

An Amish Christmas

READING GROUP GUIDE

- * Guide contains spoilers, so don't read before completing the novellas.

For reading groups with five or more members, the authors will participate in the discussion of this collection. If you're interested, go to www.Amishhearts.com.

A MIRACLE FOR MIRIAM

1. Miriam allowed Seth's youthful rejection to affect her self-confidence, even as an adult. Instead of seeing herself as a beautiful woman of God, she continued to see herself as unattractive and undesirable. What can we do to protect our hearts against the thoughtless and cruel words of others?
2. Proverbs 29:23 states, "A man's pride shall bring him low; but honor shall uphold the humble in spirit." How did Seth's accident "bring him low"? How did he vow to change?
3. List some reasons why Miriam didn't trust Seth. Think back to a time where you had difficulty trusting someone else. What allowed you to trust again?

4. The Amish value *demut* (humility) over *hochmut* (pride), and strive to be as humble as possible in all situations. Is humility difficult to achieve? How can we practice humility in our daily lives?

A CHOICE TO FORGIVE

1. Throughout the book, Lydia struggles with forgiveness. First she must find it in her heart to forgive Daniel, and later she must forgive her deceased husband. Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you needed to forgive someone who has passed on? Did forgiveness give you a sense of peace or resolve, even though you were not able to voice your feelings directly to that person?
2. Anna Marie is experiencing her running-around period (*rum-schpringe*). Is her behavior different from that of *Englisch* teenagers at this age? If so, how? Is Lydia more trusting about her daughter's actions than *Englisch* parents might be, or is this simply reflective of a generational shift across both cultures? For example, Lydia states that her parents would have been much stricter with her if they'd caught her sneaking out of the house. Are you less strict with your children than your parents were with you?
3. The Amish believe that all things that happen are of God's will. Is Lydia being true to her faith by questioning the way things happened, harboring ill will, and struggling to forgive—or is she just human? Have you ever questioned God's will in a situation where a different outcome would have affected far more people than just you?

4. Daniel and Lydia were each other's first loves, yet they went on to live separate lives. Do you know anyone who has reunited with his or her first love? Did it work out?

ONE CHILD

1. As Christmas approaches, Sarah is still experiencing grief over the miscarriage of her first child. While the loss of a person dear to us may be the biggest, hardest loss we will experience, there are other forms of loss that are difficult to cope with in life. Some of these losses include the loss of a dream, a job, a house—even the loss of a body image when a person has an accident, stroke, or other trauma that changes the way we look and move. How have you coped, and possibly even grown, from a loss in your life?
2. The Amish rely heavily on the concept of “God’s will” as a way of living spiritually. How do you interpret God’s will, and how do you use it to sustain your faith?
3. Why do you suppose we have such a fascination with the Amish? Many people admire the Amish for separating themselves from the *Englisch* world and living life according to their terms. Have you ever wanted to live a simpler life? Since most of us can’t—or don’t want to—join an Amish community, how can we live a simpler, more faithful life where we are?
4. What are some of your favorite memories of the Christmas season? How do you make sure to remember that “Jesus is the reason for the season”?

CHRISTMAS CRADLES

1. Asa and Anna's relationship is formed by a spontaneous meeting that is, in retrospect, clearly arranged by God. What "chance meetings" have you had in your own life that have revealed God's presence to you?
2. Asa's past is redeemed in a unique way through the experiences of the night. How has God turned your past mistakes into healing or wholeness in the present?
3. Anna's character is one of self-reliance and personal resourcefulness until she discovers a love that allows her to lean on another for support. What relationships in your life provide you with the greatest support?
4. How does the symbolism of "new birth" play out in the story on levels beyond the actual deliveries?

Amish Recipes

SHOESTRING APPLE PIE

This crustless “pie” is very simple and inexpensive to make. After baking, let it cool completely; then scoop out of the pie plate with a large spoon. Serve with whipped cream or ice cream. Enjoy!

