Towards ‘New Memoir’: Ira Wagler’s Ex-Amish Life Narrative Growing Up Amish

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Memoir writing has become a space of empowerment for those whose voices have been silenced, misrepresented, or not yet understood by the mainstream. Ira Wagler’s *New York Times* bestseller, *Growing Up Amish* (2011), can be viewed as a further extension of the body of literature that focuses on oppression, agency, and survival. In this essay I will survey universal literary themes in Wagler’s ex-Amish memoir—such as the father-son and identity conflicts—and situate them in Old Order Amish cultural contexts. I will further explore relevant genre conventions—including Patrick Madden’s theory of ‘new memoir’ from 2014—as well as the narrating I’s voice that reflect the Old Order Amish concept of *Gelassenheit* and the virtue of humility.

Introducing Ex-Amish Memoir and Memoir Conventions

1 The Old Order Amish is a small religious minority that seeks separation from the outside world but is nevertheless omnipresent in popular media. Yet, it is rare that representations of Old Order Amish perspectives described in creative non-fiction become a *New York Times* bestseller or reach wider mainstream audiences. Therefore, it is somewhat surprising that not more has been undertaken to examine a small but emerging sub-genre of memoir by Plain People societies that I am proposing to name ‘ex-Amish memoir.’ The popularity of this genre can be contributed to the success of voyeurism, a fascination with the “exotic,” the great demand for “wholesome” Christian books dealing with the Amish (referred to as ‘bonnet books’) as well as the memoir boom. Arising from social media’s focus on the private everyday lives of individuals and unknown, non-professional writers,[1] ex-Amish memoirs often challenge stereotypes of the Amish and comment on Amish values and ways of living. Further characteristics include internal and external trauma-filled conflicts as well as a closer understanding of personal identity.

2 Positioned between biography and autobiography, objectivity and subjectivity as well as multi-temporal levels of the past and present, memoir represents a liminal space where identity is both explored and creatively crafted. Instead of focusing on an entire life, the memoirist recounts and reflects on selective, noteworthy chapters from his or her own life, episodes featuring significant others, and either single or multidimensional themes (Couser 23; Buss 595). In contrast to autobiography as a grand narrative, memoir is a fragmented, often multivocal form allowing for multiplicity of selfhood.

3 As in literary writing, the memoirist must tell a good story with three-dimensional characters; however, it must adhere to truth telling and recount facts. In his treatise, *Memoir: An Introduction*, G. Thomas Couser has coined the term “artifactuality,” a blend of “artfulness” and “presumed factuality” which signifies the intertwined relationship between mimetic reality constructed retrospectively from factual information believed to be true (15). Presumed factuality denotes the memoir’s balancing of mimesis with “actual human experience” (15). Thus, the memoirist must above all be credible and the memoir believable—in other words: Its truth value must withstand the test of time. Exaggeration, silence, and omissions can impinge on truth value, but dishonesty or the presentation of fiction as fact is viewed as intolerable. While writers of life narratives utilize a number of the same literary devices as novelists,[2] memoirists do not enjoy the poetic license of a novel. Overly ornamental, colorful prose or too much dialogue may lead some readers to question the memoirist’s integrity. In essence, the differences between fact and fiction are not always distinguishable as memoir relies on fallible human memory of which remembering and forgetting are an integral part.

4 While personal narratives have become a fundamental part of social psychology, sociology, and even postmodern historiographical discourse, memoir is still an emerging genre in the field of literary criticism. It has lived in the shadow of the biography and especially the autobiography for decades. Similar to the condescending attitudes toward the novel in the 18th century, memoir is—even in the midst of a memoir boom—viewed by some as a rather disreputable form. Thomas Larson illuminates this limiting point-of-view:

> Memoir situates the one story as equal to or greater than […] the epic chronology of the Life. Autobiography's central tenet—wisdom gained through many years—is much too grandiose for the memoirist. In fact, memoir writers are so bent on activating the particular in their books that many are writing of the immediate past, even still-corruptible present, not waiting for time to ripen or change what they know. (16)

5 The ability to reflect on, analyze, understand, and transform one's life into a written text is not solely a matter of temporality but of distance, creativity, and reflection. The memoirist's ability to separate the subject from the subject matter depends on both cognitive and emotional factors, factors that may or may not be influenced by shorter or longer periods of time. Postmodern theory as described by Kenneth J. Gergen underlines the fragmentation of the self and deeply questions the very "concept of an 'authentic self' with knowable characteristics" (qtd. in Cahil 290), thereby shattering the very foundation upon which autobiography has been built.

