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*"I promise: you will be transported."* —Bill Moyers

### **New Mennonite Memoir Recounts a Farm Girl's Life among the "Plain" People of Lancaster County and Her Yearning for the "Fancy" World**

Born into a plain-dressing, plain-speaking Mennonite farm family in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, Shirley Showalter was named for Shirley Temple, a movie star she was forbidden to watch. She grew up with her nose pressed to the window of the glittering world, "protected from its supposed evils by parents and preachers and kind ladies with hankies in their pockets." That sheltered farm girl went on to become a college president, as Showalter tells in her new memoir, *Blush: A Mennonite Girl Meets a Glittering World* by Shirley Showalter (Herald Press, \$15.99 paperback, September 13, 2013). It's a richly textured, and affectionate, look at an American religious subculture that has fascinated outsiders for centuries, complete with Mennonite recipes and vintage photos.

Shaped by her life on the family farm, a country school, and the Lititz Mennonite Church, the rosy-cheeked, barefoot Shirley never quite disappeared. Growing up in a family of Swiss-German farmers stretching back ten generations in America, and in a church with a distrust of the world, Shirley sought to understand the strange and often contradictory stories around her while she struggled to create her own story.

From an early age, Showalter, who went on to become president of Goshen College, and later, a foundation executive, nurtured dreams of life beyond her circumscribed world: "Ever since I was little, I wanted to be big. Not just big as in tall, but big as in important, successful, influential. I wanted to be seen and listened to. I wanted to make a splash in the world," she writes. "If ambition is a bad thing, and thrice bad for a woman and a Mennonite, I could take the easy way out and blame mine on Mother. She had her secret desire to be what Mennonites call 'fancy' barely hidden under her prayer covering and plain cape dress."

Evoking the simple joys of a farm childhood, Showalter recounts life on the hundred-acre "Home Place" that formed the center of her world. "I didn't distinguish between play and work for a long time," she says. Much of her childhood as a "free range girl" was idyllic, but Showalter also tells of the hard work of farming, lean times, and friction in her extended family.

The values instilled in her by family and church are ones Showalter still holds dear today: generosity, kindness and empathy. In the Mennonite community, "a child in need was everyone's problem to solve, not only the parents," she says. "If I saw a 'plain person' in a long dress or wearing a bonnet or a plain suit on the street, I would never have hesitated to ask for a ride, for information or even for money. All through my childhood I was being trained to be that same kind of beacon of kindness for others."

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Showalter writes lovingly of Mennonite cooking and the famed “Seven Sweets and Seven Sours.” Love of food, “prepared well in large quantities, was so great among my kin that we risked one of the classic deadly sins: gluttony,” she writes. The seven sours are side dishes, such as pepper cabbage and pickled beets. The seven sweets include up to twenty kinds of pies. The book includes a recipe section, featuring Mennonite treats such as Grandma Herr’s Cherry Pudding, Sugar Cakes—and the king of all Mennonite pies, Shoo-Fly.

“Everyone’s childhood is some mixture of sweet and sour,” Showalter writes. “My Mennonite childhood was sweetest when surrounded by family, including the forty families in our church who called me by name and knew where I lived, what grade I was in and what part I sang when we opened the hymnals together.”

Though it took her years to notice some of the sour among the sweetness of her church, Showalter says, “I now see the irony that Mennonites thought it necessary in order to follow Jesus to exclude those who dressed or talked ‘loud,’ divorced, drank or danced—unless they repented.” Her own branch of the Mennonite church has relaxed rules requiring members to be “plain,” but Showalter respects the conservative branch of the church, those “who continue to maintain boundaries between the plain church and the glittering world.”

**Shirley Hershey Showalter** grew up in a Mennonite farm family and went on to become the president of Goshen College and a foundation executive at The Fetzer Institute. She is now a writer, speaker, blogger, and consultant living in Harrisonburg, VA.

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*Blush: A Mennonite Girl Meets a Glittering World*  
by Shirley Hershey Showalter

Herald Press

\$15.99 Paperback

Pub Date: September 19, 2013