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Bonnet-ripping Romances

10.19.2009 | Culture and Society  Books about conspiracy theories, wizards, vampires and sex may sell by the millions, but they have a new challenger. Amish romances — depicting horse-drawn buggies and a 19th century lifestyle — are seeing an increase in sales.

Known as "bonnet-rippers" as opposed to traditional romance novel "bodice-rippers," the books have their own intrigues, said Susan Trollinger, professor of writing and rhetoric and Amish expert at the University of Dayton.

"The Amish are appealing because of their traditional, old-fashioned lifestyle," Trollinger said. "There's a sense of belonging, a feeling of family that many middle-class Americans perceive as the correct way of life. Readers of these books and visitors to Amish country often yearn for this return to simplicity and order in the family."

Trollinger said most Amish romances appear in the Christian section of bookstores, omit most physical expressions of love, and often appeal to conservative women who identify with the lead characters in their responsibilities to children, family and structure in the home. Yet in nearly all of these stories the Amish woman falls in love with an "outsider," she said.

"It's ironic," Trollinger said. "When you think about the conservative Christian women who are the primary audience, it's interesting that they identify with the transgressor who falls for someone outside the Amish fold."

Religion and family themes aren't the only forces driving the sales of Amish literature, which have secured 15 of 100 top religious fiction slots at Barnes and Noble this fall. Another appealing characteristic is the Amish people's secretive way of life.

"Very few people can just show up at an Amish household and be welcomed," Trollinger said, explaining that outsiders are rarely allowed to witness Amish religious ceremonies or observe the Amish in their daily lives. "Amish people go through great pains to reject outside culture — not just technology — but also in how families function as well as mainstream values and beliefs. This rejection of mainstream culture is unsettling, but very intriguing to non-Amish."

People also see the Amish as the "good version of what we used to be," said Trollinger. "We admire the Amish because we believe they have some secret or wisdom that protects simplicity and a moral life."

Interest in the Amish culture is not a new trend, said Trollinger, who began her study of the Amish nearly 15 years ago. She has just completed a book about Amish tourism. Her research explores the growth of tourism in and around the Amish settlements of Pennsylvania, Indiana and Ohio since the 1960s. Tourism increased dramatically after the 1985 release of the movie Witness, starring Harrison Ford as an undercover police officer posing as an Amish man who falls in love with an Amish woman played by Kelly McGillis.

What is new is the growth of Amish literature, a trend Trollinger believes is a response to the secretiveness of the Amish lifestyle.

"These novels promise access to the Amish life," she said. "The books are perceived as an inside view and claim to explain and reveal Amish secrets."

For her research, Trollinger visits Holmes County, Ohio, known for its Amish population, during summers and on breaks from teaching. She has observed the Amish in their daily lives, interviewed and talked with many, and attended Amish worship services and weddings.

Trollinger has been a professor in the English department for three years and teaches a writing course that focuses on the Amish and consumer culture.

For more information, contact Cilla Shindell, director of media relations, at 937-229-3257 or shindell@udayton.edu (mailto:shindell@udayton.edu).