

Telling Tales Out of School: Scholars of Amish Life and the Tourist-Book Market

David L. Weaver-Zercher

Introduction

The production by scholars of Old Order Amish life of short, illustrated books and booklets aimed largely at tourists has characterized the field of Amish studies from its earliest days. Long before his first edition of *Amish Society* appeared in 1963, John A. Hostetler, the most prolific Amish studies scholar in the 20th century, published *Amish Life*, a 32-page booklet written for non-specialists that in its various editions sold nearly a million copies.¹ Hostetler's *Amish Life* had come out in 1952. In the fifteen years that followed, another university-trained sociologist, Elmer Lewis Smith, published three tourist books of his own, two of them general treatments of Amish life and one devoted largely to Amish bundling practices.² Such efforts continued through the 20th century and into the 21st, most recently with Donald B. Kraybill's *Simply Amish*, published in 2018 and subtitled "An Essential Guide from the Foremost Expert on Amish Life."³

This essay explores the propensity of scholars of Amish life to package information about Amish life into descriptive, tourist-oriented books. When did this practice begin? Why has it continued over the years? Who have been the primary players, and what stories about the Amish have they told along the way? Because these popularizing endeavors emerged in a particular context, I begin my consideration with a brief history of what I call the "Amish culture market." I then outline a case for popularization—five interrelated factors that compelled scholars of Amish life to enter the culture market—before finally,

¹ John A. Hostetler, *Amish Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1963); John A. Hostetler, *Amish Life* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1952).

² Elmer Lewis Smith and Melvin J. Horst, *Among the Amish* (Akron, PA: Applied Arts, 1959); Elmer L. Smith, *Bundling Among the Amish* (Akron, PA: Applied Arts, 1961); Elmer Lewis Smith and Melvin Horst, *The Amish* (Witmer, PA: Applied Arts, 1966).

³ Donald B. Kraybill, *Simply Amish: An Essential Guide from the Foremost Expert on Amish Life* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2018).

in the last section of this essay, outlining their “habits of popularization.” In many respects this essay is a defense of these popularizing efforts, which I consider a reasonable response to the cultural marketplace. At the same time I want to highlight the constraints, predilections, and compromises inherent in packaging Amish life for popular consumption. Taking one’s message to market inevitably shapes the story one tells, not simply altering the message’s breadth and depth but also modifying its contours and even its essence. At the very least these popular treatments have pushed beyond explaining Amish practices to offering a defense of these practices against critiques. In that respect, popular treatments of Amish life have tended toward apologies for the Amish lifestyle, a rhetorical approach that sets the stage for lesson-oriented sections that frequently conclude the works.

Some definitional clarity is in order. First, by “scholars of Amish life” I mean university-trained scholars who are not Amish themselves but have studied and written academic works on Amish or Mennonite life. Incidentally, these scholars have mostly been sociologists, though not exclusively so; they have mostly been Mennonites, but again not exclusively so. What links them together is their academic training, their scholarly productivity, and their determination to translate their expertise into the tourist book genre. Second, by “tourist books” I mean relatively short nonfiction books or booklets that, for purposes of the market, assume little or no knowledge about Amish life, are simply written, generously illustrated, attractively packaged, and free of footnotes. Of course, the publishers of tourist books are happy to sell them to anyone, including people who never leave their homes; in any case, the target market is ordinary people who want straightforward, accessible information about the Amish—and not too much of it. To narrow my scope even further, I will limit my analysis to tourist books published in the United States that seek to provide a general overview of Amish life, as opposed to those that focus on a single feature of Amish life, such as bundling, quilting, or the Pennsylvania Dutch language.

Before I begin, self-disclosure is also appropriate. First, as a scholar of Amish life, I have myself undertaken popular writing about the Amish, books and articles aimed at a readership that extends far beyond the academic community. Second, I have co-published books with Donald B. Kraybill, whose tourist books I explore in this essay and who, more importantly, I

consider a friend.⁴ Third, my spouse is a book editor at Herald Press, which has published many of the materials I consider below.

