
Barbie Stoltzfus

*Old Order Amish*

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today. That said, character development is somewhat uneven, and the sheer number of characters—some with follow-up on subsequent days, others permanently disappearing after their introduction—leaves the reader wondering whom he or she should follow closely. Then again, I recently heard the same critique leveled at Charles Dickinson’s books. I recommend researchers approach this book as a lay-level ethnographic study that could productively suggest research questions about changes in power, rhetoric, and institutions among the plain people.

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By Barbie Stoltzfus
Old Order Amish

This book is an accurate snapshot of the Amish lifestyle. It is almost uncanny how Stavisky picked up on the inner mechanisms of the lifestyle of the largest and most progressive Amish settlement in the United States. Stavisky portrayed the lifestyle with respect and, for the most part, truth. The simple fact that the Amish allowed Stavisky into their lives and homes speaks much about the author’s tact and poise.

Stavisky describes the typical Amish woman and her lifestyle well. The author takes us into their homes as they get ready for house church and prepare the traditional church meal of snitz pies. We grin in sympathy as an Amish grandmother frowns as her married daughter serves her guests watermelon instead of the traditional snitz pies. We gape with fascination as an Amish woman plants, then sweat with her as she corrals her seven children into helping with the hoeing and weeding. As she puts up hundreds of jars of canned goods using the pressure can method for meats raised on the property, and cold-water bath for fruits and vegetables, we sigh with relief when the last of the garden’s bounty is resting in sweet repose on the cellar’s shelves. As our Amish friend sews dresses, shirts, pants, and coats we wonder at her professional looking buttonholes and feel the satisfaction as the garment is ironed and hung in the closet waiting to be worn by one of her eight children. The oneness she has with her biological sisters and church sisters as they quilt or have workdays is felt deep in our hearts. The weight, as an Amish woman’s husband, ordained by lot, sacrifices much of his free time to study the Scriptures while his wife tries to keep their lively brood of eight quiet, bogs us down. The restraint required by a two-year-old while he sits quietly through the three-hour sermon amazes us.

The spotless house and large manicured yards suggest that Amish women like order and neatness. Even though our Amish friends shop at Costco, and many aren’t totally organic, they could outdo the crunchiest of crunchy granola moms. The Amish woman is oblivious to the fact that her achievements are Instagram-worthy because of the simple fact that she never heard of social media. And even if she had, she would be puzzled as to why you would want to post your ability to milk a cow, make yogurt, or bake bread, cookies and cakes, and effortlessly make mammoth amounts of granola, a known fact. All her friends and relatives, according to Stavisky, are equally talented. But as is typical in any culture, no matter how well studied, there are many mannerisms that will only be felt or noticed if you grew up in the culture. A good example of this is the photos in the book. They are outdated and not consistent with the way the Amish dressed in 2022 when the book was published. Not noticeable to mainstream so-
ciety, Amish have trends and many of the photos in the book were taken 25 years ago and do not remotely resemble today’s Amish dress. Stavisky’s assumption that artwork is not hung on the fridge as to not encourage pride, is incorrect. Artwork and small notes from children are displayed all over the house. Children are considered a gift of God and the family size is rarely discussed before a couple marries. Both assume there will be children, and lots of them. Therefore, artwork drawn by small hands is viewed the same way as the child, a miracle not to be ashamed of. Mirrors are not considered pridelful but a means of keeping yourself neat. As for Stavisky stating that the reason wall–to-wall carpeting is not used because it is worldly is laughable. Rather, who would consider such carpeting even remotely practical in a household of eleven or twelve people?

While Amish women are frugal, suggesting that they give gently used baby gifts makes them sound cheap. They take great delight in gift giving. The gifts are new or homemade. And the more progressive Amish woman, while she may hang her clothes out to dry, will not be using a wringer washer but rather a modern automatic washer powered by solar or battery. And the newer houses will have either granite or Corian countertops, a point Stavisky missed.

Stavisky debunked the myth that is portrayed on television that rumspringa [a term used less and less by the Amish themselves] is a time of wild parties. But she was incorrect about the late nights. Amish youth have curfews the same as the rest of the world.

Except for the few misconceptions I have noted, Stavisky’s book is a delightful portrait of a society of women that mystifies many. The author does a wonderful job showing her readers that while sameness and oneness are prevalent in Amish society, the women in this culture are individuals. She also helps us see that the Amish woman under her plain garb and quiet demeanor is neither less common nor more amazing than her neighbors of mainstream society. She is a woman living life the way she chooses, simple and quiet.

My name is Barbie Stoltzfus and having grown up Amish in Lancaster and still practicing the lifestyle I felt I was able to determine the accuracy of Stavisky’s book. I write short stories for magazines in the Amish community and am married to Elam Stoltzfus and the mother of five children. I have one son-in-law and one granddaughter named Laura Ingalls who I declare to be the best. While all stages of mothering are amazing, I do admit being partial to the middle-aged stage.

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Review by Byran Smucker
Miami University

My Brother’s Keeper is a book about race from a conservative Anabaptist point of view. The book, by Nathan Zook, has three parts: first, a brief history of racism; second, reflections on how the church should respond to issues of race; and third, exhortations for Christian responses to current racial issues. Personal anecdotes, as well as excerpts from interviews with ethnic minority Mennonites, are woven throughout and increase the book’s readability. Full disclosure: I count Dr. Zook as a friend.

The subtitle of this thin volume is Race Relations in Mennonite Perspective, and as someone who grew up within the conservative Mennonite community, I believe it is an apt description. As an example, throughout the book there is an assumption that discipleship is connected to particular lifestyle guidelines that are applied across a congregation. For instance, Zook warns that one danger in cross-racial ministry is watered-down discipleship (p.60-61), and it appears that, at least in this case, “church standards” are used interchangeably with discipleship. Another example of the (conservative) “Mennonite Perspective” is the way in which societal evil is to be opposed. Instead of direct confrontation and social action, Zook advocates a quiet approach that consistently