

Book Review

Paul W. Nisly. *God's Guidance: A Kansas Amish Boy Reflects on Being Led to Places He Had Not Planned to Go*. 2021. 343 pp.

Saloma Miller Furlong. *Liberating Lomie: Memoir of an Amish Childhood*. 2022. 274 pp.

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Two recent memoirs of formerly Amish persons could not be more different. Paul Nisly, in *God's Guidance: A Kansas Amish Boy Reflects on Being Led to Places He Had Not Planned to Go*, describes a nurturing Amish childhood in Kansas and focuses on his adult academic and ministerial career in Pennsylvania. In contrast, Saloma Miller Furlong's memoir *Liberating Lomie* focuses on her early life, describing an abusive and troubled childhood in Ohio, and concludes with her leaving the Amish community. These very different accounts reflect the varied experiences of Amish life, which is not monolithic, and the factors that shape those experiences.

Paul Nisly began his life as the youngest child in a Kansas Amish family of eight children on a wheat and dairy farm. Despite his mother's health problems, he always felt "totally welcomed" as a person (3). His parents were lovingly supportive. Because Nisly's first language was Pennsylvania Dutch, his father practiced English with him to prepare him for school. After Nisly completed primary school, his parents allowed him to continue his education with a few correspondence courses.

When it became clear to Nisly that he wanted to go to college and not take over the farm, his family sold their dairy herd and paid all their farm debts. He later went to college without a formal high school education. Nisly went to Hesston College, got married, and then continued his studies in English at Eastern Mennonite College. While rearing a family, he began teaching and later entered a master's program at the University of Kansas. He completed his doctoral dissertation while teaching and directing the Language Department at Messiah College (now Messiah University) in Grantham, Pennsylvania. He taught at Messiah until his retirement in 2006.

Nisly retired from teaching not long after the final illness of his first wife, Laura. He did personal travel and focused on his work in the Lancaster Conference of the Mennonite Church, where he held ministerial credentials and was also a bishop of the Harrisburg District. It was in his role as bishop that he met Nancy Ruth, the woman who became his second wife. He served later as bishop of the North Penn District.

God's Guidance is a retrospective. In his 80s, Nisly reflects on his life, seeing the ways in which he has been especially blessed, but also acknowledging mistakes and shortcomings. He



spends time reflecting theologically on Laura's rheumatoid arthritis and the difficulties and pain it caused her. She eventually died of cancer. Nisly also meditates deeply on the unexpected death of his daughter and oldest child at the age of 21 in a car accident.

The book's subtitle, *A Kansas Amish Boy Reflects on Being Led to Places He Had Not Planned to Go*, encompasses several physical relocations (including international service), his appointment as a bishop, navigation of COVID-19, and family illness and death. Nisly frequently gives thanks to God throughout his memoir, even as he faced devastating losses. Perhaps here Nisly leans into his Amish upbringing and seems to accept the losses as something he does not understand, even if he does not like them. He is honest about his emotions, even as he questions and wonders why.

Nisly's family was Old Order Amish until his parents eventually joined a Beachy Amish fellowship. The exact details of Nisly's personal departure from the Amish are not clear, though. We know he was baptized as a teenager, which was a choice he made deliberately and willingly, and we know he went through membership instruction and was received into the church. But was his leaving the Amish a result of his parents joining another fellowship and/or because he pursued a higher education? The book seems to indicate a natural progression away from the Amish because of Nisly's academic calling in English literature. He reports that his parents were "less than enthralled" with his decision to pursue education, but never "harsh or difficult" (95). Yet the stated parental disappointment seems more to do with Nisly leaving the farm than a particular church.

Nisly's memoir does not define a specific moment when he no longer considered himself to be Amish. In the case of Saloma Miller Furlong in *Liberating Lomie*, however, the moment of departure is clear and distinct. Her departure acts as a frame for the book, as indicated in the prologue's opening sentence: "I did not sneak away in the dark of night" (1), and an afterword that describes her post-Amish life. The book focuses on the first twenty years of Furlong's life, lays out her struggles to try to submit to Amish ways, and details her plans to escape to Vermont—and then her joy and triumph in living a different life.

Furlong grew up in an Old Order Amish family in northeastern Ohio. Her father suffered from mental illness, which contributed to an already troubled dynamic of emotional abuse, shaming, cultivation of favoritism, and severe punishments by her mother. Furlong also experienced physical and sexual abuse at the hands of her brother. Compounding these troubles was the family's economic situation that resulted from her father not always being able to work.

