

# Lessons Learned from Books about the Amish: Part I

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For many people, including me, the onset of cold weather and the end of the autumn semester together mark a time for reading books on my to-do list. Since my graduate student days so many decades ago, that list has always been a mix of novels and other forms of fiction, plus nonfiction, including a good number of books related to my research and teaching endeavors.

This review essay is about Amish literature of various kinds and the insights I've gained from each. Of the many insights, or "lessons learned," I will limit myself to three per book, and for a good reason. My reading commenced with Thanksgiving week 2019, and normally would have concluded sometime during late February or early March. Alas, COVID-19 and its consequences of shutting down universities, large and small, shopping malls, big and little, and restaurants of every conceivable size extended my concentrated reading days through the "merry" month of May. My home office became my only office, and for the first time in my memory, reading a book competed directly with garden work. The marigolds are reaching their summer peak, and the number of books about the Amish I've read now numbers a grand total of 11. A couple of the books are festooned with smudges of dirt, evidence that once warm weather arrived, a book on the table next to the water glass under the outdoor umbrella was a place to take a break from dirt digging, flower planting, and weed removing.

The books range from straightforward accounts of Amish society meant mostly for tourists to denser, more academic discussions of the Amish. I should add that the title of this review is slightly inaccurate because one of the books is about conservative migrant Mennonites from Mexico, but then, a title like "Lessons Learned from Books about the Amish and Conservative Migrant Mennonites from Mexico" is a bit long-winded!

This is Part I of the review essay, covering the first six of the 11 books. Part II will be published in the second issue of *JPAC*. The reason for this split is simple: to help readers focus on my comments about each of the books, which would be more daunting if the essay was twice as long.

The order of the books reviewed for both parts of this essay is purposively arranged alphabetically, by the surname of the first author. Any other arrangement might suggest that I liked some books more than others. It is not my intent to critique any of them, or to say which one made the biggest impact on me, or to preferentially recommend one or two as "must" reads over the



others. It is, instead, my goal to point out what lessons can be gained from each, and to remind readers of this essay that all books are incomplete and imperfect, but if we use our scholarly imaginations, learning nevertheless can be achieved.

One final note is in order. My definition of a lesson is straightforward, at least that is my hope. It is this: *What did I learn from the book that I could use to develop all or part of a lecture for my Amish Society<sup>1</sup> course at The Ohio State University, or to revise an older lecture?* For about 20 years I taught the Amish Society course in the classroom, but now teach it online; not because of COVID-19, but because the transition was planned several years ago and the inaugural offering of the online version just happened to coincide with the onset of this novel virus.

**Beachy, Lester. *Our Amish Values: Who We Are and What We Believe*. Self-published. 2013.**

Until recently, Mr. Beachy worked as a tour guide at the Amish & Mennonite Heritage Center near Berlin, Ohio. The Heritage Center is practically in the geographic middle of the gigantic settlement of Greater Holmes County,<sup>2</sup> which encompasses parts of six counties. Over the years, Beachy had encountered a variety of tourists, with questions ranging from the sincere to the naive. The inspiration for the book, explained in the introduction, came from these experiences:

When I lead a tour, one of the first things I try to tell them is that I welcome their questions. This gives me a better idea of what they wish to know.... Unfortunately, there is a lot of incorrect information in some books that have been written about us. That is one reason for this book. I have covered a broad field and hope I have done justice in representing the Amish.

The book is arranged alphabetically by topic—from “Anabaptist” to “Zeal”—plus two additional sections, “Baptismal Vows” and “Marriage Vows.” Each topic is described in only a few words, limited to one page each and accompanied by full-color photos of various Amish scenes on the opposite page, almost all of which appear to be from the Greater Holmes County settlement. Despite the book’s target audience of tourists, I have frequently used it and quoted Lester Beachy in my lectures for both versions of my Amish Society course. The first of the three lessons I’ll highlight is from the short essay associated with the letter *V* for values, whereby, “We believe the Word of God holds the key to the inner need of all mankind.” The second is the letter *A*, which stands for “Anabaptist.” To again quote Lester Beachy: “The Anabaptist movement was an earnest endeavor to get back to the Scriptures.” The first two lessons are now parts of a lecture where I

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<sup>1</sup> For clarification, when I refer to my course, the rules of capitalization apply; hence, it is “my Amish Society” course. When simply referring to Amish society, *society* is in lowercase.

