



Savage Harvest: A Tale of Cannibals, Colonialism, and Michael Rockefeller's Tragic Quest

By Carl Hoffman

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On November 21, 1961, Michael C. Rockefeller, the twenty-three-year-old son of New York governor Nelson Rockefeller, vanished off the coast of southwest New Guinea when his boat capsized. He was on a collecting expedition for the Museum of Primitive Art, and his partner—who stayed with the boat and was later rescued—shared Michael's final words as he swam for help: "I think I can make it."

Despite exhaustive searches, no trace of Michael was ever found. Soon after his disappearance, rumors surfaced that he'd made it to shore, where he was then killed and eaten by the local Asmat—a native tribe of warriors whose complex culture was built around sacred, reciprocal violence, headhunting, and ritual cannibalism. The Dutch government and the Rockefeller family vehemently denied the story, and Michael's death was officially ruled a drowning. But doubts lingered and sensational stories circulated, fueling speculation and intrigue for decades. Now, award-winning journalist Carl Hoffman reveals startling new evidence that finally tells the full, astonishing story.

Retracing Michael's steps, Hoffman traveled to the jungles of New Guinea, immersing himself in a world of former headhunters and cannibals, secret spirits and customs, and getting to know generations of Asmat. Through exhaustive archival research, he uncovered hundreds of pages of never-before-seen original documents and located witnesses willing to speak publicly for the first time in fifty years.

Savage Harvest is at once a mesmerizing whodunit and a fascinating portrait of the clash between two civilizations that resulted in the death of one of America's richest and most powerful scions.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

An Amazon Best Book of the Month, March 2014: “I think I can make it.” In 1961, while on an expedition to collect pieces for his father’s Museum of Primitive Art, Michael Rockefeller and his traveling companion were plunged into the warm waters off New Guinea. The billionaire scion tied two empty gas cans to his body for floatation and swam for shore, and by most accounts, he made it. But what happened there, when he encountered members of the Asmat tribe--a culture marked by ritual violence and cannibalism--has been long debated. Did he disappear into the tropical jungles, or was he rendered and eaten by the tribesmen, as many speculated and the Rockefeller family long denied? Award-winning journalist Carl Hoffman has stepped into Rockefeller’s boot prints and Asmat society, interviewing generations of warriors in an exhaustive and engrossing attempt to solve the mystery. The result, *Savage Harvest*, succeeds not only as a captivating and sensational puzzle, but also as a (seemingly unlikely) modern adventure and a fascinating glimpse of an anachronistic people pulled into the 20th century by the tensions of global politics. So, did he make it? The title might offer a clue. --*Jon Foro*



Simon Winchester

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Simon Winchester Reviews *Savage Harvest: A Tale of Cannibals, Colonialism, and Michael Rockefeller's Tragic Quest* for Primitive Art

Carl Hoffman, who with his 2010 book *The Lunatic Express* demonstrated himself to be a traveler of the greatest courage and determination, as well as a writer of skill, has now made a significant contribution to history. *Savage Harvest*, a narrative that is as exciting as it is instructive, appears finally to have winnowed the truth from the mare’s nest of legend and wishful thinking surrounding the disappearance in November 1961, of Michael Rockefeller, in a remote region of southwestern New Guinea. The 23-year old, along with a Dutch anthropologist colleague and two young guides, were sailing in a dugout catamaran some three miles from the coast of Asmat. The craft overturned; the two locals swam for help, but as the wreck drifted farther from land an impatient Rockefeller decided to try and make it alone. With two fuel cans to help his buoyancy on what he reckoned would be a twenty-hour swim, he slid into the warm shallows of the Arafura Sea -

never to be seen by friends or family again. Did he drown? Was he eaten by a shark? Did he vanish into the jungle, Kurtz-like? Or was he the victim of cannibalism at the hands of coastal villagers? Hoffman has shown that with assiduous tradecraft, hard work and near-obsessive tenacity, it is possible to know, to solve the supposedly insoluble. He has journeyed, twice now, deep into the dark interiors of Asmat, and has conducted interviews and learned the language and listened to sensible men and women – in New Guinea, in the Netherlands, in the anthropology departments of knowledgeable universities. And he has used a severe intelligence to determine just what happened on that warm dawn Monday, November 20, 1961. The Rockefellers – not least Michael's twin sister Mary, who produced her own book two years ago – may not want to believe this tale; and the family did nothing to help Hoffman in his admirable quest. But the truth, as this book chronicles in patient, meticulous detail, has a way of eking itself out. *Savage Harvest* is a remarkable testament to the revealed truth, and of its revealing - even if that truth is wholly bizarre and, to most, quite literally unpalatable.

