

Unit of Study: Cults  
Grade: 10  
Ages: 15-16

## Cults:

Webster's Dictionary defines a cult as:

"1. A formal religious veneration; 2. A system of religious beliefs and rituals and its body of adherents; 3. A religion regarded as "unorthodox or spurious"; 4. A system for the cure of disease based on dogma set forth by its promulgator.

According to many dictionaries, encyclopedias, and reliable websites, cults can be divided into two subgroups: the cults that are based in theology and the cults that are based in sociology.

Cults can also refer to an almost religious dedication to a concept or idea, such as the sighting of UFOs or an unconventional movie. There are thousands of cults around the United States and the world. Refer to the following 10 sources to learn more about or become more familiar with the concept of cults. (F) means that the source is a piece of fiction; (NF) means that the source is nonfiction.

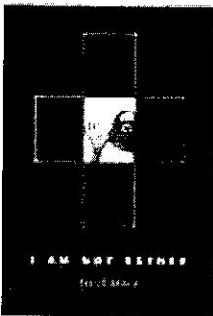
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Beale, Fleur. *I am not Esther*. New York: Hyperion Books for Children, 2002. (F)

Awards: Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers 2003

Ages: 12-16

Genre: Realistic Fiction

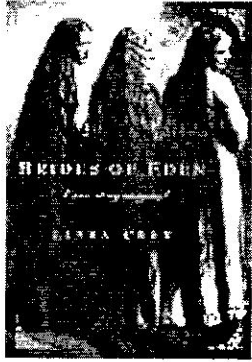


Kirby is a fourteen-year-old, abandoned by her mother. Left to live with her uncle's family, all members of a religious cult (the Fellowship of the Children of the Faith), Kirby is renamed Esther and made to work hard and pray constantly for her salvation. At first rebellious, Kirby slowly begins to appreciate the hard work and the dedication the members of the cult demonstrate. At times, even, Kirby enjoys the comfort of her uncle's family. However, Kirby, through the help of two key figures in the story, is able to find the strength to resist the cult's brainwashing attempts, especially because she continues to harbor an aversion to the often brutal male dominance in the Fellowship of the Children of the Faith.

Crew, Linda. *The Brides of Eden: A True Story Imagined*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001. (F)

Ages: 14-17

Genre: Historical Fiction



*The Brides of Eden* is based on a true story that took place in Oregon at the very beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Eva and many other female parishioners living in Colville, Oregon are smitten when Joshua comes to town and joins their Salvation Army church. Eventually he convinces these women to renounce their husbands and families and leave with him to create a new church. Many women from the town leave their homes, giving up their fashionable hair and clothing to live in a commune with Joshua. Their conversion brings disaster to the town as many of the converts are arrested or institutionalized. The novel is a fascinating exploration of how psychological coercion can work and the negative effects it leaves in its wake.

*Cults: Dangerous Devotion*. History Channel. 2007. DVD. A&E Home Entertainment. 2009. (NF)

Ages: 15-18

Genre: Nonfiction Documentary

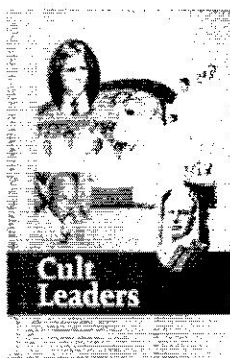


A 50 minute long documentary, *Cults: Dangerous Devotion* highlights the most infamous cult leaders in history, including Charles Manson and Jim Jones. The documentary begins by examining cults' roles in history and how cults' psychological brainwashing has been occurring for thousands of years among human societies. An excellent length for a high school classroom and a good supplement to a broad discussion of cults.

Kellaher, Karen Burns. *Cult Leaders*. Detroit: Lucent Books, 1999. (NF)

Ages: 12-16

Genre: Collective Biography



*Cult Leaders* is a collective biography of six of the most influential cult leaders in American History. Kellaher starts by explaining how abstract the term “cult” is and how it is typically defined by American historians. She also explains what characteristics tend to be shared by cult leaders. She then moves into separate biographical sections on Mother Ann Lee and the Shakers, Father Divine and the Universal Peace Mission Movement, L. Ron Hubbard and the Church of Scientology, Sun Myung Moon and the Unification Church, Jim Jones and the Peoples Temple, and David Koresh and the Branch Davidians. The biographies are organized chronologically and are supported by black and white photography.

