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A surprising spree of saucy books from Anabaptist women

by Ankita Rao by Religion News Service

Rhoda Janzen's life is the stuff of a riveting, albeit unfortunate, tale.

She survived an ugly car accident, realized her husband was gay, and sought refuge in her parents' Mennonite home for a string of hilarious, healing weeks.

Her memoir, *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress* was published last year, part of a string of "going home" memoirs by women who left the Anabaptist faith of their childhood for love, opportunities or because of tensions in the community.

Anabaptists -- the religious umbrella that includes the Amish, Mennonites and Hutterites -- have captured media attention for shunning the outside world, technology, and modern clothing.

But the recent books are not tales of horse and buggy, of bonnets and broad brims, or even a removed society. The women's memoirs indulge in sex, rebellion, and analysis of personal faith.

"In the seven years I was writing this, my knees were trembling the whole time," said Mary-Ann Kirkby, author of *I am Hutterite*.



Born to a Hutterite family in Manitoba, the Canadian broadcast journalist had been out

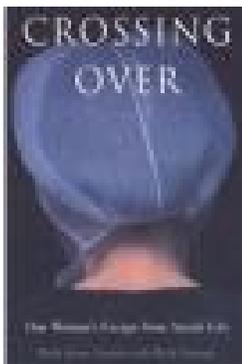
of the community for 40 years when she returned to her childhood home in 2002 after a co-worker made an uneducated -- and derogatory -- comment about the community.

I am Hutterite features a nostalgic collection of family history, wholesome memories and tempting treats.

Yet Kirkby knew she knew would ignite controversy: Her parents had left the colony in 1969 to escape growing tensions, and she knew the Hutterites would not enjoy having their story in the public eye.

"I had to weigh the importance of this story against the fact that I would hurt people," said Kirkby, now 50, from her home in Saskatchewan.

Ruth Irene Garrett also knew she would face similar criticism when she wrote her book, *Crossing Over: One Woman's Escape from Amish Life*.



Garrett was approached by PBS several years ago to create a documentary and a book

about her transition from the Amish to life among the "English," the Amish term for the outside world.

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Her account is wrought with emotion from the verbal "abuse" she encountered in her church and family when she fell in love with Ottie Garrett, an outsider and 15 years her senior.

While Garrett continues to maintain relationships with her Amish family in Iowa and Indiana from her home in Glasgow, Ky., the pain of being shunned from a community is hard to overcome.

"My mother cries most of the time, and my father preaches more of the time," said Garrett, 36. "They're convinced there's no salvation" outside the Amish church.

If revealing, risky writing defines one facet of Anabaptist memoirs, self-discovery characterizes another.

Despite embarrassing Mennonite moments of her youth -- from hand-me-down patched jeans to stinky potato salad -- Janzen found her adult unbelief challenged by her return home.

Her parents, she said, are the hardworking, service-driven devotees that define the best part of the Mennonite tradition.

"I did feel like an outsider" back home, Janzen said. "But I really like that my parents know who I am and I don't need to be duplicitous with them."

Janzen found a new life after leaving the Mennonites and penning her memoir. She re-married, joined a Pentecostal church and battled cancer. "Spiritual fitness" became a consistent part of her life, she said, as well as the impetus behind her forthcoming book, *Backsliders*.

For Kirkby, revisiting the stories and homes of her Hutterite past was also a lesson in opening up about her own life, just as she had opened others' in her work as a journalist.

"I was willing to tell everybody else's story," she said. "My own would remain a secret."

When publishers were noncommittal about her book, Kirkby opened up a small publishing house and produced *I am Hutterite* through her self-owned Polka Dot Press.

Seventy-five thousand copies later, she had a contract from Thomas Nelson publishers, and was speaking at events around the U.S. and Canada. Fans told her that her reconnection with her roots helped them understand their own cultures.

For Kirkby, it was just a matter of living an honest life. She said she spoke, ate and thought Hutterite, and there was no reason to pretend otherwise.

"I had such a privileged upbringing, I had such a wonderful childhood," she said. "I was wounded by people's misconceptions."

Garrett, too, found a sense of freedom in her life outside the Amish. "When you go home, it seems like the Amish world was even more repressive," she said, especially for women.

Janzen, now 47 and living in Holland, Mich., compared her return to life among the Mennonites to the traditional Amish "rumspringa," when young Amish men and women are let loose into the world to decide for themselves where they belong. She called her return "deliberate exposure."

"The issues that came up for me when I visited my community of origin were faith issues," she said, "And I really liked what I saw."

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