

Book Reviews

Review of **Weaver-Zercher, Valerie. 2013. *Thrill of the Chaste: The Allure of Amish Romance Novels*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.**

By Sarah Jasmine Stork, *Comparative Studies, Ohio State University*

Over the course of her book, Valerie Weaver-Zercher guides us through an analysis of the constituents of the increasingly popular Amish-fiction genre. In particular, her chapters explore the content of stories that fall within the genre, the general writing style employed by authors of Amish fiction, the common ways that Amish fiction functions for readers, and a few concerns with regards to the genre that Weaver-Zercher finds worthy of additional attention. In discussing the content of Amish fiction, Weaver-Zercher not only presents common attributes of the main characters (especially the protagonist) but also establishes major themes in the story settings themselves. These settings and themes are effectively employed by the particular style of writing that is used in Amish fiction precisely because the emphasis in this genre is on clear communication and the use of text as a mechanism for transporting the reader—rather than emphasizing the literary nature of the book in ways that distract from the story content. In addition to a discussion of the content and structure of Amish fiction, Weaver-Zercher also uses conversations with Amish fiction readers and authors to establish the ways that Amish inspirational fiction functions in the lives of readers. This function includes not only the reasons that people choose to read Amish fiction, but also the ways that Amish fictions affects readers' lives in more profound ways. The final topic that Weaver-Zercher addresses in her book are those criticisms and concerns that the genre of Amish fiction—as a subgenre of inspirational fiction—raises; these concerns are used to end the book because they provide opening questions and issues for future research and conversations about Amish fiction, inspirational fiction, and literary representation more broadly.

The content of Amish fiction stories—sometimes called Amish romance or Amish-themed inspirational fiction—most often includes a young female protagonist, almost always unmarried and struggling with some aspect of her Christian faith. Although the protagonist is most often Amish, she may also be non-Amish, in which case she is generally escaping from her hectic city life, has gotten lost and ended up in an Amish community, or is attempting to 'find herself' because she has realized that something is missing from her life and has gone in search of it. The protagonist character often builds a romantic relationship with another character, but the most important relationship built during an Amish fiction novel is the protagonist's relationship with Christ. Most Amish fiction books are published by Christian publishing companies and for a Christian readership, particularly evangelical readers. The evangelical goals of these novels leads to a narrative arc that revolves around the protagonist developing a greater relationship with Jesus, and becoming a 'believer' (truly Christian) by the end of the story. These

protagonist characters, whether Amish or non-Amish, embody the values of modesty, chastity, and the desire to be better Christians. While the details of the story's content vary, these embodied values and common character traits help to establish a common context within the genre that is present on top of the Amish theme.

The writing style for Amish fiction is presented much like the style used in romantic fiction more broadly. Romantic fiction in general—and Amish fiction in particular—acts as a way of transporting readers to a different context and mindset. Amish fiction is written so to present the Amish as different enough and far enough away from the reader to be a destination but also similar enough to the reader to allow them to relate to the stories. There are a number of ways that Amish fiction is able to act as transport, including the actual writing style, and the structure of the fictive world being presented. The stories that fall under the Amish fiction genre are written in a straightforward and easy manner, because the goal is to act as transport rather than to draw attention to the text as literature through the use of fancy metaphors or obscure language. Instead, Amish fiction authors often employ rhetorical questions—questions which make a statement—to enhance clarity, and write in ways that encourage parasocial relationships between the readers and characters. These parasocial relationships present are the ways that readers are encouraged to learn about characters and feel they are building relationships with and coming to like the characters; these relationships are most evident when readers indicate that they felt like they were becoming friends with the characters, or when they write to the authors and express intense interest in the lives and happenings of minor characters within a story.

In addition to characters, the fictive world becomes a sort of character as well because the structure of the fictive world helps readers to be transported and to become invested in the story. The fictive world is structured through the use of 'focal things,' emphasis on a pastoral place, and use of chaste characters. Focal things are those items and actions that require tending by people and, through the devotion of one's self to the care or learning of a focal practice, lead people away from hyperactive and hyper-real lives and towards a natural and communal world. Focal things and practices, then, include things like horses and home-cooked meals, which not only require active engagement of one's mind and body, but also require that you engage with others; home-cooked meals imply communal preparation and eating communally and so act as something that helps to focus the actions and attention of a social group. Pastoral places are another device used in the structure of the fictive world of an Amish novel. It involves celebrating the rituals of country life and emphasizing agrarian innocence and charm. As a common trope for the Amish, pastoralism masks the transformations that Amish life have undergone—particularly “that less than half of Amish people actually farm...[because] the majority of fictional Amish are depicted as living and working on farms.” (147) The conventions of the fictive world of an Amish novel also include the presence of chaste characters, which are not only a representation of the values of modesty and chastity within Amish communities, but who also espouse the value of chastity that evangelical readers support. By presenting sexuality only offstage—through foreshadowing or ending with the hope or presence of a child—Amish

