

IT'S NOT
ABOUT THE

Bonnet

THE APPEAL OF AMISH FICTION



by Adina Senft

“Is it really true that all you have to do is ‘put a bonnet on it’ to hit the bestseller list?” —Adina Senft

Since 1997, when Bethany House released Beverly Lewis’s *The Shunning*, women’s fiction novels set in the Amish world have enjoyed unprecedented popularity in the CBA (Christian Booksellers Association) market—and they’re filtering into the ABA (American Booksellers Association) market as well. Amish fiction has become its own subgenre, with separate and often preeminent listings on fiction sites such as Christianbook.com and Family Fiction. In 2009, 10 of the top 25 Christian books were Amish fiction. The *Wall Street Journal* reports that Lewis has sold 13.5 million copies of her books, and that author Wanda Brunstetter has sold more than five million. Sales reps are demanding more, and publishers are asking themselves, why are these books so popular? Is it really true that all they have to do is “put a bonnet on it” to hit the bestseller list? What attraction can a culture that forbids the use of electricity or cars, that requires strict standards of dress, and that insists on constant submission and obedience as a way of life, have for the modern female reader?

Several attractions, as it turns out—all of them markers of a larger literary tradition that has been drawing people to the countryside of imagination since ancient times: *pastoral fiction*.

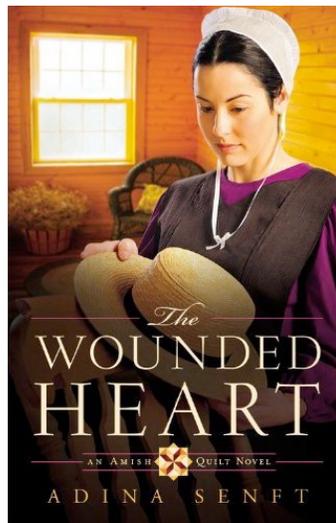
In an interview for ABC’s *Nightline*, author Cindy Woodsmall (*The Harvest of Grace*) said that the books “are rooted in faith, family and community. And people want that. They want to see it and feel it and understand it, especially in the downturn on the economy.” Readers are attracted to portrayals of a simpler way of life, to the absence of sex and violence, and—in a kind of tourism of the imagination—to the fact that they can learn about a culture that seems foreign to them even though it’s located in their own country.

Romance author Rosslyn Elliott (*Fairer Than Morning*), who holds a doctorate in nineteenth-century American literature, was one of the first to place popular Amish

fiction in the larger context of pastoral literature. “These novels do not comment on the world at large, nor do they paint social issues in a complex way,” she says on her blog. “In what I’ve read or skimmed (and I admit I’m no expert in the genre), the pastoral Christian values of the Amish are good, while the materialistic, technological world outside is bad. By [literary critic Leo] Marx’s definition, this is sentimental pastoralism: a simple dream of escape to while away a few hours.”

Pastoral fiction has been around for hundreds of years—Virgil, for instance, wrote about the shepherd in the meadow as an ideal escape from urban Rome. But after

Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* debuted in the 1600s, pastoral fiction began to develop a number of identifying motifs. Many of these motifs appear in Amish fiction, placing it neatly in the larger tradition and illuminating some of its appeal to readers. These motifs appear in the characters’ withdrawal from the world, in their innocent love, in lush descriptions of gardens and countryside, and in a well-researched backdrop showing the characters’ harmonious relationship with their more natural setting, as opposed to the busyness and strife of the urban world inhabited by the reader.



Christina Boys, senior editor at FaithWords/Center Street, agrees that the withdrawal from the world that the books offer is a big draw. “I don’t think it’s surprising that readers want to escape to a place that is real and contemporary, where none of those things [cell phones, 24-hour news] exist. What if you talked face to face with friends about something other than what you watched on television last night? What if your food was grown by you or locally by people you know well so you knew exactly what was in it? What if life was just simpler?”

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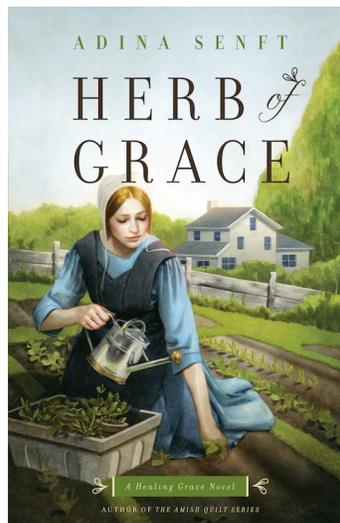
Of course, there’s nothing simple about doing laundry by hand in a wringer washer for a family of eight. Or in teaching a child under six to help in a dairy or a one-acre garden. But that’s not what Boys is referring to. She’s talking about the simplicity of the agrarian life with its well-understood roles, and in the Amish belief that work like this is done not only for the support of a family, but for personal fulfillment and the glory of God. In these books, everything an Amish woman does is related in some way to her faith, and the reader comes to Amish fiction to have her own faith validated. In talking to Publisher’s Weekly, Love Inspired senior editor Joan Marlow Golan commented, “The rate of change is so fast in today’s society that it creates anxiety, and the Amish remind us of the deeper values and what counts.”