<sup>2</sup> The word “Greater” is used to describe large, multicounty settlements. It would be quite clumsy to refer to the Holmes-Wayne-Coshocton-Tuscarawas-Stark-Ashland county settlement.

define the Amish as a rural-located religious subculture; that is, as a sect, based on sociological definitions of that word.<sup>3</sup>

The third lesson comes from the letter *R*, for *rumspringa*. Beachy admits that queries about *rumspringa* may be the most frequent, the least understood, and the most “overblown” by the general public and the people in the tour groups he conducted. I use his explanation as part of a larger lecture on outsider images of the Amish, contrasting those awful portrayals found in romance novels and reality shows with more academic anthropological and sociological perspectives of *rumspringa*.

**Cates, James A. *Serving the Amish: A Cultural Guide for Professionals*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 2014.**

The theme of the June 2019 triennial Young Center Amish studies conference was Health & Well-Being in Amish Society, a theme that closely aligns with this inaugural issue of the *Journal of Plain Anabaptist Communities*. In the past 30 years, Young Center Books in Anabaptist and Pietist Studies, published through the Johns Hopkins University Press, has included some important and authoritative books about Plain Anabaptist communities. One of those contributions is by James A. Cates, a clinical psychologist in northeastern Indiana.

The subtitle—*A Cultural Guide for Professionals*—defines the target audience. However, the book is eminently readable and appropriate for a much larger audience, for whom there are many lessons to be learned. Here are my three favorites that have found their way into my lectures.

The first lesson can be read on the first page of the preface, where Cates observes: “As human service providers we offer much to Amish communities...As with any culture, immersing ourselves in an understanding of the Amish worldview broadens our insights and perceptions of ourselves. And yet there will always be a distance” (p. vii). On occasion, a student in my Amish Society course seems to have reached the conclusion that Amish culture is superior to any other. I mostly see this as an impediment to learning and as a drift into romanticization of the Amish. I want my students to understand and appreciate the Amish from a social science point of view. One exercise to keep the appropriate distance is to ask students near the end of the course to list “lessons from them to us” and then to make a second list of “lessons from us to them.” In other words, the exchange between peoples who reside in distinctive societies and cultures is never one-way, and anyone who has served in the Peace Corps, lived for an extended period of time in another country on mission work, or spent time as a student on an exchange program or as an academic on a sabbatical leave, knows full well how much it is reciprocity that is the prime source of knowledge

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<sup>3</sup> This lecture also affords me the opportunity to clearly distinguish the sociological definition of a sect from the definition of a cult, which is a highly erroneous image some people possess of the Amish because they mistakenly believe all bishops to be domineering dictators who tell their congregants exactly what to do. The cult misperception is furthered by media reporting of occasional “renegade” Amish groups, such as the case of the beard-cutting events by former Amish in Bergholz, Ohio, several years ago.

and insight gained from a cross-cultural experience. No society or culture ever was or ever will be perfect or fully achieve its own ideals.

The second lesson from the Cates book comes in chapter 3, “Building and Maintaining Rapport.” This 12-page chapter should be required reading for all health care professionals and others who may find themselves interacting with Amish people on a regular basis. However, the real lesson, from my point of view, is that learning to work effectively across cultural differences between providers and clients is a generic skill, applicable to all other situations, including teacher-student. With regard to Cates’s book, this fundamental insight is then developed in chapters on psychotherapy, substance abuse, law enforcement, health care, and social services.

The third lesson (closely related to the second) from Cates’s well-written monograph is the common sense of working and serving people who have different cultural backgrounds. Even though pages 191–96 discuss 16 “essential points for effective service with Plain people,” nearly all the recommendations can be applied to working with any member of a group where there is a modicum of social, educational, cultural, and religious distance. Hence, an Amish Society course, vis-à-vis these 16 lessons from Cates, is an opportunity to teach what cultural relativity is really about; that is, that students should learn to understand another culture on its own terms, not on the prejudicial ethnocentrism of their own backgrounds.

