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Drawing from 1000s of pages of police reports, court documents, interviews, letters & diaries, Sillitoe's & Roberts's narrative cuts thru the complexities of this famous crime investigation to deliver a gripping, Capote-esque tale. They embrace the details, then lay them out systematically as seen thru the eyes of the detectives, victims & perpetrator. The darkest secrets unravel gradually, allowing readers fleeting glimpses of the infamous salamander as it ducks in & out of its fabricator's head. What was the salamander letter & why were so many people determined to possess & conceal it? Why was this one of the most unusual cases in American forensic history? A skilled con artist by anyone's assessment, Mark Hofmann eluded exposure by police & document authenticators--the FBI, Library of Congress, the LDS church historical department & polygraph experts--until George Throckmorton discovered the tell-tale microscopic alligating that was characteristic of the forgeries. What ensued was a suspense-ridden cat-&-mouse game between seasoned prosecutors & a clever, homicidal criminal. In the end, this story verifies the saying that sometimes truth is stranger than fiction.

Salamander: The Story of the Mormon Forgery Murders with a New Afterword Details

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From Reader Review Salamander: The Story of the Mormon Forgery Murders with a New Afterword for online ebook

Erik Graff says

Years ago I'd read another history of 'the Mormon murders' which framed them more in terms of the conflicts between the two major branches of Mormonism than this book does. Reading it, however, probably helped me better appreciate this account, written as it is less from a journalistic and more from an insider perspective.

The Mormons have long intrigued me as have similar, latter-day Christian sects like the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Seventh-Day Adventists. While Christianity--orthodox, traditional Christianities--makes incredible claims, it, being rooted in, at one extreme, classical antiquity and, at the other extreme, the Reformation, tends to be simply accepted as part of the cultural landscape, even by non-Christians like myself. Recent offshoots, however, bring into relief and into consciousness just how strange the Christian religion and its offspring are.

The events in this book will probably interest a wider range of readers than just those interested in the Utah/Mormon context. It is, after all, a tale of crime and detection. More particularly, notwithstanding the two murders, it's about the crime of forgery and about the kind of sociopathology evinced by a career deceiver who would murder innocents in order to facilitate his deceptions.

Jake says

It wasn't until I was serving a full-time Mormon mission that I heard anything about Mark Hofmann and his forgeries. And then I didn't hear much, certainly nothing official. Like so much in Mormon history, this contemporary episode quickly became something 'in the past' that 'isn't faith promoting' and therefore 'isn't discussed.' Yet, it's a classic example of the business-related fraud that is said to run rampant in Utah, where trusting church-goers often prove to be easy prey.

While the mail bomb murders that occurred are the greatest tragedy, I took away two key reactions from reading this book.

1) Mark Hofmann was remarkably adept at deceiving people from the rank and file to the upper echelon of church membership. Yet, it seems the larger community of document collectors in Utah, including non-Mormon ones, failed to call him out quickly. Of course, if the LDS church had made the documents they purchased readily available to secular scholars that might have happened sooner. Mistakes were made on all sides.

2) The law enforcement officers who were finally allowed to examine Mark Hofmann's forgeries helped bring about justice via careful, methodical investigation. The story of how they disproved Hofmann's famed "Salamander Letter" is a great crime story, independent of the religious controversies surrounding it.

I found this book accessible, largely free of sensationalism, and engrossing from start to finish.

Dad says

I can't believe I stuck with this book, not because it isn't interesting but because the print is small and it is 565 pages long. I got the book a long time ago and it has sat on my shelf ever since. Finally, I decided to read it. It is well written and quite interesting, keeping me going.

Mark Hoffman, the Mormon gone-wrong forger, must have been pretty good at what he did. He forged over a hundred documents of Mormon or US Americana interest. Several of his pieces would have changed how history was written. Also, several ripped at the beliefs of the Mormon church. Luckily, they turned that around.

Hoffman got in a bind as do most dishonest crooks and ended up needing money to cover his tracks. He ended up making pipe bombs to murder Steve Christensen and Kathy Sheets then he was severely injured by a third pipe bomb. It may or may not have been a suicide attempt.

This led to an exhaustive police investigation that pinned him to the bombs and exposed his forgeries for what they were.

It made me think how many of us have "forgeries" in our lives and have already cleared them up or need to. It also made me think, how many people in our lives do we let dupe us just because they profess to be something. Do we really examine things for what they are?

Brett Nordquist says

Incredibly detailed account of Mark Hofmann murders that took place in Salt Lake City in the mid 1980s. I appreciated the details about LDS church leaders like Hinckley and Pinnock who purchased forgeries from Hofmann or helped line up massive loans for Hofmann. I also found the forensic details around the old paper and ink fascinating.

