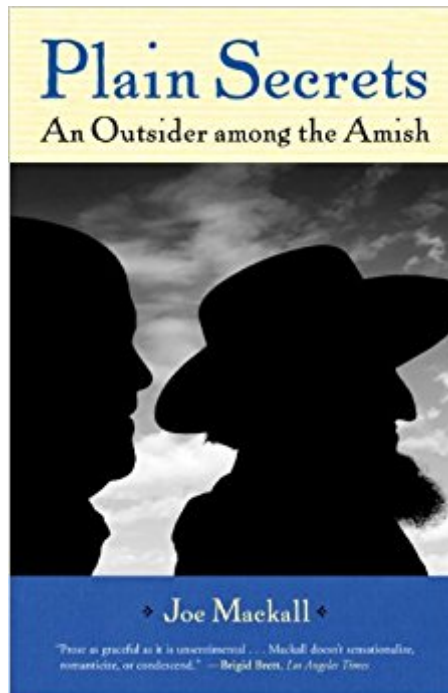




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Plain Secrets: An Outsider Among The Amish



Synopsis

Joe Mackall has lived surrounded by the Swartzentruber Amish community of Ashland County, Ohio, for over sixteen years. They are the most traditional and insular of all the Amish sects: the Swartzentrubers live without gas, electricity, or indoor plumbing; without lights on their buggies or cushioned chairs in their homes; and without rumspringa, the recently popularized "running-around time" that some Amish sects allow their sixteen-year-olds. Over the years, Mackall has developed a steady relationship with the Shetler family (Samuel and Mary, their nine children, and their extended family). *Plain Secrets* tells the Shetlers' story over these years, using their lives to paint a portrait of Swartzentruber Amish life and mores. During this time, Samuel's nephew Jonas finally rejects the strictures of the Amish way of life for good, after two failed attempts to leave, and his bright young daughter reaches the end of school for Amish children: the eighth grade. But *Plain Secrets* is also the story of the unusual friendship between Samuel and Joe. Samuel is quietly bemused—and, one suspects, secretly delighted—at Joe's ignorance of crops and planting, carpentry and cattle. He knows Joe is planning to write a book about the family, and yet he allows him a glimpse of the tensions inside this intensely private community. These and other stories from the life of the family reveal the larger questions posed by the Amish way of life. If the continued existence of the Amish in the midst of modern society asks us to consider the appeal of traditional, highly restrictive, and gendered religious communities, it also asks how we romanticize or condemn these communities—and why. Mackall's attempt to parse these questions—to write as honestly as possible about what he has seen of Amish life—tests his relationship with Samuel and reveals the limits of a friendship between "English" and Amish.

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Customer Reviews

In an engaging personal memoir, Mackall, an Ohio-based writer and professor of English, describes the close-knit relationship he has cultivated over more than a decade with a neighboring Amish family. This is neither an exposé nor an outsider's fanciful romanticization of the Amish. By focusing on the loves and losses of one large Amish clan, Mackall breathes life into a complex group often idealized or caricatured. He refers, for example, not to "the Amish" writ large, but instead to "the Swartzentruber Amish I know," describing in some detail the tremendous differences between the Swartzentrubers, by far the most traditional sect, and the Old Order, New Order, Beachy and other Amish groups. The Swartzentrubers not only eschew electricity but also padded or upholstered chairs, souped-up buggies, indoor plumbing, the tradition of rumspringa (a running-around period for some Amish teens) and perhaps most important for this narrative—contact with "the English." Mackall's is the first book to venture behind-the-scenes of this most conservative Amish group. At times Mackall is critical of the Swartzentruber way of life (such as when an eight-year-old girl dies in a buggy accident because the sect rejects safety measures for buggies), but it is a deeply respectful account that never veers toward sensationalism. (June) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Starred Review As this wonderful and enlightening book makes clear, the Amish are hardly a monolithic group. Actually, there are many different orders of Amish. The decidedly non-Amish Mackall has lived among the Swartzentruber Amish of Ashland County, Ohio, for more than 16 years. The Swartzentruber are considered the most conservative Amish, eschewing gas, electricity, and indoor plumbing. Even their ubiquitous buggies are driven without lights. Over the years, Mackall developed a friendship with the Shetler family, and *Plain Secrets* is an affectionate portrait of a family as well as a way of life. Some stereotype and romanticize the Amish, saying they represent an ideal, preindustrial American community. Others sensationalize them as backward religious fanatics. Mackall knows the Shetlers as persons, not cardboard figures, and he has readers get to know them as persons, too. His is hardly black-and-white portraiture. The Amish he writes about are as complex and flawed as any non-Amish. Although he admires their connection to

the land and devotion to family, he is conflicted about the future of Amish girls, who live under a resolutely patriarchal household regime, in particular. This is a loving portrait, warts and all, of an often-misunderstood people. Sawyers, June --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This was a very enjoyable read. Joe Mackall did an excellent job with the details of the experiences these people share everyday. Following the life of an Englisher into an Swartzentruber Amish family gave an insight that was otherwise unknown to the outside world. As an outsider you can see that the Amish are no different then we are when it comes to dealing with the sorrows and happiness of the day to day events of family and community. The only difference is the way that they are taught to deal with them. We could all take heed to their way of life and their community ties that keep them alive and thriving.