**Gingrich, Luann Good. *Out of Place: Social Exclusion and Mennonite Immigrants in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 2016.**

This is the one book in this review that is not about the Amish, but it has plenty of implications, nonetheless. Its author, Luann Good Gingrich, is a professor of social work at York University in Toronto, Canada. The book is also the most academic of the 11 reviewed here in the sense that its subject matter is aimed at a relatively narrow market, which is other academics. Its narrative is denser than the other books, discussing various concepts that are used by anthropologists, sociologists, and other social scientists to understand society and distinctive groups within. The concept of social exclusion is one with which I am familiar from other scholarship in which I am engaged, namely, rural criminology. In the general field of criminology, social exclusion is a term used to refer to forms of inequality, racial and ethnic divisions, and other ways that segmentation within complex societies often spawns subcultures that are considered by the mainstream as deviant, and even criminal. Gingrich cites some of the same sources on the concept of social exclusion as would a criminologist, illustrating that most sociological and related social sciences concepts are quite portable; that is, they can be applied to a large range of subjects.

With her background in social work, Gingrich artfully applies social exclusion to Low German Mennonite immigrants from Mexico, or “Mexican Mennonites,” living and working in Canada. Some are temporary agricultural workers, who travel back and forth, and some are more permanent residents. By making the point that Canada is becoming a nation of growing diversity, she reminds readers that, so too, is the United States trending in the same direction. These are demographic changes closely associated with globalization; that is, the idea that the flow of workers or labor

from one country or region to another creates increasing population diversity and cultural complexity, no matter how many barriers are placed at a border. With this trend comes the age-old issues of discrimination, segregation, and cultural conflict between arrivals and host populations. That is the first lesson of the Gingrich book for my Amish Society students. Amish population growth spurred the development of many new settlements in regions of North America where the Amish had never gone before (Donnermeyer & Cooksey, 2010). Their attendant problems with their host communities, from those hostile to the Amish buying up so much land to officials who attempt to enforce local ordinances that may be in conflict with the Amish interpretation of religious beliefs, is a lesson that group differences are a universal feature of all societies throughout all of human history. These conflicts are as much a part of the fabric of Amish society today as in the past when the Amish were the targets of persecution centuries ago in Europe.

The second lesson of the Gingrich book for my Amish Society course is the connection between social exclusion and social inclusion. Gingrich spends many passages in several chapters discussing the nuances of social exclusion, and by applying it to the very uneven and partial integration of Mexican Mennonites in Canadian society, also illustrates the concept of social inclusion. Similar to other authors in this review (especially Cates and Hurst and McConnell), she states: “Today, many government and private agencies have adapted their services for Dietsche (im)migrants, providing a wide range of population-specific programs to address English language and literacy skills, parenting support...” (p. 40) and a host of other social welfare programs. Yet, these very programs serve to maintain distinctiveness between the Dietsche people from Mexico and mainstream Canadian society. In this sense, social exclusion and social inclusion are equally necessary to understand differences between the mainstream of a society and its various subcultures.

The third lesson from Gingrich that informs my lectures is her consideration of alternative expressions of lifestyles found within a common set of religious beliefs among Anabaptist communities. All these communities in North America (and elsewhere) have their origins in the Radical Reformation that began in Zurich, Switzerland, not long after the onset of the Protestant Reformation. Despite those common origins, this diversity is particularly noteworthy because none of the groups have large populations. Consider the Amish, who number around 350,000 (Young Center, 2020), compared to the millions of people who belong to mainline Protestant churches (Methodist, Baptist, etc.) and the Roman Catholic Church (Association of Religion Data Archives, 2020). Yet, one could argue that diversity within Anabaptism is greater than diversity within any other cluster of religious groups in North America, and one source of this diversity is the nearly total lack of a centralized structure that can function to define and enforce a uniformity of church doctrine and related practices. Hence, the lesson is one of basic sociology—how people are organized, referred to as social structure, greatly influences how beliefs are put into practice, especially fundamental beliefs of a religious nature. Yet, even though a lack of centralization leads to greater diversity among various Anabaptist and Plain communities, all refer back to a common history and a core set of religious beliefs.

