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The unkindest cult of all

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10 December 2016 9:00 AM



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When I was 22 I met a man called Yisrayl Hawkins who said his coming had been prophesied in the Book of Isaiah. Yisrayl (born Bill) lived with his many disciples and several wives in a compound carved out of the red dirt scrub near Abilene, Texas. His cult was called the House of Yahweh, and as a sign of their commitment, his 400 followers had all changed their names to Hawkins.

Yisrayl was a narcissist, as most cult leaders are, and this made him tremendously boring. As he droned on about being chosen, and his conviction that Satan was in fact female, I watched the ferrety little Hawkins children dart between mobile homes and Airstream caravans, and his wives, the many Mrs Hawkineses, all in headscarves. They were good-looking women, and educated too. What on earth had drawn them to Yisrayl? What kept them with him?

This new, heartfelt, complicated investigation into The Family, one of Australia's craziest and most infamous sects, by Chris Johnston, a senior writer for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and Rosie Jones, a film-maker, answers questions about cults that have nagged at me for decades.

Anne Hamilton-Byrne, now 95, began to gather her Family around her in the late 1950s in Melbourne. Like Yisrayl, Anne was psychotically vain and changed both her own name and often her followers' too. Unlike Yisrayl, she was beautiful, and even those who didn't believe her claim to be a reincarnation of Christ admitted she was mesmerising. She taught a yoga class and her great trick was to find unhappy women, often middle-aged ones neglected by their husbands, and offer them affection and spiritual direction. She'd give them LSD and say, 'There's no own family. Only love. Great love.' This love dictated that they left their husbands and became, effectively, her servants. Barbara Kibby, once a Family member, says: 'She knew if she could get [women] to leave their husbands, their families would disown them and she'd have them for life.'



Trish was perfect fodder for Anne. In 1967, Trish's son died in a car crash. Two days later, Anne was at her door offering solace. A few months after that, Trish was told to go to the Royal Women's Hospital and pretend to be a 'Mrs Webb', come to adopt a child. A doctor in league with the Family delivered a baby from a terrified teenage mother and then handed it straight to Trish. This was Anne's most diabolical trick: stealing babies from disgraced mothers too vulnerable to question the doctor.

The growing collection of Hamilton-Byrne children, the heart of the Family cult, was tucked away in a backwoods property called Kai Lama, near Lake Eildon, Victoria. By the mid 1970s there were 14 of them, all called Hamilton-Byrne, all dressed in identical outfits, with hair bleached and cut into a bob. Anne thought this made them look like her. She was wrong. The photos show them looking like a cross between the Von Trapps and the alien children in John Wyndham's *The Midwich Cuckoos*.

Day in, day out, the children of the Family followed a regime devised by Anne for their spiritual good. There was yoga and chanting from morning till night, and very little food, because Anne was obsessed with weight. The children, now adults, told Johnston and Jones that they were often so hungry they'd break into nearby houses to stuff themselves with dry cereal. If caught, they'd be beaten and half-drowned in buckets of icy water as punishment. Worse: when they reached 14 the children were deemed ready to 'Go Through' and spent several days being injected with vast doses of LSD.

Anne did not herself supervise all this. Mostly she traipsed the world buying property. Instead, the children's tormentors were three of Anne's most loyal devotees — the 'Aunties' — and Trish was one of them. And it's in its insight into Auntie psychology that this book is really valuable.

Cult leaders are easy to fathom. They're charlatans or psychopaths, often both. Anne's mother had dementia and neglected her daughter, so both nature and nurture conspired in Anne's lunacy. But how could Trish, a once loving mother and normal suburban wife, abduct and abuse children? The answer lies in a simple trick. Anne reeled in her followers by offering love to the lonely, but her real skill was to withhold it. She kept her lady followers desperate for approval, so that they were willing to do almost anything to earn it.

Like Yisrayl, Anne has never really been held to account because her cult members are too traumatised and vulnerable to take the stand. He was fined, after pleading no contest to child labour charges; she was fined for benefit fraud. Both, amazingly, still attract followers to this day. Does Anne know what she's done? She has dementia now and lives in a nursing home in Melbourne, but there are glimmers of understanding. Johnston and Jones visited her, without much success, but as they left she looked up and said: 'What's that woman with the children done? Done a bunk?' Quite.

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