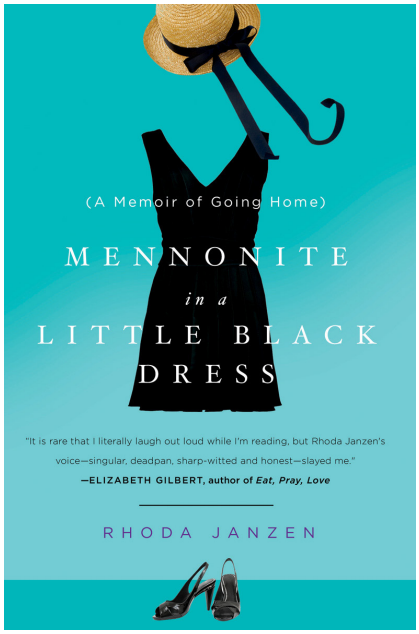
Mennonite In A Little Black Dress

A Memoir of Going Home

by Rhoda Janzen



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A Conversation With Rhoda Janzen

What prompted you to write Mennonite in a Little Black Dress?

I had never thought of myself as a nonfiction writer, and I never would have started writing a memoir on my own. When I first returned to the Mennonite community, I started peppering my friends with astonished e-mails about my folks. I was, like, Check this out! My father reuses his toothpicks! My mother is ideologically committed to finishing a super stinky cucumber lotion that she got at a hotel! It was my friend Carla who first told me that I'd better start saving the e-mails. She said they were beginning to smell like a memoir.

Your previous book is a collection of poems, Babel's Stair, and your poems have also been widely published in journals and anthologies. Was it difficult to make the switch from writing poetry to writing prose?

Fools rush in. I've been studying the craft of writing poetry my entire adult life, and my commitment to it has a serious edge that I blessedly don't feel when I write creative nonfiction. Because of my training, I'm supposed to know what I'm doing in poetry. But I've never studied nonfiction in a formal context, so it's easy to give myself permission to wing it. This is the beauty of ignorance.

What's up with those head coverings that so many Mennonite women wear?

My question exactly! The Mennonites would tell you that they wear them as a public sign of modesty. Mennonite women have a long tradition of not wanting to tempt men with their worldly beauty, you know. They used to wear ugly little capes like ponchos to hide their "womanly shape." But I suspect that the head coverings are just cheaper than hair products.

Where are you on your spiritual journey today?

So often we think of faith as the crutch of crisis; we turn to it only when our world bottoms out, as mine did when my husband left me. Weirdly, faith is becoming more important to me, not less. I'm still exploring issues of spirituality and theology, and I'm even regularly attending a church. Also, nobody's twisting my arm! I'm often amazed that an English professor prefers nonfiction to new fiction….with a nod to Viktor Frankl, the books on my nightstand are all about man's search for meaning.

You write briefly in your memoir about having chosen to not bear children. Was this a difficult decision?

Nick had a vasectomy the first month we were married. That was a joint decision. Given his misery, we felt that it would be irresponsible to risk passing on bipolarity. I do love children, and I've often wondered what kind of a mother I would have made. For us, though, the harder decision was not to adopt, as my brothers have. We chose not to because we couldn't provide a stable parenting environment.

But I can't pin my decision solely on Nick's situation. You know what troubles me? The notion that we should reproduce just because we can. Seems to me we should be able to articulate some proactive, deliberated reasons for bringing a child into the world. When women cite their biological clock, I wonder if they've thought that out. Shouldn't human beings assess their biological urges as well as admit them? What if we're having babies to feel less lonely, more needed? If so, we're using someone to make us feel better about ourselves. That's a little creepy.

Your mother is wonderfully, irrepressibly upbeat. Did her sunny outlook on life shape your terrific sense of humor?

Sure. She cracks me up. She sees the world through an astonishing parental lens. Recently I drove her to a family reunion and she sent along a picture of me that made me look like the love child of Menno Simons and Spiro Agnew—no comment, just, Here, I thought you might like this hideous picture of yourself! Then there was a picture of my sister with a pandowdy face and an underslung chin, like a muffler dragging a bumper. What is it with moms? Have they no sense? I retaliate by taking pictures of her in hats. She has a global head and no neck, and yet she just peacefully stands there and lets me photograph her in any hat whatsoever, including an eighties shoulder pad I removed from her coat.

What memoirs have moved or inspired you? Did they influence the way you wrote your own?

