

Oh, hello. I didn't see you there. I was just reading one of my many Amish romance novels. Yes, I did say Amish romance novel, but before you judge me, let me give you a tease: “Jake guided his horse and buggy up the driveway leading to her place and stopped it on the side of the barn, facing the pasture, where he knew they couldn't be seen from the house. His stomach lurched with nervous anticipation as he slid his hand under Loraine's chin. He slowly lowered his head and captured Loraine's lips with a kiss that stole his breath away.” Not too shabby, eh? This is one of my personal favorites, Wanda Brunstetter's 2009 novel, *A Cousin's Promise*, the first in a series entitled “Indiana Cousins.” Being from Indiana, I can assure you not all of us are as close with our cousins as these people. But they do bring up a good point. The Amish have a very different view of romance than the average American. For instance, in the March 25, 2010 issue of OK! Magazine, Dr. Oz prescribed all married couples to have sex twice a week to insure longevity of the relationship. And while I'm going to need to bleach my mind's eye to remove the mental image of Dr. Oz having sex, his suggestion explains in a nutshell what most Americans think of as romance in a healthy relationship. The Amish, on the other hand, as explained in the 1993 book *Amish Society* by John Andrew Hostetler, don't even have a provision for divorce in their society. Perhaps the current popularity of Amish romance novels can teach us a lot more than just how to make some damn good noodles. Did I mention there are recipes in the back of her books? Because there are.

So to really reap the benefits of what the Amish have already sowed and learn a more successful approach to relationships, let's first have our own Rumspringa and get a taste of what these bonnet books are all about; second, we will all come together as a community to raise an answer as to why the novels are so popular; before third, plowing a path of insight as to why all of us should read and learn from Amish romance novels.

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First, what are these books about? Rumspringa, literally meaning “running around,” is a traditional rite of passage in many Amish communities in which adolescents are allowed to experience our crazy “Englischer” life before deciding whether or not they want to be baptized, because as we all know, 16 year olds have really good judgment. As you can imagine, some of these young adults meet people outside of the Amish community, and thus, a pair of star-crossed lovers is born. That is, in fact, basically the entire plot of Cindy Woodsmall’s series “Sisters of the Quilts.” She’s Amish; he’s a Mennonite. Oh, the tangled webs we weave! But never fear, there will be no Shakespearean-type lusting here.

While the books have been criticized for not being totally accurate representations of the Amish, they are extremely conservative when it comes to the romancing. As explained by the [September 9, 2009, Wall Street Journal article](#), the most action any of the characters get in the “Sisters of the Quilts” series is SPOILER ALERT! a couple of kisses “on page 326.” Also, a recurring theme in many of the novels is getting into either a buggy or car accident, since the Amish aren’t so good at driving. Unfortunately for me, Beth Graybill, director of the Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society, was quoted in the aforementioned Wall Street Journal article as saying, “Buggy accidents and romances between outsiders are far less common than the books suggest,” which just kills my dream of marrying this strapping young fellow who happens to be both Amish and wheelchair bound due to a tragic accident. [All in all, these bonnet books are like any other romance novel, just a lot more wholesome.](#) As Woodsmall herself explained in a [May 26, 2009 ABC News story](#), “We keep it very clean. A 10-year-old could come by casually and pick it up and read.”

Second, let’s come together as a community and raise an answer as to why these books are so popular. When I think of romance novels, my mind doesn’t go straight to 10-year-old

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children, because I'm not a child molester, but that is one of the reasons they do so well. The books are easily accessible to a lot more people than the average Harlequin novel. Specifically, they're reaching a lot of mainstream Christian women. As Rebecca Kaye Barrett's 2003 study in the Journal of Religion and Pop Culture sums up, religious romance novels do not depict women as sexual objects, they focus on love rather than lust, and they provide a sense of community for those who read them. Barrett tried to interview women for her study who read non-religious romance novels, but they were all too busy doing it and taking the Lord's name in vain. Barrett also noted many of the women she spoke to discussed being inspired by the books, because they are about the "ideal union": one between man, woman, and God. Now that's my kind of three-way.

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Despite the fact that bonnet books have been banned in some Amish communities, some of their members are getting a little risqué. According to the April 27, 2009, TIME article, an unnamed Amish woman at a book signing told author Beverly Lewis, "All of us are reading them under the covers." And I have a feeling she's being literal, which concerns me, because reading by candlelight under non-flame retardant fabric poses a very big fire hazard. The article goes on to say, "Barnes & Noble's religion-book buyer confirms that sales are particularly strong in Amish areas."

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As for the rest of us, the appeal is simple: the Amish haven't been this sexy since Harrison Ford in *Witness*. It is all about the forbidden love, and when you think about it, pretty much everything in the Amish community is forbidden, making it all that much sexier. Susan Trollinger, professor of writing and rhetoric at the University of Dayton, and Amish life expert, agrees. In a November 5, 2009, Middletown Journal article, she says "The appeal of the books

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are their secretive elements.” It’s official, all the ladies think about what Amos is hiding under his zipperless, suspender-held pants, but we never find out. He’s such a tease.

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Finally, let’s plow a path of insight as to why all of us should read and learn from Amish romance novels. If you’re looking for some Cosmo-type tricks or positions to spice up your love life, this has got nothing for you. Unless you’re into role-playing, I guess. However, if you’re looking for *actual* satisfaction in your relationship, take note. [Hostetler’s aforementioned book](#) explains that for the Amish, “the marriage norm is not love, but respect.” WHAA? Respect?! What a novel concept. Why haven’t we tried this crazy idea, you must be asking yourself? Well, according to [Eva Illouz’s 1997 book “Consuming the Romantic Utopia,”](#) the average American’s view of marriage requires spontaneity, calculation, negotiation, and “hot romance.” While that may sound like a great synopsis for the movie “Ocean’s Twelve,” it is a bit unrealistic for everyone who isn’t George Clooney’s girlfriend; Elisabetta Canalis, I will get you. When setting expectations for your relationship, try basing them all in respect—not some fickle emotion that changes every time Javier the pool boy arrives. He’s so svelte.

See, the Amish know something we don’t—actually, we know it, but like all the other knowledge we have, we just decide to ignore it, because we’re hedonistic fools—they know about the time-intimacy equation. In his [2000 book *Time and Intimacy*, Joel Bennett](#) explains that true intimacy occurs over time. In our instant gratification society, however, if we aren’t tweeting, filming a TV show, *AND* getting a colonoscopy all at once, we’re wasting time. I’m looking at you, Katie Couric. The Amish, on the other hand, incorporate their belief of an afterlife into their cultural understanding of time, giving them the perception that they quite literally have all the time in the world. This allows for true and deep connections to be made and grow. So instead of sending a naked picture of yourself to your significant other via text—

Vanessa Hudgens—try, I don't know, staring longingly at them from across a barn made without nails. Or, you know, something equally as slow and uneventful. While everyone should heed this advice, it's especially important for the fellas: it's not a race, so take your time.

Sure, none of these characters will ever have any corsets to rip open, or brightly colored... anything to smear across one cheek, but these books are surprisingly captivating and they are sweeping the nation. After first having our own Rumspringa and getting a taste of what these bonnet books are all about; second, coming together to raise an answer as to why the novels are so popular; before third, plowing a path of insight as to why all of us should read and learn from Amish romance novels, it's easy to see they have some of our biggest problems—having successful relationships—figured out. And while I highly suggest everyone check these books out, just for future reference, next time you see me reading one, please don't interrupt me. Now where was I? Ah, yes. I'll churn your butter, Jedediah.

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