Writing about the Amish without romance

“I tried to remember that these are human beings, not caricatures.”

Elizabeth Palmer interviews David Williams

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David Williams. Photo by Joseph LeBlanc.

Read the main article, Valerie Weaver-Zercher's review of Williams's book.

David Williams is the author of When the English Fall*, a novel that portrays the relationships between an Amish community and their neighbors after a solar storm destroys technology. Williams is pastor of Poolesville Presbyterian Church in Maryland. His blog Beloved Spear is part of the CCblogs network.*

What are the connections between apocalypse and Amish culture?

An authentic Christian apocalyptic worldview isn't primarily about some great looming cataclysm. In the Greek, apocalypse means "unveiling," a casting aside of the accretions and shadows of culture as we encounter the deeper truths of God's intent for us. The Amish, I would suggest, are a community that take seriously the "now" of apocalyptically shaped identity—not as a far-off thing but as something that needs to express itself in the present. The intentionally alternate economy the Amish create is their effort to manifest that immediacy as a faith community. Or to put that another way, the Amish are *already* living after the apocalypse.

How much do you see technology as corrupting, a form of hubris, or a challenge to faith?

Much more than I did before this last election cycle, frankly. The ease with which social media have become places where truth and falsehood are on the same level freaks me out a little bit. I'm also troubled by how technology, which offers us a choking cornucopia of overabundance, has left so many people without a sense of purpose and belonging. The ever-evolving tools we create are powerful, and they're not inherently evil. But they seem to have gotten away from us.

The novel's plotline hinges on the non-Amish characters suffering deeply when technology is destroyed. Who or what is to blame for the violence that ensues? What is the role of sin in this narrative?

We human beings are to blame, particularly our assumption that the implements and structures of violence are any sort of protection. The reliance on power over others as a source of security stands at the heart of most human systems, which lean on the sword of the state or the roar of the mob to control. That hunger for "power over" is the heart of sin.

In portraying the Amish as the ones equipped—technically, morally, and theologically—to survive the apocalypse, the book could be viewed as an endorsement of a Benedict option. That is, it suggests that thick local communities of Christian practice are the ones that endure the dangers of modernity. Is that part of your interest here?

Yes, that is part of my interest. I did my doctoral work on the dynamics of healthy micro-communities, researching and writing about what makes for thriving monastic life, house churches, and intentionally small churches. I strongly feel that the Way of Jesus is most deeply manifest in the disciplines and folkways of human-scaled communities. You cannot be effectively Christian if you don't do intimacy well.

How do you avoid romanticizing Amish people as you write about them?

That can be a real challenge, particularly given the pastel-hued lens through which we mistakenly view much of Amish life. I tried to remember that they are human beings and not caricatures. Reading the stories of Amish people was vital as I worked to honor both their voices and the tensions within their communities. Reading ethnographies of these communities, particularly Donald Kraybill's excellent book *The Riddle of Amish Culture*, gave me context.

What do you most want readers to take away from this book?

It's intended to stir contemplation rather than to wallop readers with a single true meaning. I hope the book is a reminder of just how deep our Christian commitment to loving others must go if we are to consider ourselves authentic disciples of Jesus Christ.

How is the work of a pastor related to the work of a fiction writer?

Being a pastor involves storytelling, and not just when you're up there sermonizing on Sunday. You need to be able to articulate the story of your community, that sense of shared narrative purpose that creates and sustains a collective identity.

However, for many pastors, the two vocations can end up not playing well together. If a community expects its pastor to be a 24/7 CEO-Manager-Facilitator-Counselor-Accountant-Conflict Resolution Specialist-Theologian-Enforcer-Scapegoat-Janitor-Social Worker-Comedian-Professor, that soul is not going to have two functioning neurons left to rub together to be creative. I've been blessed with a little church that is immensely supportive of my writing. I think healthy tribe-sized churches—where lay leaders really lead—can be wonderful in giving their pastors room to create.

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