

How Love for God and Family Unites These Women From Different Cultures

Note: This is Part 2 of an interview with author Lorilee Craker. Find Part 1 [here](#).

Behind Amish romance novels, tourist spots and “reality” TV shows stand real people, with longings and loves just like the rest of us. Every Amish and Mennonite woman has a story. What would it be like to be welcomed into their homes and share those stories over a cup of coffee?

In the pages of *Homespun: Amish and Mennonite Women in Their Own Words* (Herald Press), Amish and Plain Mennonite women swap stories and spin yarns while the reader sits in. The book’s editor, Lorilee Craker, bestselling author of *Money Secrets of the Amish*, collected these personal writings and authentic perspectives on life, hospitality, home, grief, joy and walks with God from Anabaptist women’s periodicals. Among the stories shared are essays penned by well-loved Amish and Mennonite writers such as Sherry Gore, Linda Byler, Lovina Eicher, Dorcas Smucker and Sheila Petre.

Here she shares more of her own background and experience of growing up Mennonite and how *HomeSpun* came together.

Q: You describe yourself as a simple Mennonite girl from the prairies. Can you share a little bit about your childhood?

My childhood was deeply rooted in the Mennonite culture. Growing up, I witnessed my two grandmothers with their hair in a bun and always wearing dresses or skirts. I thought this was normal! None of my grandparents spoke English—all four of them spoke German or Low German. At family gatherings, we would eat Mennonite food such as borscht, *varaneki* (pierogies), *platz*

(fruit strudel) and *pluma moos* (cold plum soup). We ate those things in my home, too, so again, this was all very normal. We were also bound by similar values of faith and peace, and by stories of where we had come from.

Q: Your family's roots in Mennonite communities run deep, but your family history is an example of the many different stories people have. Can you tell about both your mother and father's background?

My mother's family came over from Ukraine in the 1870s. They were pioneers who homesteaded on the prairies, but they never lost their culture or assimilated too much into the broader community. The ties of language, food and culture that bind them to their pioneer great-great-grandparents are startlingly durable.

My dad's family had a completely different story. They came in the third wave of immigration from Ukraine, after World War II. They fled Stalin as refugees and experienced his holocaust. My dad lost his twin sister to starvation, so those stories were imprinted painfully on his heart.

I knew from early on that there were lots of different kinds of Mennonite stories.

Q: Growing up in Manitoba where there was a large Mennonite population, you didn't realize most people didn't live the same way you did. What was the biggest adjustment for you when you moved to Chicago for college?

The biggest adjustment was that no one seemed to know what a Mennonite was, or they assumed that I should be wearing a bonnet and driving a buggy like the Amish. Everyone seemed to think that being Amish or Old Order Mennonite and being my kind of Mennonite were one and the same. This assumption led to lots of explanations on my part about the difference between my modern Mennonite upbringing ("like Baptist, with a German accent and special foods") and those other related

subcultures.

People were surprised that I wore makeup and nail polish and so on. In Winnipeg, people knew that Mennonite women were modern because they knew so many of them. That wasn't the case in Chicago.

Q: Explaining how you were Mennonite, not Amish, eventually led to you writing your previous book, *Money Secrets of the Amish*. What did you learn in that process that made you feel more connected to what your roots?

As I visited Amish homes and barns in Michigan and Pennsylvania for my 2011 book, I recognized bits of their dialect, *Deitsch* (Pennsylvania German), from my spotty grasp of Low German. Their baby naming customs were also similar. The Amish women's hair buns and long skirts, not to mention the tantalizing aromas of fruit strudels (*platz*, to me) baking in their ovens, reminded me of my beloved grandma Loewen. I recalled my little dynamo of an *oma* (grandmother) tsk-tsk-ing me about the length of my skirt. She always had a twinkle in her eye as she chided me, but I still made sure to go for full coverage as I interviewed the Amish.

