

Shirley Hershey Showalter, *Blush: A Mennonite Girl Meets a Glittering World*. Waterloo, ON/Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2013. Pp. 271. Softcover, \$15.99.

Since book publishers reclassified Amish and Mennonite romance novels as a separate genre in 2011 (Valerie Weaver-

Zercher, *Thrill of the Chaste*, 5), patrons of Walmart, CVS, and other stores that sell mass-market paperbacks have become accustomed to associate a Mennonite prayer covering on a book cover with drama and intrigue, and possibly scandal. Shirley Showalter's 2013 memoir *Blush*, is clearly pitched to a different type of audience. On the cover, a teenage Showalter smiles above a high collar and thick sweater, her prayer covering just visible behind the pink cursive font of the title—no sign of the well-built plain man with a smoldering glance that mass-market readers might expect. Yet Showalter's title does contain at least a hint of intrigue. What might make such a modest-looking girl blush?

A "bonnet ripper" this book is not, of course—Showalter joined the Mennonite church in sixth grade and hasn't left. *Blush* covers formative moments in her youth, such as the death of a baby sister, an eye-opening visit from a Fresh Air Fund kid from New York City, a difficult move for her family from a rental property to their own farm, and her high school days of fast cars, competitive Bible quizzing, and conservative courtship.

Blush's most dramatic chapters are about Showalter's parents, especially her mother, who was transformed, within a year, from a high school thespian and social butterfly to a conservative Mennonite homemaker. Showalter's mother had resisted joining the church, but after getting hit by a car, she had promised God she would join if she lived. She keeps her promise, marries Showalter's father, and leaves readers flipping back and forth between pictures from the beginning and end of the chapter, struggling to see the resemblance between the girl in the high school head shot, with makeup and a perm, and the plain woman in the grainy photo that follows. The only echo of the first picture in the second is that the baby the woman is holding is named after Shirley Temple.

As the book unfolds, Showalter's mother continues to transfer tensions between her former and current life to her first child, leaving Shirley with mixed messages, especially about how to negotiate ambition and ego. In one striking story from Shirley's third-grade year, her mother, while braiding Shirley's hair for church, tells her that according to her dad, "someone" looked prideful in church the week before. Shirley mentally runs through the women her father might have been referring to, because, as she notes, "It never occurred to me that the person could have been a man." When Shirley fails to come up with any candidates for such an offense, her mother tells her that the "someone" was Shirley herself. Hurt and confused, Shirley tries to puzzle through this indirect rebuke with little help from her mother: "So feeling great and

looking like you enjoy yourself must be called ‘pride,’” she remembers thinking.

Similar incidents follow: young, ambitious Showalter is repeatedly labeled as “prideful” because of her hard work and success. “There was that pattern again,” she notes as she helps her team win a Bible quiz match: “Feel good. Be reminded of pride. Feel bad.” Yet rather than reflect on her community’s restrictions on women, Showalter repeatedly chooses polite silence over broader critique. Clearly, “If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all,” is a mantra not exclusive to the Mennonite community. Perhaps the closest Showalter comes to criticizing these damaging patterns is to say, “I always felt that I could trust [my mother] and that in some secret place she wanted me to fly, perhaps even to fly away, for my own good.”

One chapter particularly freighted with the unsaid is titled “Seven Sweets and Seven Sours.” Showalter reflects on the “sweet” elements of her Mennonite childhood, then acknowledges how long it took for her “to see that identity formation always includes an ‘us’ and a ‘them.’ It’s easy to see all sweetness in ‘us’ and all sour in them.” Rather than delving into that “sour,” however, perhaps by sharing a specific story of someone exiled into “them,” Showalter instead notes that she “admire[s] many conservative Mennonites who continue to maintain boundaries between the plain church and the glittering world,” then shifts into upbeat language to close the chapter: “What brings us together best? Food!”

While much of the book left me hungry for more analysis, I have met readers who feel that Showalter has said too much in this book. Given her restraint, it’s impressive how much critique Showalter does convey with brief references, and even with silence. Simply exposing the gender imbalances within her community—even without critical commentary—can be seen as subversive in this context. For women who grew up with constant reminders not to be too “prideful,” even considering their lives worthy of memoir, much less actually writing a memoir, is rebellious in itself.

It’s hard to tell, though, whether such silences transmit the intended message to an audience unfamiliar with conservative Mennonite communities, or to fans of “bonnet-rippers” and more commercial books about women leaving the church. Rhoda Janzen’s 2009 best-selling memoir *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress*, one of the few Mennonite memoirs that made the *New York Times* bestseller list, told an honest story of not just exit from the community, but a return. Yet Janzen was criticized by many Mennonites—even, however gently, by Showalter herself (see

shirleyhersheysowalter.com, 11/21/09)—for what they saw, despite Janzen’s often self-deprecating tone, as an ungenerous airing of dirty laundry. After witnessing the response to Janzen, why would Mennonite women with similar stories want to speak up?

One of Showalter’s most incisive observations in *Blush* is about the cliques in her fourth grade class, from which she and her fellow Mennonites were usually excluded. “The funny thing about all these little clubs? Despite their lack of social prestige, the plain kids had lots of experience in exclusive environments.” The world of Mennonite women’s memoirs still feels relatively exclusive—Janzen on one end, Showalter on the other. Yet the Mennonite community, as well as its representation in the outside world, is richer—if far from complete—with the existence of both of these books, which will hopefully open more space for a broader spectrum of voices in between.

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