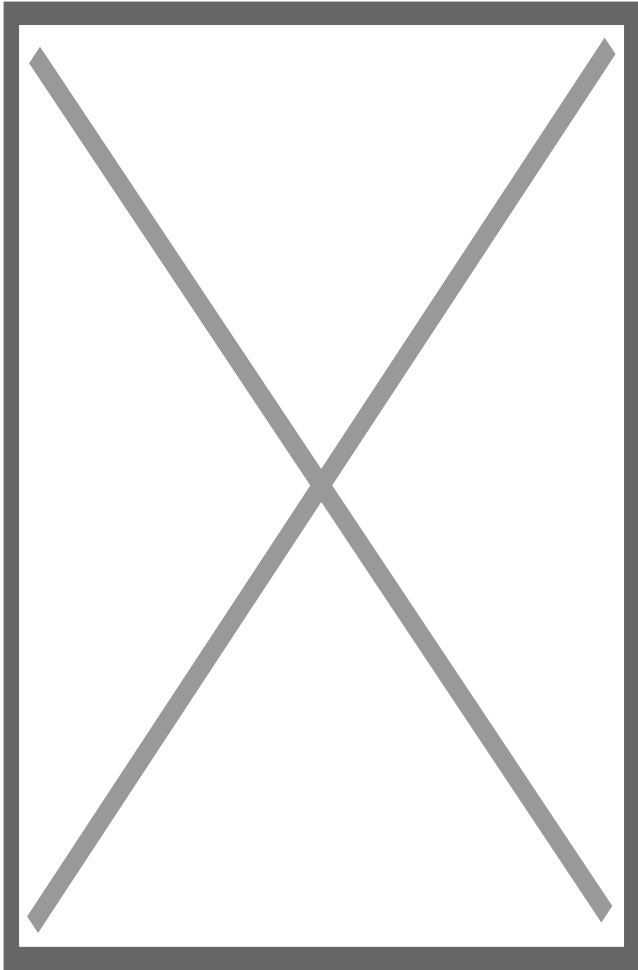


Does This Church Make Me Look Fat? by Rhoda Janzen

reviewed by [Shirley Hershey Showalter](#) in the [October 17, 2012](#) issue

In Review



Does This Church Make Me Look Fat?

By Rhoda Janzen
Grand Central

"Isn't that an off-brand religion?" One of my son's soon-to-be-relatives asked this question when he was introduced as having grown up in a Mennonite family.

If Mennonites are off-brand to many Americans, then Pentecostals might be known as firebrands. The average person knows very little about either faith. Rhoda Janzen, who has moved from the former to the latter, brings awareness to both by chronicling her sometimes calamitous, sometimes hilarious and now mystical experiences of the past five years, as seen in the context of her 48-year spiritual journey.

Janzen landed at the number one spot on the *New York Times* best-seller list with her first memoir, *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress*. She begins her second memoir, *Does This Church Make Me Look Fat?*, by recapping some of the plot details from the first book: a divorce and an auto accident followed by a four-month recuperation visit to her Mennonite family in Fresno, California, after she had “fallen away” from that faith for many years. By the end of her first memoir she had returned to the dating scene, and the reader met, among others, Mitch, an unlikely suitor sporting a large Jesus nail around his neck.

She married him.

And thus life, which threw so many curveballs Janzen’s way in memoir number one, provided enough stranger-than-fiction opportunities for a second book.

Mitch comes as a package with his octogenarian father and teenage son, both of whom live in the house that became Janzen’s home when she married Mitch and moved into the basement level with him and his son, Leroy. With her usual droll wit, the author shows us the eccentricities of the house and family in everything from the plumbing to the wild geese wallpaper.

Four months after she started dating Mitch, Janzen got the bad news that she had breast cancer, that it had invaded her lymph nodes and that she would need chemotherapy and a double mastectomy. Instead of ending her relationship to Mitch, the disease brought the two of them closer together; they were determined to love whether their time be short or long. Mitch declared himself to be just the man for the job of caretaker and supporter and proved himself over and over again. In contrast to her skepticism, he brought belief; to her metaphorical imagination, a focus on the concrete. Alongside her inimitable style, he offered no style; and to her finely honed gifts of teaching and leading, he added the paths of listening and learning.

It will be interesting to see how fans of the first memoir react to the second. Given the gravity of the subjects—cancer and religious conversion—Janzen gave herself an enormous challenge. Could she maintain her hallmark comic voice in the midst of suffering and transformation? The answer is yes, and that is no small accomplishment. Throughout the ordeal of chemo, Janzen sang a serene, slightly offbeat song, even laughing at death itself. She named the metallic body odor from the Taxol phase of her treatment “Come Maggots.” When she acquired a New Age–inspired visualization CD that suggested imagining “tiny beings” within a healing fountain, Janzen quipped, “It’s very satisfying to sing ‘Tiny Beings’ to the tune of ‘Tiny Bubbles’ in the style of the late Ambassador of Aloha, Don Ho.”

Given the difficulty of combining serious subjects with a comic tone that ranges from irony to fantasy to parody, the reader should not expect to find all the humor uproariously funny. For me, Janzen’s humor works best when she is establishing character through playful dialog. Just when the reader is wondering how a college professor and a “Jesus-nail-necklace wearing manly man” have enough in common for the long haul, we get to eavesdrop on one of their bits of banter, and we know the queenly quipper has met her match.

In the midst of giving his father a haircut, Mitch adapted the serenity prayer: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the Hitler haircuts I cannot change, and the wisdom to know what I *can* change. And the courage to know the difference.” In response, Janzen declared that she herself had the courage to change the wild geese wallpaper she hated in their basement apartment.

“‘O Lord,’ teased Mitch above the high whine of the clippers. ‘Make me an instrument of thy geese!’”

Critics and blurb writers have compared Janzen to Anne Lamott, whose combination of genuine religious search and sarcastic tone brought a fresh, irreverent approach to the spiritual memoir. This book, however, reminds me more of Mary Karr’s *Lit*, which details both Karr’s struggle to overcome alcoholism and her conversion to

Catholicism. Karr offended some of her secular audience by standing up for a church. Janzen will perhaps disappoint some readers with what they may well see as a too-easy conversion to another crazy religion.

On the other hand, some of the epiphanies about the greater importance of loving than of being right, the value of sexual abstinence in the right context, and the abundant blessings that come from tithing will amuse some of her elders in the Christian faith. These lessons are not exactly new or unfamiliar.

But what makes a memoir great is the honesty to claim what has been right in front of oneself all along. Only when we are ready for truth to sink in can it become our own. The excitement of discovery is palpable in this book. My guess is that while some readers will walk away, others will be attracted—and at a deep level.

As a Mennonite working on my own memoir, I've taken a keen interest in Janzen's work. When I reviewed *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress* on my blog, I concluded, "Here is my wish for her future: may she borrow more of her mother's kindness and a tad more of her father's integrity—without losing an ounce of her own wonderful chutzpah. And may she turn a forgiving but clear-eyed focus on her true antagonist, herself."

I give Janzen an A for fulfilling these wishes in her second memoir. And since I hope for more memoirs from her, let me offer another wish: that she write a childhood memoir as seen from the point of view of her current adult self. A humorist has many selves and knows when to use which one. I often wonder which Rhoda Janzen is speaking—the stylish sophisticate, the scholar, the piercing perceiver, the grammar girl, the lover, the audacious rebel, the chastened convert or yet another self. She has used a Mennonite childhood as a dialectical plot device, as the thesis to Pentecostalism's antithesis, and we still await the synthesis. Memoir number three would be the right opportunity for that.