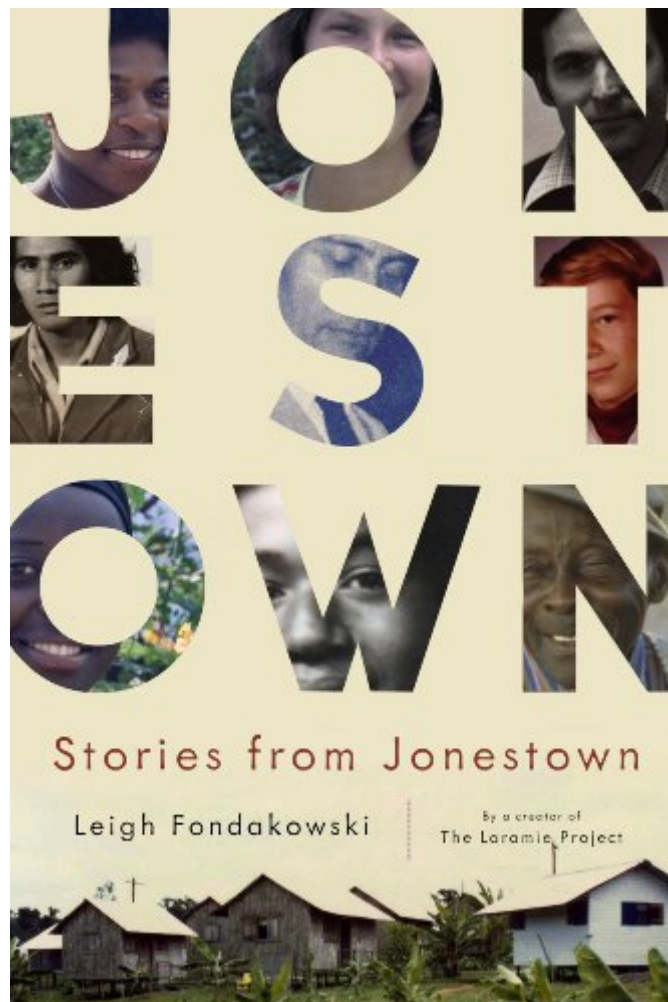


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Stories From Jonestown



Synopsis

The saga of Jonestown didn't end on the day in November 1978 when more than nine hundred Americans died in a mass murder-suicide in the Guyanese jungle. While only a handful of people present at the agricultural project survived that day in Jonestown, more than eighty members of Peoples Temple, led by Jim Jones, were elsewhere in Guyana on that day, and thousands more members of the movement still lived in California. Emmy-nominated writer Leigh Fondakowski, who is best known for her work on the play and HBO film *The Laramie Project*, spent three years traveling the United States to interview these survivors, many of whom have never talked publicly about the tragedy. Using more than two hundred hours of interview material, Fondakowski creates intimate portraits of these survivors as they tell their unforgettable stories. Collectively this is a record of ordinary people, stigmatized as cultists, who after the Jonestown massacre were left to deal with their grief, reassemble their lives, and try to make sense of how a movement born in a gospel of racial and social justice could have gone so horribly wrong—taking with it the lives of their sons and daughters, husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, and brothers and sisters. As these survivors look back, we learn what led them to join the Peoples Temple movement, what life in the church was like, and how the trauma of Jonestown's end still affects their lives decades later. What emerges are portrayals both haunting and hopeful—of unimaginable sadness, guilt, and shame but also resilience and redemption. Weaving her own artistic journey of discovery throughout the book in a compelling historical context, Fondakowski delivers, with both empathy and clarity, one of the most gripping, moving, and humanizing accounts of Jonestown ever written.

