



# Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia

By Dennis Covington

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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.

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## **Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia** By Dennis Covington Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #36310 in Books
- Brand: Covington, Dennis
- Published on: 2009-08-11
- Released on: 2009-08-11
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.25" h x .75" w x 5.50" l, .66 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 288 pages

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

*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*

#### From Publishers Weekly

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.

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#### From Library Journal

Fascinated by the religious practice of snake handling, the author, a novelist and writing instructor at the University of Alabama, relates his association with the Church of Jesus with Signs Following in Scottsboro, Alabama. Working for the New York Times, Covington covered the trial of the church's preacher, who was convicted of attempting to murder his wife with rattlesnakes. Upon discovering this remnant of distinctive Southern culture, the author continues his journalist's involvement with the church, which develops into a

personal spiritual journey. Awed by the faith and daring of the followers, he becomes a participant in their peculiar rituals. Although the author's observations and insights are interesting, this book is only marginally informative. For a more complete study, see Thomas Burton's *Serpent-Handling Believers* (LJ 3/15/93).

*Eloise R. Hitchcock, Tennessee Technological Univ. Lib., Cookeville*

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Nowadays reading books are more than want or need but also become a life style. This reading practice give you lot of advantages. The huge benefits you got of course the knowledge the rest of the information inside the book in which improve your knowledge and information. The data you get based on what kind of publication you read, if you want get more knowledge just go with knowledge books but if you want truly feel happy read one along with theme for entertaining like comic or novel. The particular *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia* is kind of reserve which is giving the reader capricious experience.

#### **Danielle Smith:**

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#### **Jody Vinson:**

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