Why I Left the Amish
A Memoir
By Saloma Miller Furlong

Why I Left the Amish is not a study of the reasons Amish young people decide to leave their faith, nor does it shed much light on the broader Amish world. Instead, it is a poignant and difficult account of author Saloma Miller Furlong’s childhood and adolescence in a dysfunctional Amish home in Ohio. Telling us that “there are two ways to leave the Amish—one is through life and the other through death” (p. 1), Furlong explains her reasons for leaving her family and explores the effects of her decision to leave her Amish world.

Furlong begins her story with her arrival as a non-traditional student at Smith College; here, even as she begins a new phase in her “English” or non-Amish life, her thoughts remain with her father, who is in the last stages of life in his Ohio home. As she writes a letter of farewell to her father and a letter of support to her mother, Furlong reminisces about her early childhood, drawing a picture of her parents that is striking in its ambivalence—while her letters speak of fond memories, the stories she recounts are fearful. She remembers her father as physically misshapen, and her account reveals him to have been emotionally distant and physically abusive.

Throughout this memoir, Furlong shifts between her life as a non-Amish adult, married with a college-age son and studying at Smith, and her Amish childhood in Ohio. Driving home for her father’s funeral, Furlong prepares to confront a mother who provided little in the way of security or support, an older brother who sexually assaulted her, sisters whom she could not trust in childhood and who have also left their parents’ world, and relatives and friends from her previous life of whose welcome she is unsure. We come to know them through Furlong’s reminiscences, and, seeing them through her memories, we question their lives.

Much remains unanswered in this memoir. We learn nothing as to why Furlong’s sisters leave the Amish community, nor do we ever really come to know the younger brother, Simon. Furlong’s older brother, Joe, is cruel and abusive and, even though he apologizes after the funeral, it is clear that she does not trust him. She hugs her mother before leaving to return home after the funeral, a “tradition” she had started when she returned to her community four months after leaving it, but Furlong leaves this first return unexplored. We do not know how long she stayed, whether she was pressured to return to the church, or what her reception was.

Other hints suggest that the funeral is not Furlong’s first return
home. On the way back to Massachusetts, for example, she and husband David talk of her brother Joe’s reaction the previous summer to seeing his nephew, whom he may have fathered. Yet, despite these visits, Furlong’s son seems ignorant of the ways of his maternal grandparents and other Amish relatives. How, we wonder, has she been able to maintain contact with her parents and siblings while keeping her son in the dark about all that shaped her life?

This is not a story about the Amish. It is instead, a personal journey across time, space, and culture. Furlong’s childhood, and the community’s unwillingness to turn to the outside world for help in dealing with an abusive family, exacerbates the author’s personal pain. However, there is nothing particularly Amish about her suffering; her abusive family dynamics, unfortunately, know no ethnic, racial, or religious boundaries. Although vividly described, the Amish world of Furlong’s childhood is presented through a dark lens of hurt and sadness. In short, while this book is important as a personal memoir of abuse, it contributes much less to our understanding of Amish culture.

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