Scholars of Amish Life and the Amish Culture Market: A Short History

One hundred years ago, the Old Order Amish were not a renowned religious group, let alone a precious cultural commodity. Journalists produced occasional stories about them in the 1910s and 1920s, and a few local merchants produced Amish-themed postcards, but as a distinct cultural phenomenon, the Amish were largely ignored in the first third of the 20th century.⁵ This relative anonymity began to wane in the late 1930s, partly because of a conflict the Amish themselves incited. In 1937, a group of Amish leaders in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania sought to defend their communities' one-room schoolhouses against the forces of school consolidation. The conflict, covered by *The New York Times* and other national media outlets, awarded the Amish a new measure of attention and, in some circles, heightened esteem.⁶ Publishers and other merchants were quick to capitalize on this clash between the proponents of social progress and those who would preserve an icon of America's rural past. In 1939, for instance, a New York City publisher released Ella Maie Seyfert's children's book, *Little Amish Schoolhouse* that, with other popular publications, set the stage for a full-blown Amish culture industry to emerge in subsequent decades.⁷

The first book-length academic studies of Amish life appeared shortly thereafter. In 1942, Walter M. Kollmorgen, a researcher for the US Department of Agriculture, produced a 100-page study titled *Culture of a Contemporary Rural Community: The Old Order Amish of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania*.⁸

⁴ Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, and David L. Weaver-Zercher, *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007); and Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, and David L. Weaver-Zercher, *The Amish Way: Patient Faith in a Perilous World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

⁵ One example of this early journalism was Katherine Haviland Taylor, "Pennsylvania Dutch," *Travel*, June 1929, 10-11, 42.

⁶ See David Weaver-Zercher, *The Amish in the American Imagination* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2001), 60-78.

⁷ Ella Maie Seyfert, *Little Amish Schoolhouse* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1939).

⁸ Walter M. Kollmorgen, *Culture of a Contemporary Rural Community: The Old Order Amish of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania* (Washington, DC: US Department of Agriculture, 1942).

That same year, the Reformed minister Calvin George Bachman published *The Old Order Amish of Lancaster County*, a 294-page monograph published by the Pennsylvania German Society.⁹ These two works, both concerned with the persistence of Amish life in an age of assumed assimilation, anticipated the production of other full-length books: Elmer Lewis Smith's *The Amish People: Seventeenth-Century Tradition in Modern America* (1958); Smith's *The Amish Today: An Analysis of Their Beliefs, Behavior, and Contemporary Problems* (1961); William Schreiber's *Our Amish Neighbors* (1962); and John A. Hostetler's *Amish Society* (1963).¹⁰ All of these monographs had their strengths, but it was Hostetler's *Amish Society*, more than the others, that would become the standard reference work for decades to come.¹¹

Although Hostetler, who had grown up in an Amish family but opted not to join the Amish church, was not the first writer to perceive a market for an Amish-themed tourist book, he was the first university-trained scholar to produce one.¹² His publication of *Amish Life* in 1952, when he was three years into a graduate program in rural sociology at Pennsylvania State University, came at the urging of both his professors and his academically-minded

⁹ Calvin George Bachman, *The Old Order Amish of Lancaster County* (Norristown, PA: Pennsylvania German Society, 1942).

¹⁰ Elmer Lewis Smith, *The Amish People: Seventeenth-Century Tradition in Modern America* (New York: Exposition Press, 1958); Elmer Lewis Smith, *The Amish Today: An Analysis of Their Beliefs, Behavior, and Contemporary Problems* (Allentown, PA: Pennsylvania German Folklore Society, 1961); and William Schreiber, *Our Amish Neighbors* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1962). For a recent consideration of these works, see Joseph Donnermeyer, "Of Shoulders and Shadows: Selected Amish Scholarship before 1963," *Journal of Plain and Anabaptist Studies* 5, no. 2 (2017): 162-95.

¹¹ Published by Johns Hopkins University Press, *Amish Society* would eventually go through four editions (1963, 1968, 1980, 1993). For the dominance of *Amish Society* and Hostetler more generally, see Cory Anderson, "Seventy-Five Years of Amish Studies, 1942 to 2017: A Critical Review of Scholarship Trends (with an Extensive Bibliography)," *Journal of Plain and Anabaptist Studies* 5, no. 1 (2017):1-65.

¹² In 1937, Berenice Steinfeldt produced *The Amish of Lancaster County*, a 32-page booklet she and her father sold in and around Lancaster, Pennsylvania. In a related vein, Joseph W. Yoder published *Rosanna of the Amish* in 1940. *Rosanna* was not a tourist book *per se* but a book-length narrative based on his mother's life. See Berenice Steinfeldt, *The Amish of Lancaster County* (Lancaster, PA: Arthur G. Steinfeldt, 1937); Joseph W. Yoder, *Rosanna of the Amish* (Huntingdon, PA: Yoder Publishing Company, 1940); Julia Kasdorf, *Fixing Tradition: Joseph W. Yoder, Amish-American* (Telford, PA: Pandora Press, 2002), 137-65.