Simon Winchester is the acclaimed author most recently of *The Men Who United the States* as well as *Atlantic*, *The Professor and the Madman*, *The Man Who Loved China*, *A Crack in the Edge of the World*, and *Krakatoa*, all of which were New York Times bestsellers. In 2006 Mr. Winchester was made an officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) by Her Majesty the Queen. He resides in western Massachusetts.

From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review Award-winning travel writer Hoffman's (*The Lunatic Express*, 2010) penchant for extremes fueled his demanding quest for the truth about Michael Rockefeller's disappearance in New Guinea in 1961. Freshly graduated from Harvard and eager to emulate his art collector father, Nelson Rockefeller, then governor of New York, Michael became enthralled with the Asmat's extraordinary wood carvings and was dashing from village to village, buying as many pieces as he could find, when his boat capsized in rough seas. Death by drowning was the official finding, but rumors of a far more horrific fate persisted. After arduous sojourns among the enigmatic Asmat, Hoffman came to understand how their ancient cosmology was enacted through "reciprocal violence," headhunting, and cannibalism. He also realized just how risky Rockefeller's buying spree was, given the bloody conflicts raging between the Asmat and the Dutch colonial authorities, and how little the novice collector knew about the spiritual significance of the art he was acquiring, including monumental works on display in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. By dint of grueling fieldwork, startling archival discoveries, revelatory visits with a Dutch missionary relieved to break his 50-year silence, profound insights, and muscular writing, Hoffman tells the unforgettable story of a soothing and politically expedient cover-up and a brutal and tragic collision of cultures. --Donna Seaman

Review

"[Hoffman's] reporting takes hold, drawing a vivid portrait of the world of the Asmat people, hunter-gatherers who lived in isolation until the mid-20th century. Gripping." (New York Times Book Review)

"In an expertly told tale that is begging for a film adaptation, Hoffman crafts a remarkable, balanced examination of this sensational case. . . . [He] deserves much credit for this riveting, multilayered tale." (Publishers Weekly (starred review))

“With urgency boarding on obsession, Carl Hoffman retraces Rockefeller’s perilous footsteps. The result is a hypnotic journey into otherness, a wild detective story amid cannibals and headhunters. A thrilling, one-of-a-kind tale -I couldn’t stop reading.” (Andrew McCarthy, *The Longest Way Home: One Man's Quest for the Courage to Settle Down*)

“A bare-knuckle, adventure-filled journey in search of the answer to a half-century-old cold case: Whatever happened to Nelson Rockefeller’s son, Michael? . . . A searching, discomfiting journey yields an elegant, memorable report.” (Kirkus Reviews (starred review))

“A tremendous accomplishment-easily one of the best books I read this year. Carl Hoffman’s acute eye for detail is something to envy. And that closing passage will stick with me for a long, long time.” (Brendan I. Keoner, *The Skies Belong To Us: Love and Terror in the Golden age of Hijacking*)

“Not only has Carl Hoffman helped solve one of the great mysteries of the last 50 years, he has also written a page turner. An instant classic.” (Scott Wallace, *The Unconquered: In Search of the Amazon's Last Uncontacted Tribe*)

“A gripping whodunit. . . . a powerful book that succeeds in solving a half-century-old mystery.” (Wall Street Journal)

“Terrific . . . What’s surprising about this book is not the revelation of Rockefeller’s fate but rather the author’s portrayal of a unique cultural encounter.” (Washington Post)

“Hoffman is an intelligent writer.... [the]best kind of non-fiction writing.” (The Globe and Mail)

“Compelling. Intoxicating. Sensational. *Savage Harvest* is a great read, as long as you’re not eating lunch.” (Newsweek)

“A gripping read ... he’s erected a solid foundation of reporting that goes far beyond what the rest of us did and is likely to make this the definitive account.” (Tim Sohn, *Slate*)

“Richly detailed nail-biting exposé...*Savage Harvest* fascinates for the mystery it aims to solve as well as its portrait of an isolated but changing way of life.” (Chicago Tribune)

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Patrick Adkins:

Have you spare time for the day? What do you do when you have far more or little spare time? Yep, you can choose the suitable activity intended for spend your time. Any person spent their very own spare time to take a go walking, shopping, or went to the actual Mall. How about open as well as read a book titled *Savage Harvest: A Tale of Cannibals, Colonialism, and Michael Rockefeller's Tragic Quest*? Maybe it is to be best activity for you. You recognize beside you can spend your time with your favorite's book, you can smarter than before. Do you agree with it is opinion or you have different opinion?

Guillermo Behler:

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