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The offspring of 'Jesus Freaks'

Shocking book delves into the inner machinations of the Children of God

By Rebecca Rosen Lum

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David Berg was a small-time circuit preacher whose flocks ran thin until the late '60s, when the sexual revolution and the Jesus movement bloomed at once.

The sex-obsessed Berg wove the two into a double helix, drawing from the remnants of hippie life -- people with nothing to lose, nowhere to go, and no Christian background to serve as a compass while in the thrall of a man who purported to live by Scripture.

His Teens for Christ became the Children of God, with enclaves in California and Texas expanding into a evangelical empire across continents, yielding profit and power for the "end-time prophet" and his inner circle.

But writer Don Lattin is only so interested in what makes a self-anointed prophet run. Lattin, whose book "Jesus Freaks" hit bookstores this month, cares more about what happens to children born into authoritarian groups -- the offspring of those who voluntarily cast their lot with people like Berg.

Subtitled "A True Story of Murder and Madness on

the Evangelical Edge," the book follows the brief, tormented life of Ricky Rodriguez, Berg's designated prophet prince.

As the longtime religion writer for the San Francisco Chronicle, Lattin plumbed what happens to children in cults, including the Church of Scientology, the Moonies, the Hare Krishnas and the Children of God (which would later be renamed The Family, or Family International).

Rigorous indoctrination

In each, "The kids didn't have the chance to grow up and be themselves," Lattin said in an interview just before the book's release. "There were hours and hours a day of indoctrination. In that way, the Children of God was the worst."

The accumulated years of indoctrination exploded for Rodriguez in a murder-suicide in 2005 that shook Lattin and compelled him to write "Jesus Freaks."

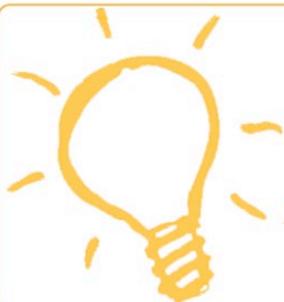
"I was so taken aback by what drove Ricky, raised by The Family, to kill someone else and take his own life," Lattin said. "He was the ultimate example of what can happen to kids when they're raised in an atmosphere of severe indoctrination.

"It's a really dark story, a sensational story," Lattin said. "I tried to get in the mind-sets of these people."

The Children of God melded apocalyptic Christian evangelism with mind-boggling sexual mores. Lattin stunned readers when he first detailed the unorthodox practices of the Children of God in 2001.

Berg dispatched young, attractive female followers to lure male converts through sex in a practice he

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called "flirty fishing." He discouraged them from using birth control.

Rodriguez, the first child conceived through "flirty fishing," was the natural son of Berg's common-law wife, Karen Zerby, also called "Maria," and a waiter she picked up in the Canary Islands. Rodriguez was called "Davidito."

"Davidito and Maria are going to be the Endtime witnesses," Berg wrote in 1978. "They are going to have such power they can call down fire from Heaven and devour their enemies."

In fact, Rodriguez did devour his enemies: He left the cult, but tormented by a life of abuse, could not make a life for himself. Driven by rage, he vilified his mother in a videotaped rant, stabbed one of his former nannies to death and shot himself in 2005.

More than 13,000 children were born to followers between 1971 and 2001; "women with six, eight, 10, 13 kids were not uncommon," Lattin said.

Mothers and caretakers pulled children from their beds at night to engage in sex acts with Berg in a regular "sharing schedule" (some kids referred to it as the "scaring schedule"). A poor performance yielded brutal punishment.

"They were made to believe their eternal salvation depended on this," Lattin said.

Deep suspicion

The group once enjoyed plenty of good press.

In the waning days of the Summer of Love, parents would say, "at least they're Christians," Lattin said.

Berg died in 1994, and Zerby took control of the

organization.

Grown survivors of the group have developed a deep suspicion of outsiders and adults, Lattin said. But gradually, they sensed their stories were safe with this blues guitar-playing writer, part-time professor and married stepfather of two girls, and they let it all out.

"I've never seen so many problems among kids," he mused, munching Thai food at a favorite Berkeley haunt.

"The Children of God was a machine to spread the ideas of David Berg," he said. "The children were born to do the same thing. That was the real evil. Then, when they rebelled, as teens do, they would send them off to these re-education camps."

"Victor camps" in Macao and other places provided a punishing diet of enforced silence, hard labor and sometimes, exorcisms.

Amazingly, the material for some of the most wrenching passages in the book were provided courtesy of Berg and his inner sanctum.

"The Story of Davidito" recounts Rodriguez' sexual education, which Zerby arranged with a series of "nannies" from the time of his infancy.

"David Berg was so prolific about publishing every thought that came into his mind," Lattin said. "Essentially, he hung himself."

A child custody trial in England brought by the grandparents of one of the children also provided voluminous documentation.

'Born and raised'

No current members would talk to Lattin. They have

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issued prepared statements defending the group's charitable activities and distancing it from its sexually hyperactive past.

As Lattin prepared for a round of booksignings and appearances, a familiar story played out in the news: the rape trial of Warren Jeffs, president of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, who arranged a marriage between a 14-year-old girl and her 19-year-old cousin in 2001.

"Same kinds of things," Lattin said. "Kids were born and raised in it. They weren't raised to be themselves. They were raised to be part of a machine."

Those who have studied other cults are lavishing praise on the book and its author.

Los Angeles Times investigative reporter Tim Reiterman ("Raven: The Untold Story of the Rev. Jim Jones and His People," Dutton, 1982) praised Lattin's focus on Berg's lasting impact on the second generation.

"One of the insights it gives you quite well is a sense of how people can be drawn into a group, regular people who had needs that made them vulnerable to a charismatic leader," he said. "They were ready to accept things they wouldn't have been ready to accept the day they walked in."

So how do people who begin as idealists descend into unthinkable abuse? The same "way a frog will if you put it in cold water, then gradually heat the water to a boil," Lattin said.

"You try to understand the psychological dynamics of it," he said, shaking his head. "People were convinced to do some pretty reprehensible things. When you backtrack, you can see how it happened incrementally."

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Profile

WHO: Don Lattin

WHAT: Author of "Jesus Freaks: A True Story of Murder and Madness on the Evangelical Edge" (HarperOne, \$24.95, 236 pages)

BOOKSIGNING: 7 p.m. Oct. 30 at Cody's, 1730 Fourth St., Berkeley, 510-559-9500

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