**Hoover, Allen, and Jeanette Harder. *For the Sake of a Child: Love, Safety and Abuse in Our Plain Communities*. Stoneboro, PA: Ridgeway Publishing. 2019.**

Allen Hoover is a member of an Old Order Mennonite group, and Jeanette Harder is professor of social work at the University of Nebraska, Omaha and the cofounder of Dove's Nest: Faith Communities Keeping Children and Youth Safe. I received a copy of this book because I donated to Dove's Nest out of admiration for its mission. Yet, the book is more than a gratuity, because it is quite easy to find three lessons that I would use to develop lectures for my Amish Society course. Like several other books in this review, it centers on issues of health and safety.

In recent years, the issue of child abuse in all its forms (physical, sexual, verbal) have emerged from the shadows into the light of increased awareness, at least among a great many leaders of various Plain Anabaptist communities. In part, this emergence is due to the glare of media attention when stories of abuse in Amish families make headline news. In part, the emergence is internal and practical; that is, a greater recognition of the need to find solutions to these issues within families before they take on *National Enquirer* proportions. Finally, it is a matter of doing what is right!

Since this book is meant to be read by members of Plain Anabaptist communities more so than by health care professionals and others who understand the serious problems of child abuse throughout Canadian and US societies, it starts out the right way—with anecdotes. So, the first lesson that I can use to improve my lectures is to first consider the specifics or particulars of a group of people before explaining the general features of that group's culture. For example, on pages 3 and 4 the authors present a proverbial *Tale of Two Cities* of how two brothers growing up in a Plain community with an inflexible and verbally abusive father reacted in two very different ways and themselves are parenting in very different ways. The anecdote is a reminder about the importance of socialization for reproducing the fundamental beliefs, values, and practices that are the sociological elements of any human group.

There is no better chapter in any of the books reviewed in this essay than chapter 3, "Recognizing Abuse." It begins with an anecdote to set the stage for a series of "rules" for identifying abuse. Even though these rules (four in all) were written with Plain Anabaptist communities in mind, they apply to everyone, regardless of religious affiliation. My lesson, therefore, is to use these rules to illustrate the commonalities of problems encountered by Plain Anabaptist communities and mainstream North American society. Depression, drug abuse, alcoholism, family violence—all are found in every society, and ignoring the problems carries a serious cost to victims; hence, the title of this book. Both these problems and their costs know no social or cultural bounds. One can debate if Plain Anabaptist communities are only reluctantly and belatedly addressing issues of child abuse, and one can argue if the prevalence of abuse in Plain communities is higher or lower than in the mainstream, but these considerations are largely irrelevant to the greater mission, which is to get on with addressing problems like child abuse in a straightforward and proactive manner. Hence, the lesson to be learned is the way an issue emerges

and attempts at solutions are made, especially in sectarian groups like the Amish. Those sociological dynamics help illustrate how subcultures behave.

The third lesson from the Hoover and Harder book is closely related to the second lesson, and is found on pages 71–78. It is the authors' description for the development of an infrastructure for responding to cases of abuse, especially in church-related communities where the ties of membership to the church are strong. Cohesive networks of any kind, but especially when built around religious beliefs, can greatly delay a response to problems of abuse, as many other church groups (such as the Roman Catholic Church), and youth groups (such as the Boy Scouts of America) have discovered. Nevertheless, these strong networks are also the basis on which effective responses are built. Hence, pages 71–78 show the essentials for using social cohesion and solidarity to solve problems. In a more general sense, these networks represent an example of the ways social change can be purposively planned and effectively carried out within the Amish subculture and all other human groups.

**Hurst, Charles E., and David L. McConnell. *An Amish Paradox: Diversity and Change in the World's Largest Amish Community*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 2010.**

Since its publication in 2010, the Hurst and McConnell monograph has been the primary textbook for both the residential and online versions of my Amish Society course. It is about one of the two largest Amish settlements, the Greater Holmes County community of northeast Ohio. What better book for a course about the Amish at The Ohio State University than one about the Ohio Amish! That alone, however, is an insufficient reason to adopt it as a required text. It is the quality of its presentation of the various dimensions of the Amish society that make it an excellent textbook.

