



Raised in Brooklyn as a Jehovah's Witness, Barbara Grizzuti Harrison has written extensively on cults, from the Moonies to est. "The NRA reminds me of a cult," she says, "embattled, absolutely convinced of their cause, in continuous need of external enemies." A traveler and essayist, Harrison is the author of one novel and five books of nonfiction, including *Italian Days* (winner of the American Book Award) and, most recently, *An Accidental Autobiography*. Her classic book on her days around Bethel and growing up as a Jehovah's Witness, *Visions of Glory*, is out of print, but this new book contains memoirs of her Witness days as well. Randy Watters considers her the best author of all Witness biographies bar none.

## What Could Be More Tempting Than An Exclusive Club Run By God Himself

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**By Barbara Grizzuti Harrison**

The fires at the Branch Davidian compound in Waco consumed seventeen children, I thought, when the innocent were slaughtered, of a Bible verse: "Jesus wept." And while I thought of this simple compassion - and considered this silence of God in the face of so much suffering and evil - a friend turned to me and said: "That could have been you."

She meant that I, too, having been brought up in an apocalyptic, millennial sect, might (given a slightly different twist of fate) have perished in a devouring fire.

When I was nine years old, my mother - energized by a passion for certainty, a crying need for singularity and exclusivity, a fear of the natural demands of the flesh and a yearning for undeviating purpose - became a Jehovah's Witness. She brought me up in that strange, chilly and, I am bound to say, aberrant sect.

The Witness, who go door to door selling salvation and offering *The Watchtower* and *Awake!* Magazines to the weary of heart, would never position themselves as David Koresh did. They wouldn't seal themselves off and blow themselves up. For one thing, they have too much corporate property to preserve and defend. It is also true that they do not systematically punish their children physically or molest them sexually, as cult leader Koresh may have done. Nevertheless, there are parallels that can, without tendentiousness, be drawn.

My friend was wrong: I rate the possibility of my having died of a gunshot wound or in a fire at zero, the Witnesses being dedicated to their own survival. In a profound way, though, she was right. Had I stayed in a sect that despised the world and believed in the absolute wickedness of all but true believers, my chances of dying spiritually, emotionally and mentally in an inferno of hatred and enforced otherness and mortification and self-disgust and an atrophy of will would have been roughly 100 percent.

This makes me so sad! For the dead and orphaned children of Waco, and also for the child I was.

When the subject of Waco comes up, the question I am most often asked is, How can people lend themselves to this kind of mania, this rabid lust for discipline and subservience? How can people surrender their souls and their minds - and their children - to a mad theology of doom?

The *how* is subsidiary to the *why*.

The need for certainty - for absolute, letter-of-the-law certainty - may be satisfied by fundamentalism or fanaticism; it cannot be satisfied by the mainline churches. Mainstream religions quarrel over whether women should be ordained priests or rabbis, and offer conflicting views about everything from homosexuality to the death penalty, abortion rights, pacifism and "just" wars. As a result they frequently (if inadvertently) leave the burden of choice and discrimination to the individual believer. But the fanatic, the fundamentalist and the cultist are able to say: "This is how it is; it can be no other way; I am certain." A lot of people are willing to abdicate reason and deny their own experience for what they regard as the privilege of being relieved of the oppressive burden of choice - and for the privilege of being one of the chosen few who possess the truth, the only truth.

Oh, we were certain. Certain and cranky. Like David Koresh we were certain that the end of the world would come in our time - and sooner, rather than later, I knew a woman in 1944 who wouldn't get her cavities filled because she considered it a waste of money; soon God would take care of her dental problems, in a New World that would be inhabited only by Jehovah's Witnesses, the rest of humanity having perished in the bloody and fiery. Armageddon in which David Koresh also believed, in 1974, years after I left the Witnesses, many of them, again anticipating the end, sold their homes and gave up their jobs in order to preach full time; their hopes were dashed. But the odd thing about the certainty game is that a leader can switch the rules (or the dates of the Apocalypse) as Koresh did, without the appreciate for certainty diminishing.

A charismatic leader can hold onto his flock even when his prophecies fail. In a way, it's like a bad marriage; you stay in it to recoup your investment.

Jehovah's Witnesses had no one charismatic leader, The organization was our leader; it was spoken of as "theocratic," which is to say emanating from and directed by God; so we regarded every organizational imperative as an unequivocal order from God. To disobey the leader was to disobey God and, consequently, to suffer not only alienation from Him but also dismissal from the group, was to be disgorged into a world of evil and, finally, to be consigned to "the lake of fire and brimstone," endless death.

The children who left the Branch Davidian compound before the fire thought (according to a report in the *New York Times*) that "the outside was full of bad guys, unbelievers without the 'light' evil and hurtful people." This is what they were instructed to believe. It is what I was instructed to believe. Like Koresh and his followers, we were glued together by our jargon: the unbelievers were "goats," we were "sheep." We were "in the truth," the others were God's sworn enemies. These enemies (for the purpose of doomsday theologies, there is no practical difference between Gandhi and Hitler) would die - and we would witness them die - in seas, rivers and fountains of blood.

