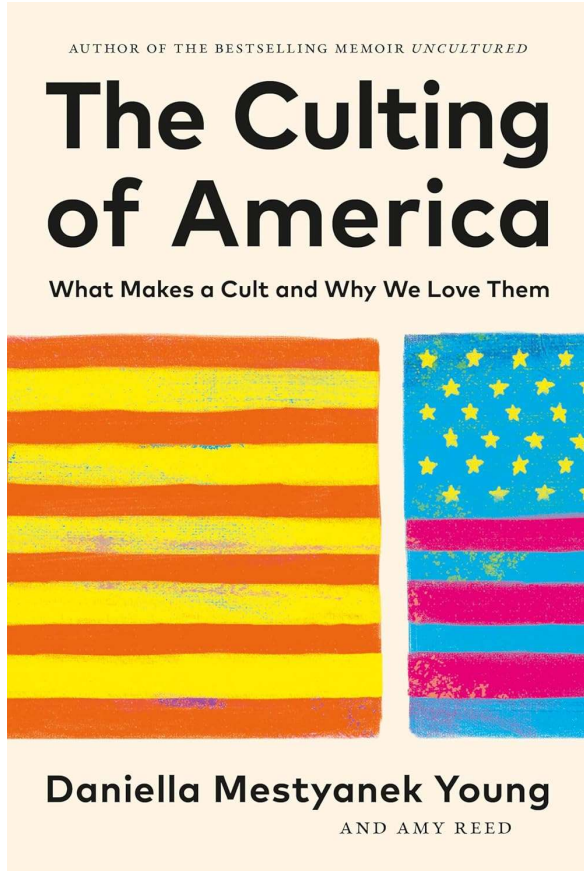


## 'Culting of America' looks into how Americans get trapped

Posted: Sunday, April 19, 2026

*"The Culting of America: What Makes a Cult and Why We Love Them" by Daniella Mestyaneck Young and Amy Reed. Asheville, NC: Otterpine, 2026, 352 pages, \$35.00 (hardcover).*



“What makes a group a cult?” Daniella Mestyaneck Young and Amy Reed ask at the beginning of “The Culting of America: What Makes a Cult and Why We Love Them,” their recently released effort to enlighten us on an age-old phenomenon that perennially threatens our society, individually and collectively. “And who decides? There are lots of lists and they don’t all agree. As both a cult survivor and a scholar of cults and extreme groups, I feel none of the current definitions are exactly right. I think what is sometimes lost in translation is that it isn’t a simple binary question that can be easily answered with a check yes or no.”

“A cult seems easy to define from the outside,” the authors continue.” We’ve probably all seen a quick listicle of ‘how to tell if you are in a cult.’ Most Americans, with the specter of Jonestown, Waco, and Charles Manson in our recent history, truly feel we know what makes a cult. But the only thing that cult scholars can agree on is that what makes a cult has many hidden layers and is anything but easy to define.”

So begins a truly illuminating foray into one of the more perplexing characteristics of contemporary American life. The word cult gets thrown around carelessly by both sides of the political spectrum, often without any guidance or evidence provided by those using the term. This is where Young and Reed can be immensely helpful in not only describing what cults are, but how to deal with them. If you think you understand the psychology behind why people are drawn to cults, and especially why they join them so enthusiastically, this is one you definitely should add to your reading list. There is a lot more going on here than you think.

Structurally, the book is comprised of a prologue and introduction, followed by eleven relatively succinct yet deceptively complex chapters covering a different aspect of the issue at hand. Extensively researched, with eleven pages of source notes and a 47-page bibliography, the literary style is crisp and straightforward, making the narrative accessible to a general audience, even though those with a more intimate understanding of cults will have a greater appreciation for the cautionary elements the authors are constantly emphasizing. Also included at the conclusion of the main text are three resources that serious students will find especially helpful: a checklist for assessing whether or not your organization shows signs of becoming a cult, a short terminology guide for those unfamiliar with the concepts covered, and a list of recommended book club discussion questions. Young and Reed seem to have covered all the bases with this one.

One of the more fascinating explanations offered for why people join cults can be found in “Sacred Assumption: But We Are Saving Lives,” the second chapter and one I found particularly instructive.

“When you dig deeper into why people join these groups, you start to see how cults and terrorism studies overlap in some pretty interesting ways,” the authors assert. “As an intelligence officer working in counterterrorism during the so-called war on terror, I saw firsthand how terrorist organizations offer recruits a complete transformation – an entirely new worldview and a deep sense of purpose. Once people buy in, they become fiercely loyal and almost cultlike in how they dedicate themselves to the group. You see the same patterns in gangs, too. It’s all about finding identity and belonging, and perhaps a feeling of protection, in something larger than yourself. And it’s even more appealing when the world doesn’t seem to offer another place where you fit in.”

“Radicalization doesn’t happen in a single dramatic moment; it happens over time, one small rationalization at a time,” they continue a little later. “People don’t realize they’re in a cult until they’re deeply entrenched, and most violent extremists don’t set out to become terrorists. No one joins a ‘dangerous cult’ or ‘terrorist cell’ – they join something that feels like a solution, a salvation. The slow shift into extremism mirrors how the sacred assumption forms: tiny, almost invisible steps, each one just close enough to normal that you don’t notice you’ve crossed a line.”

A cult survivor, Young is a Harvard-trained organizational psychologist as well as a U.S. Army veteran. She currently lives in Maryland with her 10-year-old, a retired operations helicopter pilot, and their dog. This is her second book; the first being “Uncultured: A Memoir,” which was published in 2022. Reed, who is best known for her award-winning young adult novels, including “The Nowhere Girls and Beautiful,” lives in Asheville, North Carolina where she edits nonfiction books and is working on her first adult novel.

If you were wondering if Young and Reed venture into the current political and sociocultural landscape, your curiosity is rewarded handsomely. Consider the following from “The Ends Justify the Means: What Red Flags?” the tenth chapter:

“Nowhere is this mentality more visible today than in the MAGA movement. On November 8, 2016, much of America watched in disbelief as Donald Trump became the forty-fifth president of the United States. Then, eight years and an attempted armed insurrection later, we watched it happen again. People have struggled to understand the unwavering support he commands, especially from groups that traditionally champion ‘morality’ and ‘family values.’ After all, Trump – a thrice-divorced man embroiled in scandals and now a convicted felon – seems to contradict everything these groups claim to stand for. Yet to anyone familiar with the psychology of cults, this steadfast allegiance isn’t surprising at all.”

“Donald Trump has followed a familiar blueprint. He has positioned himself as the lone protector against an array of existential threats: the ‘deep state,’ immigrants, liberal elites, the media, political opponents – and now with Trump 2.0, DEI initiatives, government workers, higher education, and the trans community. He has painted them as enemies out to destroy America, fostering a siege mentality among his followers. This constant sense of threat makes the group more insular, more paranoid, and more loyal. In this climate of fear, Trump’s flaws aren’t disqualifying; they’re seen as badges of authenticity. He is being attacked because he’s right. The more the world condemns him, the more his followers cling to him and deepen their self-image as persecuted victims.”

As one reviewer on Amazon noted, “I picked this up out of curiosity, not expecting it to land as personally as it did. What surprised me most is how gently but clearly it connects extreme cult dynamics to everyday systems most of us move through without questioning. Workplaces, families, social groups, even online spaces all started coming to mind as I read.”

I had a very similar experience with this one. Highly recommended.

*Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, WKU.*