friends in the Mennonite Church.¹³ Reluctant at first—academics without tenure popularize their scholarship at their own risk—Hostetler eventually gave in to their advice. In an article published in the *Pennsylvania Dutchman* in 1951, one year before *Amish Life* appeared, he made a case for people like himself occupying exactly the right position for interpreting Amish life to the larger public. In his view, his dual identity—Amish farm boy, university-educated sociologist—helped him chart a safe route between the Scylla of “superficial interest” demonstrated by mainstream social scientists and the Charybdis of “idolization” demonstrated by untrained aficionados.¹⁴

Hostetler’s decision to write *Amish Life* had an adversarial impetus as well: the seemingly endless series of Pennsylvania Dutch-themed booklets produced by A. Monroe Aurand Jr. Beginning in the late 1920s, Aurand, who operated a bookstore in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, produced more than two dozen such booklets, which he eventually sold by the thousands to travelers along the Pennsylvania Turnpike. Although he cast his cultural net wider than the Amish *per se*, his Pennsylvania Dutch booklets (especially after 1937) often highlighted Amish people and their practices.¹⁵ Aurand showed a particular interest in bundling, a traditional courtship practice in which a courting couple enjoyed one another’s company in bed. This practice, more widespread in Amish communities in the 1940s than it is today, piqued the interest of outsiders, who found it curious that Amish church leaders would tolerate a practice so rife with sexual temptation. That Aurand would feature this phenomenon, link it to the Amish, and season it with salacious details irked Hostetler, who knew there was much more to Amish life than this.¹⁶

¹³ In unpublished reflections written in the 1990s, Hostetler recalled that the encouragement to write *Amish Life* came from Mennonites Guy Hershberger and Melvin Gingerich. See David L. Weaver-Zercher, “An Uneasy Calling: John A. Hostetler and the Work of Cultural Mediation,” in *Writing the Amish: The Worlds of John A. Hostetler*, ed. David L. Weaver-Zercher (University Park, PA: Penn State Univ. Press, 2005), 144 n72.

¹⁴ John A. Hostetler, “Toward a New Interpretation of Sectarian Life in America,” *Pennsylvania Dutchman* 3, no. 4 (1951): 1-2, 7.

¹⁵ For instance, Ammon Monroe Aurand Jr., *Little Known Facts about the Amish and the Mennonites: A Study of the Social Customs and Habits of Pennsylvania’s “Plain People”* (Harrisburg, PA: Aurand Press, 1938).

¹⁶ For example, in Mifflin County, Pennsylvania, where Hostetler was born, Aurand wrote that “unusual incidents” take place in Amish communities that require “a delicate touch in the retelling.” When pregnancy can no longer be denied, the young Amish woman appears

When Hostetler failed to get vendors to stop selling Aurand's booklets, he decided to enter the Amish culture market himself. *Amish Life* was the result.

Chances are good that Hostetler would have entered this market even if Aurand had never published anything. By the early 1950s, popular interest in the Amish was ascendant, as was the willingness of outsiders to offer their interpretations of Amish life, some more serious-minded than others. *Plain and Fancy*, a Broadway musical that followed a sprightly New York City couple as they explored Lancaster County's Amish region, debuted in 1955 to enthusiastic audiences and strong reviews. Amish Farm and House, the first Amish-themed tourist attraction in Lancaster County, opened that same year, paving the way for what became by the mid-1960s a thriving Amish-themed tourist industry. These entrepreneurs, drawing on a long tradition of cultural tourism, knew there was money to be made by selling information about exotic people, regardless of the information's accuracy. Not all these endeavors played fast and loose with Amish reality, but some clearly did. Perhaps more upsetting to Hostetler, many portrayals demonstrated a dismissive attitude toward Amish spiritual sensibilities. Even as he praised *Plain and Fancy's* theme song, "Plain We Live," as the "best statement of Amish credo coming from a secular source," he must have noticed that the musical's urban protagonists held deeper reserves of moral wisdom than did its boorish Amish patriarch.¹⁷

In the decade following the debut of *Amish Life*, Hostetler was joined by other scholars who used popular modes of expression to disseminate their own interpretations of Amish life. In contrast to Hostetler, who downplayed bundling in his *Amish Life* booklet, a Madison College (Virginia) social scientist, Elmer Lewis Smith, addressed the practice head-on with *Bundling Among the Amish*.¹⁸ Smith's goal was apparently to woo the same audience that Aurand had captured but then provide them with a more nuanced interpretation of bundling.¹⁹ In a similar fashion, Franklin & Marshall

before church leaders and confesses everything ("with whom, where, when, and under what circumstances"). A. Monroe Aurand Jr., *Bundling Prohibited!* (Harrisburg, PA: Aurand Press, 1928), 21-22.

