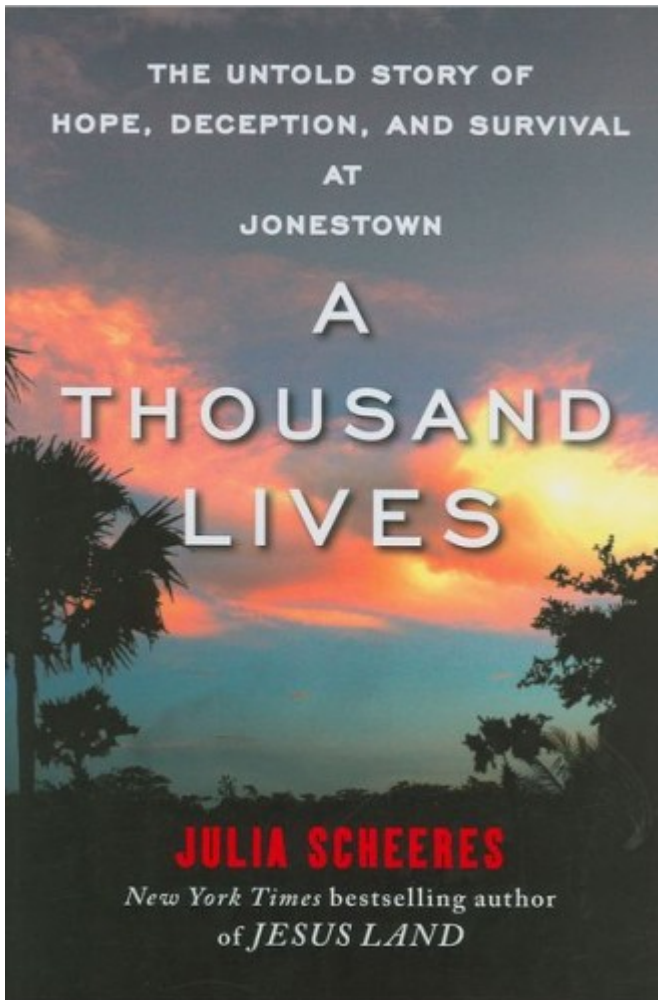


The lure of Jonestown

by [Valerie Weaver-Zercher](#) in the [May 30, 2012](#) issue

In Review



A Thousand Lives

By Julia Scheeres

Free Press

Working as a secretary in the late 1960s, Edith Roller watched as student sit-ins engulfed her office at San Francisco State College. Angered by the college administration's proffering of student records to the Selective Service for draft

purposes, the students protested for months and were met with police in riot gear. Roller, who was in her sixties, was also disturbed by the injustices of the Vietnam War and the racist policies of the U.S. government. She had watched her father, a miner, die from black lung disease and had developed a commitment to helping the weak stand up against the powerful. Now, watching protesting students being beaten bloody by police officers, Roller decided to speak up. She resigned from her position at the university because of the institution's "outright fascist trends" and sent a press release to local newspapers explaining her decision.

The short article about Roller that appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle* caught the eye of Jim Jones, then a young preacher with a growing church committed to social justice. His aides invited Roller to their church, Peoples Temple, and Roller was pleased to find a community where she could work for the ideals she cared about so deeply. She began attending and within a few years had moved into communal quarters with other Peoples Temple members. She began keeping a diary, at Jones's request, which would become a historical record of the temple. In January 1978 she moved with others in her church to a new settlement in Guyana. Less than a year later, she died there, along with more than 900 other people.

Julia Scheeres tells Roller's story in *A Thousand Lives*, the most recent addition to the literature on what has been called the "catastrophic millennialism" of Jim Jones. Scheeres chronicles the story of Jones, the members of Peoples Temple and their communitarian commitments and the colony in Guyana whose violent end in 1978 is both memorialized and trivialized in pop culture's references to "drinking the Kool-Aid."

The subtitle claims that this is the "untold story" of Jonestown because Scheeres's research tapped FBI files made public three years ago. But the story of Peoples Temple has been told over and over again, by academics and journalists and artists and survivors. Over 40 books have already made Jonestown their sole focus. These retellings, including Scheeres's, are testaments to the magnitude of the tragedy and the multiplicity of lenses through which it can be viewed. Authors ponder what Jonestown stood for, the balance of good and evil it contained, and how what began as a Christian movement committed to social justice and racial equality ended with nearly a thousand bloated bodies.