4 cups peeled, finely chopped apples
1 cup white sugar
2 tablespoons flour
¼ cup water
2 eggs, beaten
½ teaspoon cinnamon
4 tablespoons butter, divided

1. Preheat oven to 450°.
2. Grease two 9-inch glass pie plates with cooking spray.
3. Combine the first six ingredients until sugar is dissolved and apples are moist. Divide mixture between the two pie plates.
4. Dot each pie with 2 tablespoons butter.
5. Bake in the oven for 15 minutes, then turn down the temperature to 350° and bake for 20 more minutes, or until apples are soft.

Source: *A Taste of Home* from the Schlabach family.

MOLASSES CRINKLE COOKIES

1. Mix together well:

- 3 cups vegetable oil
- 4 cups brown sugar
- 1 cup molasses
- 4 eggs, beaten

2. Add:

- 8 teaspoons baking soda
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 2 teaspoons cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon nutmeg
- 1 teaspoon ground cloves

3. Stir well. Mix in the following with your hands:

- 2 cups whole wheat flour
- 6 cups all-purpose flour

4. Form into 1-inch balls and roll in white sugar. Bake at 350° for 10 minutes.

Makes approximately 10 dozen—plenty for sharing!

Source: Courtesy of an Old Order Amish friend.

FRIENDSHIP BREAD

Give this recipe to your friends to make their own Friendship Bread.

1 cup starter (see following page)
2/3 cup vegetable oil
2 cups all-purpose flour
1 cup sugar
3 eggs
1 1/2 teaspoons baking powder
1/2 teaspoon baking soda
1 teaspoon cinnamon
1/2 teaspoon vanilla
1/2 teaspoon salt

Mix the starter, oil, and eggs together until well blended. Combine the rest of the ingredients in a separate bowl and gradually add to the starter mix.

Here comes the fun part: add chopped apples and raisins (one cup of raisins and one apple) or chocolate or butterscotch morsels or nuts (about a cup or so). Pour into a greased 9 x 5 x 3" loaf pan and bake in a preheated 350° oven for about 45 minutes. Allow to cool for 15 to 20 minutes before removing from pan.

There are as many recipes for Friendship Bread as there are friends! I've seen some use pudding for added richness and different flavors. For an extra-special gift, put the starter in little crockery pots you can buy at the store, and tie the handwritten recipe and a wooden spoon on with ribbon.

Be sure you keep a cup of the starter to keep it going for the next time you want to make a batch of Friendship Bread.

STARTER

Note: Do NOT use a metal spoon for stirring the starter.

1. Mix the following ingredients in a big, deep glass mixing bowl.

- 1 cup sugar
- 1 cup milk
- 1 cup all-purpose flour

2. Partially cover with a lid or use a piece of cheesecloth held with a rubber band or string. Store at room temperature—do NOT refrigerate.

3. Each day for 17 days, stir; skip stirring on day 18. Stir for the next three days; then, on day 22, stir and add the following:

- 1 cup flour
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 cup milk

4. Stir and partially cover again. On days 23, 24, 25, and 26, stir the mixture and cover again. On day 27, stir and add the following ingredients:

- 1 cup flour
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 cup milk

5. Stir. There should now be about 4 cups of starter. Divide into four portions and give 1 cup each in a container to two friends. Reserve 2 cups.

Source: Courtesy of an Old Order Amish friend.

DONNA'S RAISIN-FILLED COOKIES

1 egg
3 teaspoon cream of tartar
1 cup mill
2 teaspoon soda
2 cup sugar
½ teaspoon salt
1 cup shortening
flour (start with about 4 cups)

Mix ingredients together, adding enough flour to make a soft dough. Roll out dough, cutting to desired size. Place on cookie sheet and put a spoonful of raisin filling on top. Top with another cookie and seal around edges.

Bake in 350° oven until slightly brown.

Filling

1 box raisins
2 eggs
1 cup sugar
1 tablespoons butter
2 cup water
2 tablespoons flour

Cook the raisins until tender. Add the sugar and butter. Mix eggs and flour together and stir slowly into raisins. (May be slightly lumpy but it won't matter.) Cook slowly, stirring constantly. Cool.

Hints: Make the top cookie thinner than the bottom one. I take the top cookie and sort of flatten it a little in my hand and then form it around the bottom cookie, sealing the edges. I use about a box and a half of raisins. That way you can put plenty of raisins in each cookie. I use a medium-size glass to cut out my cookies. You can make any size you want.