

## Savage Harvest

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By Carl Hoffman

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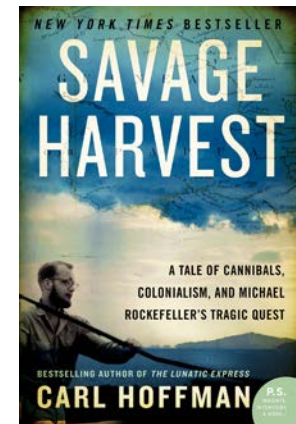
### Introduction

The mysterious disappearance of Michael Rockefeller in New Guinea in 1961 has kept the world and his powerful, influential family guessing for years. Now, Carl Hoffman uncovers startling new evidence that finally tells the full, astonishing story.

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 fifty 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



### Questions for Discussion

1. Think about Michael Rockefeller. What propelled him to go to New Guinea? How did his age and his privileged background influence his choices? The author writes, “He carried a responsibility, every Rockefeller did, to do good things, big things, to make something of himself. ‘Stewardship was the word the family used.’ ” Did this sense of duty help seal his fate?
2. We in the West sometimes consider people like the Asmat to be “primitive.” Do you think theirs is a primitive culture? What makes a society primitive or advanced? Compare and contrast Asmat society to our own. Think about violence, our attitudes toward life and death, our rituals and clothing. What accounts for the differences—and the similarities?

3. What is our attraction to “the Other”—to people, places, even food, that is different from that in our own lives? What does getting to know “the Other” tell us about ourselves?
4. Would you call societies like the Asmat’s Edenic? Do you think an Eden exists anywhere?
5. Think about places like the Museum of Primitive Art. We collect objects from societies like the Asmat and call it art, but we are not familiar with those objects’ true meaning and purpose. How does this lack of knowledge perpetuate stereotypes as well as false romantic notions of “the Other”?
6. Hoffman writes, “the Asmat lived in a complex world of spirits kept in balance by elaborate ceremonies and constant reciprocal violence. No death just *happened*.” Discuss the idea of balance and why it is important to the Asmat. Why would killing Michael have achieved balance? Why do you think some cultures practice rituals—like cannibalism—that others see as taboo?
7. Talk about the various white men who have infiltrated Asmat society. How were they received by tribesmen? Is it better, as an outsider, to try to fit into a different culture—to adopt clothing, customs, rituals, language—or to remain true to one’s native culture? Compare several of those who visited the Asmat. How did each behave, how did their behavior impact their interactions with the natives—and how did early engagements set the tone for those that followed?
8. To what extent was Michael Rockefeller responsible for his own demise, and to what extent was he a victim of forces beyond his control?
9. *Savage Harvest* is Carl Hoffman’s attempt to uncover the truth of Michael Rockefeller’s death fifty years ago. By the end of the book has he accomplished his goal? What do you think happened to Michael Rockefeller? What did the author learn about the Asmat? Do you think he really knows them? Do you? Why do you think he chose the title *Savage Harvest* for the book?
10. What did you take away from reading *Savage Harvest*?