



The Shelter Cycle

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An American original, Peter Rock brings our strangest beliefs to vivid and sympathetic life in this haunting novel inspired by true events.

The Shelter Cycle tells the story of two children, Francine and Colville, who grew up in the Church Universal and Triumphant, a religion that predicted the world could end in the late 1980s. While their parents built underground shelters to withstand the impending Soviet missile strike, Francine and Colville played in the Montana wilderness, where invisible spirits watched over them. When the prophesized apocalypse did not occur, the sect's members resurfaced and the children were forced to grow up in a world they believed might no longer exist.

Twenty years later, Francine and Colville are reunited while searching for an abducted girl. Haunted by memories and inculcated beliefs, they must confront the Church's teachings. If all the things they were raised to believe were misguided, why then do they suddenly feel so true?

The Shelter Cycle Details

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From Reader Review The Shelter Cycle for online ebook

TinHouseBooks says

Cheston Knapp (Managing Editor): Peter Rock's new novel, *The Shelter Cycle*, follows the lives of several people who were brought up under the influence of the Church Universal and Triumphant, in Montana in the late-'80s, early-'90s. While the organization is often referred to as a cult, Rock remarkably manages to skirt all such judgment and, more importantly, avoid any whiff of parody. The characters earnestly search and you search with them. They're haunted by the residue of their former beliefs, as are you. The prose is spare and lyrical and the book as a whole is strange and wild and luminous, often literally. I've been recommending it so much it sounds like I'm chanting. If you're intrigued, check this out and this.

Jennifer says

In the land of half stars, I'd probably give this a 2 1/2, because I didn't feel much enjoyment while reading it, although I was interested in the beliefs of the religious group on which the novel is based. I wondered if it were a real religion, and the author's Acknowledgements gave me my answer: Yes. I was less interested in the characters and plot, although I have a greater appreciation for the former after participating in a Skype discussion with the author as part of an online book club. At the start of the novel, a girl's disappearance brings together one of her neighbors, a pregnant woman named Francine, and Francine's childhood friend Colville, who has decided he must look for the girl. I sensed from the beginning that the missing girl storyline would remain unresolved, and I was correct. Instead, the novel follows Colville and Francine separately as they take steps to rediscover the religion they were brought up in. It is an interesting religion, which the author out of necessity could only share so much of, but so much is the pity. In keeping with this faith, both characters are struggling to bring more Light into the world decades after their separation from the group, but both characters also bring about a degree of darkness in the attempt to do so, through deception in Francine's case and through unthinkable thefts in Colville's. The author artfully presents these missteps in such a way that the reader is disinclined to judge them too harshly, however. The end of the novel takes a mystical turn which I did not expect, but did appreciate, hence the bump up to 3 stars. Although many questions are left unanswered, I was engaged by the process of making my own interpretation of strange spiritual events. Either the characters are crazy, or the world is magical, or both. You decide for yourself.

Purl Scout says

Rock is clearly a gifted writer, but the work feels unfinished, characters not fully defined, and a past of great importance to its characters without any emotional pull for the reader. Like Rock was too afraid of offending his (based on real events) subjects to examine and portray this cult and many of the book's themes with true grit.

Tara says

Peter Rock is one of my favorite authors. *My Abandonment*, which connects loosely to this novel, is a must

read for lovers of nature. And while Rock's writing is just as good in this novel, as sparse and lyrical as the last, with intense observations on setting and a snowbound world, I felt that the author was not given the space he needed to fully flesh out this story. I read after I finished the book that it was originally 900 pp. The final copy is 211. I'm a huge fan of condensing in literature, but this time, too much was cut. Francine and Wells are hardly defined, and they needed to be to balance out the wonderful, deranged, sweet Colville. Sometimes a writer has to trust his or her own instincts. I would have gladly followed Rock through many more pages, he's that good.

Having said that, this is a unique, deftly plotted, carefully unbiased look at real cult life and its ravages and triumphs on the human spirit.

Michelle says

Intriguing page turner, but in the end I was not connected to the characters and struggled with the ending. During our discussion with the author, we found out that the book was originally over 900 pages long. I understand the authors purpose of leaving the reader to think through the ending, but in my opinion it was way to abrupt.

Victoria says

I love how by coincidence unrelated novels can sometimes flow together so perfectly. The cult here ties nicely with the last book that I read, Chevy Steven's Always Watching. Though brief (just over 200 pages), this is both a strange and fascinating novel. Raised in an End-of-the-World-is-Coming cult in Montana, Francine now lives with her husband, Wells, in Montana. When a neighborhood girl is kidnapped, Francine's childhood best friend, Colville suddenly arrives. Broken into Francine's direct recollections and Wells and Colville's present, the book unfolds in an engaging manner. Life in the cult is presented simply, with plenty of room for the reader's own imagination to fill in the holes left in the plot and Francine's memories. This makes it a not entirely satisfying read, but a very well-written one. Personally, I prefer to have a bit more of a concrete plot and though the book's description states that this is inspired by true events, even that connection is not fully explained in an author's note or any other addendum. However, it is a very interesting book and one that I think that would do well in book clubs or classrooms as it would certainly evoke some lively discussions.

