

Serpents and salvation

## Glimpses into the faith of snake-handling holiness Christians

by [Elizabeth Palmer](#)

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James Lloyd, Vicie "Snook" Haywood, and Randy "Mack" Wolford after a rattlesnake bites Mack during a worship service in Panther, West Virginia, May 2012. Photograph by Lauren Pond, winner of the 2016 CDS/Honickman First Book Prize in Photography.

The professor was ill, so I'd been asked to teach the class on Pentecostalism with only a few days' notice. I skimmed the assigned textbook, consulted a few scholarly articles, located a brief video of Appalachian Pentecostals handling poisonous snakes and drinking strychnine, and did some exegetical research on Mark 16:18: "They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick; and they shall recover."

Watching the video, most of the students were flabbergasted by the idea that anyone would take a few Bible verses so literally as to put their lives in danger each week during worship. Truthfully, so was I. I later wondered if it had been wrong to show the video, which seemed only to exoticize a group of believers whose faith was drastically different from that of the students.

Years later, I read Dennis Covington's [\*Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia\*](#). A finalist for the 1985 National Book Award, the book documents the culture and worship life of Appalachian snake handlers. What begins as a newspaper assignment—covering the trial of a pastor accused of attempting to murder his wife with rattlesnakes—turns into full immersion for Covington. By the end of the book, the *New York Times* reporter finds himself handling snakes:

I felt no fear. The snake seemed to be an extension of myself. And suddenly there seemed to be nothing in the room but me and the snake. . . . I was losing myself by degrees, like the incredible shrinking man. The snake would be the last to go, and all I could see was the way its scales shimmered one last time in the light, and the way its head moved from side to side, searching for a way out. I knew then why the handlers took up serpents. There is power in the act of disappearing; there is victory in the loss of self.

“Feeling after God,” Covington concludes, “is dangerous business. And Christianity without passion, danger, and mystery may not really be Christianity at all.”

Lauren Pond captures some of this passion, danger, and mystery in her visually stunning and ethically provocative book. [\*Test of Faith: Signs, Serpents, Salvation\*](#) intersperses vivid photographs of a West Virginia serpent-handling Pentecostal church with the stories of its members. “Religion,” Pond writes, “—let alone a fringe Christian tradition of handling deadly snakes—was one of the last things I imagined myself documenting in depth.” But she does document it, deeply and empathetically.

At the heart of the narrative is an unexpected twist—while Pond was photographing the ministry, the church's pastor, Randy “Mack” Wolford, was bitten by a rattlesnake during worship and died of the bite. Pond is deeply aware of the moral quandaries of photographing a person while he is dying, and she concludes the book with a

beautifully vulnerable essay on the ethics and vocation of photography. “Would I be willing to publish my photos?” she asks herself. And later: “How *could* I just have stood there and photographed Mack dying?” Her reflections are so honest that they may cause some readers to wonder about the ethical implications of looking at such photographs.

Pond’s photographic eye is more compassionate than voyeuristic, and she captures something of the essence of Mack’s faith even while hesitating to pin it down. Snakes are at the heart of the beauty of life in this fragile world, it seems, as well as the pain. In addition to symbolizing death, Pond explains, “a creature capable of shedding and building upon its past . . . embodies forgiveness and renewal.” The Wolford family also manifests this sense of renewal as they negotiate a continued relationship with Pond even after she publishes some sensitive photographs of Mack in a major daily newspaper shortly after his death.

Pond eventually puts down her camera, but not so she can take up snakes like Covington does. She simply sits in the pew next to the Wolfords at worship. Pond’s willingness to relinquish her camera captures something of the loss of self that Covington writes about. Removing the lens, she collapses the barrier between herself and her subjects.

And her understanding of the snake-handling Christians changes. As she listens to the sermons, she is surprised to find herself hearing about “human fallibility and God’s mercy” more often than fire and brimstone. “Although I had documented the Signs Following faith for several years, I felt as though I were seeing it for the first time. The snakes were almost superfluous.” What isn’t superfluous is everything else she observes: love in the midst of vulnerability, a shared story, and the hope for salvation. There’s nothing exotic about those elements of faith.