One memoir I read late into the night was Kao Kalia Yang's The Latehomecomer, about the Hmong immigration to the United States from Laos. But I never seriously read memoir as a genre until I had written one. I was always too busy with poetry and with cultural criticism circa 1885. Now, though, I love curling up with a good memoir from time to time. Who doesn't love David Sedaris's deadpan humor, Jeannette Walls's submerged self-pity, Elizabeth Gilbert's discursive questing? Good stuff.

Discussion Questions:

1. Rhoda's parents are deeply religious. What are some of the more notable ways their faith manifests itself? What qualities do they possess that you admire? Were you surprised by anything you learned about the Mennonite community?

2. The lover named Bob pops up with an almost incantatory persistence, like a refrain. Do you think it would be harder to be left for a man or a woman? Given that Rhoda returns to the lover's gender

again and again, what do you think Rhoda would say?

3. Consider the marriages portrayed in this book. Rhoda and Nick remain together fifteen years; Mary and Si, more than forty-four years; Hannah and Phil, eleven years. Does the book make any tacit suggestions about what makes a good marriage? Do you know of any marriages that make you say, "I want what they have"?

4. Consider Rhoda's family gatherings on Christmas Eve and Christmas. Would you describe this as a functional or a dysfunctional family dynamic? Rhoda and her siblings are very different from one another – do they get along better than you would expect, or not?

5. Rhoda does not explicitly state that her parents opposed her marriage to an intellectual atheist, but we may infer that with their deeply held religious convictions, they grieved for Rhoda's future. Do you think that Rhoda's parents would have opened their home to Nick, if he had wished to become a part of the family? What should loving parents do when their child chooses unwisely?

6. Rhoda announces early on in the memoir that her husband left her for a man he met on Gay.com; however, as the book progresses, she slowly reveals that her marriage had been troubled for some time, and that she knew Nick was bisexual before they were married. Does this revelation change your perspective? Can we sympathize with a woman who knowingly entered into a marriage with a bisexual man? Do you think Rhoda's piecemeal revelations mimic the way in which Rhoda comes to terms with the end of her marriage? Why do you think the book is structured this way?

7. To what extent is this a memoir about growing up? Rhoda humorously relates her embarrassment at having to eat "shame-based foods" at school as a child – but admits that as an adult, she enjoys them. Similarly, she looks back fondly on other experiences that were likely not very pleasant at the time – setting off a yard bomb inside the van she was sleeping in on a camping trip, for one. Are there other examples you can think of? Do you think this kind of nostalgia – a willingness to appreciate and poke fun at bad memories – is something that's indicative of maturity, of adulthood? Or is it a dodge, a way to avoid facing unpleasant truths?

8. The Mennonites disapprove of dancing and drinking alcohol. Rhoda says that while growing up, radios, eight-track tapes, unsupervised television, Lite-Brites, and Barbies – among other things – were all forbidden. Does her family gain anything positive by limiting "wordly" influences? Did Rhoda and her siblings lose anything in being so sheltered? What "wordly" influences would you try to protect your children from today?

9. Some Mennonites disapprove of higher education. Do you think that a career in academia necessarily precludes one from faith? How does Rhoda reconcile the two?

10. Rhoda's mother is, as Rhoda puts it, "as buoyant as a lark on a summer's morn." Rhoda claims to be not as upbeat as her mother, but do you think that in some ways, she is? Given the seriousness of some of the issues explored in the memoir, did the humorous voice surprise you?

11. Rhoda freely discusses the problems in her marriage, and how poorly her husband sometimes treated her. Looking back on it, however, she thinks that she probably still would have married him regardless. She asks, "Is it ever really a waste of time to love someone, truly and deeply, with everything you have?" What do you think?

12. Does the memoir signal Rhoda's forgiveness of Nick? Or does the writing of it suggest that in some ways she is still hanging on to her hurt? Forgiveness isn't often explicitly taught. Some religious institutions fall short in this area, stressing that we *should* forgive rather than telling us how to forgive. How did you learn to forgive? How can we teach forgiveness to our children?

13. Rhoda and Hannah make a list of men they would refuse to date – it includes, but is not limited to: men named Dwayne or Bruce; men who have the high strange laugh of a distant loon; men who bring index cards with prewritten conversation starters on a first date. What qualities might you assiduously avoid in a romantic partner?

14. Rhoda's mother tells her, "When you're young, faith is often a matter of rules…but as you get older, you realize that faith is really a matter of relationship – with God, with the people around you, with members of your community." Is Rhoda's own relationship with faith an example of this, in a way?

15. Toward the end of the book, Rhoda remarks that she "suddenly felt destiny as a mighty and perplexing force, an inexorable current that sweeps us off into new channels." Do you believe in destiny? Can you really ever escape your roots or change your beliefs?