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Customer Reviews

I have read every available published book on Jonestown, the Peoples Temple, and Rev. Jim Jones. I found Leigh's book to be refreshing for a change. She had started basically from scratch to understand Jonestown and what really happened. She had put a human face on the people who comprised the Peoples Temple. She had sought to understand what motivated many of them. I admire and respect the author's ability to understand what really happened in November 1978. On November 18, 1978, I was a five year old in New Jersey. On that day, 918 lives were lost in Jonestown, Guyana. The media had created a myth about Rev. Jim Jones and his people. Of course, it was a massacre and it wasn't suicide. People didn't willingly die but were pressured and forced to drink the cyanide. Everybody in the top hierarchy of Jim Jones had a careful plan to execute the unthinkable of murder-suicide. Leigh and her team planned to develop a creative play in displaying the Peoples Temple to the public. Leigh would meet, interview, study, and examine the world of the Peoples Temple. She had survivors like Stephan Jones, Jim and Marceline's only natural son and Tim Carter. In reading their accounts, I began to understand why they are resistant to writing their own stories about Jonestown and the Peoples Temple. Stephan and Tim have a lot of guilt on their shoulders about what happened like a life sentence since 1978. If you want to know about Jonestown, this book adds a level of humanity, compassion, and understanding to those who died and those who lived and remember a time and place long ago. The Peoples Temple provided more than just religious services. If you were poor, homeless, unemployed, hungry, and thirsty, you were fed, given a job, fed, and cared for.

If, like me, you grew up in the 70s - or have ever used the term 'drank the Kool-Aid' - you are aware of what happened at Jonestown in Guyana on November 17-18, 1978. Congressman Leo J. Ryan (D-CA) was on a fact-finding tour, investigating claims that Peoples Temple members were being held against their will. When, on the 17th, several people asked him to help them escape, orders were given to stop the exodus. On the afternoon of the 18th, as the congressman, his entourage, and several Peoples Temple members were boarding two planes, gunfire erupted at the airstrip.

Ryan, three newsmen, and a defector were killed; several more were wounded, some severely. By the end of the day, 914 people of all races, creeds, and ages lay dead. Some died voluntarily, by their own hand; some with a little ... assistance. And it wasn't only poison that took many of those lives. But, that is not all there is to know. More than a thousand people belonged to the Peoples Temple. On the day of the murder/suicide, some were in Georgetown on Temple business. Some had never left California. They are all survivors. These are their stories. ~*~*~ The book starts with a brief history of Jonestown and of this project. It explains what is known of the time, of the origins of the Peoples Temple, and how Leigh Fondakowski came to be involved in 3-1/2 years of interviewing survivors. A brief caveat: I received an uncorrected ebook for review. It is, therefore, entirely possible that the final, published product may vary from this version. With that said, this is an incredible book. As I mentioned, I grew up around this story. I remember the news reports of the shooting at the airstrip.

With the phrase "drink the Kool-Aid" part of our lexicon it behooves us to go back and look at where that phrase originated. In *Stories from Jonestown* by Leigh Fondakowski we learn that it wasn't Kool-Aid, but was, in fact, poisoned Flavor-Aid that was used in the mass suicide/murder of over 900 followers of Jim Jones People's Temple agricultural project in Guyana on November 18, 1978. About half of those who died were children. Included in the 918 people who died were U.S. Congressman Leo Ryan and three journalists who were accompanying Ryan on a fact-finding mission to Guyana. Jim Jones group began as a Christian church in Indiana. He moved to San Francisco in the 1960s. While the group began as a integrated group who wanted to help the community, it soon changed into a much less altruistic socialist experiment. But this book is not about Jim Jones. It is about the survivors. Some of them still think the Peoples Temple was wonderful, others wonder at their blindness to the warning signs that there were problems and Jones was no longer the man or leader they thought they were following. There are already numerous accounts written about Jim Jones and The Peoples Temple murder/suicide. In *Stories from Jonestown*, author Fondakowski focus is on interviewing the survivors. She points out that only they "can truly know what it means to survive a tragedy of this magnitude. These are the stories of the survivors. It is a privilege to tell them." Fondakowski, a playwright, spent over three years interviewing survivors, reviewing documents, and collecting letters trying to compose a complete picture of what happened while gathering material in order to write a play about their experiences. The book is a compilation of the many interviews and stories she collected.

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