This is what Koresh's followers believed, and what I once believed. I was steeped in the blood poetry of the Book of Revelation - the same book that Koresh tried, and spectacularly failed, to make sense of. That book, the last book of the Bible, rich, evocative, alternately ferocious and tender, healing and savage and, ultimately, opaque has intrigued scholars and challenged the imagination of madmen for two thousand years.

One is entitled to wonder what comfort any same person can derive from seeing his God's "enemies" swimming in seas of blood. When, finally, I left the Jehovah's Witnesses, it was because I could not worship a God who was less compassionate than I. When I left the Witnesses, a man who loved me wept: "Now you will be like everybody else. You will never know certainty again." I thank God (a loving God) that that is the case. May we all be delivered from bloody certainty.

There is no limit to the absurdity of what people will believe. I was instructed to believe that the United Nations was "the beast with seven heads and ten horns, the abomination of abominations" spoken of in Revelation. I believed that Revelation's "Babylon the great, the mother of harlots," was the Roman Catholic Church. I believed that "the faithful men of old" - the prophets, Moses and David and Daniel and Joshua - would come back to reign as princes on earth during my lifetime. I wondered what I'd serve one of them if he chose to honor me with his presence for dinner.

I wasn't stupid. I wasn't unkind. Yet I believed these things for years. The children Koresh manipulated had, as Dr. Bruce D. Perry, chief of psychiatry of Texas Children's Hospital, wrote in *The New York Times*, "many strengths: most

exhibited tenderness and caring toward siblings. The majority were very socially engaging. You liked them. They were nice kids." Any yet they believed. Apparently normal - the walls of their dormitory rooms, according to *Newsweek*, were decorated with drawings and cutouts, "cowboys and Indians, flowers, letters of the alphabet" - they believed.

They believed because Koresh set parent against child, child against parent, so that the only source of nourishment and light and approval was Koresh himself. I know exactly how this works. We were told to be "separate from the world"; we regarded college, for example, as the devil's playground. The organization was the sole source of our instruction and self-esteem. We didn't vote and didn't salute the flag and didn't have blood transfusions and didn't hang out with "worldly" people. And if we did any of those things, we were disfellowshipped - excommunicated. *And then no one from the organization - not our mother or our father or our sister or our brother or our best friend or our child - was ever allowed to speak to us again.* What would one risk to avoid that? It is surpassingly terrible, but it is not surprising, that one of Koresh's followers, her clothes aflame, tried to run back into the furnace of that building. Her life was in that building, her lord, her master, her truth, her future.

So how does this appalling dependence happen?

### **How can people surrender their souls and their minds - and their children - to a mad theology of doom?**

Ultimately, all belief - wholesome or vile - is a mystery. But we do know that a cult leader established an elaborate system of protocols - through sexual, emotional and mental intimidation and coercion - that convince the fanatic that he or she will be utterly lost without the Truth. Sometimes the convincing is incremental: long hours of Bible study and indoctrination, approval alternately lavished and withheld from the world, food or sleep deprivation (in my case, deprivation of any reading matter except that which the organization published) all of these do their work. Less frequently, the conversion experience is instantaneous; I found this out when I investigated another apocalyptic cult, the Church at Island Pond in Vermont: "Within a half hour [the leader] made me question my entire Christian upbringing and practically had me convinced I was an infidel, and my head hurt and my eyes ached...and I thought I was going to die or fall at his feet." The man who told me this returned to himself and was, when I met him, entirely rational and sane. The only thing I can venture to suggest is that craziness - religious psychosis - sucks everything up into itself; it's like a vacuum. There is a pernicious strength in this variety of insanity - it is so blazingly sure of itself. In an eerie echo of what I heard in Vermont, the former husband of one of Koresh's "took my entire Christian upbringing and put it in such a tailspin I didn't know what I believed."

Why some people are vulnerable and others not is a vexed question. I was a child when I believed. But perhaps all cultists are emotional children. Is this simplistic? I don't know. I do know that longing for a God who seems devastatingly remote can bend the most unlikely people out of shape...and His perceived silence is replaced by the demented babbling of mad human voices.

There is one thing I know for sure, and from experience: the sense of persecution is kind of gel that holds people in fringe groups together. Perversely, it offers them proof that they are special; the "hatred" of the world is proof to them of the love of God. Blasting Nancy Sinatra records and Tibetan chants at the Branch Davidians was almost guaranteed to *strengthen* their faith. I can see then, in my mind's eye, sitting in the fetid dark and rejoicing God had chosen them to be persecuted.

It breaks my heart.

One of the recorded sounds the Branch Davidians heard before they died was that of rabbits slaughtered. But they believed the whole world was fit for slaughter, why would the squeals of rabbits bring them to their knees? Their deranged certainty that the world was in every aspect evil led them to their deaths.

As I write this, I sit at my window and love every aspect of the physical world I see. To love the world, to allow myself to be loved by the flawed and imperfect men and women who are its crowning glory - and to believe that in spite of our discontent and His apparent inexplicable silence God broods gently over us all - has been my salvation.

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