My only complaint with the book is the legal details bog things down near the end of the book and the back and forth (starting with the murders, then providing details about the players, followed by the legal process) got a bit confusing at times. Just as Hofmann delivered the bombs, the story forwards to the legal proceedings and loses some of its excitement.

These are minor quibbles. Brent Metcalfe, on an interview with John Dehlin and Mormon Stories, recommended Salamander as the most balanced book on this sad historical account of one of the saddest moments in Utah and LDS history.

Kiekiat says

I'd actually give this book 3.5 stars if I had the option. It was readable and I have several other books about the case I haven't read yet so I will need to read them to see how other authors handled the amount of information involved in this complicated and convoluted case. I don't think the two writers of the book had much experience in writing true crime, and this shows more in the structure of the book and oft-confusing characters emerging briefly in the story and reemerging two-hundred pages later. A list of the dramatic personae at the front of the book would have been of great help. The authors are professional writers, so the writing was well-done but its minutiae induced more than its fare share of longueurs.

The events of the story are now over 30 years old, so I will assume that many readers will recall them well-enough that I do not have to warn of "spoilers." The story is rather simple. Mark Hofman, a clever dealer in antiquities, is also a clever forger. The story takes place in Salt Lake City and the surrounding areas and Hofman specializes in selling ancient (and forged) documents to the leaders of the Mormon (LDS) Church. The Mormons seem obsessed with any historical documents, particularly those that disparage the LDS Church in any way or cast doubt on Joseph Smith's Divine revelation.

To the authors' credit, both are apparently involved in the close-knit Mormon historical document community but no attempts are made to hide the complicity of the Mormon leaders in inadvertently aiding and abetting Hofmann's forgeries. Hofmann is from a staunch Mormon family and is tightly-connected to the LDS Church, though he admits later that he lost his faith in Mormon Doctrine at an early age. Church leaders are interested in antiquities that both prove the Church's official history and also want to suppress any documents that cast a negative light on the Church's rather bizarre history.

Hofmann is basically a sociopath who becomes expert in forging fake documents and selling them to other avid collectors and to LDS Church officials. After years of duping other historical document dealers and LDS grand poobahs, not to mention expert authenticators of the documents, Hofmann finally ends up deep in debt and at odds with Church authorities. His solution to losing his credibility is to murder several people with pipe bombs. One of the bombings eliminates a pesky colleague with higher moral standards who is on the verge of exposing Hofmann as being duplicitous and underhanded, thus ending his already chequered document dealing career. The other bomb is a diversion. A 3rd bomb explodes in Hoffman's car while he is inside it, injuring but not killing him. Hofmann is immediately the main suspect in all the bombings after being injured by the third bomb and a large part of the book is devoted to the Salt Lake City Police Department's effort, along with the ATF, in building a case against Hofmann. While building the bombing murder cases, a motive is sought and police and prosecutors put in a tremendous amount of work to tie Hofmann to the bombings and to decipher his forgeries and to establish his motives for the murders.

The authors offer a fascinating glimpse into the world of Mormon antiquity trading and the ineptitude of various document authenticators who had pronounced most of Hofmann's documents as being real. This was an interesting tale about a clever sociopath who has achieved a sort of legendary infamous status in the LDS Church community. In the hands of an experienced and more organized true crime writer, this could have been a five-star book. As written, it is a flawed, three-star book that still tells an interesting story.

Regan says

A non-fiction I stumbled on by reading Charlie Lovett's *Bookman's Tale*. In that book, which deals with a forged historical document one of the characters refers to *Salamander: the Story of the Mormon Forgery Murders*. I just HAD to get it....and it was a super read.

Scott says

I have read *Salamander: The Story of the Mormon Forgery Murders* by Allen D. Roberts and Linda Sillitoe previously and I will probably read it again. I remember when all this happened and I find the story as

fascinating today as I did so many years ago. This is a well written book with lots of detail and facts.

John says

Not as rivetingly written as "The Mormon Murders", but still fascinating, and in many ways more detailed in its account of the Hoffman forgeries and murders.

Tanya W says

I wish I had remembered to review this a month ago when it was fresh in my mind. This was an excellent true life crime book and very fair to all involved. I could hardly put it down.

I loved learning about how the detectives figured out that almost everything Mark Hoffman ever sold was a forgery and a fraud... how through the most meticulous work and effort, they rose above the high intellectualism and skill of experts who had authenticated hundreds of items and had not the slightest doubt of their authenticity.

I was amazed at how a person so diabolical was able to pass himself off as a normal, faithful LDS man. It is scary to know that no matter our faith, there are wolves, devils among us. They know how to blend in. Such evil lurked in the boyish and wholesome appearance carried by Mark Hoffman. Hoffman served a mission and by all appearances was a devout and faithful member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. All the while he was enacting a plan to change church history in a negative way by creating it through forgery. It's strange that a person who doubts their own faith would go to the trouble to create a faith diminishing alternate history and try to damage the faith of others. It is as if he decided, "I don't believe it, so I will sow as many seeds of doubt as I can, even by making up lies and documents." He did all this while he profited to the tune of hundreds of thousands of dollars. He confused church leaders who must have been stymied by the content of his creations, which fooled reknown experts. Of course they didn't want to publish things that were so unexplainable and didn't really fit with the real history of the LDS church, though they did publish many of these questionable documents, and unfortunately spent a lot of money on them.

