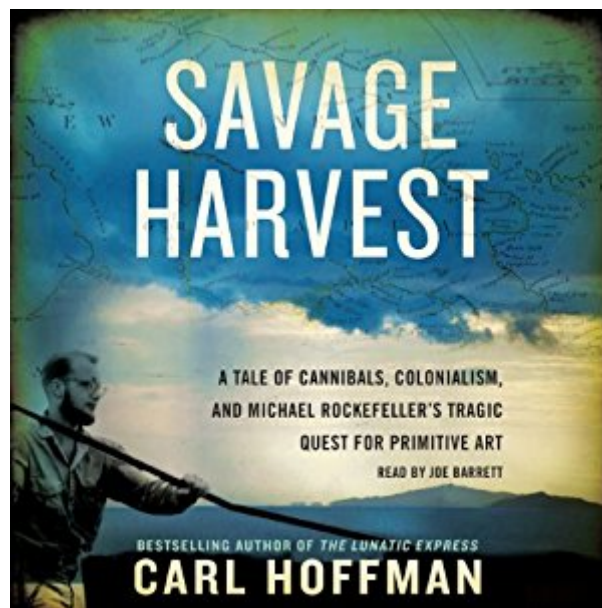


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# Savage Harvest: A Tale Of Cannibals, Colonialism, And Michael Rockefeller's Tragic Quest For Primitive Art



## Synopsis

The mysterious disappearance of Michael Rockefeller in remote New Guinea in 1961 has kept the world, and even Michael's powerful, influential family, guessing for years. Now, Carl Hoffman uncovers startling new evidence that finally tells the full, astonishing story. On November 21, 1961, Michael C. Rockefeller, the 23-year-old son of New York governor Nelson Rockefeller, vanished off the coast of southwest New Guinea when his catamaran capsized while crossing a turbulent river mouth. He was on an expedition to collect art for the Museum of Primitive Art, which his father had founded in 1957, and his expedition 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 Rockefeller was ever found. Soon after his disappearance, rumors surfaced that he'd been killed and ceremonially eaten by the local Asmat - a native tribe of warriors whose complex culture was built around sacred, reciprocal violence, head hunting, and ritual cannibalism. The Dutch government and the Rockefeller family denied the story, and Michael's death was officially ruled a drowning. Yet doubts lingered. Sensational rumors and stories circulated, fueling speculation and intrigue for decades. The real story has long waited to be told - until now. Retracing Rockefeller's steps, award-winning journalist Carl Hoffman traveled to the jungles of New Guinea, immersing himself in a world of headhunters and cannibals, secret spirits and customs, and getting to know generations of Asmat. Through exhaustive archival research, he uncovered never-before-seen original documents and located witnesses willing to speak publically after 50 years. In *Savage Harvest* he finally solves this decades-old mystery and illuminates a culture transformed by years of colonial rule, whose people continue to be shaped by ancient customs and lore. Combining history, art, colonialism, adventure, and ethnography, *Savage Harvest* is 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

"Savage Harvest" is about much more than the 1961 disappearance of Michael Rockefeller in Papua, New Guinea. This brilliant book also contains elements of exploration, adventure, anthropology, politics, and personal introspection. My only complaint is that the book is too short. Any of these themes could justify far more words than are presented. Much like Carl Hoffman's previous book, "The Lunatic Express," everything about "Savage Harvest" is audacious: the physical and financial risks of his two trips, the belief that after so long there was still something new to uncover, the challenge of being accepted by the indigenous Asmat people with whom Hoffman lives, and even the notion that a marketable book could be created from a story in which headhunting and cannibalism are central concepts. Even the structure of the book, in which first-person contemporary reporting is combined with detailed, if plausible and well-documented, recreations of historical events indicates a writer who doesn't like to play it safe. Now, this is not a breezy read. Any book that begins with a graphic account of one man being killed and ritually eaten by other men requires a certain commitment from the reader. This is a book that I read in small sections, thus allowing me to fully process the many implications of the text. "Savage Harvest" demands, and rewards, a lot of thought. The most powerful message presented by "Savage Harvest" is that the Asmat live in a world profoundly different from the one occupied by those who are likely to read this book. Asmat values, Asmat social expectations, and even the relationship between the Asmat and "reality" can be fundamentally alien to a modern, western mind.

As I was entering my sophomore year of college, Michael Rockefeller, the son of the then Governor of New York, Nelson Rockefeller, was reported missing when the catamaran he and a friend were sailing on collapsed. This had happened near a remote island off the southwest coast of New Guinea, deep in the Pacific Ocean. What was reported in the newspapers at the time is that his friend chose to wait on floating debris and was rescued, but Michael chose to try to swim the five miles to the island in question, in a rather desperate personal search for primitive artifacts for his museum featuring items from the Asmat people. The Asmat tribe was a small group of pre-stone

Age people, having little or no contact with the outside world. At first it seemed it would just be a matter of days before Michael would be found and reported alive -- after all he was a Rockefeller. But as the time stretched out, the chances that he would be discovered at all, dimmed. The conventional wisdom had it that undoubtedly he had drown. And then the reports petered out altogether ... Over the years, intermittent reports trickled-in but became more and more speculative and more and more macabre, until there were only a rash of unconfirmed reports of a death due to cannibalism? Those reports were received with equal measures of tantalizing shock and incredulity; and as often as not, were dismissed. Now with this book, it seems that after nearly 50 years, we do finally get the full story of what happened to him. And if this story can be trusted, and I believe many parts of it can, it is indeed a story worthy of the long wait. Apparently, Michael did not drown as many had speculated, but did indeed manage to swim to the Dutch island in question safely.

In 1961, Michael Rockefeller, son of Nelson Rockefeller disappeared on his second trip hunting for primitive art in Papua New Guinea. Despite intense searches, officially, the cause of his disappearance and presumed death has remained unknown, a mystery, since. The speculations ranged from his going native, drowning at sea, and being killed and eaten by members of the Asmat cannibal headhunters in the region. Recently, author Carl Hoffman set out to find better answers, and this the story of his experiences. Hoffman chooses to dispense with anything like an introduction. He offers no calm, rational overview of his report on what happened to Michael Rockefeller. Instead, he opens this masterful account with a body slam followed by knockout blow to the jaw: a detailed account, albeit speculative, of how the murder and following rituals of consuming Michael, body and spirit, might have taken place. When you wake up and shake off this stunning blow (never totally), he takes you on an extensive journey into the hearts and spirits of humans who are radically different from those of us in the "civilized" Western European world. Alien and Other, they truly are. Hoffman speculates that he and Michael Rockefeller were both lured by the opportunity to know first hand these differences, to know them from the inside. The outcome for Hoffman - the experiences that led to this book - is radically different than for Rockefeller's. His was a killing done by those whose world included spirits of their dead who create havoc if not avenged. Hoffman's well-supported speculation is that the Rockefeller scion most likely was a victim of a ritualized murder done to balance the earlier killings of indigenous cannibal headhunters by (white) Dutch soldiers.

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