I became interested in the Amish after reading a novel and looking deeper into their way of life. I found it very interesting how they live their lives through their rules of their church. To be that dedicated is what I admire about them as a people. The author did a great job in putting himself into learning about his subjects.

I have read and traveled pretty extensively among the Amish, but even so, Mackall's book shared insights that I had not heard before. These insights were mainly about the differences between the different sects of the Amish. When all is said and done though, once again, I am reminded how we fellow human beings are more alike, than different! We all have to have a healthy regard for human life in general and we would be a much better people!

I very much enjoyed reading this book, and I would recommend it to people who are curious about the day-to-day life of perhaps the most reticent group of Amish in the United States. I wouldn't recommend the book to people who are motivated by the "secrets" in the title. It's true that the Schwartzentruber (how it's spelled out my way) Amish are harder for the English to get to know than, say, Lancaster County Old Order Amish, but that doesn't make them secretive, nor does the author spill secrets in a hushed tone. Instead, the book offers a well-written, thoughtful memoir of a friendship between an Amish man and an English man. The structure and pacing are excellent, and I find Mackall's observations to be spot-on. These are portraits of an extended family, not generalizations about all Schwartzentrubers or all Amish or even all farmers. In fact, I wish that the

author had continued in that vein, omitting most of the drama associated with the tale of a young man who chose to leave the church. The book was lovely and fascinating without the subplot. I would disagree with Tolstoy's pronouncement that all happy families are happy in the same way--in other words, boring. The book would have been just fine if the meaning of the friendship between the men, and between their wives, were the entire content. And now, my beef. The author allows himself two rants--one about the question of the happiness of Amish women, who take a subordinate role, and one about the safety of Amish children. I feel that he stepped out of the relationship in the book to address the reader directly in words he would never use to his friends. In film, we would say that Mackall broke the third wall when he vented his frustration to the readers instead of to his friends. It felt like a violation of the friendship as I read it, and it doubly felt as though Mackall didn't "get" the core of the culture. It's about the faith--the faith that God doesn't make mistakes, the faith that His ways are not our ways, the faith that we are not here to stay. So this is a very good book, a groundbreaking description of one district of Schwartzentrubers. The subtitle is a much better descriptor than the title, and there are some pages I could have lived without. Even with my reservations, I don't regret the purchase, and I would recommend it to my English friends. I would also read other works by Joe Mackall, because he's an excellent storyteller and painter-with-words.

Thanks to Joe Mackall for this book - it is virtually as good a book as I can imagine being written, for providing an honest look at Amish 'daily life'. Mackall manages to steer an admirably true course, avoiding the extremes of scandal-mongering sensationalism on the one hand, or fawning romanticism on the other. Mackall writes out of his own close friendship with an Amish family, the Shetlers, which formed out of Mackall's own act of kindness to the Shetler family. His friendship gives him access to Amish life, in a way that few 'outsiders' are ever granted. Mackall uses his access to give his readers fascinating insights into Amish ways of work, family, courtship, etc, as well as the tension inherent in their contacts with the 'outside world'. Some of the most fascinating, and simultaneously melancholy, chapters in the book relate to the Shetlers' young kinsman Jonas, and his bumpy journey out of Amish life, which serves to starkly highlight the contrasts between Amish and 'modern' ways of life. Such a simple thing as getting a Social Security number, so he can work, becomes maddeningly complex for Jonas, having grown up virtually without 'official' documentation. And the struggles of young would-be ex-Amish to make their way in a world which they are in no way prepared to comprehend, can be simultaneously comical and heartbreaking. As I made my way through the book, I found myself again and again wondering whether Joe Mackall's

reflections on his experiences of the Amish, or my own reactions to what I was reading, might not be saying more about Joe Mackall, or myself, as 'moderns', than about the Amish themselves. By the very nature of their life, the Amish stand as a stark rejection, even a rebuke, of modern ways, and our own response to that rejection could tell us a lot about ourselves. Even Joe Mackall, honest and affectionate as he is toward his Amish neighbors, can't quite bring himself to wonder whether the Amish approach to gender roles might not have strengths or advantages that hadn't occurred to him. And I found myself lamenting what I took as Amish devaluing of education. Both of which amount to impositions of 'outside' perspectives on choices the Amish have made, for reasons of their own, regardless of what I, or Joe Mackall, might think about them. I truly appreciated the warm humanity of Mackall's presentation of Amish life. Because the Shetlers are his friends, he doesn't come to the Amish as to a group of exotic strangers. Rather, he is able to talk about his friends and neighbors as real, flesh-and-blood human beings, trying to make their own way through this world, and ultimately, to arrive in Heaven. Of course, their lives are fascinating for the ways they diverge from 'modern' American society; and, if we are attentive, they might possibly teach us things we hadn't anticipated.

The insight in this book is remarkable and very interesting. However, the flow of the book somewhat detracted from the overall reading experience. If you are looking for a detailed and easily understandable explanation of the inner working of a strict Amish sect, this book provides it. It is an easy read, but as mentioned the flow is lacking.

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