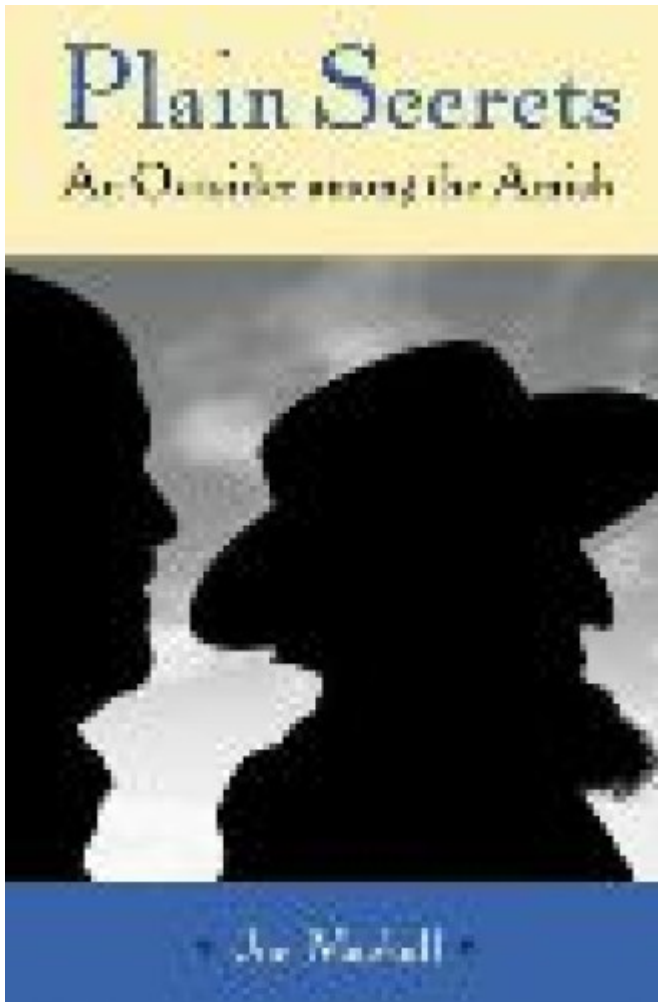


Plain Secrets

reviewed by [Levi Miller](#) in the [August 7, 2007](#) issue

In Review



Plain Secrets: An Outsider Among the Amish

Joe Mackall
Beacon

Last summer I visited the elderly Amish bishop of the church district where my parents were members when I was a child. I took the bishop to visit a few relatives

of his in the Holmes County, Ohio, community. But the main person the bishop wanted to visit was an “English” (that is, non-Amish) bank employee he knew well in the neighboring town of Millersburg. That he greeted her with a hug struck me as unusual, but that he had an English friend did not; Amish people often have a non-Amish friend or two.

Author Joe Mackall lived next to an Amish family in Ashland County, Ohio, for 16 years, and becoming friends with them was not unusual. However, that he wrote about this Swartzentruber Amish family is unusual, even singular. Of the various Amish groups, the Swartzentrubers are especially withdrawn, tightly knit and suspicious of the outside world. They are also the most traditional regarding farming, technology, adornment of buggies, family size and contact with the outside world.

The friendship began when Mackall drove his Amish neighbor to Ontario so the neighbor could attend his mother’s funeral. The rest of the book is the story of a longstanding relationship. Mackall describes the details of family, farming and church life with sympathy, accuracy and good will. Where he lacked personal information, he sought help from scholars and other reliable informants. His particularistic description of one family is a welcome addition to what has often been a sociological literature.

One reason the book is so enjoyable is that Mackall, an experienced writer and editor at nearby Ashland University, freely enters into the story, giving his own feelings and opinions regarding the Swartzentrubers. He goes to them for spiritual consolation and appreciates their close community, their caring for each other and their farming. At the same time he criticizes their disregard for safety with their buggies and their lack of personal freedom. A second story running alongside the Amish family’s story is the tale of a young Amish teen’s struggle to leave the Swartzentruber community and join the English. This is no easy project, and Mackall expresses his inner conflict over what he would do if a daughter from the neighboring Amish family should come to the Mackall family to seek assistance in fleeing.

Mackall is generous in describing the Swartzentrubers’ particularism and Amish provincialism, but he feels no need to exercise such generosity when writing about the Swartzentrubers’ non-Amish neighbors. He describes them variously as people who are insincere in their religious beliefs and as rednecks and corn-fed country

boys who drive pickups (too fast), patronize the local auto race track and make fun of the Amish. Early on we visit a bloody Amish hog butchering, but we are assured that the scene is not as toxic or barbaric as what goes on in a meat-processing plant. The contrast seems overdone: the book reveals that the same freedoms that allow some small-town Americans to be the way they are also allow the Swartzentrubers to be Swartzentrubers. And when it comes to their views of property, their ethnic prejudices, their religious beliefs and their buying habits, the Swartzentrubers may have more in common with their English neighbors than with the affluent, religiously inclusive people who are likely to buy Mackall's book or read the Christian Century.

For all their traditionalism, the Swartzentrubers are quite a mobile group, moving from one state to another. Currently there are Swartzentrubers living in a dozen states and Ontario. Part of the conflict in the young Amish family Mackall writes about concerns whether to move west to more isolated territory or to stay put in Ashland County. And then there's the writing of the book itself. It is not clear whether this Amish husband and wife quite understood the full meaning of offering so much inside information on their family and their private church for publication in a book. To his credit, Mackall agonizes over this dilemma up until his last sentence. Still, one suspects that after the book is published, the family will have one more reason to move out of the community.