

Book Review

Dirk Eitzen. *Fooling with the Amish: “Amish Mafia,” Entertaining Fakery, and the Evolution of Reality TV*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2022. Pp. 239.

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Readers of this journal know that the Amish, while diverse in many ways, are by and large a peaceful people who seek to witness to the Kingdom of God on Earth by following Jesus’ teachings in the here-and-now. For the Amish, Jesus’ teachings are pretty straightforward. Whether stated in the Sermon on the Mount or given in the Lord’s Prayer or embodied in Jesus’ life, the Amish know that Jesus calls them to love their enemy, live humbly, never take up arms against another, forgive those who trespass against them, and depend on God in all things.

When the so-called reality TV show *Amish Mafia* launched its first of four seasons on the Discovery Channel in 2012, I could not have been less interested. Gun-toting Amish guys throwing their weight around Lancaster County to settle scores, force rule-breaking Amish back into submission, and make money via extortion was simply too ridiculous. I did not need to watch an episode to know it would be a waste of my time.

Dirk Eitzen, Amish scholar and documentary filmmaker, watched not just one episode but all four seasons. More than that, he wrote a whole scholarly book on the show. A good question to ask is *why*.

In *Fooling with the Amish*, Eitzen seeks to understand the appeal of a so-called “reality show” that is obviously fake. All reality shows, he points out, involve a certain amount of fakery. Viewers of reality TV shows like *Survivor* or *The Bachelor* or *The Apprentice* expect a bit of deception or, at least, to be misled now and again. How else are those shows going to deliver scintillating story lines and dramatic conflicts that keep viewers watching season after season?

Eitzen explains that central to the appeal of reality TV shows is the idea that what viewers are watching is unscripted and that the people in the show are who they say they are. Neither is the case in *Amish Mafia*. As Eitzen deftly demonstrates through careful analyses of camera work, scene setup, dialogue, and story lines, every episode of *Amish Mafia* was scripted and staged. Moreover, Eitzen shows, the individuals who appear in the show are definitely not who they say they are. Lebanon Levi, the purported godfather of the Amish mafia in the show, is pure fiction. While raised Amish, the actor who played Lebanon Levi was, when first hired for the part, “leading



an ordinary ‘English’ (non-Amish) life, living in his own apartment, driving a car, running a roofing and siding business with his brother, and volunteering with the local fire department” (37).

Eitzen’s purpose in this book is to explain how a “reality show” that was so fake as to be utterly ridiculous was also very popular. How could this be so? Did viewers know that what they were watching was fake? If so, what did they think of that? Did it have a negative impact on their opinion of the show? If they thought what they were watching was real, and later discovered that a scene or story line or character was utterly fabricated, how did they respond? Were they irritated at the show for deceiving them?

Eitzen convincingly argues that the success of *Amish Mafia* is best understood as a transaction between its content producers (producer, director, writer, actor) and its viewers. Viewers of *Amish Mafia* wanted scenes and story lines that were sensational yet plausible in some way (plausibility had less to do with veracity than with viewers’ imaginations about what might be plausible), and that empowered them with inside information that promised to raise their social capital when talking with others either about the show or about the Amish beyond the show. The producers of *Amish Mafia* provided all that. All they asked for in exchange was that their viewers let them get away with the fakery. If viewers were willing not to see or to ignore or to rationalize fakery in the show, then producers could deliver what viewers wanted.

Eitzen also argues convincingly that, on the whole, viewers of *Amish Mafia* were good with that transaction. Indeed, confounding viewers in their efforts to ferret out what was true and what wasn’t, according to Eitzen, was central to the entertainment value of the show. Viewers enjoyed trying to ferret out real from fake, to the extent that they could.

There is much to recommend in this book. Just one example would be Eitzen’s close readings of scenes in which he exposes the “sleights of hand” involving, say, camera work or scene setup that trick audiences into thinking that what they are watching is real. I will assign this book in my course on the visual rhetoric of Amish life and culture so that my students can learn from Eitzen how to slow a text down in order to see better how it is doing what it is doing. I am thinking, in particular, of Eitzen’s shot-by-shot analysis of the scene in which Levi and his sidekick supposedly catch “an important Amish man” hooking up with a prostitute. Viewers are invited to experience the scene as if they are on a stakeout with these two members of the Amish mafia, watching them as they find just the right moment to storm the motel room, capture a few compromising photos of the Amish john, and give him their ultimatum: get out and don’t come back or else! It is all very dramatic. And it’s all fake. Eitzen demonstrates that there had to be another camera shooting the scene to get the shot of the Amish john heading into the motel room. Moreover, the Amish john wasn’t Amish. Turns out he comes out of the Old Order River Brethren tradition and got the part through his son, who was a regular on the show.

Eitzen’s close attention to the mechanics of this show and its discourse effects is important. Rather than dismiss the show as ridiculous (even if it is), Eitzen takes it seriously. He wants to understand why such fakery gets traction. And isn’t that a question many of us are asking in these days rife with fake news, absurd conspiracy theories, and online “chats” with customer service representatives that aren’t even human?

Eitzen's book tells us a lot about *Amish Mafia*—the show, its fake content, its rhetorically astute use of the idioms of “reality TV,” its transactional relationship with its audience, and so forth. And while I can't go in for what I understand Eitzen to be proposing as the “first cause” for the success of *Amish Mafia*—namely, that viewers loved the show because (thanks to evolution) human beings are “hardwired” to get pleasure from gossip—I am grateful that, having read this book, I have a much better sense of what those who endeavor to traffic in truth are up against.

I am glad (I think) that I was obliged to watch an episode of *Amish Mafia* in order to write this review. Watching it and, much more, reading Eitzen's book taught this rhetorical scholar a lot about why audiences can be captivated by stories, scenes, and people that are utterly fake and absolutely ridiculous. We fail to appreciate such rhetorical processes at our peril.

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