Inspirational novels in general, and Amish fiction in particular, “celebrate the gynocentric values of generosity, healing, sharing, and love, which Christian women also traditionally espouse. In reading about the triumph of these values over evil, Christian women find affirmation for their beliefs. This affirmation results in an emotional response,” says critic Rebecca Kaye Barrett. The emotional response is more than just involvement in the characters’ love story, though. The reader comes to Christian fiction to be reminded of her belief that the love story of the hero and heroine reflects the love of Christ for His church. She wants to be involved in the characters’ spiritual realizations, to learn through the characters some facet of God’s plan, or to understand her own faith better. “Through their emotional response to characters,” Barrett continues, “readers participate in the emotional journey of the novel.”

This emotional journey of the characters contains both the faith arc and the romance arc. In Amish fiction, the latter is most often portrayed from a pastoral standpoint, meaning love is depicted as innocent. The culmination of the romance arc is often the moment of the first kiss. Some

novels only go as far as a touch on the hand; in my novel *The Wounded Heart*, this is the case:

But before he could reply, Matthew and Elam had opened the driver’s door and flung themselves, snowy boots and all, onto Eli’s lap, shouting their greetings. And somehow, when she moved even closer, his arms were long enough to fit around them all.



A female character taking off her prayer covering or even letting down her hair in front of a man to whom she’s not married can pack the punch of another novel’s full-length seduction scene. Readers of Amish fiction don’t come to these books looking for love scenes, though. The primary appeal here is in the element of safety found in the books.

This emphasis on safety does not mean nothing bad happens to the characters. As author Mary Ellis (*A Marriage for Meghan*) observes, “The Amish live their faith every day of their lives. I’m not saying that they never sin, or face doubts, or succumb to temptation. They keep their lives simple to reduce the ways they are tempted to sin.” Human nature being what it is, Amish fiction can deal with chronic disease, the aftermath of rape, or loss in death, just to name a few issues from recently published novels. But these events are presented in such a way that the focus is less on the event than on the character’s struggle with and eventual triumph over it, with the help of her family, her close-knit community, and her faith. It is this guarantee of a “safe read” that edifies even as it entertains that appeals to readers. On her blog, author Cecelia Dowdy asked several authors to join readers in a discussion on the appeal of Amish fiction. Responses ranged from a discussion of what “safe” entails—and a conclusion that it means your kids can pick up any of these books and read them—to the observation that the books are “clean” and “have a bit of history about the Amish.”

“Here are characters who consider family to be second in importance only to faith.” — Adina Senft

This “history,” or descriptions of their traditions, is another facet of the books’ appeal. Authors of Amish fiction make a point to carefully research their books. Cindy Woodsmall even has her novels vetted by an Old Order Amish woman for accuracy, as do I. Literary critic Ken Gelder says, “The romance genre often relies on well-researched historical detail and readers can be connected to it informationally as well as emotionally.” One of the hallmarks of pastoral fiction is a preoccupation with the rural community, which in Amish fiction translates to detailed and well-researched descriptions of customs, clothing, and food. Oh, the food! Old Order Amish author Linda Byler describes a meal from the point of view of her YA protagonist, Lizzie, who loves to eat:

That night at dinner, Mam was busy filling everyone’s plate with steaming chicken stew. Large chunks of chicken, white cubes of soft potatoes, orange carrots, peas, and slivers of onion and celery floated in a thick, creamy sauce. Specks of black pepper and little pieces of dark green parsley dotted the broth. Best of all, Lizzie thought, were the mounds of fluffy white dumplings on top. Mam plopped half of one on each plate, and then spooned gravy over it. Cold macaroni salad and thick slices of homemade bread with butter and peach jam completed their meal.

It’s not surprising that descriptions like this have become a trope in Amish fiction, making a reader tormented by fad diets and negative self-image swoon and gobble them up mentally, if not physically. But behind these luscious descriptions are several Amish traditions hard at work that the author must also take into account: a family eating together, everyone with a place at the table; a wife and daughters whose employment is in the home; and hours of labor in all kinds of weather to grow food for the family.

Modern readers may remember growing up in families where everyone sat down to a dinner that Mom had made. But in many homes today, Mom is running her own

business or working for a corporation, the kids are booked up with extracurricular activities or out with their friends, and dinner may just be pizza in front of the computer or TV. The only conversations that might occur are via text message. Is it any wonder that a reader might appreciate the nostalgia of a family dinner “the way it used to be” when she might view her own family as fragmented and out of her control? She may have never raised a vegetable from seed in her life, or made a pie from scratch, but that does not lessen her enjoyment in reading about women who have. In contrast to her hectic life, here are characters who consider family to be second in importance only to faith, and where each member of the family knows his or her role and its importance in the smooth operation of the household.