¹⁷ John A. Hostetler, "Why Is Everybody Interested in the Pennsylvania Dutch?" *Christian Living*, August 1955, 8.

¹⁸ See footnote 2.

¹⁹ "Although we can question the wisdom of bundling among the Amish," Smith wrote, "there

College folklorist Alfred L. Shoemaker tried to capitalize on the marketing successes of others—Lancaster County tourism entrepreneurs—to provide an informed interpretation of Amish life. Shoemaker entered this market with *A Peek at the Amish* in 1954, but his most creative interpretive vehicle was the Dutch Harvest Frolic, a weeklong potpourri of lectures, demonstrations, and activities that debuted in Lancaster in 1961.²⁰ Much like Aurand in the 1920s and 1930s, Shoemaker was interested in a range of Pennsylvania Dutch groups and practices, but given the Amish's rising celebrity, he increasingly devoted his efforts to the Amish slice of Pennsylvania Dutch ethnic pie.

The popularizing efforts of these scholars—Hostetler, Shoemaker, Smith, and eventually Hostetler's protégé, Donald Kraybill—were both creative and effective at reaching wide audiences, but their work could scarcely keep pace with other endeavors that educated people about Amish life. By the late 1970s, three million tourists were flocking to Lancaster County annually, with other Amish-absorbed travelers heading to Holmes County, Ohio, and Elkhart County, Indiana. In each locale, tourists were greeted with a plethora of informational sources, from tour guides to films, and from “working farms” to glossy pamphlets. Not coincidentally, other entrepreneurial media began to pop up and multiply. In 1985, Paramount Pictures released the Amish-themed feature film *Witness*, a star-studded action flick that filled cinema seats from coast to coast and, in the course of two hours, introduced moviegoers to certain features of Lancaster County Amish life. Other Amish-themed movies and television shows would follow, including *Harvest of Fire*, which aired on CBS in 1996, and *For Richer or Poorer*, which debuted in theaters the following year. By the early 21st century, two other popular media—reality television and romance novels—had enfolded the Amish in their warm and lucrative embrace.²¹ Some reality

is little evidence to support the assumption that it results in sex delinquency [i.e., premarital sex], for their sex problems [i.e., out-of-wedlock pregnancies] seem fewer than experienced by our national population.” Smith, *Bundling Among the Amish*, 30.

²⁰ Alfred L. Shoemaker, *A Peek at the Amish* (Lancaster, PA: Pennsylvania Dutch Folklore Center, 1954). Shoemaker began his festival work in Kutztown, Pennsylvania, in 1950. In 1961, he organized a festival near Lancaster that, according to advance publicity, was “dedicated to the Plain Dutch,” that is, the Old Order Amish and other conservative Anabaptist groups. The festival drew nearly 100,000 people, but it lost money and was not repeated.

²¹ For an analysis of Amish romance novels, see Valerie Weaver-Zercher, *Thrill of the Chaste*:

offerings, most notably the Discovery Channel's "Amish Mafia," stretched reality to the breaking point, but they did exactly what their producers hoped they would do: they attracted wide audiences. Not unlike Aurand's booklets in the 1930s, they succeeded in shaping at least some people's perceptions of Amish life—and in rankling scholars who held accuracy and nuance in higher regard.²²

As with any quick survey of Amish-themed media in the 20th and 21st centuries, this sketch is incomplete, but it suffices to show that the dilemma Hostetler faced in 1950 only grew more complicated over time. In 1950, he could start with the relatively reasonable goal of stanching the flow of bad information (by convincing vendors to stop selling Aurand's booklets) and replacing it with something better (i.e., *his* books). No scholars of Amish life would be so optimistic today. Still, some continue to share Hostetler's conviction that shaping popular perceptions of Amish life is an integral part of their work. Producing tourist books continues to be one way to advance that objective.

The Case for Popularization

The case for scholars of Amish life to disseminate their ideas in popular media, including tourist books, cannot be separated from the foregoing contextual considerations. In particular, this case hinges on five interrelated factors.

First, *outsiders have long found the Amish both fascinating and confounding, a curiosity that made the emergence of an Amish culture industry practically inevitable.* Touristic forays through Amish regions date to the early years of the 20th century and, along with journalistic accounts that reported about Amish life, set the stage for commercial endeavors that burgeoned over time—from Aurand's booklets in the 1930s and Amish Country tourism in the 1960s, to *Witness* in the 1980s and Amish romance novels and reality television in the 2000s. Near the end of his life, Hostetler wondered if his scholarly output had contributed to the growth of the Amish

The Allure of Amish Roman Novels (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2013).

