

Chaste romance: The lure of Amish fiction

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Calling someone nostalgic is an “affectionate insult at best,” Svetlana Boym has written, and few people appreciate the affection. Although the term has shed its medical connotations—it was first used in the late 17th century to describe the physical ailments of Swiss soldiers stationed in France and Italy—nostalgia remains an unwelcome diagnosis. (Nostalgia comes from *nostos*, meaning “return home,” and *algia*, meaning “longing.”) Viewed by many as “an ethical and aesthetic failure,” writes Boym, nostalgia usually evokes bathos and schmaltz. If memory is the respectable and even manly recollection of the past, nostalgia is its cloying cousin, the girl with the soppy smile.

So when an entire genre of fiction coalesces around plots, characters and settings that emerge straight from an imagined past, many have a hard time taking it seriously. Women selling jams and relishes, men with horse-drawn plows turning dark clods of soil, couples stealing chaste kisses behind the barn, families sitting down together for hand-mashed potatoes and three kinds of pie: these are the markers of Amish romance fiction, a subgenre that has astounded observers with its massive success and apparent staying power.

During 2012, a new Amish romance novel appeared on the market about every four days. The top three novelists of Amish fiction have sold a combined total of more than 24 million books, and a quarter of the titles on a recent Christian fiction best-seller list were Amish. Articles about Amish fiction have appeared in *Bloomberg Businessweek*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *USA Today* and *Salon*, to name a few. And like the Amish, who themselves are spawning new communities at an astounding rate, Amish fiction is calving new genres of Plain romance, including novels about Mennonites, Moravians, Puritans and the Amana colonies.

Beloved by many readers of Christian fiction, who enter their favorite authors' Facebook drawings for free books and quilts and trips to Lancaster County in Pennsylvania, Amish novels draw readers looking for a "clean read." Just as fervent as the fans are the critics, including one who suggests that the readers of the genre are "non-Amish religious women who somehow wish they could be even more repressed by a traditional Western religion than they already are."

I spoke with members of both camps—Amish fiction's loyal readers and its dedicated critics—in researching my book *Thrill of the Chaste: The Allure of Amish Romance Novels*. I corresponded with readers of Amish fiction, met with them over coffee, asked them to answer an informal survey and visited a book group that was discussing an Amish-themed novel. I lurked on Amish fiction discussion boards and Facebook pages and talked to authors of Amish fiction who relayed to me comments from their readers. I also spoke with literary agents, editors, marketers, booksellers and scholars. As I listened, I became convinced that the connection between Amish fiction and nostalgia is more complicated than it appears.

The eagerness with which a mostly female evangelical readership has embraced Amish novels is often regarded as evidence of disturbing nostalgia: a longing for a more wholly Christian, white, rural, patriarchal time and place. Others have suggested simply that evangelical women, weary of the hyperactive pace of life and the exigencies of a not yet recovered economy, enjoy traveling to an imagined location in which soccer leagues for four-year-olds and second incomes are unnecessary.

"These books take people out of the world of cell phones and being on 24-7," a marketing manager suggested to me. "The family gathers around the table for meals and they pray together and they go visiting and it's all family, family, family. For a lot of people, especially moms, they're saying 'Gee, that's the life I wish I

had.’” One reader I interviewed kept switching to past tense when talking about the Amish, and a Christian publishing insider told me that Amish fiction does well because, although most Amish novels are set in the present, they *feel* historical to readers: “We actually see Amish as a subgenre of historical, even though it’s contemporary, which is part of the reason it’s really thrived.” One literary agent told me that economic recessions often fund the popularity of nostalgia-driven genres, and it is true that in the two years after the Great Recession began, the production of Amish fiction titles doubled—and then doubled again.