fiction is not only appropriate for a younger audiences but also removes attention from sex and the production of children and instead shifts the focus to the young woman's faith in God by indicating that she is pregnant by God's will or that God will grant her children if it is his intent. Finally, Amish fiction is written with a happy ending and in a way that preserves a nostalgic perspective on the Amish, which can act as a mechanism for readers to imagine a different future and to critique "current conditions of the self and society...By reading about the Amish, who seem to have somehow escaped history's inexorable march, non-Amish readers get to rehearse alternatives to hypermodernity" (152).

Weaver-Zercher has conversations with a number of readers of Amish fiction, and is able to explore the functions of Amish fiction in and on these readers' lives. In particular, she finds that the primarily female readership of Amish fiction (and inspirational fiction more broadly) use Amish fiction as a tool to nurture their real life relationships and to reinforce their Christian commitments. By this, Weaver-Zercher means that these female readers use Amish fiction stories as reminders that their struggles with their own faith or families are both common and part of their path to be closer to Jesus. Many of the female readers that Weaver-Zercher spoke to indicated that they related to the characters partly because they felt their experiences were similar to those portrayed in the stories. These stories, then, modeled ways of coping with one's life and of reaffirming faith. In addition, the content of Amish fiction (the female protagonist and the emphasis on modesty specifically) also allowed the novels to act as "sanctuaries, of sorts, from the body-sculpting rituals of a culture that, to many readers, feels increasingly both immodest and dangerous to women's sense of self" (160). As a space generally free of explicit focus on physical descriptions of bodies and which does not depict women as primarily sexual objects, Amish fiction allows readers a space that does not seem to belittle them or to force them to compete with an idealized set of characters—the characters are people just like the readers, with flaws and talents just like everyone else.

The last point Weaver-Zercher emphasizes is concerns about Amish fiction, including whether or not Amish fiction is a form of appropriation, issues of exoticism and domestication, and issues of race and ethnicity in both the fictive world and the real world. In relation to appropriation, Amish fiction is challenging to consider because there is not a clear power differential between the Amish subjects of writing and the evangelical writers. However, the question of borrowing and benefiting from another culture can be addressed; in fact, Weaver-Zercher notes that although the goal of Amish fiction authors is not to assert dominance or control over the Amish, "the sheer number of Amish books written by evangelicals, and the success they are finding in the publishing marketplace, makes it fairly clear who is in charge" (213). The question then becomes, is it ethical to benefit from portraying the Amish through the medium of inspirational fiction when the Amish themselves may have no say in that representation and may not be benefiting also?

Following this concern about who is benefiting from the portrayal of the Amish in fiction, there is also concern about the practices of exoticism and domestication of the Amish within

these novels. Although exoticism works by emphasizing difference and domestication works by masking difference, both are employed to represent the Amish as “Other” so that the Amish are more interesting while also being relatable to readers. The use of exoticism and domestication both lead to problems relating to racial and ethnic difference, although the real-world demographics of Amish communities make this consideration difficult to address. Though non-White members of Amish communities are rare, the invisibility of racial difference within Amish fiction is a salient point of discussion because the genre does not generally engage with the conversations of race and ethnicity that are pressing in contemporary society. According to Weaver-Zercher, “the whiteness of Amish fiction is notable because it incarnates the racialized reality of fiction in the wider CBA marketplace,” which is to say that evangelical fiction in general is dominated by White characters despite criticism by African American readers of inspirational fiction that have been calling for more racial and ethnic diversity in Christian romance publications (226). In fact, one African American reader and author of inspirational fiction with whom Weaver-Zercher spoke indicated that many African American authors writing inspirational fiction with the intention of reaching a Christian audience had to publish with secular publishers or had to self publish; this challenge to getting published when writing inspirational fiction engaging with issues of racial and ethnic difference helps us to explore additional reasons that Amish fiction might be controversial. Through exoticism and domestication—and as a result of change to American society over time—the Amish “slide between nonwhiteness and whiteness in the popular imagination,” which means that they can function within inspirational fiction as both “Other” (nonwhite) and “self” (White, as the reader is assumed to be). The Amish can act as different enough and exotic enough so that the reader can learn from that difference without feeling threatened, but can also act as similar to the reader—by virtue of their Whiteness—so that the reader can identify with the characters and their lives without being challenged by overt concerns of difference. The conundrum here is in how—and even *if*—Amish fiction can and should engage with the discourse of ethnic and racial difference in contemporary society; this is an area of study that Weaver-Zercher opens for us and encourages us to do more work on.

