

*Swaggart*, by Ann Rowe Seaman

reviewed by [Tom F. Driver](#) in the [February 2, 2000](#) issue

They are as American as the Fourth of July, these sensationalist preachers who nowadays crowd the TV screen and in earlier days brought thousands into camp meetings. Having about them an almost biblical air of rawness, their strongest appeal has always been to souls well acquainted with hard knocks: sufferers from poverty, arduous labor, sexual abuse or the pervasive violence of America from its inception until now. Jimmy Swaggart exemplifies the pattern.

Ann Seaman opens her engrossing, insightful biography in October 1987, when Swaggart, then at the height of his fame and influence, emerged from a motel on Airline Highway in New Orleans in the company of a prostitute and in full view, as it happened, of a hidden camera set up by another evangelist, Marvin Gorman, who believed that Swaggart was out to ruin him by divulging Gorman's own sexual transgressions. Reading Swaggart's story you can almost smell the funk: lust for money and fame, male rivalry, the emotional power of the pulpit, trancelike visits of the Holy Spirit, and raw sex.

Swaggart regarded his internal life as a pitched battle between God and Satan. Given such severe moral dualism, it was perhaps inevitable that once he became a star he would fall, a victim not so much of sex as the puritanical theology he had inherited in the dirt-poor milieu that formed him.

Should we care? Swaggart has gone into eclipse, and Gorman seems to have had even less than the proverbial 15 minutes of fame. But Swaggart's story affords a keen look into the heart of America: the rootage of so many in poverty and frontier life, the religious passion and naïveté, the infatuation with fame and wealth as signs of God's blessing, the fusion of religion with popular culture, the false (yet potent) dichotomy between sex and religion, the romanticizing of family within hegemonic (and often abusive) male supremacy, the pandemic alcoholism, the blurring of the line between God and country, the sentimentality laced with chauvinism, and last but not least, much genuine love of God.

There are even more trenchant motifs in Swaggart's life: the power, for good and ill, of television; the similarity between Swaggart and his first cousin (with whom he grew up), the notorious rock star Jerry Lee Lewis; the phenomenal wealth that TV preaching can generate; religious worship and show business as overlapping types of performance.

"I have to remember," W. H. Auden once said, "that any drunken old priest can forgive my sins." And so, he might have added, can one who is driven by cravings for fame, money and illicit sex. Many people don't agree, certainly not in public. It was the issue over which St. Augustine clashed with the Donatists, who insisted that their priests had to be pure.

What brought Swaggart down was not sex itself but hostility toward the ambiguity and irony of religious life, especially his failure to accept that the emotions calling one toward God are inseparable from those that beckon toward Aphrodite. In this regard, as in so many others, Swaggart is all-American.