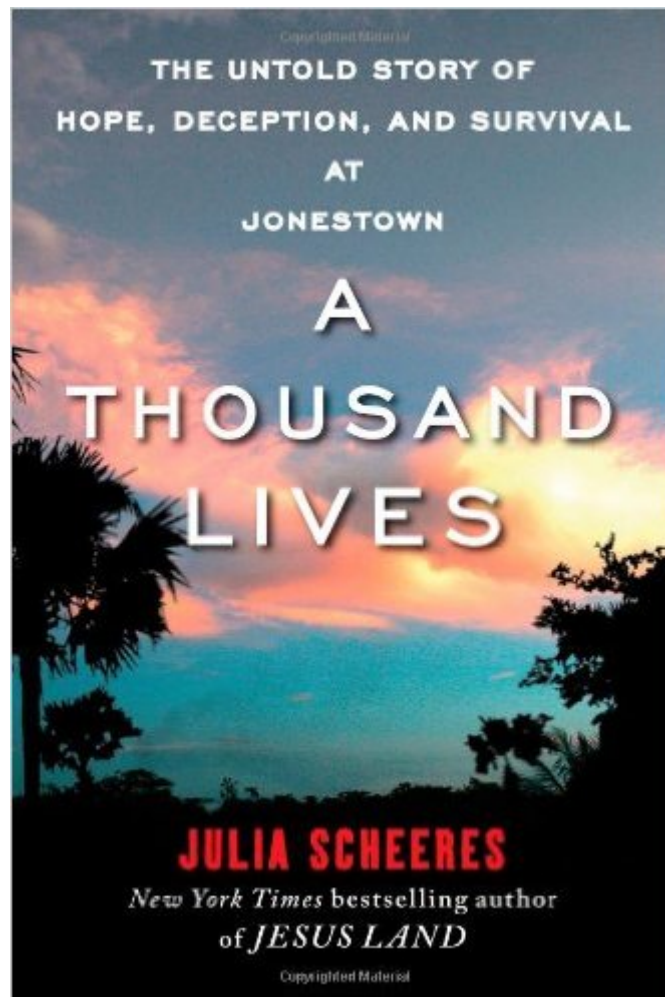


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# A Thousand Lives: The Untold Story Of Hope, Deception, And Survival At Jonestown



## Synopsis

and love socialism, and I'm willing to die to bring it about, but if I did, I'd take a thousand with me." Jim Jones, September 6, 1975

In 1954, a pastor named Jim Jones opened a church in Indianapolis called Peoples Temple Full Gospel Church. He was a charismatic preacher with idealistic beliefs, and he quickly filled his pews with an audience eager to hear his sermons on social justice. After Jones moved his church to Northern California in 1965, he became a major player in Northern California politics; he provided vital support in electing friendly political candidates to office, and they in turn offered him a protective shield that kept stories of abuse and fraud out of the papers. Even as Jones's behavior became erratic and his message more ominous, his followers found it increasingly difficult to pull away from the church. By the time Jones relocated the Peoples Temple a final time to a remote jungle in Guyana and the U.S. Government decided to investigate allegations of abuse and false imprisonment in Jonestown, it was too late.

*A Thousand Lives* follows the experiences of five Peoples Temple members who went to Jonestown: a middle-class English teacher from Colorado, an elderly African American woman raised in Jim Crow Alabama, a troubled young black man from Oakland, and a working-class father and his teenage son. These people joined Jones's church for vastly different reasons. Some, such as eighteen-year-old Stanley Clayton, appreciated Jones's message of racial equality and empowering the dispossessed. Others, like Hyacinth Thrash and her sister Zipporah, were dazzled by his claims of being a faith healer. Hyacinth believed Jones had healed a cancerous tumor in her breast. Edith Roller, a well-educated white progressive, joined Peoples Temple because she wanted to help the less fortunate. Tommy Bogue, a teen, hated Jones's church, but was forced to attend services and move to Jonestown because his parents were members.

*A Thousand Lives* is the story of Jonestown as it has never been told before. New York Times bestselling author Julia Scheeres drew from thousands of recently declassified FBI documents and audiotapes, as well as rare videos and interviews, to piece together an unprecedented and compelling history of the doomed camp, focusing on the people who lived there. Her own experiences at an oppressive reform school in the Dominican Republic, detailed in her unforgettable debut memoir *Jesus Land*, gave her unusual insight into this story. The people who built Jonestown wanted to forge a better life for themselves and their children. They sought to create a truly egalitarian society. In South America, however, they found themselves trapped in Jonestown and cut off from the outside world as their leader goaded them toward committing a revolutionary suicide and deprived them of food, sleep, and hope. Yet even as Jones resorted to lies and psychological warfare, Jonestown residents fought for their community, struggling to maintain their gardens, their school, their families,

and their grip on reality. Vividly written and impossible to forget, *A Thousand Lives* is a story of blind loyalty and daring escapes, of corrupted ideals and senseless, haunting loss.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Like many people born in 1980 or later, I grew up with a vague notion of Jonestown as a weird town in a jungle where a bunch of people in a cult drank poison Kool-Aid and died. I use the term "drink the Kool-Aid" when I refer to someone completely buying in to an idea or a cause. But until I read this book, I never really knew what Jonestown was all about. Scheeres provides a service in this book, both as a skillful historian and as a compassionate human being. She synthesizes hours of audio recordings and written documents into a gut-wrenching tragedy that will linger with the reader. The true strength of her work is the constant tension between the hope of the individual characters and the inevitable doom that presses down on every page. Scheeres truly loves the victims of the massacre, and she is clearly determined to present them in sympathetic ways, sharing stories of simple people who came to Peoples Temple because it offered real racial integration, miraculous healings, and loving community. They believed in a socialism that affirmed the value of every human being, and they were willing to sign away all of their possessions for the cause. As the group developed, though, things got darker, and Scheeres brings in an impressive level of detail in her examples. She writes about demonstrably fake "healings" and sham "assassination attempts" that Jones fabricated to make his followers feel persecuted by outsiders. There are heart-dropping scenes when church members are forced to sign blank pieces of paper, knowing that if they desert their communities, then the church leaders will type confessions (to murder, child molestation, or

any other crimes) and deliver them to authorities.

This is one of those books that you don't read for pleasure. To say that what happened at Jonestown was a tragedy is an understatement of incredible proportion. That goes without saying. Even though I once watched a documentary on television about Jonestown, I didn't know much about it. (I was only 2 years old in 1978). As I watched that documentary, I remember thinking "Why didn't they just leave?" This book helped me realize that the answer to that question is far more complex than it seems. The people at Jonestown left the United States in search of a dream. They wanted to live in a utopia of racial equality and harmony. By the time they realized just how dangerous and unstable Jim Jones really was, the settlement had become pretty much like a concentration camp. It can be easy to judge people who get involved with cults as stupid and naive. We tell ourselves that we would never get into a situation like that. But I think reality is that all humans need to believe in something. I think if the circumstances were right, anyone could be duped by a cult. That is why books like this are so important. I think it is so important to recognize the warning signs of a cult and to be proactive. Cult leaders like Jim Jones will often brainwash their followers, control them through brainwashing and some type of abuse, and isolate them from family and friends. I hope that people will read books like this and that something good will eventually come out of something so horrific and tragedy. I think it is also important to remember that that these were real people. They were someone's friend, mother or father, son or daughter, grandparents, and friends. They had lives and names. Hindsight is always 20/20 and it's easy to look back and see the clear warning signs.

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