ForeWord Reviews

CULTURE

Why Cows Learn Dutch and Other Secrets of Amish Farms
Randy James
Crist C. Miller, illustrator
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In Geauga County, Ohio, cows do indeed learn Dutch. So do horses and dogs and pigs. In this Amish settlement, the fourth largest in the U.S. and Canada, more than 1,800 households speak Pennsylvania Dutch, at home and on the farm.

The author began his professional life as a county agricultural agent here, where modern agriculture and the Amish way co-exist, and where he quickly found that his college education provided "twentieth-century answers that are of little value for the eighteenth-century problems facing the Amish community." James holds a Ph.D. in agronomy from Ohio State University and is associate professor of Food, Agriculture, and Environmental Sciences there.

James's descriptions of the Amish farms and farmers he has come to know over the years provide both portraits of the farms and a glimpse into the Amish way of life in the twenty-first century in this area. The text is accompanied by charming line drawings from one of the few Old Order Amish professional artists; Miller runs his own art gallery in the county.

The Amish may outwardly appear rigid in their ways, and indeed they deeply value tradition, even for its own sake, but James believes that it is their ability to adapt, their "resilience and flexibility," that allows them to continue to be successful farmers. Ask a Yankee (non-Amish) agriculturist what he does, and he'll tell you he's a *dairy* farmer, or a *pig* farmer. The Amish are just farmers, period. Riding on market whims and weather woes, Yankee farmers are the ones who appear set in their ways; their Amish neighbors thoughtfully and thoroughly approach farming as an ever-changing challenge.

Tell the Geauga Amish that their grade B milk isn't marketable, and they just build their own cheese factory. Show them a market for vegetables, and they'll plant acres of tomatoes and peppers; money from chickens still mostly covers their grocery bills. James shows how "the 'plain' farm family lifestyle the Amish so cherish is predicated on the operation of a profitable farm."

Why Cows Learn Dutch is strictly a book about farms and farmers; it's not a cultural

study about Amish families or their community. It's about how they make farming work the Amish way. While James does explain his history working with the Amish, a welcome addition to the stories would have been a bit more about the evolution of his work, the way in which he has come to his obvious respect and even affection for the Amish people.

Pennsylvania Dutch is actually a German dialect, dating back to the 1600s. The Amish, who value tradition, have seen no reason to leave the language behind, and their cows will continue to learn it for a long time to come.

Chris Arvidson