

THE FIELDING ALUM BEHIND NETFLIX'S #1 TRUE-CRIME DOCUSERIES

CHRISTINE MARIE ON THE DANGER AND MORAL STAKES OF TAKING ON A CULT LEADER

BY CATHERINE RYAN



As *Trust Me: The False Prophet* climbed to #1 on Netflix's television charts in April, Fielding alum Christine Marie, PhD (MEDIA PSY '20), found herself at the center of a global conversation she had spent years making possible, often at enormous personal risk.

The four-part docuseries follows Dr. Marie, a cult psychology expert, and her husband, videographer Tolga Katas, as they documented and helped expose Samuel Rappylee Bateman, a self-proclaimed prophet and leader of a small Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (FLDS) splinter group in the Short Creek community along the Arizona-Utah border. Bateman's crimes against women and girls led to his 2024 federal sentence of 50 years in prison.

The evidence Marie and Katas gathered helped build the federal case against Bateman, but it came at a cost Marie is still reckoning with. For years, they worked in the Short Creek area along the Utah-Arizona border, building relationships within the fundamentalist community where Bateman was based. Marie gradually earned the trust of Bateman and his immediate family, including more than 20 wives, at least 10 of whom were minors when he claimed them as his. All the while, she knew that the truth she was documenting would one day feel like betrayal.

Ultimately, at Bateman's invitation, Marie and Katas spent 2021 documenting him directly, often daily, along with his family and followers. His goal was self-aggrandizement. For Marie and Katas, their work had a different purpose: to gather evidence of child sexual abuse.

Marie's Fielding doctoral work examined humiliation, victim-blaming, coercion, misrepresentation, and the traumatic

consequences of media narratives. As she was completing her dissertation, that research became lived practice during the Bateman saga. She earned her PhD in Media Psychology in 2020, just before her undercover work entered its most dangerous phase. Her expertise in cult psychology, and her own history as a survivor of cult-based human trafficking, gave her work unusual depth.

"To say that Christine Marie's documentary *Trust Me* helped others is an understatement. It changed lives," notes Fielding's Dr. Karen Shackelford, core faculty in the Media Psychology doctoral program and Editor of the APA journal *Psychology of Popular Media*. "Christine Marie entered Fielding knowing the purpose of her dissertation work. She made her goals become a reality, and she did that exceptionally well."

In this follow-up to Fielding's April feature story about Marie, she reflects on the shock of sudden public attention, the danger and moral weight of going undercover, the Fielding education that helped shape her approach, and why she believes the series succeeded not because it was watched by so many, but because it helped people find the courage to stand up for others.

Watching the extraordinary response to your docuseries *Trust Me: The False Prophet*, what is going through your mind right now, personally and professionally?

I am in a state of shock, to be honest. The positive outpouring from around the world is absolutely surreal. It is beyond my expectations.

On a personal level, I feel validated for my decision to use a nonjudgmental, harm reduction approach with this stigmatized people rather than attacking them about things I disagreed with. On a professional level, I hope this series shows that by

not sensationalizing a heart-breaking story or not simplifying a complicated character, media can create empathy and even healing for victims of true crime who have the courage to tell their stories.

While you were living undercover inside the cult, building trust with people whose lives were shaped by abuse, fear, and coercion, what moments were the most intense, morally complicated, or emotionally unforgettable?

One intense moment was when my husband Tolga and I were in the car with Sam and three of his "wives," when he started explaining the nightmare that he put them through, justifying it with religion. I immediately recognized it as ritualistic sexual abuse. My entire nervous system started exploding, and I had to battle to think straight enough to know how to respond. It was difficult to not let my natural emotions guide my actions in the moment.

Another complicated time was when Sam informed me that he had named one of the babies after me. Of course, I was honored, but I was also distressed imagining what that mother, a wife, and true believer in Sam, would feel when she learned that her child was named after the person who would ultimately put her child's father in prison for life.

How did you carry that emotional burden while you were undercover, and how do you carry it now as the success of the docuseries unfolds?

This internal conflict was more difficult than I can even describe. The more Sam's followers loved me, the more I went home and cried. Sometimes it was excruciating to keep going, but I knew I must. When I got weary, I focused on the 13-year-old girl (Jane Doe) who was quietly crying next to me in the car when Sam

described the abuse that he had put her through. That single memory filled me with determination, not just to help get her to safety, but all his victims.

I am still close with Jane Doe today and she's doing great. She told me she wanted the story to come out to help prevent this from happening to others, and that has been honored. The series has been a success, not because so many people watched it, but more importantly, because it impacted people in a positive way.

Viewers worldwide have shared stories like how this series gave them the strength to speak out against their abusers or to walk away from coercive situations. Therapists have shared how this story has informed their practices, teenagers have written about how this series helped them decide on a career path, and people have mentioned the conversations it inspired them to have with their loved ones and to do more to help others. It was all worth it.

What gave you the courage to take on an unpredictable cult leader who tightly controlled more than 20 women and girls he claimed as wives, all seemingly under his spell?

I kept thinking of the phrase, "Friends don't let friends drive drunk." When we love people, sometimes we have to do what is in their best interest even if they will be upset. I hope people will find an example in the courage of Julia, a featured character who risked her life and reputation to stop the abuse, and also in Nomz, the first wife to publicly speak out against Sam. Sometimes, doing the right thing comes with difficult consequences. In spite of that, this series shows the good that can happen when people power through that fear, do the right thing anyway, and let the chips fall where they may.