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Bookworm review

Bookworm: "Plain: A Memoir of Mennonite Girlhood" by Mary Alice Hostetter

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Terri Schlichenmeyer

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(Editor's note: The Daily Union print edition runs the column, "The Bookworm Sez," by Terri Schlichenmeyer, in which she reviews books on a variety of topics. Some are for children; others, for adults. An avid reader, the writer resides in La Crosse with her two dogs and 11,000 books.)

Every kid wants to fit in.

The shoes everyone else has are mandatory, and flashing a movie character is key. Same brand of notebook, even the same kind of pens could matter if you hoped to be on the good side of the Popular Kids. Everyone wants to fit in but in the new book, "Plain" by Mary Alice Hostetter, going against the tide can eventually work out fine, too.

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The table in the kitchen where Mary Alice Hostetter grew up was a long one; it had to be, to fit twelve children and two parents. The kitchen was the hub of the large Mennonite family, and though her parents never said the L-word, "treats like doughnuts were as clear an expression of love as hearing the words."

Born in her parents' bedroom in rural Pennsylvania, Hostetter remembers that there was a strict division between women's work and men's work among the pacifist Mennonites. Her father and brothers tended the farm, while her mother tended home and children. And yet, when she was needed, Hostetter was allowed to do "boy's work," and it left a heady feeling.

Figuring out her own recipe for soup at age ten was a moment of pride, but Hostetter longed for more. What was it like to have your own bedroom? How would feel to have sunshine on her legs instead of a long dress, for modesty?

At fourteen, she struggled with a main tenet of her faith; at fifteen, she accepted that tenet, attended church, and tried to be a good daughter, but life outside the community beckoned. Hostetter wanted to go to college.

Her parents wanted her to wait and see if she might want a family first.

Her growing up was "such a beautiful way of life," she says, and "I sometimes felt almost proud I was part of that way of life... until I remembered how eager I was to get away as soon as I could."

In "Plain," author Mary Alice Hostetter writes, among other gentle memories, of her mother as a storyteller. Can something like that be inherited? Because Hostetter is a storyteller, too—and a fine one, at that.

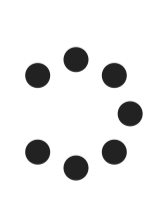
If you've ever been a fan of "The Waltons" or Laura Ingalls Wilder, you have an inkling of the kind of old-fashioned tales you'll find in Hostetter's book. Life is quiet on her parents' farm, she and her siblings each have two pairs of shoes (one for "good," one for chores), dinnertime is family time, and modern things rarely appear.

The difference is that Hostetter's tales are warm, but not cheerful. Proud, but also embarrassed. They chafe with the need to escape, but with one foot still on the farm and despite a quick, surprise happy ending and another kind of L-word, they leave hanging a wonder of what might have been.

But don't hang. Instead, enjoy this book and leave it on the table, because you might want to read it again. "Plain" is worthy, and short enough to fit in your schedule now.

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