Here are three of the most valuable lessons that I tried to earnestly teach students during in-class discussions of assigned readings, including this book. The first lesson is the incredible diversity to be found within Amish society. This diversity is described in chapter 2, where the origins of various Amish affiliations present in the Greater Holmes County settlement is narrated.<sup>4</sup> In the Greater Holmes County community, there are presently four major affiliations, along with several minor groups. Hurst and McConnell focus only on the “big four.” Their description of each is a basic lesson about how, over time, if any cultural group is able to sustain itself across many generations and to grow in size, so too is growth in diversity an inevitability. This is a fundamental lesson in the science of sociology: as societies grow larger, complexity increases in turn. This is

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<sup>4</sup>An affiliation is a set of Amish church districts who consider themselves in fellowship with each other, which means, for example, that a bishop from one church district would be allowed to ordain someone from another church district if both belong to the same affiliation. However, readers should remember that there is diversity within diversity. For example, there are several subaffiliations within the conservative Swartzentruber branch of the Amish. Affiliations help maintain a sense of identity within a continuum of the approximately 2,500 church districts today, from very conservative Amish who might prohibit indoor plumbing to very progressive Amish who allow electricity in their homes.

simple to illustrate using dyadic relationships. There is one relationship between two people, but add a third person, and there are now three dyadic relationships. A fourth person creates six possible relationships, and so on, and so on. Complexity, including cliques and other subgroups, soon becomes the social structure of groups who grow larger and larger in size. Yet, despite this branching out (some might even refer to minor Amish divisions as “twigging”), all groups have maintained their identity as Amish and all ban car/truck ownership, which is one of the major differences between the Amish and mainstream North American society.

A second important lesson from this book is contained within chapter 6. That chapter is about work, and its title shows how much change is a regular part of Amish society: “Work Within and Outside Tradition.” Hurst and McConnell cite the appropriate statistics about the declining percentage of Amish men who farm to make a living for their families, but it is their description of the complexity of the economic system in the Greater Holmes County settlement today that is the real lesson I want to teach students from this chapter. A peek at this complexity can be seen in a quote from a non-Amish person who is much involved in the economic development of Holmes County: “If we didn’t have agriculture going on, we would not have the tourism, and if we didn’t have the tourism, we would not have all that furniture manufacturing going on” (p. 177). In the past, some misplaced commentary about the Amish has bemoaned their shift out of agriculture, as if it would ruin their culture. That is a static view of the Amish. The shift has not diminished the strength of Amish society, which is more accurately described as a religious subculture that continuously changes while maintaining its core religious, social, and cultural features. Consider, for example, that the shift out of agriculture has occurred concomitantly with an increased rate of retention or baptism of daughters and sons into the Amish faith (Friedrich, 2001). There may not be a cause-and-effect relationship between the two; however, it certainly disproves the notion that the shift out of agriculture and the diversification of work is a negative trend.

The third lesson from the Hurst and McConnell book is chapter 7, “Health along the Life Cycle.” This chapter stands out for one of its major characteristics—its comprehensiveness. It does not dwell on the peculiarities of the Amish penchant for using folk medicines (even though that subject is discussed). Instead, it focuses, issue by issue, on health considerations at various stages of life, from birth and childhood to old age and death. Like Cates and Hoover and Harder, Hurst and McConnell frequently mention the importance of communication between health care professionals and the Amish. In reference to doctors and others who are non-Amish and involved in providing health care services, they observe:

Sensitivity to and respect for Amish culture and internal variations are important to patients. A physician who can speak Pennsylvania Dutch or who has an Amish background will be attractive to the Amish.... Being able to ‘discern’ differences among Amish patients is also important to caregivers. (p. 147)



If I was forced to select only one topic as a vehicle for teaching about Amish society, I would select health care. There is no other issue that illustrates the connection and commitment of the Amish to their own religious beliefs and values, their lifestyles, and their many encounters with various parts of mainstream North American society.

**Miller, Marlene C. *Called to Be Amish*. Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press. 2015.**

This book is an autobiographical account of the long journey of someone who grew up close to the Greater Holmes County community, but did not grow up Amish. Marlene Miller is one of the few individuals who converted to the Amish faith and remained Amish for the rest of her life. The next time I teach an in-class version of Amish Society, this will be the first reading assignment, because it is a story of socialization and assimilation. The author passed away only recently.