Lorrie says

Impossible to put down! The story intertwines with several of Rock's previous stories. So if you've read all of Peter Rock's books, you will really enjoy the hidden references to a couple of the former characters and some of the recurring props.

The author sheds light on the writings of Elizabeth Clare Prophet and her religious group's underground shelters that were last used on 3-15-1990.

Colville and Francine, childhood partners & friends, in the "Church Universal and Triumphant" group haven't seen each other since they were young. As adults they once again meet in the most odd of circumstances.

Rock reminds the reader of what it was like to be a child again--what it was like to accept your surroundings as normal and to find happiness from that normal. He also forces the reader to imagine what it's like for people who do not feel normal because as adults they live in ways that are not as they were raised. One is reminded to mesh the past with the present in order to find the greatest contentment.

The story meanders along a path, up the side of the mountain, down the other side, but all the while pausing to rest, reflect, and regroup. The paths were thought provoking, that I will say.

The ending.....WOW!!

Jerrod says

How this book has an average rating over 3 I do not understand. It is an objectively bad book (thank goodness it was short). Characters underdeveloped, cult social structure not described, and not much compelling material (this last critique is a bit more subjective). The book starts you in the middle of a story and then ends without completing it.

If you liked this book, you would probably find *Going Clear* fascinating. But if you liked *Going Clear*, you won't necessarily like the *Shelter Cycle* (I fall into the latter group).

Spoilers

Two of the main characters grew up in a doomsday cult in Montana but then left and are now revisiting the belief system in early-to-middle adulthood. The belief system itself is uninteresting (feeling vibrations, saying prayers to various entities, etc.). Francine's struggle with coming to terms with her past seems to be driven by the soon-to-be-born baby she is carrying. Colville's re-embrace of the beliefs is mostly do to the fact that he is a wackjob (he hallucinates the existence of various people from the past, sees a girl floating in air, etc.). Maya (Francine's sister) makes the illuminating comment to Francine that she was happy in her childhood because she was 10 and 10 year olds tend to be happy (or, at least, we tend to remember those days fondly). This leads to my main critique of the book: making this book about having grown up in a cult does not make it substantially different from a book in which two characters come to terms with a false understanding of their childhood (such as their parents "making their marriage work" even though one of them was having an affair).

A few other thoughts:

- conjecture: Colville kidnapped and killed (either inadvertently or on purpose) the girl living next door to Francine. I give this 80% chance of being true.
- conjecture: Colville never actually left the town to visit the old cult compound. He only hallucinated it. I give this about a 40% chance of being true.
- Colville just does things without motivation, as if he were an automaton (this makes him truly horrifying). Cases in point: stealing the dog and kidnapping Francine's newborn daughter.
- Francine keeping her husband in the dark about her impromptu visit to her sister was super annoying (tension for the sake of tension)

- Describing the cults beliefs without describing the rules and social structure of the cult makes the book much less interesting.
- Having Colville give Francine's daughter to the neighbor's little girl to return to Francine seemed like the author's rushed attempt to give the book a happy ending. It would have been better to have Colville walk into the wilderness with the baby and end it there.

The best/most disturbing part is Colville's kidnapping of Francine's new daughter. The language is clipped and the reader is kept in suspense; very well done. This alone saves it from a one star rating.

Cults, and other groups that separate themselves from society, are often interesting because of the system of rules they institute in order to accomplish this separation. Without giving any details or even hints as to how the cult functioned, *The Shelter Cycle* fails to confront what actually makes cults different from other social groups.

Mary Lou says

The Shelter Cycle by Peter Rock offers a glimpse into the world of the Church of the Universal and Triumphant which predicted that the world could end in the 1980's and the lives of members since. I did not find it compelling. The story is about a pregnant woman, Francine, who writes about her childhood in the church as her pregnancy progresses. A man, Colville, who was her best childhood friend, visits her when a neighbor child of the woman's disappears. The child seems to have something to do with the religion and the next end of the world, but Rock does not spell that out clearly. Francine goes to see her sister Maya who lives near where they grew up, and Francine visits the physical structure where the sect planned to take shelter when the end came. Colville stalks Francine, steals her dog and her baby, and then returns both. The baby talks to Colville as if the infant is a spiritual leader, but also functions like a dependent infant, so he gives the child to the sister of the missing girl. As I said, this is not a compelling book.

