

## Book Review

**Jane Flynn. *Mennonites of Southern Illinois: A Photographic Journal*. Carbondale, IL: University of Southern Illinois Press, 2024. 119 pp.**

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Photographer and author Jane Flynn has created a book, *Mennonites of Southern Illinois*, that invites viewers to step into a different world—one of self-sufficiency and community wrapped in faithfulness to God. Her black-and-white photos of static subjects in muted tones provide a respite from the many highly saturated color photos that appear broadly elsewhere.

A native of Scotland, Flynn arrived in southern Illinois to enter the MFA program at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale. Her first introduction to Mennonites came when shooting documentary photos of the towns of Stonefort and Carrier Mills, east of Carbondale. She later learned to know people in the Mount Pleasant Mennonite community, west of the town of Vienna, about 40 miles southeast of Carbondale, and recorded images of life there—subjects at work and play, exterior scenes, and interior still lifes.

Two forewords provide an excellent introduction to the subject. First, Herbert K. Russell outlines the history of the Anabaptists and Mennonites in general, then Illinois Mennonites in particular. Generations of Mennonites have moved from Pennsylvania to the Midwest, largely in the nineteenth century. Some made central and northern Illinois their homes in the 1930s and 1940s. In the 1950s, there was a deliberate effort by conservative Mennonites toward “evangelization by colonization,” which led three families—with more following—to settle in southern Illinois a few miles west of Vienna. They established the Mount Pleasant Mennonite Church, followed shortly by the Mount Pleasant Mennonite School.

Those who are familiar with the branches of the Mennonite churches might have found it helpful if more specifics about the communities Flynn visited had been included. For example, the Stonefort/Carrier community shown was presumably related to the Carrier Mills Amish Mennonite Church. The Mount Pleasant Mennonite Church, begun in 1960, would have originally been a Lancaster Mennonite Conference church that joined the Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Conference when that group was formed in 1969 or shortly thereafter. When encountering a particular group of Mennonites, it is easy to speak of them as representative, but it is important to remember that ways of living out one’s beliefs vary widely under the Mennonite name.

In the second foreword, Liz Wells focuses on the documentary photography aspects of the book, outlining sociological and artistic histories and influences. She draws attention to details in



the photos that give clues to the subjects' lives—for example, there are books and blackboards in the schoolroom rather than videos and computer screens—and asks the viewer to look closely. Wells notes that “relatively isolated communities and lifestyles can be brought to broader attention, allowing those unfamiliar with a locality and lifestyle to consider the implications of cultural differences” (xix).

Flynn chose to shoot or make photos via film exposure, then processed and printed each by hand and toned them in selenium to fine-tune the density. She shot largely in 35-millimeter but switched to large format when the subject and situation called for it. The handmade process was intense and deliberate, an effort to better represent her subjects and their purposeful lives. As she notes, “The handcrafting of the photographs is reflective of a society that appreciates and admires the handmade over a digital artifact” (xxv).

The original photographic prints likely show a luminosity that will have been flattened by the book's production process. (Though initially handcrafted, the photo prints would have been scanned electronically, then reproduced as halftones—which simulate continuous tone photos through dots of various sizes—when the book was printed.)

Flynn practiced documentation through immersion. She learned to know Mount Pleasant Mennonite families over a period of months, initially attending church services, then joining in community meals, and later visiting in homes. She was received warmly, especially by the women, and shared deeply. Her respect for her subjects—friends—is evident. Traditional gender roles shaped her community participation and thus the images made. “The comfort my subjects had in front of my lens was a direct result of my being so accepted into their ranks, which in turn was a result of not putting my subjects in an uneasy position or pushing their social roles and boundaries” (xxiii).

Photos in *Mennonites of Southern Illinois* are placed one per page and organized loosely in themes, each introduced with a passage of scripture. There is family life, farming and beekeeping, education, sewing, butchering, storekeeping, and friendship. Captions with the photos note their content as well as explain a related aspect of community life.

The viewer is reminded that we all set up or accept parameters within which we can best live our lives. Jane Flynn has illuminated a people in southern Illinois who maintain a quiet rural lifestyle and raise their children within their boundaries of faith.