Often, students in my Amish Society course ask how “hard” (although a few say “how easy”) it is to convert to the Amish faith. Often, I refer to either personal accounts of the few Amish I know who began their lives non-Amish, or I recount the events behind the journey of Marlene Miller because, by writing *Called to Be Amish*, she provides a written account detailing events, emotions, and insights of her metamorphosis. That is the first lesson: converting is not some simplistic decision to switch membership from one faith group to another after touring an Amish area or earning an A in a college-level course with the title “Amish Society.” For Miller, the journey was one of a verbally abusive mother, romance with a young Amish man, pregnancy followed by a nearly cancelled marriage (for her husband, it was the issue of marriage outside the Amish faith), marital estrangement, a spiritual change of heart, and baptism for both. One could easily get the impression that Marlene Miller’s account reads like a television soap opera, but the narrative is straightforward and never suggests exaggeration of circumstances.

The second lesson from Miller’s book is the challenges of adjusting to an Amish way of life. It is a story of socialization of an adult, not a child. In other words, it is a story of the difficulties of resocialization. It recounts a probationary period of several years as Marlene and her husband, even while raising their family, made the transition and eventually were baptized Amish. Marlene had the assistance of her sister-in-law, who both helped her and taught her essential homemaker skills like sewing clothes. (As a side note, these events occurred in the 1960s, when nearly all Amish made their own clothes, a practice that has since changed.) Chapters 8–13 recount Miller’s gradual assimilation into an Amish way of life, and times when she thought she could not continue as Amish any longer. The pressures of raising a family on a tight budget and all the hard work that comes from being an Amish mother nearly made her just walk away. In the end, even after composing a note to that effect, she had a change of heart, similar in its emotional weight to the moments when she first decided to become Amish. As the first sentence of Part II, which is chapter 8 (“Getting Dressed in Amish Ways”) begins, “It wasn’t peaches and cream or high mountain after my conversion” (p. 93). This long series of anecdotes, covering all six chapters in Part II, form a single, valuable lesson about the differences between an Amish and a non-Amish way of life and the hundreds of points of distinction between the two worlds.

The third lesson from Miller's book is in the eight chapters of Part III, which are about her experiences raising a family and growing old as a mother and then grandmother. Aside from the many excellent anecdotes illustrating how she struggled and then successfully transitioned into Amish society, there is a section of Chapter 15 on her and her husband's experiences hosting the church service for the very first time. The lesson from her description of events is how much visibility exists within any Amish community. It is truly a more face-to-face and communal life than that of most people who live in mainstream North American society. That is a lesson I try to teach my students, because I know so many of them are now growing up in an age of cell phones, gaming, streaming, headphones, "man caves" and "she sheds," and every other conceivable way there is for people to isolate themselves and select what parts of themselves to display in more public settings. Our lifestyles are more segmented, as we present separate aspects of who we are from one group to the next, while an Amish lifestyle is less segmented, even though the diffusion of iPhones and social media is creeping into their lives as well.

### **Brief Concluding Remarks**

These six books are very diverse in terms of authors' backgrounds and authors' intent. Notwithstanding that diversity, the six share a commonality of lessons that I can employ to create better lectures for both the residential and online versions of my Amish Society course. As well, each book contains lessons that can be applied to any historical or social science course that has no focus whatsoever on the Amish, except to discuss them as an example of how all human groups behave. There is a universality in the very particulars of Amish society. Other readers can adopt a different view of each book, but likewise learn much that is new, or that reminds them and reinforces for them what they already knew.

In the next issue of the *Journal of Plain Anabaptist Communities*, I'll share lessons from *The Amish: A Concise Introduction* by Steven M. Nolt, *What It's Like to be Amish* by Sam S. Stoltzfus, *Life Through Their Lens: A Photo Collection* by Melissa Thomas, *Success Made Simple: An Inside Look at Why Amish Businesses Thrive* by Eric Wesner, and *Cathedrals, Castles, Caves: The Origins of the Anabaptist Faith* by Marcus Yoder.

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