No matter how many more books appear, observers will likely never agree on what Jonestown meant or on who is authorized to interpret its legacy. Fielding McGehee,

primary researcher at the Jonestown Institute, suggested when I interviewed him that Peoples Temple is like the proverbial elephant whose identity blind men try to discern: Was it a cult? Or a church? A social welfare agency? Or a political organization? The answer, said McGehee, is yes.

Reading this or any book about Jones-town inevitably feels like rubbernecking. But what ultimately makes *A Thousand Lives* so unsettling is not just the deaths of almost 1,000 people, including 300 children, or the bizarre behavior of its leader. It is Scheeres's reminder that Peoples Temple could have appealed to you, me and her: anyone concerned about racism, gender inequality and poverty, anyone eager to belong to a community devoted to works of justice and compassion. Known for her best-selling memoir *Jesus Land*, Scheeres, who is white, writes that she and her adopted African-American brother "would have been thrilled and amazed by Peoples Temple, a church where blacks and whites worshiped side by side, the preacher taught social justice instead of damnation, and the gospel transported the congregation to a loftier realm. We longed for such a place."

In *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown*, scholar and pastor Mary McCormick Maaga suggests that outsiders may perceive the residents of Jonestown, like Edith Roller, as "the intimate other": someone who both resembles and frightens us, so we experience twin emotions of empathy and horror. This dual response—the realization that one could have been Scheeres's subject rather than her reader, paired with revulsion at what unfolded—is what makes it impossible to look away.

Scheeres spends several chapters excavating the early days of Peoples Temple, which became affiliated with the Disciples of Christ and practiced what Jones called "apostolic socialism," and following its migration from Indiana to California. She recounts the stories of people like Jim Bogue, a white man who hoped Peoples Temple would rebuild his crumbling marriage and family, and Stanley Clayton, a troubled black youth for whom Peoples Temple became a sanctuary from the streets and a family who believed in him.

Through staged healings, social gospel messages and personal charisma, Jones pulled into his orbit people disenchanted with churches' silence on social issues, and he fashioned himself as a civil rights leader. He began siphoning off members from black churches in San Francisco and Los Angeles, said McGehee of the Jonestown Institute. One elderly black survivor told McGehee that inside Peoples Temple Jim Jones was black, while outside the church he was white. Although most of Jones's

inner circle were white, his seeming ability to slip back and forth across the race line—understanding the powerless but moving among the powerful—augmented his appeal. By quickly mobilizing his large congregation to vote in close elections, Jones endeared himself to influential players in California politics, including George Moscone and Harvey Milk.

But as pressure from negative press accounts and defectors increased, along with the possibility of tax fraud allegations, a deal negotiated with the Guyanese government—to lease 3,800 acres at 25 cents an acre—provided an escape route. Jones engineered the relocation of a thousand members of his flock to Guyana, creating promotional videos of his eponymous Guyanese commune as a utopian rural community, a promised land where they could escape the fascist project of “AmeriKKKa.”

The bulk of Scheeres’s book chronicles this era of Peoples Temple history. By the time of the exodus to Jonestown, according to Scheeres, Jones made little pretense of religious faith, and his movement had migrated toward a communal socialist politics rather than a Christian social gospel. Members’ Bibles were confiscated, and Jones directed that a shipment of Gideon Bibles be used as toilet paper in the communal bathrooms. Some residents maintained private faith commitments, but outward allegiance had to be pledged to Jones and Jonestown, not Jesus. A custody battle, a vocal bloc of relatives and defectors, and finally the visit of Representative Leo Ryan and reporters became the justification for Jones to enact his apocalyptic finale.

Scheeres focuses mainly on the stories of five Jonestown residents, four of whom survived. One myth surrounding Jonestown is that only a few survived, but those who died at Jonestown represented only about 20 percent of the Peoples Temple membership, according to McGehee. About 100 Temple members in Guyana survived the murder-suicides, including those who were in the capital of Georgetown, and at least 4,000 members remained in California. Add to that all the family members and friends of those who died at Jonestown, and the number of people who could be considered survivors of Jonestown is vast. McGehee said that if you are an African American of a certain age and live in the metropolitan area of Los Angeles or San Francisco, chances are good that you knew someone who died at Jonestown.

