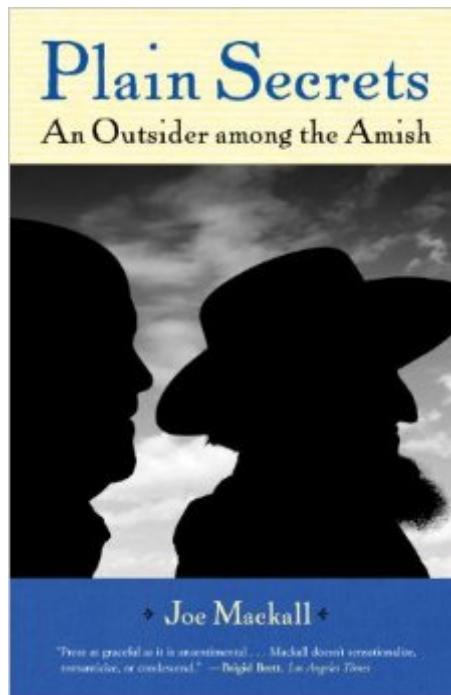


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# Plain Secrets: An Outsider Among The Amish



## Synopsis

Joe Mackall has lived surrounded by the Swartzentruber Amish community of Ashland County, Ohio, for over sixteen years. They are the most traditional and insular of all the Amish sects: the Swartzentrubers live without gas, electricity, or indoor plumbing; without lights on their buggies or cushioned chairs in their homes; and without rumspringa, the recently popularized "running-around time" that some Amish sects allow their sixteen-year-olds. Over the years, Mackall has developed a steady relationship with the Shetler family (Samuel and Mary, their nine children, and their extended family). *Plain Secrets* tells the Shetlers' story over these years, using their lives to paint a portrait of Swartzentruber Amish life and mores. During this time, Samuel's nephew Jonas finally rejects the strictures of the Amish way of life for good, after two failed attempts to leave, and his bright young daughter reaches the end of school for Amish children: the eighth grade. But *Plain Secrets* is also the story of the unusual friendship between Samuel and Joe. Samuel is quietly bemused and, one suspects, secretly delighted at Joe's ignorance of crops and planting, carpentry and cattle. He knows Joe is planning to write a book about the family, and yet he allows him a glimpse of the tensions inside this intensely private community. These and other stories from the life of the family reveal the larger questions posed by the Amish way of life. If the continued existence of the Amish in the midst of modern society asks us to consider the appeal of traditional, highly restrictive, and gendered religious communities, it also asks how we romanticize or condemn these communities and why. Mackall's attempt to parse these questions to write as honestly as possible about what he has seen of Amish life tests his relationship with Samuel and reveals the limits of a friendship between "English" and Amish.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Neither a scholarly treatise nor a vilification, an idealization nor an exposé, Joe Mackall's *PLAIN SECRETS* is a narrative that explores one man's relationship to an Amish family and, by extension, a community. Mackall, who lives in Ashland County, Ohio, befriends the Shetler family: Samuel, Mary and their nine children (names changed by the author). Over the years, living in close proximity to the Shetlers, Mackall develops as close a relationship with the family as an Englisher might be allowed. What emerges is the peace, beauty and goodness of the culture, as well as the disturbing questions he finds himself asking about legalism, the rights of women and the protection of children. His friendship with the family also helps him learn more about himself. "I have chosen...to mine the raw material of their everyday lives in search of everyday truths," writes Mackall. It's an immersion into the world of the Swartzentruber, the most traditional and strict of the Amish sects. The Swartzentruber refuse to use reflective signs on the back of their buggies, leave school after the eighth grade, bathe only once a week and carry no insurance. The women are not permitted to wear bras and are not allowed to shave their underarms or legs. However, there are plenty of surprises. This conservative sect shops at Wal-Mart and loves the Dollar Store, and may enjoy junk food such as Milky Way candy bars and potato chips. Although they don't practice "rumspringa" like many other Amish sects, the Swartzentruber Amish let their teens go on "dates," in which a teenage boy and girl spend the night together, side by side, in her bed.

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