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Anne Rowe Seaman. *Swaggart: The Unauthorized Biography of an American Evangelist*. New York: Continuum, 1999. Pp. 438. No Price Listed (Paper).

[1] Seaman's book is an account of the rise and fall of one of the world's most fascinating and controversial Christian evangelists. Like all good biographies, it can be read on two intertwining levels: the biographical details and how they connect to important historical and social phenomena - in this case, the rise of revivalism and evangelical Christianity after World War II. Swaggart built a vast "televangelism empire" with a worldwide television audience estimated at scores of millions, and taking in \$500,000 a day. In 1987 he was photographed leaving the motel room of a New Orleans prostitute, which shattered his followers, and elicited scorn from pulpits and editorial desks around the world. As Seaman says, "We are fascinated with larger-than-life figures like Swaggart who have so much talent, and who seemingly throw it all away for reasons the rest of us cannot understand."

[2] Swaggart's success masked a harsh childhood. Born in 1935 in rural Louisiana to a poor family with inbred cousin marriages, he was a bright boy fiercely pressured by family and church to outshine his wild and talented cousins - rock musician Jerry Lee Lewis and country music singer Mickey Gilly. They grew up playing, battling, and praying to a Pentecostal god who was incomprehensibly cruel and merciful in turns. The setting was a rural share-cropper town during the depression-era in the Louisiana Bible Belt, poised between the severe Protestant north, and New Orleans (Big Easy), whose Black rhythm and blues music drifted up the nearby Mississippi River. Black ways and White ways, Christianity and bayou shamanism, sacred and profane music all fermented together, and fed into two powerful social phenomena of the twentieth century - fundamentalism and rock and roll.

[3] Within conservative Protestantism, Pentecostal religion boomed after World War II. Founded in the early 1900s, several charismatic denominations flourished as major carriers of revivalistic religion, the largest being The Assemblies of God, which later ordained Jimmy Swaggart. Healing revivals began churning through the small towns and industrial communities of the South and Midwest. Rapturous "spirit-filled" revivals could go on for weeks, in which people were encouraged to release all kinds of emotion and ecstasy. These

included weeping, falling on the ground, leaping, dancing in states of transport, and speaking in incomprehensible tongues - giving Pentecostals the derogatory nickname "holy rollers." In the mid-twentieth century, the healing touch and casting out demons seemed to have been passed to Evangelicals. From small independent Pentecostal ministries came a generation of preachers who, with the aid of radio and later television, cast off their hometown shackles and became powers in the larger world.

[4] Jimmy Swaggart was one of these, and his evangelical empire grew meteorically. His rousing music, husky singing voice, and charismatic style drew huge crowds, even in Catholic countries. Donations rolled in from the faithful, as well as royalties from religious music records and publications. In addition to grossing \$500,000 a day, by the 1980s, his headquarters in Baton Rouge included a huge auditorium, administrative offices, a sophisticated media center for editing video tapes, an enormous mail center that did so much business that it had its own zip code, a campground with trailer hookups for the visiting faithful, an elementary school, a high school, a college, and a payroll of over 1,500. Swaggart's was among the competing empires of James Bakker (the PTL Club), Jerry Falwell (the Moral Majority), Oral Roberts, Rex Humbard, and others that grew and competed for money and audiences.

[5] Such successes had costs. With it came outside attention and critical investigation, particularly about Swaggart's unremitting anti-Catholicism, and ultraconservative stances on religious, social, and moral issues. Most controversial was accountability for the vast inflow of money. Since authority ultimately rested with founder and a few trusted others, there were few structures for accountability. Such lone evangelists often became trapped in a world of never-ending practical and organizational decisions they were ill equipped to make. Thus, decisions in such enterprises often became arbitrary and disjointed, and it easily appeared that vast resources were being misused for personal aggrandizement and extravagant living.

[6] Another kind of risk for famous Pentecostal leaders was evangelical religion itself. It was unforgiving, particularly for its leaders who, like all famous leaders, had little private life. The "saved" person - particularly a famous one - was expected to be a perfect moral person. It left little room for ordinary imperfections or failures and produced enormous guilt - particularly for traditional sins about booze and sexuality. According to an attorney and minister who followed Jimmy's career for years, ". . . there is no room for failure . . . In Catholicism you go to confession, admit you sinned, and are forgiven. But in the Pentecostal Church you're either saved or you ain't. One sin keeps you out . . . when [Jimmy] began privately battling with [pornography and prostitution], he battled them alone."

[7] When the 1970s scandals erupted within competing Evangelical circles, they were about misuse of money, illicit sexuality, materialism, or other moral flaws. They erupted first about a regionally famous evangelist (Gorman), and later about the more widely known Jim Bakker, who, with his wife and partner, were accused of all of the above. Jimmy Swaggart, Jerry Falwell, and others were called upon to pick of the pieces of empires ruined by such disasters, which some viewed as hostile takeovers of competitors. Simmering with revenge, aggrieved evangelists photographed Swaggart emerging from a cheap hotel with a prostitute in 1987. *Swaggart's fall was thus not only caused by hypocrisy and personal failings, but also by bitter vendettas and rivalries.* Though he repented publicly and to the faithful on television ("I have

sinned . . . !") and sought their forgiveness, his empire crumbled but survived, and even rebounded modestly. But, law enforcement officials and the press caught him again patronizing a prostitute while on a trip to California.

[8] Swaggart's ministry still survives, but audiences are a fraction of what they once were. However, the evangelical subculture with which he was associated and helped to build thrives. Today it is a political force that casts a large shadow in the Republican Party, in Congress, and in national politics as a Christian right in issues about welfare reform, education, and abortion. While reading this book, I kept thinking of the parallels (and differences) with Bill Clinton's impeachment trial.

[9] Seaman's book is a large and thoroughly documented one. As a reader, I must admit to having a hard time becoming engaged with the book. Some times I felt that the ocean of biographical details swamped the clarity of the other story - about religious trends in American society. But in the end, it is all there, and becomes a fascinating read. Not suitable for use in classrooms, it would make a good reference book for any library or anyone interested in religion and contemporary American society.

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