The clearly divided gender roles of the Amish community (where the man works in the outdoors and is the head of the household, and the woman keeps the home) do present one of the tensions for authors creating believable Amish fiction. How do you create a character that is unique and proactive in her story when that same woman wears her hair hidden under a prayer covering to convey her submission and obedience to authority? Feminist critics have already had a field day with the way romances supposedly support patriarchy. How does the writer handle a setting where “headship” (the medieval order of submission: God, Christ, the church, man, woman, child, animals) is strictly upheld?

In the plain house church where I grew up, there was a saying that the Amish also use: “The man may be the head of the household, but the woman is the neck that turns the head.” In many Amish novels, the heroine’s struggle may include an element of rebellion against authority or a wish to manage her own life, sometimes to the point where she will leave the church and try to live in the outside world. According to academic Pamela Regis, there are three basic assumptions that underlie a romance heroine’s actions: “affective individualism (acting for one’s

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own happiness), property rights for women, and companionate marriage (marrying for love).” Amish fiction locates another source of tension here: the fact that individualism goes against Amish teachings. An Amish child is brought up from birth to remember the acrostic JOY: Jesus first, others next, and yourself last. The community is always put first in decisions, from a simple “What will everyone think?” to the more serious “We have to go to the bishop about this.” To insist on one’s own needs before the wellbeing of the community is seen as selfishness.

This prioritizing of the individual, and in fact, the whole question of sexual politics, makes a tricky balance between creating an appealing heroine and showing Amish traditions honestly. Mennonite Studies scholar Michelle Thurlow says of Beverly Lewis’s fiction, “Although her most sympathetic hero[in]es never go out of their way to defy fathers, husbands and bishops out of sheer perversity and rebellion, these leading ladies do not always see eye to eye with their male authority figures and definitely struggle with submitting to them. Usually, these conflicts center on why the hero[ine] is proscribed from engaging in certain artistic activities (e.g., painting, singing), while the patriarch in question, as keeper of tradition, is reduced to stating firmly and without elaboration, ‘It is our way.’”

This kind of heroine, while popular with readers, is the product of the American mainstream culture’s admiration for the individual—artistic activities, of course, being the pinnacle of individual creativity. But the Amish feel that such pastimes draw attention to the individual, which is why they are frowned on. Author Linda Byler is one of a very few exceptions; though she is Old Order Amish, she was permitted by her bishop to write novels about Amish life because her husband was unable to support the family for medical reasons.

But despite these tensions for the writer, the appeal of Amish fiction for the reader is that the characters are close to God—closer, maybe, than the reader feels she herself might be. In pastoral fiction, characters do believe they are closer to God outside in nature, in this case a well-cared-for Amish farm, the landscape painted by an author in

which to place the reader. “The idea of the countryside as the appropriate site of the conversion experience is common to the Christian tradition,” says theorist Leo Marx. The author can bring her characters to such a natural location if she writes Amish fiction—a gardenlike landscape where everything planted is for the sustenance of the community, and where the very views of the fields and trees cause the characters to think of God’s provision. She can also create a location where the believing reader can imagine hearing God speak to her—a literary place providing, as Rebecca Kaye Barrett says, “comfort, relaxation, encouragement, challenges, and spiritual reassurance that, with faith, everything can turn out well for those who love the Lord.”

The popularity of Amish women’s fiction shows no signs of slowing down, and new authors are added to the shelves every month. Agent Wendy Lawton says, “We are seeing some Amish fusion these days—taking the distinctive Amish culture and juxtaposing it against a more modern theme. It offers fertile ground for conflict.” This is borne out by Amish suspense novels by authors like Marta Perry and Linda Castillo. Published not by CBA houses, but by secular houses like Berkley and Macmillan, they are being snapped up by secular readers interested in the unusual setting.

Pastoral fiction may have had its heyday in the 1700s and 1800s, but it still lives on in this literary byway of the ultramodern world, where contemporary women readers who want to spend some time in a well-tended garden of ideas and faith curl up for a couple of hours with a novel about Amish women. As Lawton says, “Readers long to be part of something honorable—a different culture that is somehow familiar and comforting. Simple faith, strong values, and the battle to keep materialism at bay—it’s not so different from what we all long for.” The plain truth is that what readers take from those hours has nothing to do with the bonnet on the cover—and everything to do with the comfort and relief that pastoral fiction has brought to the human imagination for centuries.

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Adina Senft grew up in a plain house church and was often asked if she was Amish. (The answer was no.) Writing as Shelley Bates, she was the winner of the RITA Award for Best Inspirational Novel in 2005, a finalist for that award in 2006, and, writing as Shelley Adina, was a Christy Award finalist in 2009. She holds an M.F.A. in Writing Popular Fiction from Seton Hill University in Pennsylvania, where she is adjunct faculty. Her first Amish novel, *The Wounded Heart*, launched her Amish Quilt trilogy from FaithWords in 2011, followed by the Healing Grace series in 2014, beginning with *Herb of Grace*. She is currently working on a new Amish novel, and has been called "the Jodi Picoult of Amish fiction."