

The Amish

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Masterfully researched book offers enlightening insight into the often misunderstood religion and culture of the Amish.

If people have any knowledge at all about the Amish, it is pretty much limited to a few basic images: a horse and buggy, plain clothing, and community barn raisings. While these impressions are accurate, they only hint at the depth of the actual practices and beliefs of a group that often not only finds itself at odds with the modern world but also whose members disagree among themselves regarding degrees of conservatism. Donald B. Kraybill, Karen M. Johnson-Weiner, and Steven M. Nolt spent twenty-five years researching the religion, culture, and history of this community. In *The Amish*, they present a well-rounded picture of the Amish mindset and lifestyle.

The authors begin *The Amish* (which is the companion book to the *American Experience* documentary on PBS) with an overview of the struggles the Amish have had in trying to maintain their long-standing beliefs and culture while being increasingly exposed to American modernism. The opening chapters trace their European roots and arrival in America. Then, a thorough explanation of their religious roots, rituals, and symbols continues the insightful look into Amish ways.

One difficulty that the authors continually have to confront is that beliefs and practices vary widely among the Amish people. While some very conservative groups denounce practically all modern machinery, some more liberal groups use computers, tractors, telephones, and other equipment to perform their work. Since there is no centralized governing body, each Gmay—a grouping as small as just a few families—is able to adapt its beliefs to accept or reject any element of modern culture as it deems appropriate.

The authors close with an in-depth look at how the Amish have adjusted to such factors as technology, health matters, government interactions, and tourism. There are also two helpful appendices: one offers valuable information on key events in Amish history, the other compares the beliefs and lifestyles of the Amish to those of the Mennonites and other related groups.

Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt have provided masterful research that enlightens the reader about this often misunderstood religion and culture. While they present information in a respectful way, the authors do not avoid some of the darker subjects, such as child abuse and domestic violence.

The Amish is a must-read for anyone willing to look beyond the horse-and-buggy stereotype and gain some actual understanding of a people who keep a wary eye on the modern world while holding fast to their past beliefs and traditions.

JEFF FRIEND (Summer 2013)

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