Haddix, Margaret Peterson. *Leaving Fishers*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997. (F)

Awards: Best Books for Young Adults 1998

Ages: 12-15

Genre: Realistic Fiction

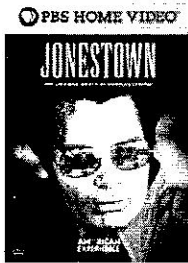


High School Junior Dorry has just moved and is friendless and alone. On the verge of depression she meets and befriends a group of high school students headed by Angela. These students belong to a religious group called the Fishers of Men. As the friendship escalates, Dorry finds herself moving from typical high school hangouts like parties, movies, and pizza into prayer groups and bible studies. At one point, Dorry finds herself trying to convert children that she is babysitting and slowly realizes that she has been brainwashed by a cult.

Nelson, Stanley. *Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple*. PBS Home Video. DVD. Paramount Home Entertainment. 2007. (NF)

Ages. 16-18

Genre: Biography Documentary



PBS's dramatic documentary on Jonestown in Guyana, the cult headquarters of preacher Jim Jones is chilling and authentic. The documentary is supported by interviews of former cult members and family members of Jones's cult members who committed suicide while living at Peoples Temple in Jonestown. The DVD is 90 minutes long. The teacher must determine whether to show the entire DVD to his or her class or to choose segments of the film that highlight how Jim Jones was able to psychologically brainwash his 900+ followers.

Snow, Robert. *Deadly Cults: the Crimes of True Believers*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2003. (NF)

Ages: 15-18

Genre: Nonfiction



Snow, the current commander of the Indianapolis homicide division, presents information about cults in this organized, up-to-date collection. He relies primarily on second-hand-information such as interviews, newspaper articles, and trial transcripts to present information about many infamous and obscure cult leaders. He also includes chapters that define the different types of cults and their behavior and also a chapter on how to avoid cult indoctrination. Snow includes a bibliography and index at the end.

Tamm, Jayanti. *Cartwheels in a Sari: a Memoir of Growing Up Cult*. New York: Harmony Books, 2009. (NF)

Ages: 16-18

Genre: Memoir



Jayanti Tamm, as a child and young adult, was part of a New York-based religious cult run by a guru named Sri Chinmoy. Tamm was a chosen disciple of the guru, who led this cult that has thousands of worldwide members including celebrities and heads of nations. Tamm, indoctrinated from her childhood, learned through illicit relationships with boys and a young-adult crisis that ends in a suicide attempt how to break free of her cult-based life and experience true individuality for the first time.

Waite, Judy. *Forbidden*. New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2006. (F)

Ages: 14-17

Genre: Realistic Fiction



*Forbidden* provides an inside look at the brainwashing tendencies of religious cults. Elinor has never known anything except the True Cause, the group of “believers” to which she belongs. Everything beyond the True Cause is called the “Outside.” Most of the members of the cult are young women who are led by Howard. When a young woman turns 16 she becomes one of Howard’s “wives.” However, as Elinor begins to grow independently, she meets an outsider named Jaime. Through Jaime’s help, Elinor begins to painfully discover who she is when not associated with the True Cause. Her transformation is not easy nor is it immediate; she is a true victim of the psychological effects of the cult.

Yolen, Jane and Bruce Coville. *Armageddon Summer*. San Diego, California: Harcourt Bryce, 1998. (F)

Awards: Best Books for Young Adults 1999; Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers 1999

Ages: 13-16

Genre: Realistic Fiction



Marina and Jed have been called, along with their families, to the top of Mount Weeacup to await the end of the world. Reverend Beelson is the head of a millennial cult that has invited 144 individuals to be saved by awaiting the Armageddon together at the top of the world. Marina and Jed are there to help Marina’s embittered mother and Jed’s depressed father, however neither of them believes Beelson’s projections for the future. As the situation top the mountain turns violent and overzealous, Marina and Jed must do whatever it takes to protect their families.

## Selection Tools Bibliography

*A&E Television Website.* [www.aetv.com](http://www.aetv.com).

*Best Books for Senior High Readers.* Libraries Unlimited, 2004.

*Booklist.* Reviews from April 2009, March 2004, and October 2002 Issues.

*Books in Print.* [www.booksinprint.com](http://www.booksinprint.com). Accessed Monday, June 28, 2009.

*PBS American Experience.* <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/jonestown>.

*Reality Rules!: A Guide to Teen Nonfiction Reading Interests.* Libraries Unlimited, 2004.

*School Library Journal.* Reviews from March 2006 and April 2000 Issues.

*VOYA (Voices of Youth Advocates).* <http://www.voya.com>. Accessed Wednesday, June 30, 2009.