

A Talk with Shirley Showalter, author of
the new memoir *Blush: A Mennonite Girl Meets a Glittering World*

Q. Your mother named you after the film star Shirley Temple, whose movies you were forbidden to watch by your Mennonite church. How did bearing that name, with its hint of the “glittering world,” influence you?

A. My name probably influenced me more unconsciously than consciously. It was less about Shirley Temple as a movie star than it was about the fact that I was the firstborn and a daughter who got to become “Shirley” because my mother craved a Shirley Temple doll in the 1930’s when she was a girl. She never got that doll, but she did get to hold her own real live baby when she herself was only 21 years old. When Mother told me the story of the Shirley Temple doll, I could tell how much she wanted me.

Mother was an actress in high school. She joined the Mennonite Church later than most other girls who grew up in Mennonite homes, and had a hard time giving up jewelry, makeup, fashion, for plain-ness. I sensed that struggle in her, and I took it on as my own struggle.

Q. What was it like to grow up in a culture that puts many constraints on its members, including how to dress, how to speak and what forms of entertainment are acceptable?

Oddly enough it feels fine—so long as one stays inside the boundaries of farm, home, and church. The constraints don’t feel onerous if everyone agrees to them. I describe my childhood, my first six years, as “magical.” There was space, freedom, love, beauty, and peace all around me.

Q. When did you first recognize the difference between Mennonite life and the wider world?

School was the arch, the gateway to the wider world. Suddenly, I was aware at age six that other kids lived in town, went to kindergarten, wore red nail polish, carried The Lone Ranger and Mickey Mouse lunch buckets, and watched TV every night. None of my relatives or classmates at church, my first friends, did these things.

Q. What is your favorite memory of life on the farm?

The memory that stands out most from growing up on the farm is that of walking barefoot down a dusty path to the creek at the edge of our property. There my brother and I played for hours in the creek, making dams, trying to catch tadpoles, feeling the slimy moss between our toes, and picking bluebells to take back to Mother in the kitchen.

Q. You talk about Mennonite “car culture” and the boys who drove hot rods, cruising as a pastime. Was that not at odds with the Mennonite lifestyle?

In that chapter, I explore the anomaly of the hot rod as a reward to young men for working hard on their father’s farms. In my day Lancaster County youths began to flaunt fancier and fancier cars. It was a case of Mennonite fathers purchasing “glittery” cars in order to keep the boys down home on the farm. In many cases, the exchange worked out the way the parents wanted it to. The young man attracted a young woman who married him and took over the farm. They then sold the hot rod and bought a Ford or Chevy or Dodge sedan.

Q. Mennonites are known for their hearty, simple, delicious cooking. What are a few of your favorite recipes?

I love sours like pepper cabbage, cole slaw, and pickled beets and red beet eggs, especially with pork and ham. And, though I seldom indulge today, I also love sweets. Recipes—the old family recipes for cherry pudding, sugar cakes (cookies), and a few classics from the Mennonite Community Cookbook—are included in the memoir. I had to include shoofly pie, of course.

-continued-

Q. How did your family and church instill enduring values in you such as generosity, kindness and empathy?

My family used example as the deepest form of instruction. Mother and Daddy pointed out the people in the congregation whom they thought of as saints. I still remember these women and men. The warm eyes and caring touch. Their love of scripture and hymns. Their quiet presence enlivened with humor yet solemnity. My father pointed out a businessman in the congregation who had been audited by the IRS because they didn't believe he would give all that money away. My mother pointed to the woman who never married so that she could devote her life to those who needed her help and to her nieces and nephews.

The most important teachers, of course, were my parents themselves. They loved me and I knew it. This is the greatest teaching any child can have and makes all other instruction possible.

Q. Why are so many people fascinated with “plain people” such as Mennonites and the Amish?

Horses and buggies, plain dress, and the Pennsylvania Dutch dialect attract tourists to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, and to other places where Mennonites and Amish live. The first attraction is to the exotic and to quaintness. But under the surface, I think one can often find a yearning for a deeper, quieter, simpler life and the realization that many 21st-century lives are out of control.

The pace of life, the consumerist pressures, the highly sexualized, exhibitionist celebrity culture – all of these elements of our society call forth a longing for a better way to live. The extreme individualism of late capitalist society also leads to nostalgia for the “olden days” when people lived in communities that cared for each other.

When you walk against the current, as the Amish and Mennonites are taught to do, when you are willing to die in order not to kill, when you are deliberately plain rather than fancy, you stand out. If you are the “real deal,” and not some kind of fake playing on a reality show, you may help others find the courage to change their lives.

Q. Why did you decide to write a memoir?

Like many memoirists, I want my family to have a gift and my grandchildren stories to read after I am gone. I also want to leave a testimony to my faith and to share the values that shaped me. I want to transport readers to another time and place and bring them back again, changed by the experience and ready to embrace their own blush, whatever that might be.

Q. Are you still a Mennonite today?

I am! I include a list of reasons in the book itself, which really boil down to the conclusion that I discovered by writing this memoir that Mennonite was one of my first names for love. It will be one of my last also.

Blush: A Mennonite Girl Meets a Glittering World
by Shirley Hershey Showalter
Herald Press
\$15.99 Paperback
Pub Date: September 19, 2013