²² Marie Cusick, "A Growing Backlash Against 'Amish Exploitation' in Pennsylvania," National Public Radio, August 24, 2014; <https://www.npr.org/2014/08/24/342474911/a-growing-backlash-against-amish-exploitation-in-pennsylvania>; accessed January 31, 2019.

culture industry, but there is no reason to think that the commodification of the Amish was dependent on the work of Hostetler or any other scholar. To the contrary, America's free market, multiplied by its commitment to free speech, provides plenty of room to make money by telling other people's stories. In this environment, it was only a matter of time until an Amish culture industry would develop.

Second, *the Amish themselves have not been major players in this industry, refusing (for the most part) to explain themselves to the larger world.* There are exceptions to their informational reticence, to be sure, but these have been modest in scope, late in coming, or both.²³ One needs only to spend a day in Salt Lake City, Utah to see what is possible in terms of an exceptional religious group taking control of its own story and mediating it to outsiders. There are many reasons why the Amish have not gone the way of the Latter-Day Saints and their theatrical Temple Square, but for our purposes the reasons for this reticence are less important than the plain fact of it, which has created considerable space for others to enter the informational marketplace.

Third, *the chief aim of the Amish culture market is to produce representations of Amish life that sell, an objective that has sometimes run roughshod over other representational values such as close correspondence to reality.* Granted, many of these productions have demonstrated both accuracy and nuance, but many have not, and this deficiency has contributed to some scholars' willingness to enter the informational marketplace. This can be seen most clearly in the case of Hostetler, who produced *Amish Life* in direct response to Aurand's pamphleteering and later provided ameliorative commentary to a host of media outlets in response to *Witness*.²⁴ For Hostetler, allowing others to control the marketplace was to forsake his scholarly vocation, which was to advance people's understanding of Amish

²³ The most obvious exception to this is Herald Press's Plainspoken series, in which plain Anabaptists offer accounts of their lives. Two entries in this series are Loren Beachy, *Chasing the Amish Dream: My Life as a Young Amish Bachelor* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2014), and Marlene C. Miller, *Called to Be Amish: My Journey from Head Majorette to the Old Order* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2015).

²⁴ For instance, Dawn Clayton, "John Hostetler Bears Witness to Amish Culture and Calls the Movie *Witness* 'a Mockery,'" *People Weekly*, March 11, 1985, 64; and John A. Hostetler, "Marketing the Amish Soul," *Gospel Herald*, June 26, 1984, 452-53.

life.²⁵ Hostetler may be the most obvious example, but other scholars have felt similarly responsible to counter deficient portrayals of Amish life, especially when those portrayals can potentially reach wide audiences.

Fourth, *24/7 news coverage about everything, including events that affect real-life Amish people, means that opportunities abound for both good and bad information to circulate.* The cocaine trafficking arrests in 1998, the Nickel Mines Amish school shooting in 2006, and the strange case of Amish men forcibly cutting other men's beards in some Ohio Amish communities in 2011—each of these events was reported widely in the media. More significantly, each event raised questions that begged for answers. Do Amish young people buy and sell illegal drugs? Can Amish people forgive grievous wrongs in just a matter of minutes? Are there rival Amish groups that despise one another so much that they resort to violence? Journalists from many quarters sought to answer these questions, and although some did an excellent job, others missed the mark. Even the best journalistic accounts raised additional questions about Amish life, ones that scholars thought they could answer, even as they realized most people would not want to read long, dense academic treatises.

Finally, *the production of much popular literature, and especially tourist books, rests on the assumption that many consumers have short attention spans.* To be sure, there are many points along the reading spectrum between a five-hundred-page treatise and a tourist booklet; and there are many other media besides print by which people can learn about Amish culture. Nevertheless, there continues to be a market for explanatory books that can be stuffed into purses, backpacks, or glove compartments, and that can be read quickly or even on the run. Publishers of Amish romance novels have recognized this ongoing reality and have thus sought to enter the tourist book market themselves, sometimes drawing on their most popular authors to compose the text.²⁶ Still other publishers are looking to scholars to produce this sort of literature.

These five factors have convinced some Amish scholars to devote

²⁵ Hostetler, "An Amish Beginning," in Weaver-Zercher, ed., *Writing the Amish*, 32-35.

²⁶ For instance, Mindy Starns Clark, *Plain Answers About Amish Life* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2013); Richard Brunstetter and Wanda E. Brunstetter, *A Portrait of Amish Life* (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour Publishing, 2012).

themselves to producing popular works on Amish life. This endeavor is entirely reasonable to undertake if one is convinced that (a) ideas matter; (b) filling the minds of ordinary people with accurate information is a public good; and (c) one is well-positioned to produce that kind of information. This is not to deny that other motives, including public recognition and financial gain, may influence a scholar's decision to produce a popular work. Still, if scholars of Amish life are convinced that they have the ability to advance the public's understanding of Amish life, entering the tourist book marketplace makes more sense than standing on the sidelines and lamenting what they see.