Jeremy Birks says

The Church Universal and Triumphant was a radical, new age religion most productive in the late 1970s and 80s based in Montana which predicted an apocalypse in the Spring of 1990. The church's leader, Elizabeth Clare Prophet received high frequency vibrations only she could decipher from beings known as the "Ascended Masters." These were entities who once embodied human beings such as Catherine the Great and other perennials throughout history. The church is remembered for the expansive doomsday shelters they built through the rural ranches of Montana, and this novel centers mainly on two former members coming to grips with a world they were told as children would no longer exist.

Peter Rock has written a great literary novel which sucks you in the same way a great pop thriller would. Rock's prose is totally compelling and the plot is just mysterious enough you will want to read it in just a sitting or two in order to find how it all comes together.

One thing I really took away from the book was how Rock used the, quite frankly, absurd teachings of the Church Universal as a background for the characters' without making them seem crazy. It goes to show how people we would deem in society as "smart" or "normal" can be susceptible to any bizarre persuasion in the proper context.

Shannon says

Though *The Shelter Cycle* is fiction Peter Rock has used the real-world Church Universal and Triumphant, a New Age religious group preparing for the end of the world in the late 1980's, to frame his most recent book. When a neighborhood child goes missing, Francine is surprised to encounter a face from her own childhood among those searching. Colville brings with him waves of memories from their lives inside the Church, prompting her reconsider the years she has spent away from religion prior to the birth of her first child.

I tend to enjoy books that explore religions, whether they're common or cult-like, and thought *The Shelter Cycle* would be a fictional lens into the religion. While it touches on the beliefs and founder a bit, there was much more of a focus on Francine and Colville. What's frustrating, though, is that I had a difficult time enjoying the book from a novel perspective because I felt the characters were quite underdeveloped. I kept hoping I would find out more about the church or their childhood, but was instead given further descriptions of walking through snow or the inside of a shelter. There is a climax toward the end, but it didn't feel redeeming enough to make up for what the rest of the novel seemed to lack.

While *The Shelter Cycle* may resonate with readers that have left religion behind and are questioning their choices later in life, I had a hard time syncing the novel I read with my expectations.

Adam Johnson says

I read an advance copy of this spooky and brooding novel. It's filled with hidden worlds, secret languages and lost souls. Rock takes you to another world, one hidden beneath your feet, that's infused with silence and paranoia. I felt like a tomb raider when I'd finished. If you loved *My Abandonment*, you'll fall for this follow-up!

Keri Smith says

The *Shelter Cycle* does not disappoint!

The novel provides a strange and exhilarating look into the past and the remnants of the Church Universal and Triumphant.

It is rare that a book so understated and intentional can move along at such a break-neck pace. The narrative has an intensity that at times makes it hard to breathe as you wait to find out what happens next.

The characters of Peter Rock's book are in many senses haunted by their past; a past that is foreign to most readers, but so close to the characters as to encroach on the present. It is not fear that causes these characters to re-engage with their origins, but a lurking suspicion that there is more than distant memories to what they left behind. They feel an unexplainable longing to return. Peter Rock's books are often filled with characters who function in socially unexpected and unacceptable ways. By their actions and attitudes, his characters step outside the everyday and experience the same world in a new way. Rock's generosity allows you to understand and feel for the characters even as their decisions spiral out and your own anxiety rises.

As these characters move towards the remains of their childhood, the reader is presented with the strict detailing of objects and locations, and an almost obsessive recreation of space. Rock describes these objects in such a dead-pan manner that he does not drown out the other voices that hum behind his words, the voices that inhabit the spaces of the shelters. The text itself becomes haunted as, towards the middle of the book, the focus is displaced from the characters and onto the excavation of time and place. Here, in Peter Rock's newest novel, everything is allowed to speak for itself, a feat which requires an uncommon and uncanny quiet.

This exploration is only permitted for so long before the characters' desires come careening back into the foreground and race towards the conclusion of the novel.

This book is perfectly paced and voiced, making it from start to finish an excellent read.

Peter Rock says

I'm really proud of it. It was hard to write.

Liz says

I'm clearly in the minority here, but my response is Boo, Hiss. Yes, he had an interesting set up and two pivotal and opposed characters to carry the reader through the "learning process" about the cult and its background, but if you are going to tie these characters so closely together and suggest that their two stories are actually going to meet and become one by the end of this story, the author completely bungles it. More important to me as a reader is that I'm willing to stick around through mysterious and vague pieces in the knowledge that everything is going to come together in a clear way at the end. In fact, I really like these suspenseful stories where you are handed pieces early but can't really see them for what they are without the larger context coming into focus, or without having all the pieces in your possession. This author royally pissed me off by not only stopping the story without ending it, but in never putting all the pieces together at all. Nothing is more annoying as a reader than having your trust in the storyteller abused and played upon.