Yet Furlong's childhood had its positive moments. She loved the childhood experience of being bathed and held in a warm towel by her mother, a weekly ritual that she describes in detail. She appreciated the instances when her mother listened well, which she did on occasion, and she describes a time when her father tried to be understanding. She had good talks with her friends Annie and Olin Clara and found solace in nature on her family's farm. Despite a childhood of abuse, Furlong does her best to present its good moments when she can.

Like Nisly, Furlong's first experience away from home was public school. Unlike Nisly, Furlong had no preparation from her family on how to speak English. Even though her first days of school began in tears, Furlong looked back on some years in school as an experience that

provided refuge from the troubled dynamics at home and also prepared her for life outside the Amish community. Yet school, like her home, was complicated because some teachers, like her parents, were frightening.

When Furlong joined the church, she did not want to. She reflects on the irony of those in *Martyrs Mirror* rebelling against state church authorities to be able to “make their own choices,” whereas she wished she had the freedom *not* to be baptized (202). She felt pressure from her family and community to join and began attending instruction classes. During one of these sessions, the bishop pointed out that she was still attending young people’s parties, which are not allowed for church members, and indicated she was not fully submitted to the process of becoming a member. She was later angered to find out that this bishop’s son also attended these parties, even after he was baptized, but she was the one singled out for doing so.

The same bishop was lenient when Furlong’s father confessed to the church that he had given a harsh beating to one of Furlong’s sisters. The bishop said, “I believe if the wife and daughters weren’t so rebellious, then maybe Sim wouldn’t have this problem” (217). He allowed her father to confess while sitting instead of kneeling. The members of the church were then to vote on accepting the confession. Since everyone was expected to agree with the bishop, Furlong felt she couldn’t say no. After an unsuccessful attempt to involve a social worker in her household, Furlong made secret plans to go to Vermont.

Liberating Lomie is a deliberately crafted memoir. It is a coming-of-age story that focuses on a particular time in Furlong’s life. Furlong has written other memoirs, but she wrote this one because she realized that the reason for her leaving was not simply because of her father’s violence. After years of reflection, she realized that her mother was also part of the dynamic of abuse. The book focuses on the complicated relationship Furlong had with her mother and siblings. *Liberating Lomie* comes with a trigger warning. Furlong makes it clear to readers that she describes acts of violence in the book, and readers should take this warning seriously.

Furlong faced special difficulties because of the submissive role of women and girls in her Amish community. Nisly’s successful teaching career and family life, on the other hand, was possible because of Laura’s support. He wonders sometimes in the book what she was thinking throughout their marriage and acknowledges in hindsight that the family’s move to Kenya while she was in cancer treatment may not have been the best decision he made. Laura went to Kenya in loving submission and bravely endured cancer treatments in another country so that Nisly could fulfill his dream of international service.

Despite gender role differences, both Nisly and Furlong had a sense of call to life beyond their Amish communities, and both knew what that meant. Of what Nisly shares in *God’s Guidance*, it appears that his home community simply didn’t have space for his intellectual calling, and he wanted to pursue higher education. This meant moving away from home.

Furlong made plans to leave the Amish because of abuse at the hands of her parents and siblings and the church’s acceptance of such abuse. She knew that the life she was meant to live was one where she made her own choices, not choices that her family or the church expected her to make.

In her post-Amish life, Furlong made conscious choices not to perpetuate abuse on her children and sought counseling. She later continued her education and earned a college degree in her 40s.

Yet Amish upbringing obviously shaped Nisly and Furlong, even after they left their communities. Becoming a (Mennonite) bishop, Nisly noted, was not something he ever planned. He remembered how an Amish bishop put his parents out of the church for a few weeks because they were slow to completely remove electricity from a house they recently bought. This made a negative impression—yet he submitted when the opportunity came to him. Likewise, Furlong prioritized her children and delayed higher education until after her children were grown.

God's Guidance and *Liberating Lomie* would appeal to anyone with personal or scholarly interest in Amish life, belonging, and gender dynamics. Nisly's role in the Lancaster Mennonite Conference would interest church historians, and his account of teaching at Messiah would help those who are researching the history of the university. Students and others studying memoir as a literary genre or as a spiritual practice may find these two books to be a fascinating study, since Furlong's memoir is an act of liberation and self-determination, and Nisly's is an act of reflection and devotion.

These two books are part of a body of an ex-Amish memoir genre and together show Amish life as multifaceted and complex. People with good and bad childhoods leave the Amish, and gender roles and family life shape individual experiences. Yet *God's Guidance* and *Liberating Lomie* ultimately affirm that Amish life is a choice and a calling—and that some Amish persons are called to life and work beyond their communities of origin.