



All God's Children: Inside the Dark and Violent World of Street Families

Rene Denfeld

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James Daniel Nelson first hit the streets as a teenager in 1992. He joined a clutch of runaways and misfits who camped out together in a squat under a Portland bridge. Within a few months the group—they called themselves a "family"—was arrested for a string of violent murders.

While Nelson sat in prison, the society he had helped form grew into a national phenomenon. Street families spread to every city from New York to San Francisco, and to many small towns in between, bringing violence with them. In 2003, almost eleven years after his original murder, Nelson, now called "Thantos", got out of prison, returned to Portland, created a new street family, and killed once more. Twelve family members were arrested along with him.

Rene Denfeld spent over a decade following the evolution of street family culture. She discovered that, contrary to popular belief, the majority of these teenagers hail from loving middle-class homes. Yet they have left those homes to form insular communities with cultish hierarchies, codes of behavior, languages, quasireligions, and harsh rules. She reveals the extremes to which desperate teenagers will go in their search for a sense of community, and builds a persuasive and troubling case that street families have grown among us into a dark reversal of the American ideal.

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