I was impressed with many of the real life players on this stage of human drama. Police detectives have a place in my heart for their tireless efforts to uncover fraud, murder, and evil among us, and hold perpetrators accountable for their horrible acts.

I agreed with Terri Christensen, that her husband was a martyr so that Mark Hoffman could be exposed for what he was and not subject the leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ to ongoing falsehood, forgery, lies, and in a broad sense, extortion.

I really hope the Gary Sheets and Steve Christensen families are doing well and at peace in spite of such horrible loss. Thank goodness, through their faith in Jesus Christ, they have the assurance of being reunited with their loved ones after this life... for Jesus Christ overcame the world and gave all of us everlasting life.

Becca says

Super interesting non-fiction read about the forgeries and bombings that occurred in the 80's. This book honestly read more like a Dan Brown book than a historical account. The authors weren't LDS, but I felt that it was a pretty unbiased telling, which I appreciated. This is a great historical read.

Elynn says

I remember vaguely some of these events from when I was little (something about a salamander and a bomb), but I became intrigued with the story when I found out I was working in the same building, on the same floor where the first bomb went off. I walked by it every day. The more I found out about the story the more I wanted to read what happened. Such a bizarre story of what someone will do to protect a lie. There are several books written about these events but I had to search for one that didn't seem just a bashing session. This version seemed to give a fairly unbiased presentation of the facts and the investigation (it did express the bias of the people involved).

The story was fascinating and bizarre. The writing was good. I would have given the book four stars but the middle section that went through the life history of Mark Hoffman from childhood to murderer was often boring. It did give insight into his character and I guess is necessary to how things ended the way they did, but it was a bit boring.

Cindi says

This book was quite the ride!

My only complaint was that there were so many names to keep straight. There's not much the author could do about that. There were times when I became confused and had to look back to figure out who someone was. It didn't help that I stopped reading in the middle and then came back to it. I have to say that this author did an incredible amount of research and an exceptional job at writing this book!

Eye-opening. Steve Christensen was the brother of one of my friends in Elementary School, but I never really understood what had happened. I had heard of the Salamander letter and since then, I've heard a bit more about the contents and what went on, but this book really spells it out. All of it!

I was surprised to find that both Mark Hofmann and Steve Christensen were liberal believers (in the case of Hofmann, he would probably be classified as a non-believer).

This book was written in such a way as to keep the reader in suspense until the very end where we hear Mark Hofmann's confessions and methods for forgery.

James Badger says

What an astonishingly gripping tale of a true crime. This book was simply impressive on a number of fronts.

First of all, the depth of the research that went into the making of this book is simply staggering. Secondly, I commend the authors for writing nonfiction which unfolded like fiction. Looking back, the Hofmann affair seems too unlikely to be true. Even so, the writing style of Sillitoe and Roberts brought more than a measure of reality to the story. Thirdly, I appreciated the way in which the book followed the numerous impacts on the personal lives of the key players in these events. The book conveys a tremendous amount of empathy for nearly everyone who ever had the misfortune of coming into contact with Hofmann. Finally, I appreciated the sensitivity of the book. It would be very easy to attack the church and its leaders for not having enough inspiration to steer clear of a con man, which is something several people have done in the wake of the Hofmann affair. Sillitoe and Roberts took the high ground and simply stuck to the facts. They did not make any assertions about whether or not these events cast doubt on the prophetic abilities of Hinckley, Oaks, and Pinnock. Of course Pinnock did not come out of these events with his good reputation completely intact, but the facts would seem to indicate that this was for the best.

I enjoyed this book very much, and I can honestly say that it is possibly the most endlessly fascinating piece of nonfiction I have ever read. I don't know that I can recommend it highly enough.

Noreen says

There is an old board game called "careers." Players can win by choosing, Love, Fame or Money. A friend who played this game often as a child, learned to "win" by choosing Money. Mark Hofmann was a Mormon Eagle Scout who forged historical Mormon documents and sold many to Mormon church officials. He wanted the fame of a close working relationship with the highest officials of the Mormon church. He also needed the money to maintain his lifestyle. The crime was forgery.

Kenneth Arrow's Individual Choices and Social Values applied to Mark Hofmann who was trying to have both Fame and Money, and wound up with the irrational result of neither, fame or money.

Donald Powell says

Fascinating story of intrigue, law enforcement, old documents and church politics. This was a real page turner.
