

Book Review

Brad Igou, comp. *Amish Voices: A Collection of Amish Writings*. Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2019. 239 pp.

Brad Igou, comp. *Amish Voices, Volume 2: In Their Own Words, 1993–2020*. Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2023. 255 pp.

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The Amish are a group of people that fascinate many. Much has been written about them, mainly by writers outside of the Amish faith. Perhaps the reason so many people read works about the Amish written by non-Amish authors rather than works written by the Amish themselves is because the number of literary works actually written by Amish people is small. But if the earnest reader wants to understand the positions of another person or group, wouldn't it be best if the information came from the mouths of the group's members? Brad Igou attempts to do that by taking writings of the Amish themselves and compiling them into two readable, topic-sorted books.

Igou uses excerpts from the Amish publication *Family Life*, produced by Pathway Publishers in Aylmer, Ontario, which allows the Amish to talk about their struggles, joys, and beliefs in their own words. The two volumes cover a 52-year period of *Family Life*, from its beginning in 1968 through 2020.

A Collection of Amish Writings, as Igou subtitles volume 1, opens with a chapter acquainting the reader with *Family Life* magazine. It quickly transitions into the second chapter, "Amish Beginnings." Drawn mainly from the research of the magazine's staff writers, it does a good job of preparing the reader for the journey into understanding Amish thought and beliefs. Chapter 3 talks about choices on everything from telephones to hunting and owning guns to games and sports. It is followed by chapters on marriage and family, the young, work, church, discipline, and clothing. Hearing non-Amish voices in the book is very rare, although in chapter 10, "The World," Igou includes a letter to *Family Life* from Ronald V., who writes, in part:

Often, I asked questions about the Amish, but those I asked knew no more about you than I did....At this point I began to realize that I did not really want to know about you; I wanted to know you, a people who would voluntarily choose to become members of the Christian community....I learned of *Family Life*. Now I feel I understand what you believe in..." (178)



Igou concludes the book with chapters titled “Aging, Illness and Death,” “Controversies,” “People of Peace,” and “Odds and Ends.” Topics do not shy away from controversies. The subjects the Amish write about are real, the stories they tell are heartfelt, and the writers strongly believe their actions have eternal consequences. The passion of their beliefs will affect the reader. I found myself drawn into the stories: their concerns became my concerns, and their tears became my tears.

Is it possible to explain Amish beliefs in just a few paragraphs? In the first volume, Holmes County Amishman Monroe Beachy tells a story that may come close.

Some years ago, a group of fifty-two people chartered a bus and came to Holmes County to see the Amish. They had arranged to have an Amishman meet them and answer some of their questions.

For their first question, they began, “We all go to church,” and named some churches. “So we know about Jesus. But what does it mean to be Amish?”

The Amishman thought a bit, and then he asked a question of his own. “How many of you have television in your homes?” Fifty-two hands went up. “Now, how many of you feel that perhaps you would be better off without television in your homes?” Again, fifty-two hands went up. “All right. Now, how many of you are going to go home and get rid of your television?” Not one hand went up!

Now that is what it means to be Amish. As a church, if we see or experience something that is not good for us spiritually, we will discipline ourselves to do without.

The world in general does not know what it is to do without! (48)

In Their Own Words, as Igou subtitles his second volume, covers the years of *Family Life* writings from 1993 to 2020. It follows a similar layout to the first volume, with the book divided into 16 chapters instead of the 14 in the first volume. The combined material of both volumes gives the reader a broad understanding of Amish thought. The marginally interested reader could choose to only read one of the volumes and be reasonably informed without digesting the almost 500 pages of both volumes.

In the first two chapters of volume 2, Igou again defines, as in volume 1, what *Family Life* magazine is and how the Amish faith began. He uses different voices to tell the stories with new information, for the most part, that is not covered in the first volume. In one section of chapter 3, “Living in the Present,” a writer covers common sources of discontent, describing them as ailments, such as “green grass fever,” also known as “moving fever.” Other ailments include “money gripe,” and “spinal deficiency,” also known as “weak backbone disease.” The writer not only lays out the symptoms of these and other diseases, but also the cures. I love the writer’s use of humor to make a serious point.

Igou addresses issues of interest to all of us in chapters 4 through 11. The subjects include marriage and family, the young, work, church, discipline, clothing, the world, and aging, illness, and death. Some may think the Amish are static and do not change over time, but those who are

familiar with the Amish know this is not true. Careful readers of these volumes will notice that the writers in volume 2 struggle with new issues that were not present in the first volume, which covers an earlier time period.

The last 20 years have brought issues such as computers, cell phones, and, more recently, electric bikes into the forefront. Many Amish feel these technologies have the potential to destroy the very fabric of their society if not handled in a proper manner. Where may we compromise and where must we hold the line are questions every congregation struggles with. The reader gets to eavesdrop on the ongoing debate. How do I live in the world but not be of the world? “The World” chapter addresses such subtle issues as “the rush-rush syndrome,” “not a wholesome diet,” and “the throwaway spirit.” The Amish writers show their concern regarding inequality, the pollution of plastics, the domination of big business, and living and eating naturally in tune with the land.

Igou closes out the book with chapters titled “Controversies,” “People of Peace,” “Amish Humor,” “Odds and Ends,” and “Amish Parables.” I would be remiss if I didn’t mention the many poems that are scattered throughout the two volumes. Over the past 50 years, more than 1,400 poems were submitted to *Family Life* by just 14 prolific authors. Many will delight and inspire the reader.

In some chapters, Igou draws heavily from the writings of the staff of *Family Life*: David Wagler, Joseph Stoll, David Luthy, and Elmo Stoll. Some might prefer to hear more voices from Amish people not involved in publishing. To be fair, the staff are all Old Order Amish, very articulate writers, careful researchers, and represent the views of most of the Amish groups. Igou has done a good job in trying to balance the mix.

Overall, the two volumes are impressive in the number of topics covered and questions answered. Longtime readers of *Family Life* tend to be collectors of the magazine. I believe these two volumes would complement those collections. For others, the arrangement of the collection into a little over a dozen topics allows the reader to quickly hear Amish voices on subjects that we all wrestle with in our own family’s daily lives.