That said, entering this marketplace comes with particular constraints. Putting one's ideas into an accessible form necessarily requires the sacrifice of nuance, a sacrifice that runs counter to the academic enterprise. In addition, people who seek to merchandise their ideas need to be attentive to consumer desires, a reality that can sometimes lead to other practices, tendencies, and even compromises. To these habits of popularization we now turn.

Habits of Popularization

By referring to "habits of popularization," I do not intend to be either prescriptive or pejorative. My intent is quite straightforward, namely to ask what representational practices characterize the tourist books produced by scholars during this period. These practices may ensue from an author's own sense of what it takes to capture the Amish culture market, or may emerge at the behest of the publisher, whose marketing staff may shape the product in ways the author did not conceive—and perhaps does not like. Indeed, authors who sign publishing contracts agree to relinquish some degree of control over the final product, a deal they strike on the assumption that their publishers can reach wider markets than they could reach themselves. For some authors this contractual relationship feels like a deal with the devil. For others it feels like a blessing from above. For most it feels like a combination of the two.

The first habit of popularization is *answering the questions about Amish life that ordinary people are asking* (or at least are perceived to be asking). In the original edition of *Amish Life*, Hostetler cast many section headings in the interrogative, posing questions such as "Are They Flush with

Money?” and “Do They Know World Affairs?”²⁷ Forty years later, Kraybill and his publisher titled his first tourist-oriented work *The Puzzles of Amish Life*, underscoring that it took seriously the questions of ordinary folk.²⁸ Taken as a whole, outsiders’ questions are legion, but tourists are most apt to be curious about what they see as they travel through Amish regions—horses and buggies, people in plain dress, farms and farming practices—topics that, along with courtship and marriage, appear almost without fail in tourist booklets.

Of course, some questions gain more prominence in certain eras than in others. In his early tourist book offerings, Hostetler devoted attention to bundling, a topic altogether absent in later tourist booklets.²⁹ As for *Rumspringa*, the period in Amish teenagers’ lives when they “run around” with other teens, early tourist booklets mention it only in passing, if at all, whereas later booklets, especially in the aftermath of the cocaine trafficking arrests of two Lancaster County Amish men in 1998, award it significant space.³⁰ Similarly, information about the forgiveness of evildoers appeared in these booklets only after the 2006 Amish school shooting in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, a horrific and internationally reported event that was followed by gestures of forgiveness from the local Amish community. In the case of Kraybill’s *Simply Amish*, published in 2018, a section on “Forgiveness at Nickel Mines” runs to nearly six pages.³¹

The second habit is *making Amish life visible*, an inherently challenging endeavor given the Amish aversion to being photographed. In some cases,

²⁷ Hostetler, *Amish Life* (1952), 13, 30.

²⁸ Donald B. Kraybill, *The Puzzles of Amish Life* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1990). Each of the book’s eighteen chapters are subtitled with a question, for instance, “Why are horses used to pull modern farm machinery?” (65).

²⁹ Compare Hostetler, *Amish Life* (1952), which devotes two pages to bundling, to Donald B. Kraybill, *The Amish: Why They Enchant Us* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003), which doesn’t address it at all.

³⁰ Compare Hostetler, *Amish Life* (1952) to John A. Hostetler, *The Amish*, 3rd ed., revised by Steven M. Nolt and Ann E. Hostetler (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2013). The latter work has an additional section titled “Becoming Adults” (30-31) that focuses on *Rumspringa*. See also Kraybill, *The Amish: Why They Enchant Us*, 21-24; and Donald B. Kraybill, *The Amish of Lancaster County* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Press, 2008), 42-44.

³¹ Kraybill, *Simply Amish*, 38-43; see also “Forgiveness and Peace,” in Hostetler, *Amish Life* 3rd ed., 46-48.

this aversion seems not to have troubled the booklets' producers. Both Shoemaker's *A Peek at the Amish* (1954) and Smith's *Among the Amish* (1959) were little more than photo essays, with the scholars providing captions or short paragraphs to accompany the images, many showing Amish people at close range. In Shoemaker's *Peek at the Amish*, the first nine pages are devoted to Amish dress, with fifteen close-up photographs by Charles Rice filling the 5.5 x 8.5-inch pages. For his part, Smith worked with photographer Melvin Horst to produce an 8.5 x 11-inch spread, advertised on the cover as "a pictorial presentation." Both booklets were produced in black-and-white, and neither offered any justification for photographing Amish subjects. Consumer interest in "the bearded and bonneted people" inhabiting an "American fairyland" was assumed to be justification enough.³²