Scheeres does an impressive job of telling the stories of the rank and file of Peoples Temple—people who were clearly victimized. She also explains Jones’s behavior by highlighting the cocktail of zealotry, egomania, paranoia, drug use and conflict that fueled all of it. Less intelligible in Scheeres’s account are the motivations of the Jonestown vanguard—the aides who helped to stage false attacks on Jonestown to convince residents that they were being persecuted, the nurses who injected unwilling Jonestown residents with the cyanide-laced Flavor Aid, the public relations “girls” stationed in the Guyanese capital who seduced officials in order to build alliances. Readers unfamiliar with the Jonestown story will be surprised at the extent to which a Peoples Temple intelligentsia served the movement until the end, writing legal briefs and representing Jones to the public. These and others in the inner circle were privy to Jones’s manifold deceptions yet remained faithful to the cause. Many consented to Jones’s corrupted version of Huey Newton’s concept of “revolutionary suicide.”

Both victims and masterminds of carnage can be easier to comprehend than subcontractors of it, and Scheeres’s focus on the kindly schoolteachers, on the one hand, and on Jones himself, on the other, does little to explain the complicity of these many adults in the final Jonestown event. As scholar Rebecca Moore suggests in *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, the popular literature about Jonestown “tends to blame the charismatic leader, and to exculpate his followers, for all that transpired.” To understand the radical commitments of Jonestown leaders and their gradual acclimation to Jones’s deviance, as well as the wider stream of cultural practices and ideologies from which Peoples Temple drew, one needs to turn to Moore’s text and John R. Hall’s *Gone from the Promised Land*. As those two books make clear, the Jonestown story can’t be reduced to a narrative of innocent multitude versus megalomaniacal monster or of brainwashed cult versus enlightened opponents. The elephant is simply too big, and our vision too poor.

Scheeres’s biggest misstep may be her dismissal of previous accounts of Jonestown as either “sensational media accounts” or “narrow academic studies.” The literature on Jonestown is wide and deep, and it exists within a larger matrix of work about new religious movements. Although the Jonestown canon does feature some lurid tabloidism and fusty scholarship, it also includes several noteworthy books that are, like Scheeres’s, humanizing, accessible accounts of the tragedy. Making one’s way through well-traveled territory should not require pooh-poohing those whose tracks one follows.

Is there anything new in *A Thousand Lives*? Yes, although perhaps less than one might expect. The 50,000 recently released FBI files on Jonestown include reams of financial statements and correspondence that alter what was already known only a little. As psychologist Katherine Hill, who does research for the Jonestown Institute, suggests in a review of *A Thousand Lives*, “People unfamiliar with the details of Jonestown but with an interest in the subject matter will likely find this book intriguing. Those with a great deal of knowledge on Jonestown will likely not find a lot of new information here.”

Scheeres’s book has garnered favorable reviews in the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, as well as a starred review in *Publishers Weekly*, but many of those close to the Jonestown story have had a more ambivalent reaction. McGehee said that some of the survivors whom Scheeres interviewed “felt she walked in the door with the story already written.” In a review in the *Jonestown Report*, an annual publication detailing Jonestown-related research, one survivor writes that *A Thousand Lives* “seems heavy on abuse and discipline, and light on the personal, social and psychological rewards of the communal, politically engaged life.” It was these rewards, claims Kathy Tropp Barbour in the *Jonestown Report*, that “at least while Peoples Temple was still stateside, made so few of us members seriously entertain the idea of leaving.”

A Thousand Lives has its failings, but it deserves attention for its carefully rendered portrait of Jonestown members who, Scheeres claims, should be remembered as “noble idealists.” Her examination of how utopian idealism slid into dystopian nightmare, and of the powerful curvy of apocalyptic ideology and charismatic authority that led hundreds to consent to their own deaths, is compelling. Ultimately, the strength of the book lies in the author’s restraint and her avoidance of flourishes, which allows the stories of her main characters to be heard. An example of this is the scene in which survivor Hyacinth Thrash, an elderly Jonestown resident who slept through the poisoning, learns of the tragedy. Thrash’s story has been told in a self-published book titled *The Onliest One Alive*; Scheeres’s book makes it available to a general readership.

Scheeres knows better than to create any literary special effects or to attempt any commentary as she tells the story of Thrash waking up on the morning of November 19, 1978, the day after the murder-suicides. Thrash notices that her roommates, who had gone to a hastily called meeting at the pavilion the day before, have not returned. As we watch Thrash hobble out the door of her cottage, in that last

moment before discovering that her loved ones are all dead, we too are confused by the “deep stillness” that greets her. We too find ourselves blinking in the Guyanese sun, wondering what on earth could have gone wrong.