

**Dennis Covington, *Salvation On Sand Mountain*
Film "The Holy Ghost People"**

At the same time that we mine our sources for information, we need to scrutinize them, to read them critically, considering the nature and strength of their evidence and the interpretations they place on the evidence.

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What makes Covington's book similar to or different from the kind of study an anthropologist might have done? What kind of work is it? Can you think of other books you have read in the same style?

In what ways does Covington's intense personal involvement and identification with his subjects and their story affect his understanding? Is his willingness to empathize with the snake-handlers and to connect their lives with his own a source of strength or weakness in his book?

Covington's book is non-fiction, but it follows certain archetypes or themes found in many American novels and films. How do those patterns shape his understanding of his subject, for better or worse?

What is Covington's stance on whether anything happens randomly or accidentally? (See esp. p.203.) How does this stance affect his understanding?

How does Covington deal with questions of what is true or untrue, good or bad?

What can we say about the social backgrounds and daily lives of participants in snake-handling churches?

Why do the neighbors of the snake-handlers feel so strongly against them? What elements of middle-class culture are the snake-handlers rejecting? What takes their place?

What is the measure of someone's worth in a snake-handling church? What other measures do we have of someone's worth in other churches or in other sectors of American society?

Do the snake-handling congregations constitute communities? If so, what kind of communities are they?

What do you think members of these churches get from their participation and experiences? Why is power important?

Why snakes? What is their symbolism?

What is Covington's historical and psychological explanation of the snake-handlers? How do you think he reached it? What are the pieces of the explanation, and how do they fit together? Do you see any problems?

What differences do you see between the data and interpretations in Covington's book and the data and interpretations in the film, "Holy Ghost people"? Does anything in the film seem to contradict his presentation or give a different slant on a subject, for instance the position of women?

How is the Holy Spirit, as it enters into church members, like other forms of spirit possession? How is it different? What happens in the meeting before members feel the spirit?