The peace and gentleness I felt when visiting the Amish reminded me so much of visiting my Grandma's farm. I felt oddly at home among my spiritual and cultural cousins. It was amazing to me that over 300 years had passed since our break up and we still had things in common! I came to realize we were more closely tied to me and my upbringing than I had ever dreamed.

Q: What are some of the differences between Mennonite and Amish beliefs? What are the biggest similarities?

While there is a great variety of Mennonite culture, practices and lifestyles, from very old-fashioned to very modern and even progressive, the Amish are much more the same across their communities. They are extremely dedicated to living much

as they did in 1693, when they split off from the Mennonites over the matter of buttons. Mennonites were okay with buttons, but tailor Jacob Amman's followers, the Amish, thought they were worldly. To this day, Amish fasten their clothes without buttons.

The similarities lie in spiritual roots of being peace-loving, set-apart people with a radical faith. The most modern Mennonite in downtown Winnipeg might name their children Isaiah, Ezra, and Naomi, and the most conservative Amish will have children with those same Bible names. They have both kept some remnant of their dialect—Amish speak Pennsylvania Dutch which is really Deutsch—German. I was startled to recognize bits of the Amish dialect as being similar to my own Platt Deutsch—low German. Foods are similar sometimes, too. And food customs, like faspa, which is a cold meal served on Sunday late afternoon so the ladies wouldn't have to cook on Sunday.

Q: What was the inspiration behind your new book, *Homespun*? How did you collect the stories included in the book?

Herald Press approached me about being the general editor of a collection of writings from Amish and Mennonite women. I collected the stories from mainly two sources, *Daughters of Promise* magazine, a beautiful and beautifully written literary journal done by conservative Mennonite women, and *Ladies Journal*, a much more spare periodical by Amish women.

It was thrilling for me to discover new writers and incredible writing from mostly unknown writers! These women have a lot to say and I was fascinated by their take on modern life. To hear from women specifically appealed to me, as a feminist. Sometimes in conservative subcultures, their voices are silenced or muted. This book gives them space and grace to speak.

Q: What themes did you notice emerging as started compiling the stories? How is *Homespun* organized?

As I read stories for the book, a number of themes arose, so I arranged the stories by those topics and wrote a brief introduction tying them together.

Welcome. A deep sense of hospitality is fundamental to these women. Yet it's not hospitality in the HGTV, your-house-needs-to-be-perfect kind of way. As one of the writers shares, it is easy to overthink hosting, but Jesus made it look quite simple, and his hosting style can be described in one word: love.

Abide. Hospitality is sacred and spiritual, but it doesn't mean these writers don't want to have an appealing home space in which to dwell. They want to abide in an abode, if you will, that nurtures them and feeds their spirit. The writers here expound beautifully on what home means to them.

Testimony. Story makes the world go round. When we hear the stories—the testimonies—of others, we are better able to understand our own story and our place in the world. These narratives stirred different emotions in me.

Wonder. The blazing faith of early Anabaptists is evident in the openness of these writers to all things wondrous. These are true stories of miracles, phenomenal happenings that don't make sense from a human perspective. They highlight the possibility of the miraculous happening all around us, in big ways and small.

Kindred. A core value of both Mennonites and Amish is the preeminence of family—kinfolk, whether they be kindred or not. Our kin shape us in ways both known and unknown, good and bad. These essays and stories speak to the tremendous influence of family.

Beloved. These essays enthused my soul, and I came away feeling as if I had just been to church. My cup had been filled. There is something wonderfully elemental and childlike about the devotion expressed here, devotion even in doubt.

These pieces drew me closer to the One who calls all his daughters “beloved.”

Q: What do you ultimately hope readers will gain from reading *Homespun*?

I hope they will find a pocket of peace and gentle witness in their hectic, modern lives. These women have a countercultural, singular mindset that is refreshingly different. I hope our readers will see their own stories in a new, Homespun light! {eo}

Learn more about Lorilee Craker online at . You can also find her on Facebook (@LorileeCraker), Twitter (@lorileecraker) and Instagram (@thebooksellersdaughter).