Christian fiction is not the only expression of wistfulness. According to music writer Simon Reynolds in his book *Retromania*, pop culture has begun to double back on itself, becoming preoccupied with the artifacts, sounds and looks of the not-so-distant past. “Nostalgia is now thoroughly entwined with the consumer-entertainment complex,” Reynolds writes. In an April 2011 *New Yorker* piece, Adam Gopnik describes what he calls the “Golden Forty-Year Rule”: American popular culture hallows the trends of 40 years earlier. He attributes the four-decade nostalgia wave to the fact that much of the film, literature and music that make up popular culture are fashioned by fortysomethings, who have grown fond of the era in which they were conceived. The residents of the 1960s were enthralled with World War I and the *Titanic* and my peers are held rapt by *Mad Men*. “Forty years past is the potently fascinating time just as we arrived, when our parents were youthful and in love, the Edenic period preceding the fallen state recorded in our actual memories,” declares Gopnik.

Interestingly enough, the Amish fiction boom seems to confirm Gopnik’s rule. In a 2011 article in *Christianity Today*, historian Eric Miller posits that evangelical readers superimpose their own tradition’s story on top of the religious story of Amish protagonists. The authors of Amish fiction, Miller says, use the Amish as an “adequately alien, adequately familiar community to imaginatively work out persisting cultural and theological questions.” In Gopnik’s terms, writers and readers of Amish fiction, by reading about a separatist, world-rejecting community of faith, are returning to a simulacrum of 1960s conservative Protestantism. This was before the rise of the Moral Majority and the accrual of power and attention to evangelicalism during the 1970s and 1980s. In the 1960s, being an evangelical still meant feeling embattled by shifting societal mores and contributing to what James Davison Hunter calls the “strong subcultural infrastructure” of religious radio programs, Christian schooling and evangelical media. By reading about the Amish,

who remain set apart from the world more than most Christians, evangelical readers get to rehearse an earlier time in their own history, before their divorce rates approximated that of nonevangelicals and before prominence had bred acculturation.

Most readers of Amish fiction are not descendants of the Amish, of course, just as most Americans didn't have dads anything like Don Draper. Nor do the Amish dwell in some prelapsarian paradise—as most readers are well aware. But an imagined homeland need resemble an actual one only a little; nostalgia is, in the words of Boym, the “longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed.” Thus, many evangelical Christians articulate a vague sense that the Amish are spiritual forebears of a sort: living ancestors who have somehow survived into the 21st century. “The Amish kind of remind me of when I was a kid,” one reader told me. “Our life was much simpler. . . . Amish fiction is like we used to live, and we've kind of marched on and left all that behind. So it's kind of nice to go back.”

The notion that we all used to be Amish, and that the Amish story is really *our* story, is problematic at best, and we should not dismiss too quickly the dangers of appropriating another culture or religious group's narrative. But exploring issues of appropriation goes beyond the purview of this piece. What remains is to consider whether the nostalgia fueling the Amish fiction craze is mere dysfunctional retreat, or whether it might provide what sociologist Janelle Wilson calls a “sanctuary of meaning”: a place from which readers can imagine alternative values and practices.

Do Katie Lapp and Rhoda Byler and Sarah Beachy and all the other protagonists in Amish fiction usher readers into a past-focused trance, or might these heroines collectively inspire readers to envision a different future—one that is a little freer from the reign of technology, the ever-expanding demands of consumption and the primacy of the self? Might Christian nostalgia, wrapped in a cape dress and sealed with a kiss, have anything to do with the future?

Offering one definitive answer to those questions would be too simple. The meanings of texts are as multiple and unique as the readers who construct them. Some readers of Amish fiction may put their love of the genre to work in raising the barn of an imagined, whitewashed Christian past, in which virtue looks a lot like patriarchy and godliness a lot like parochialism. Others may use Amish fiction as a tool to hammer out a countercultural vision of community, simplicity and pacifism, a disciplined, embodied faith. Generalizing about either scenario is not helpful. But for

observers who may be tempted to write off Amish novels as pious formula fiction, it's important to note the constructive possibilities inherent in nostalgia.