Compared to both Shoemaker and Smith, the Amish-raised Hostetler took the Amish taboo against photography seriously. In the first edition of *Amish Life* (1952), nearly half of the images featuring Amish people were ink drawings, not photographs. Of the thirteen photographs that appeared in the thirty-two-page booklet, six were entirely devoid of human subjects, focusing instead on animals, farmsteads, and technology. Of the seven photographs that did include Amish people, only two included adults: one of a barn raising and one of a horse-drawn wagon, both taken so remotely that individuals are hard to identify. The other five human-subject photographs were photos of children: two candid shots showing children doing farm work, and three close-ups, clearly posed, including a cover photograph of Hostetler and his brother Jacob.

Here, then, we see the genesis of a representational ethic that some publishers and scholars would adopt in the years ahead: the determination that, despite the Amish taboo against posing for photographs, it was permissible to publish close-up photos of Amish children and teens. This halfway covenant had some basis in reality—Amish adults were more likely to avoid or even scold potential photographers than were Amish children—but in many ways it was more exploitive than snapping pictures of reluctant adults. In time, scholars and publishers would find other ways to justify using intimate Amish photographs, including the photographer's sensitivity to his

³² Smith, *Among the Amish*, 4 ("bearded and bonneted"); Shoemaker, *Peek at the Amish*, [3] ("fairyland").

or her subjects, the fact that a given photograph was already in circulation (it hadn't been taken for *this* particular book), or both. Of course, the ultimate reason for such photographic images was economic: consumers would more likely buy books that included such images than those that did not. Just as important from an economic standpoint, the Amish were known to abstain from filing lawsuits. Gaining permission from an Amish subject to publish a photograph may have been possible, and perhaps even ideal, but without the threat of lawsuits it was never really necessary. In sum, the Amish were—and remain—an easy target.

The third habit is *making Amish life appear rational, even defensible*. Many questions that these books seek to address are the why-questions of ordinary people, some of which carry implicit charges of irrationality, even hypocrisy. Why do the Amish ban telephones from their homes, a ban they do not apply to their barns or shops? In *Puzzles of Amish Life*, Kraybill suggests it is because overreliance on telephone talk would in time “remove conversation from the rich symbolism of face-to-face interaction.” More specifically, “body language, facial expression, and dress codes—all so important in Amish culture—would be stripped away in phone conversations.”³³ Why do the Amish refuse to own cars, even as they are happy to ride in them? In *Lessons for Living*, a trio of Amish scholars notes that cars “make people go in opposite directions, and by doing so, people spread out and no longer need neighbors.”³⁴ Answers such as these, clearly and confidently stated, do two correlated things. First, they conceal the simplest explanation behind a particular practice: because the Amish community have always done it that way, and defying a community tradition can be socially ruinous. Second, they suggest that Amish life operates according to a deep logic that many fail to see.³⁵

More than just giving rational explanations, however, tourist booklets are prone to suggest that the Amish approach to a given feature of life has

³³ Kraybill, *Puzzles of Amish Life*, 67.

³⁴ Joseph F. Donnermeyer, George M. Kreps, and Marty W. Kreps, *Lessons for Living: A Practical Approach to Daily Life from the Amish Community* (Walnut Creek, OH: Carlisle Press, 1999), 13.

³⁵ For a critique of this rational approach, see Michael S. Billig and Elam Zook, “The Functionalist Problem in Kraybill’s *Riddle of Amish Culture*,” *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies* 5, no. 1 (2017): 82-95.

more to offer than the standard American approach, the latter of which can thus be cast in a negative light. Take, for instance, the Amish practice of limiting personal dress options. What contemporary North American has not fretted over his or her wardrobe, wishing for more options to choose from? The Amish live free of that consumerist angst. In fact, community-imposed fashion restrictions make them freer than their faddish neighbors, whose limitless aspirations lead to becoming “arrogant, conceited, and self-destructive.”³⁶ As for the Amish rejection of modern technologies, readers are reminded that these technologies often have adverse effects on their users. Here again the Amish have wisdom to offer. “By restraining the trends toward large and costly machines,” wrote Hostetler in *Amish Life* (1983), the Amish have escaped “the disintegrating aspects of modern society—haste, waste, aimlessness, and violence.”³⁷

