



# Seductive Poison: A Jonestown Survivor's Story of Life and Death in the People's Temple

By Deborah Layton

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

Deborah Layton was, by her own account, a typical rebellious youth, with nothing in her dossier to indicate that she would eventually find herself in Jim Jones's People's Temple in Guyana, looking for a way out of the green hell that had become the People's Temple Agricultural Project. She barely escaped in June 1978. Within months, more than 900 people drank Jones's cyanide punch and committed "revolutionary suicide" in the face of mounting stateside pressure on the cult, some of it prompted by Layton's own testimonials upon her safe return home. Her brother, Larry, also survived, and as one of the few left alive in Guyana became a scapegoat for Jones's crimes; he is now serving a life sentence in federal prison.

There is a simple naiveté at the root of *Seductive Poison*. Layton's own youthful innocence, foremost, but also the desire to trust another person, the need for belonging and meaning, which led so many perfectly normal Americans to place their faith in a suicidal madman. Far from confirming the simplistically monstrous Jones of the public imagination, Layton paints the man as a dark, twisted shaman, by turns soothing, then suddenly malevolent and petty, with a hugely sadistic streak that belied his perfectly coifed hair, expensive suits, and impressive political connections. The scenes in which she describes her escape and flight to safety are wrenching, her last-minute conversation with Jones and his seductive appeal for her to return home to Jonestown are chilling, and her fear and indecision are still palpable on the printed page. For Layton to recount tales this personal and horrifying must have been tremendously difficult. For her to lift those recollections above the bargain-basement freak-show reputation the People's Temple has achieved in the popular imagination and depict them with the power of great tragedy is nothing but extraordinary. --

*Tjames Madison*

#### From Publishers Weekly

Published on the 20th anniversary of the suicide-murder of more than 900 followers of Reverend Jim Jones in the Guyanese jungle, Layton's book is the first by a former high-level member of the People's Temple. A troubled teen from an affluent family in Berkeley, Calif., Layton and her mother were introduced to Jones by her brother, Larry. For seven years, she was Jones's close confidante in California, and in 1977, she left with her mother for the "Promised Land" of Jonestown. In the months that followed, she became aware of trouble in "Paradise," realizing she had arrived in a work camp patrolled by armed guards and ruled by a deceitful "Father" (Jones), who practiced manipulative mind-control tactics, dictated grueling physical labor, staged suicide drills and devised bizarre punishments such as wrapping a boa constrictor around the neck of a "sinner" or hanging children upside-down in a well. By May 1978, Layton had engineered a complex escape plan and returned to the U.S. Concerned for her mother, brother and friends still in Jonestown, she went to both the press and the State Department to warn of a possible mass suicide-murder but found few who believed her. Her fears were, of course, founded and not only did her mother die of cancer in Jonestown shortly before the mass suicide, but Larry was convicted for the conspiracy to kill Congressman Leo Ryan and is still in prison. Layton's lengthy account provides valuable insights into the inner workings of cults, and the details of her escape in the closing chapters generate strong suspense, hinting at film possibilities. "Never before published" photos unseen by PW. (Nov.) FYI: Layton's other brother, Thomas, wrote an earlier family history, *In My Father's House* (1981), with journalist Min S. Yee.

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#### From Library Journal

In 1978, following orders from their leader, over 900 followers of the Rev. Jim Jones committed suicide in

Jonestown, Guyana. They were convinced that their Guyanese enclave, the "People's Temple," was about to be invaded. The public was shocked, unable to understand how this horrible event could have occurred. Layton, one of the tragedy's few survivors, was a high-level member of the People's Temple. Her mother, a Holocaust survivor, and her brother Larry were close confidants of Jim Jones, having joined his group in the early 1970s. Jones led his disciples to Guyana from California to develop a Socialist paradise. But Jones's paranoia soon turned Jonestown into a community of terror and repression. Recognizing the danger, Layton managed to escape and alert the U.S. authorities, whose investigation led to the ultimate tragedy. Vividly written and powerfully told, this book shows convincingly how a group of people, seduced by promises of an "Eden" on earth, will blindly follow a charismatic leader. Highly recommended for all collections. Sandra K. Lindheimer, Middlesex Law Lib., Cambridge, MA  
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