

Book Review: Considering the Renegade Amish

Donald Kraybill begins his excellent new book, *Renegade Amish*, by describing attacks on Amish families that feel entirely surreal: because they were perpetrated by other Amish, and because they were so violent, so seemingly inexplicable. Could people known for being “the quiet in the land” really enact such horror on their Christian brothers and sisters?

Kraybill answers this question with a resounding yes. The renegade Amish of the Bergholz settlement did indeed violently attack other Amish, men and women who were not only co-religionists, but sometimes even their own family members. They broke into homes, often at night; forcefully restrained and terrorized their victims by screaming in their faces; and then cut their victims’ beards and hair, before disappearing again, many times leaving in vehicles owned by unsuspecting hired drivers.

The apparent dissonance in these opening narratives and the peculiar nature of Amish acting violently to sheer helpless victims sets the scene for Kraybill’s fascinating exploration of the Bergholz Amish. In compelling detail, Kraybill describes the development of the Bergholz settlement, the odd and troubling behavior of its leader, Bishop Sam Mullet, and the events in 2011 that sent sixteen Amish to trial, and then to federal prisons for sentences ranging from life to one year.

The book’s last chapters also consider United States’ jurisprudence, as the Bergholz case challenges current hate crime laws and the Shepherd Byrd act, established in 2009 to protect victims of hate crimes and to more effectively prosecute hate crime perpetrators.

Kraybill has long been recognized as an Amish expert. His *The Amish*, published in 2013 and co-authored with Karen M. Johnson-Weiner and Steven M. Nolt, is the most comprehensive study on the Amish to date; the book also served as a companion to the PBS American Experience documentary of the Amish. As a scholar of Amish faith and culture, Kraybill brings insight into why the Bergholz settlement might have developed, the ways Bergholz Amish differed significantly from other Amish groups, something Kraybill acknowledged as part of his testimony at the 2012 criminal trial of Bergholz settlement members.

His authority as an Amish scholar is clearly evident in *Renegade Amish*, as Kraybill sets the development of the Bergholz settlement within the context of wider Amish history and practice, showing how divergent the Bergholz people and their leader were from other Amish communities. Kraybill describes Mullet as “strong-minded, opinionated, and conservative,” an imposing man who “wanted to hold tightly to old customs” and who was critical of other Amish whom he believed were too easily yielding to modernization.

Kraybill narrates the crimes committed by Mullet and his followers, their trial and jail sentences, as well as the appeals process that is ongoing. For those interested in history, *Renegade Amish* is especially significant, as the book shows how the history of religious freedom in the United States may be challenged and changed by the Bergholz case, as the court system decides how people will be prosecuted under the Shepherd Byrd act, and how broadly hate crimes can be defined.

The court cases are still unfolding, although Kraybill’s book ends in spring 2014. But rather than seeing this new ruling as undermining or contradicting what Kraybill has written in *Renegade Amish*, readers should see the potential retrial of the Bergholz Amish as only a continuation of a compelling story: one being written in the lives of those convicted, as well as in the lives of those who were victims of a culturally-specific kind of violence.

Hopefully, Kraybill will provide a follow-up to his excellent book, as the narrative of the Bergholz barbers is clearly not finished yet.~ This review, by Melanie Springer Mock, is excerpted from “[How A False Prophet Led Amish to Violence](#),” *Mennonite World Review*, January 5, 2015. See the full review online.