The fourth habit flows logically from the third: *urging readers to learn from the Amish and bend their lives in the Amish direction*. The lessons presented to readers vary widely, but include valuing “communal wisdom” over the will of the individual,³⁸ taking control of technology,³⁹ fostering personal, face-to-face relationships,⁴⁰ slowing down one’s pace of life,⁴¹ and placing more value on “self-reflection about who we are, why we are here, and where we are going.”⁴² These lessons almost always come near the end of the book, introduced by dramatic chapter titles or section headings, such as: “What Good Are They?” in Hostetler’s first edition of *Amish Life* (1952) and “Joys and Satisfactions,” in his revised edition of *Amish Life* (1981); “The Amish Challenge,” in the tri-authored *Lessons for Living* (1999); “Amish Wisdom,” in Kraybill’s *The Amish: Why They Enchant Us* (2003); and “Hope for the Future,” in Hostetler’s posthumously revised *Amish Life* (2013). In all

³⁶ Kraybill, *Simply Amish*, 92.

³⁷ Hostetler, *Amish Life* (1983), 15-16. Kraybill concurs: “In many ways [the Amish] are more thoughtful and cautious about the impact of technology on social interaction than many of the rest of us, who eagerly gobble up all the gadgetry that energizes our high tech society.” Kraybill, *Simply Amish*, 75. See also Hostetler, *The Amish*, 3rd ed., 51; and Donnermeyer, Kreps, and Kreps, *Lessons for Living*, 141.

³⁸ Kraybill, *The Amish: Why They Enchant Us*, 46.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴⁰ Hostetler, *The Amish*, 3rd ed., 52.

⁴¹ Donnermeyer, Kreps, and Kreps, *Lessons for Living*, 170.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 171.

these cases, scholars seek to remind readers that the Amish are more than a curious feature on the North American landscape, more than a people frozen in time. They are thoughtful critics of modern life, with reservoirs of wisdom that could benefit their less critical neighbors.

Conclusion

These four habits of popularization—answering readers’ most pressing questions about Amish life, making Amish life visible, making Amish life rational, and commending Amish wisdom—are not necessary to writing a tourist book on Amish life. In fact, Smith’s early contributions to this genre, *Among the Amish* (1959) and *The Amish* (1966), were descriptive but not apologetic, and rather than leading readers to consider the lessons the Amish had to offer, they concluded with sections on “An Amish Funeral” (1959) and “Death” (1966). While concluding a book on Amish life with a consideration of Amish death has a certain logic to it, in the scholar-produced tourist books produced since then, Amish death and dying have received relatively little attention and certainly do not provide the last word on Amish life. To the contrary, the last word has increasingly trended toward answering this question: How can the Amish help the rest of us lead more satisfying lives on this side of the grave? In this light, Hostetler was ahead of his time, concluding his first edition of *Amish Life*—published in 1952, just seven years after Hiroshima, at the dawn of the nuclear age—with an open-ended sermon, yet a sermon nonetheless: “Perhaps the modern hurried, worried, and fearful world could learn something from the Amish.”⁴³

Using the Amish to remedy non-Amish people’s lives comes with built-in drawbacks, even conundrums. How does one draw benefits from a comprehensive way of life without adopting that way of life *in toto*? How does one secure the blessings of a peculiar way of life while also avoiding its pitfalls? More to the point, how does one distinguish between what Kraybill generously calls “communal wisdom” and a communally sanctioned authoritarianism that quashes people’s spirits, the latter of which is cited in nearly every narrative written by people who left the Amish church?⁴⁴

⁴³ Hostetler, *Amish Life* (1952), 32.

⁴⁴ For one of many examples, see Saloma Miller Furlong, *Why I Left the Amish: A Memoir* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State Univ. Press, 2011).

Tourist booklets cannot begin to answer these questions in a few concluding paragraphs, and for this reason, it is fair to criticize the habit of celebrating “Amish wisdom” as a final, takeaway point. That said, cultural tourism has always been about the desires of tourists, who inevitably use the Other as a mirror by which to reflect on their own lives.⁴⁵ Although some Amish-themed tourist books abstain from that sort of reflection, most scholars who have spent time in Amish communities have become unsettled by what they have seen. As they have witnessed the ebb and flow of Amish daily living, they have also wondered about the patterns and assumptions of their own lives. In that sense, their musings about Amish wisdom are just as much autobiographical as sermonic. Indeed, when Hostetler wondered in 1952 about a “hurried, worried, and fearful world” learning from the Amish, he was thinking about more than a world with the recently acquired ability to blow itself up. He was also thinking about himself.

David L. Weaver-Zercher is Professor of American History at Messiah College in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania.

⁴⁵ For one consideration, see David Picard and Michael A. Di Giovine, ed., *Tourism and the Power of Otherness: Seductions of Difference* (Bristol, UK: Channel View Publications, 2014).