Recognizing that scripture is infused with nostalgia is one step in this direction. From the backward glance of Lot's wife (Gen. 19), to the homesick Hebrew exiles hanging their harps on willows (Ps. 137), to Jesus' longing that Jerusalem would be the city of peace that it had once been (Luke 19:42), the Bible is full of the bittersweet memory of places and times to which characters cannot return. Yet Zion is both departure point and destination, and in some ways we only recognize the latter by remembering the former. Nostalgia can thus serve as a guiding force—a generative impulse that has as much to do with the future as with the past. Recalling our former home helps us to locate our eternal one. *This world is not my home, I'm just passing through* need not be mere escapist fantasy; it can also serve as a declaration of independence from the manifold gods of the contemporary age.

Boym acknowledges this sturdier version of nostalgia. Nostalgia frequently glances "sideways," Boym writes, rather than backward to the past: sideways, in this case, to the Amish, who exist somewhere in our peripheral vision rather than in memory. The notion that the Amish are *still* living this way, the way that many people think "we used to live," as one reader told me, means that the Amish—at least the fictional ones—have escaped both the advances and declines of the modern world. Janelle Wilson writes, "When so many threats and obstacles to constructing a coherent, consistent self abound, the acts of remembering, recalling, reminiscing, and the corollary emotion of nostalgia may facilitate the kind of coherence, consistency, and sense of identity that each of us so desperately needs." She quotes communication theorist Roger Aden, who has written that nostalgia can provide individuals with a "secure place of resistance."

Claiming that Amish fiction is a literature of resistance would be farfetched, but it would be just as wrong to claim that it is only caked in sentimentality. In my interviews with readers of Amish fiction, many shared with me the sense that they were being changed for the better by their reading. One reader told me that as a result of reading Amish novels, she is trying "not to purchase items just for the sake of purchasing them." Another reader posted on an Amish fiction discussion website, "Other than the Bible, the Amish books have changed my life more than any other books. I am now more aware of keeping life simple, of putting family and community high priority, relishing the simple in what I buy, etc."

One college-aged reader liked how the genre confirms her own antipathy toward videogames and other digital distractions, and several other readers mentioned that Amish fiction inspires them to hold onto many of the practices they see slipping away from contemporary life: eating together as a family, caring for one's neighbors, prioritizing one's local congregation, resisting the urge to buy every new gadget, choosing to forgive. These and other readers are finding in Amish fiction a "sanctuary of meaning," as Wilson calls it: a safe place from which to name the costs of technological progress and the lies of consumer capitalism and from which to imagine an alternative.

Such nostalgia is roomy enough to contain the past and the future. Indeed, the happy endings of Amish romance novels demonstrate the eschatological potential of this much-maligned emotion. Historian Lynn Neal, in her book *Romancing God*, suggests that although critics often see the uniformly happy endings of evangelical romance novels as evidence of "naive optimism, a childish fantasy," they actually offer "a theology of hope and perseverance." Another critic suggests that romance novels are "narrative eschatology": stories about how to get to an "eschaton of love, completion, fulfillment, happiness, generational continuity, maturity, and hope."

So rather than discounting the readers of Amish fiction as nostalgics pining for an idealized past, we might listen to the meaning that they are making and the type of longing that flavors their words. It is possible that Amish romance novels are helping many readers imagine a sideways route to happiness. "We should perhaps not too quickly discount the idealized images of the Amish that pervade mainstream culture," historian Paul Boyer once wrote. "As Thoreau argued, it is good for societies to think about alternative social models, even if the process involves distortions and misperceptions."

Thinking about an alternative social model and *constructing* one are two radically different things, and no evidence suggests that Amish fiction readers are en masse setting about revising cultural codes or establishing countercultural communities. But my conversations with readers suggest that many are doing more than pining for some mist-shrouded past; they are envisioning an alternate future for themselves and their families and their churches.

Boym's declaration that we moderns are "nostalgic for a time when we were not nostalgic" is certainly true. But Christian readers, whether or not we care for Amish romance fiction, also long for a time when we *will no longer be* nostalgic. Actual Amish life may resemble Zion only a little, but fictional Amish life is close enough to

nurture in many readers a yearning not only for the Old Order but for the order of things to come.