

Book Review

Beth Oberholtzer. *Amish Weddings: From Courtship to Celebration.* Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2025. 191 pp.

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In *Amish Weddings: From Courtship to Celebration*, Beth Oberholtzer draws on multiple interviews with members of the Lancaster Amish community to explore the traditions of dating, youth gatherings, courtship, and weddings. From the first page, she makes clear that Amish weddings are not simply the marriage ceremony and the meal or reception that follows. Instead, Oberholtzer challenges readers to understand how an Amish wedding is a culmination of events and activities that take Amish young people from childhood to adulthood. More importantly, she shows how Amish weddings mark the passage of two Amish individuals into life as a couple, each with a role to play, supported by and contributing to the church community. While wedding activities are certainly fun, they are also steeped in faith. Oberholtzer successfully captures the traditions that bring together not just two young people but also families, friends, history, and the lived faith of the Amish church community.

Oberholtzer's first chapter, "Introduction to Amish Weddings," looks deeply at how Amish courtship follows patterns established across generations and within a network of family and friends. Children grow up watching older siblings date, attending and then participating in the weddings of brothers, sisters, cousins, and friends, until they themselves join in young folk gatherings, begin to date, marry, and carry on the traditions of their forebears.

But weddings certainly build on a couple's decision to wed, and, as Oberholzer points out, that decision comes after Amish young people leave school, increasingly take on adult responsibilities, join a youth group, and begin dating. Chapter 2, "Amish Youth," explores the lives of Lancaster Amish teens from the time they leave school until they decide to join a youth group. Oberholtzer lets Amish young people talk for themselves about their experiences, highlighting the decision about which youth group to join and why and the implications for their adult lives in the community. Through interviews with older adults long past the *Rumspringa* years, Oberholtzer shows the importance of the youth group for establishing lifelong friendships. This chapter also outlines the youth group activities, making clear how the social events that are the context for dating are grounded in the religious life of the community.



Although not all Amish young people meet their future spouses in a youth group, the youth group gatherings provide a community-approved context for carrying on the courtship. Flirting and dating multiple partners is frowned upon, for the goal is to find a life partner with whom one can raise a family and be a participating member of the church community. In Chapter 3, “Courtship and Engagement,” Oberholtzer offers multiple stories of young people finding each other, the girl waiting until she’s asked for a date, the nervous boy having to ask, and their friends cheering them on as the couple follows the steps leading to their engagement or “publishing,” when the date of their wedding is announced to the congregation.

When the couple is published, the focus of family and community shifts to the upcoming wedding. Chapter 4, “Wedding Planning and Preparation,” looks at the myriad decisions that the young couple and their parents must make, from where to construct the wedding venue to who will help cook and who will help clean up afterwards. Oberholtzer pays particular attention to the different responsibilities of the bride and her family and the groom and his. While the broad strokes are provided by tradition, and everyone knows what rituals will be followed, Oberholtzer lets young couples talk about how they made their wedding day special. “Rosie,” for example, talks about the “look” she wanted and how the colors of the dresses she and her attendants would wear would complement the table accessories.

Because those hosting an Amish wedding never know exactly how many guests will attend, they prepare to feed hundreds at the midday meal after the wedding, at the evening supper, and with snacks throughout the day for a large number of helpers. In Chapter 5, “The Essential Wedding Menu,” Oberholtzer outlines the duties of all those honored with an invitation to help and provides a detailed wedding menu divided to highlight different roles, including the “roast people,” the “potato people,” and the “gravy people.” She also includes a timetable for preparation and several recipes for dishes guests are likely to taste at an Amish wedding.

While much of the work, including some of the cooking, has to wait for the actual day of the wedding, there are chores that need to get done the day before if all is to go smoothly. Oberholtzer highlights these in her sixth chapter, “The Day Before a Wedding.” In particular, “Eck tenders” must decorate the Eck; that is, the corner table where the bride and groom and their attendants sit, while men work together to set up benches and chairs for the wedding church. Ideally, all will be ready for the cooks and hostlers (who tend the horses) who will show up early the following morning for the wedding day.

Oberholtzer covers the big event in Chapter 7, “The Wedding Day: Morning,” and Chapter 8, “The Wedding Day: Afternoon and Evening.” The morning is about the wedding service itself, a religious service in which the actual exchange of vows is only a small part. The afternoon and evening are the celebration, the feasting, the gift giving, and the singing.

And the end of it all begins the next day as the newlyweds begin their transition to married Amish life. In her final chapter, Oberholtzer details the activities that go on “After the Wedding Day.” Not only is there lots of cleaning up, but there are social events that mark the slow change from single life to married participation in church and community, including visits to relatives and, perhaps, a honeymoon. Oberholtzer notes that being married means the young couple must focus

on establishing their own home, and their time for socializing with the youth is over. Eventually, they will, hopefully, have a family. They are finally Amish adults.

This book is enjoyable, well researched, informative, and accessible to a general audience. The text's easy style is enhanced by the stories from Amish informants and numerous color photographs that highlight the written discussion. In short, it is a pleasure to read.

One concern, however, is the title *Amish Weddings*. As Oberholtzer herself notes, the practices described in this book are those of the Lancaster Amish community and its daughter settlements. She acknowledges that "there are other Amish-related groups in Lancaster County and Old Order Amish in other areas that have practices different from those noted here" (14). Yet this work does not address that diversity. It does not mention that, in the broader, diverse Amish world, not all Amish young people can engage in volleyball or meet their life partner while volunteering for a disaster relief organization (51) because those activities would be forbidden by the *Ordnungs* of their respective church communities. Readers will not learn that, in very conservative Amish communities, a dating couple is not seen out together publicly until they are published, and their courtship is still kept secret from all but the closest friends and family (see p. 58). *Amish Weddings* does not address church-community variations in young folk activities, dating, arrangements for being published, gifting traditions, the labor at weddings, accommodations for the shunned and English guests, or the wedding menu. In short, the publisher's choice of title suggests a comprehensive look at Amish courtship and wedding traditions that the author herself never claims. That said, this detailed study of the wedding and courtship traditions of the Lancaster Amish settlement will serve as an excellent basis for comparative studies.

Amish Weddings also challenges researchers of the Lancaster Amish community and its daughter settlements. Oberholtzer points out a number of changes to Lancaster Amish wedding practices that have occurred over the past few decades, and these could be explored. What does it reveal about changing Amish life and relationships in the church community that Lancaster couples may forego some of the visiting that their grandparents would have done to instead take a honeymoon in Florida? What does it tell us about the Lancaster Amish community that courting is no longer secret, that couples are published long in advance of the wedding, and even that cakes can be frozen for the *Infehr*? When did home shopping parties (see p. 61) to celebrate a young woman's engagement become a custom and what did they replace? Have courtship and wedding traditions in Lancaster Amish daughter settlements changed like they have in Lancaster County? Changing traditions suggest an evolving Amish culture and beg for further research.

In *Amish Weddings. From Courtship to Celebration*, Beth Oberholtzer gives us an in-depth look at events that mark the passage from childhood to adulthood and unite and strengthen the Amish church community. At the same time, she provides an excellent starting point for a broader study of Amish life. I heartily recommend this work.