

The Amish in the American Imagination, by David Weaver-Zercher

reviewed by [Daniel Born](#) in the [June 14, 2003](#) issue

In the most vivid of all Amish urban legends, three bonneted women from Lancaster County enter the elevator of a New York City skyscraper. Just before the doors close, a huge black man, accompanied by a Doberman straining at the end of a leash, boards the elevator with them and in a commanding tone says a single word: "Sit!" Without hesitation the Amish women collapse on the floor at his feet. Later that same day in a midtown restaurant the women finish their lunch and prepare to pay their bill. The waiter comes over and says, pointing at another table, "Ladies, put your money away. Reggie Jackson just picked up your tab." They turn around to look and see that the big man with the Doberman is smiling in their direction.

Although this story doesn't appear in David Weaver-Zercher's new book on the Amish in American culture, it is precisely this sort of popular mediation of the plain people that interests Weaver-Zercher, an assistant professor of American religious history at Messiah College. He is not so much concerned with describing how the Amish came to be or who they are in belief and practice as with how they have been represented. A dutiful cultural critic, he has scoured the American media for the images that have come to us through romance novels, children's literature, Hollywood films, kitschy Lancaster County tourist brochures, the words and pictures found on food labels and the music videos of Weird Al Yankovich.

As the author explains, "unlike [in] other scholarly treatments of Amish life, the main characters in this study are not the Amish themselves, but rather outsiders who, for various reasons, took it upon themselves to represent the Amish to other Americans." In their attempts to show the Amish to a wider audience, those "outsiders" have demonstrated attitudes toward their subject ranging from snooty condescension and contempt all the way to admiration and nostalgic sentimentality. Depending on the outsider's bias, the Amish have been perceived as everything

from dolts and perverts to pure and noble rustics, as wayward sectarians out of touch with the Radical Reformation that set their course, to the noblest specimens of American simplicity and virtue. Weaver-Zercher's efforts to show how the Amish have functioned in what he calls "the American imagination" deliver multiple impressions.

Readers wanting to find out the details of the late-17th-century split of Jacob Ammann's followers from the larger Swiss Mennonite community will probably want to go elsewhere for enlightenment, though Weaver-Zercher sketches the outline of those early developments in four workmanlike pages. On the other hand, those who are curious about the debates that surrounded the production of the blockbuster film *Witness* (1985)--starring Harrison Ford as a hardboiled Philadelphia detective who falls for the voluptuous Amish widow Rachel Lapp (Kelly McGillis)--will find Weaver-Zercher's study useful and entertaining.

Not the least of this book's fine qualities is its abiding good humor. The author devotes attention, for instance, to the subject of "bundling," a mysterious Amish courtship custom which independent scholar Ammon Aurand documented in a series of pamphlets during the 1920s and 1930s. Weaver-Zercher describes the practice as one "in which lovers lay in bed together fully clothed (or, depending on the story at hand, not so fully clothed). Never hesitant to repeat himself, Aurand published six different booklets on bundling, asserting in each of them that the Pennsylvania Dutch were America's most enthusiastic bundlers." One of Aurand's publications shows a frontispiece illustration of a young couple in bed, separated by "The Old-Fashioned Center-Board," while an older couple looks on approvingly. Aurand's caption reads, "The Pennsylvania Germans invented all kinds of ways and means to get the courting couples together--and all kinds of knick-knacks to keep them apart when they got together!"

This kind of work disturbed more sober commentators on the Amish, including Mennonite sociologist John Hostetler, who railed against Aurand's writing as "foul, filthy and obscene." The fact is, as Weaver-Zercher documents, interpreters of the Amish to the wider culture have generally fought among themselves as to who most accurately describes the plain people. (The author also shows how claims to descriptive objectivity and advocacy and successful commercial ventures are frequently difficult to keep separate in the practical realm.) These cultural brokers are also apt to question each other's motives. When Hostetler accused Paramount Studios of exploiting the Amish for financial gain in making *Witness*, director Peter

Weir duly noted "that, as a writer, Hostetler also made money off the Amish."

Weaver-Zercher scores his most telling points when he describes how Amish culture has been commodified. The two most commercially successful artistic interpretations of the Amish, the Broadway hit *Plain and Fancy* (1955) and *Witness*, both romanticize Amish simplicity and community-barn-raising set pieces dominate both works, a three-minute foot-stomping extravaganza in *Plain and Fancy*, a visual feast in *Witness* set to a lush, soaring soundtrack. But both works' larger message is that the moral framework of the Amish is inadequate to the complexities of modern life.

In *Plain and Fancy* shunning comes across as an unreflective practice needing to be reformed. The violent behavior of the shunned man, Peter Reber, turns out to have been warranted because he was protecting a woman from an Amish sexual predator. *Witness* respects the nonviolent culture of the Amish but makes it altogether clear that justice can be done only when detective John Book gets hold of a shotgun and dispatches the evildoers who have invaded the Edenic Amish paradise.

Weaver-Zercher's book renews wonder on two counts: at the resilience of the Amish in resisting conformity to their surrounding culture, and at the insatiable American appetite to find, and then assimilate for its own purposes, religious and cultural exoticism in every form.