

Steven M. Nolt, *The Amish: A Concise Introduction*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016. Pp. 130. Softcover, \$16.95.

Steven M. Nolt's, *The Amish: A Concise Introduction* is well titled. Clocking in at only 130 pages, this well-written book provides a rich and engaging look into Amish life and culture. It is organized into nine (simply-titled) chapters that, despite their brevity, do an excellent job of discussing a range of topics about the Amish in such a way as to provide the reader with a clear yet complex understanding of this often-misunderstood people. The reader benefits greatly from Nolt's command of both primary and scholarly sources on topics including the origins of the Amish in the Radical Reformation, key values that define Amish life and culture, the un-bureaucratic organization of the Amish church, family life and education, their negotiated relationship with technology, representations of the Amish in American culture, and more.

A central thread that runs throughout the book consists of two strands. One strand focuses on what the more than 300,000 Amish who live in settlements and within varying groups (or affiliations) all across America share with one another. Important practices and values that they share include the use of horse and buggy for transportation; the limit on education to the eighth grade; plain dress that is set by the church; the embrace of a posture of yieldedness (or *Gelassenheit*) in relationship to others including God, the church, and the world; resistance to calls for or the display of patriotism; and so forth. By not only identifying these shared practices and values but also explaining their significance, especially as they differ from the practices and values characteristic of mainstream culture, the book makes the case for the Amish as an important people group that gives the lie to the notion that the way the rest of us live in mainstream culture is "natural." At the same time, the book relentlessly complicates any characterization of the Amish as either simple or static by talking about the diversity in practices and values among Amish affiliations and by recounting how Amish life and culture have changed over time and adapted to historical contingencies.

With these two strands at play throughout, the book challenges readers to eschew simple-minded ways of thinking about the Amish as either a backward people stuck in history or some ideal manifestation of all that is good about America. Instead, this book provides a complex and engaging account of the Amish that invites

readers to ask important questions not only about who the Amish are and why it matters that they are so different from mainstream culture but also about the readers themselves and why they might embrace (or accept as natural) aspects of mainstream American culture and life such as individualism, competition, a harried life, conspicuous consumption, violence, and patriotism.

Put another way, this book takes seriously the witness that the Amish provide to the world that it ain't necessarily so. Things could be otherwise. That is, if we really wanted them to be. As with an Amish way of life, it would take a lot of doing things differently and a lot of being otherwise. That could be as uncomfortable as a dark double-knit dress on a hot summer day. But, this book invites readers to consider, it just might be worth it.

Susan Trollinger
University of Dayton