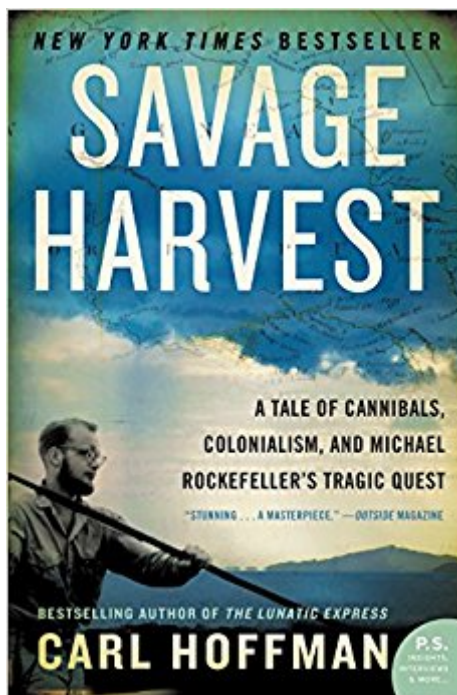




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# Savage Harvest: A Tale Of Cannibals, Colonialism, And Michael Rockefeller's Tragic Quest



## Synopsis

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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

An 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

View larger 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 are not least Michael's twin sister Mary, who produced her own book two years ago

—œ 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. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

**\*Starred Review\*** Award-winning travel writer Hoffman—œs (*The Lunatic Express*, 2010) penchant for extremes fueled his demanding quest for the truth about Michael Rockefeller—œs 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—œs 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 —œ“reciprocal violence,—œ• headhunting, and cannibalism. He also realized just how risky Rockefeller—œs 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 --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

I definitely should have downloaded a sample before buying this book. It opens with a lyrical recital of Michael Rockefeller's thoughts and feelings as he swam toward New Guinea from his capsized catamarin. The author must truly have done extensive research in order to learn what went through Rockefeller's mind in those final hours since the next thing he tells us is that Rockefeller was killed without communicating more than a "shout" to his "rescuers". And, equally amazing, the author

attributes to Rockefeller the memory of his "Widener swim" at Harvard; the only problem is that the entire history of the Widener swim is as fabricated as the author's imagined recollection of Rockefeller's final thoughts. It is possible to claim that Hoffman should be granted "poetic license" in order to be more engaging, but both his publisher and I categorize this book as history not as historical fiction. I am amazed that Hoffman got away with this deception and deeply disappointed that Simon Winchester recommended the book without calling the author on his fictionalized speculation masquerading as history.

Having travelled in and out of Papua New Guinea as a consultant for two years, I was deeply interested in the cultural aspects of the other half of New Guinea. One of the things we learned was that a lack of understanding of the culture and social mores is a critical mistake. Hoffman does a great job of getting to know the people and not imposing his values on them as so many missionaries do. Additionally, his writing style is exceptional. He takes an event that happened over fifty years ago and brings it to life on many levels. My only criticism lies in the statements that cannibalism and head hunting are no longer practiced. They as well as shape shifting, witchcraft, and the spirit world are alive and well today

This is a well written, interesting and convincing investigation into a famous and mysterious death. I had never read about New Guinea and the reasons that some people practiced cannibalism. It is fascinating that it is such a spiritual practice. I'm so glad that I read this book and now will probably read more on the subject. I also feel sadness and sympathy for so many native people who have had their way of life ripped away from them by "civilized" (usually white Europeans) that think the only correct way to live is their way.

I loved this book, it was like participating in author's journey of discovery, then reviewing the events leading up to Michael Rockefeller's disappearance. He does an amazing job of taking you to the Asmat villages, their daily experiences, their daily lives, their need for balance in the world, and their long memories. By the end of the book the author seems to write it off as the triumph of the Western world, but I don't think so. I am unsettled having finished the book, that balance has not yet been restored. I see Michael Rockefeller's killing as a revenge killing, but it wasn't enough to restore balance for the 4 military leaders killed by Lapre back in 1958. So - I think their unsettled spirit will live on. I was fascinated by the Dutch colonial power, how Christianity entered in, all of this was new territory for me and quite interesting.

One of the better books I've read this year. Some people have criticized this book for the portrayal of Rockefeller as a character out of his depth and not understanding what he was getting into, but I don't think that criticism is accurate. Hoffman does an excellent job dealing with the facts leading up to the disappearance of Rockefeller and the subsequent search for him, as well as his personal account searching for the truth. It also does an excellent job outlining cannibalistic ritual and the role it played in New Guinea in the early 1960s. I highly recommend this book.

For fans of extreme travel narrative and anthropological true crime. Hoffman is an engaging writer and an intrepid traveler, going to great lengths to get the story here and "solve" this historical whodunit. In interspersing his own travels to these remote island civilizations with the real life journey of Michael Rockefeller, he builds suspense throughout the book. His manner of viscerally presenting cultural insights and the clash of civilizations here bring the reader face to face with the taboo topic of cannibalism - yet he does so with nuance and historical clarity making the practice (almost) understandable. That may be the most chilling achievement of this excellent book.

It was hard to stomach the initial descriptions of the tribal rites, at first. Then, the realization of modern factual events intersecting with my own travels in that geographical vicinity made Hoffman's quest more personal. I even had to check my high school yearbook for my Dutch Indonesian boyfriend's picture to "ground" myself into Hoffman's story. Grossly riveting at times, the mystery of Rockefeller's disappearance came to a somewhat satisfying conclusion.

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