Weaver-Zercher has chosen a topic that, while seemingly addressing a niche interest area with regards to Amish, is actually quite versatile. She has managed to weave together Amish society studies with literary and narrative analysis, evangelical soteriology, and a critical exploration of race and cultural appropriation. Of particular interest for people researching across disciplines or areas of study are chapters five, six, and nine. Through these chapters, cross-disciplinary scholars are exposed to: an analysis of iconography and coded meanings as they apply to Amish fiction, examples of the myriad ways that readers of Amish fiction relate to the stories and use the stories to better their personal lives, and an examination of issues of race and cultural appropriation in the context of primarily White, non-Amish authors portraying primarily White Amish characters. Although each of these concepts is being looked at in relation to Amish fiction, they may be usefully applied to other groups being portrayed in inspirational and romantic fiction—especially other plain and Anabaptist groups, as they are also being

increasingly portrayed in fiction. This book is also a useful resource for those who study the cross-cultural interaction and social conflict because the issues of literary representation (by non-members), and the use of fiction for social critique and social change can be applied to contexts far outside those of plain and Anabaptist studies. Her discussion of racial and ethnic difference and representation in literature is particularly applicable for people interested in studying media (because Amish fiction and romantic fiction in general are easily accessible public mediums) and social change through examining social responses to changes in media content—like that of African American inspirational fiction authors and readers to the overwhelming Whiteness of the genre of inspirational fiction, especially with the rise of Amish fiction.

Review of **Keiser, Steven H. 2012. *Pennsylvania German in the American Midwest*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.**

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Keiser's book "Pennsylvania German in the American Midwest" combines data from a decade of field work in order to present a detailed account of the origin and distribution of several key features distinguishing Pennsylvania German spoken in Pennsylvania (PPG) from that spoken in the American Midwest (MPG) and the internal and contact induced changes that resulted in their divergence. He compares the Amish communities of Lancaster County and Montgomery / Bucks Counties in the East and Holmes County, Ohio; Kalona, Iowa; and Grant County, Wisconsin, in the Midwest. His work is grounded in ethnography as well as quantitative methods of data collection and analysis.

Although there is a sizable body of work on PPG dating back to the 1950s, comparatively little work has been done on PG outside of Pennsylvania, despite the fact that the majority of PG speakers now live outside of its namesake state and that Holmes County, Ohio, is home to the world's largest Amish population. Keiser's work is among the first of its kind, along with Loudon (1993; 1997; 2001), to empirically demonstrate the systematic differences between the two varieties and trace the development of MPG. Keiser places his work in the context of linguistic studies of dialect contact such as Weinreich (1954) and Thomason and Kaufman (1988) as well works specifically in the American context, Haugan (1953) and Silva-Corvalan (1994). He includes his research in the body of work on other German speech islands, "sprachinseln," although it departs from previous work by describing secondary migration patterns following the establishment of the speech island.

This book, published by the American Dialect Society as a supplement to Volume 86, *American Speech*, is best suited to readers with a basic knowledge of linguistic concepts as well as familiarity with Amish cultural practices. Although some historical background is given at the onset, there is very little description of cultural and sociological differences that distinguish the Amish from the majority American society, or the core beliefs that guide their cultural and

Preview " Thrill of the Chaste by Valerie Weaver-Zercher. Thrill of the Chaste: The Allure of Amish Romance Novels. by. Valerie Weaver-Zercher (Goodreads Author). 3.97 · Rating details. · 72 ratings · 24 reviews. Valerie Weaver-Zercher combines research and interviews with devoted readers, publishers, and authors to produce a lively and provocative examination of the Amish romance novel. She discusses strategies that literary agents and booksellers use to drive the genre's popularity. By asking questions about authenticity, cultural appropriation, and commodification, Thrill of the Chaste also considers Amish fiction's effects on Amish and non-Amish audiences alike. ...more. Get A Copy. Amazon. Valerie Weaver-Zercher is an editor and writer in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania. 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. Valerie Weaver-Zercher combines research and interviews with devoted readers, publishers, and authors to produce a lively and provocative examination of the Amish romance novel. She discusses strategies that literary agents and booksellers use to drive the genre's popularity. By asking questions about authenticity, cultural appropriation, and commodification, Thrill of the Chaste also considers Amish fiction's effects on Amish and non-Amish audiences alike. -- Julia Spicher Kasdorf, author of The Body and the Book: Writing from a Mennonite LifeSuzanne Woods Fisher, author of Amish fiction and