"New" Memoir and Narrative Structuring

6 In addition to considering memoir in terms of genre, literary analysis, and thematic subgroupings, Patrick Madden has suggested broadening these approaches to include the interdisciplinary vantage points of postmodernism and cultural studies. According to Madden, exploring memoir in terms of "the mediated nature of life, the unwieldiness of experience, the fallibility of memory, and the artifice of textual transformation" provides a more productive method of delineation than conventional approaches alone (223). Instead of being presented with a final product in which episodes are simply recounted in written literary form, the writer of "new memoir" invites readers into the writing process on a metalevel, while making sense of the narrative's deeper meaning. The new memoirist delves into the "meditative quality" of the writer's experience rather than leaving that arduous task up to the reader (224–25). Humility is a further feature of new memoir which focuses on situating one's life in relation to others and the universality of experience instead of viewing one's life as special or exceptional (226–27). Building on the work of memory studies and the shift from the "known to the unknown" (227), uncertainty is also an integral part of Madden's designation as are subversion, the uses of pain and suffering, and formal experimentation (229–34). While Wagler's memoir does not completely fit Madden's concept of new memoir, especially with regard to formal experimentation and subversion (rebelling against genre conventions or questioning the memoir's own validity), Wagler's self-story converges on new memoir in other ways.

7 Before exploring *Growing Up Amish* in terms of new memoir, I would like to make some preliminary remarks on narrative structuring, which Donald E. Polkinghorne refers to as "smoothing." According to Polkinghorne, smoothing can be explained as follows: "In configuring a story of life episode, narratives often omit details and condense parts ('flattening'), elaborate and exaggerate other parts ('sharpening'), and make parts more compact and consistent ('rationalization') to produce a coherent and understandable explanation" (9). Smoothing operates in a dialectical process with memory and is heavily influenced by culturally available plots and the "conceptual network of the culture in which they are produced" (12). In other words, narrativization—the act of producing a narrative from memory—is influenced by ethnic and cultural knowledge similar to the way culture influences language or the way orality is considered a recognized narratological feature of both African American and Native American storytelling.[3]

8 In the following, I will show that Wagler's *Growing Up Amish*—which appeared three years before Madden's study—approaches new memoir as some of its features overlap with Amish ways of knowing. For now, let us turn our attention to narrative identities and structuring. I suggest using Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's four narrative levels that distinguish between different facets of narrative identity:

1. The "'real' or historical 'I,'" the "flesh-and-blood person located in a particular time and place," who is "unknown and unknowable by readers" (72);
2. The "narrating 'I' or "the 'I' who tells the autobiographical narrative" (72);
3. The "narrated 'I'" or the object of study (73);
4. The "ideological 'I'" or the self that is "historically and culturally situated" (76–77).[4]

9 In fiction, a clear distinction is made between the author, narrator, and protagonist; in life writing as a form of non-fiction, as Phillipe Lejeune has pointed out in his book, *On Autobiography* (1989), there exists an implicit "pact" with the reader that "the *author*, the *narrator*, and the *protagonist* must be identical" (5).[5] The benefit of using Smith and Watson's term "real" or "historical" person instead of author is that the identity of the real person continues to develop over time, long after a piece of life writing has been published. The narrating I, narrated I, and ideological I are all part of the real person, but the real person is more than these since not all aspects of one's identity are openly revealed to others. Adrian Holliday, Martin Hyde, and John Kullman refer to the process of negating the complexity of ourselves in everyday life as "cultural reductionism" (164).

Growing Up Amish

10 Keeping these designations in mind, let us now turn our attention to the narrative structure of *Growing Up Amish* which is divided into four sections: prologue, part I, part II, and epilogue. The prologue commences *in medias res* with Wagler's running away from home in the middle of the night, a scene which foreshadows his fall from grace. Written in a suspenseful style, the prologue serves both a marketing and literary function by setting the stage for a trauma-filled journey: "One fateful, starless, April night, I got up at 2:00 a.m. in the pitch black darkness, left a scribbled note under my pillow, and walked away. […] I could not know of the years of turmoil, rage, and anguish that eventually would push me on the brink of madness and despair" [ix].

11 Adhering to mediated cultural scripts, life stories usually commence with one's childhood.[6] Thus, in *Growing Up Amish*, part I begins with the narrated I's birth as child number nine, creatively recounted from family stories and general reflections on the cultural meaning of babies in an Amish community. In this section, the narrating I breaks stereotypes (the Amish are the same; the Amish are successful, content farmers) by introducing the Amish as diverse cultural groups (ch. 2), by presenting Wagler's siblings as individuals with diverse personalities and interests (ch. 3), and by describing his father as a passionate writer with poor farming and fathering skills (ch. 7). In addition, part I reflects on the beauty of growing up in a large, close-knit family and community. Growing up in a communal society means that the ideological I's identity is closely linked to both family and group, an observation manifested in the narrativization of Wagler's life.

12 While critical at times, Wagler has composed his memoir in a humble, considerate manner as his audience unmistakably includes both Plain People and non-Plain readers. Respectful of Amish ways, the narrating I includes no photos and steers clear of taboo topics, such as teenage pregnancy, divorce, homosexuality as well as physical and sexual abuse among the Amish. Wagler walks a tightrope—explaining Amish ways to the dominant culture and questioning some Amish practices—without alienating most people of his heritage. At the same time, *Growing Up Amish* is still subversive in that Wagler—in a quiet but authorial voice—speaks against tradition for the sake of tradition as well as rebels against group power dynamics, the lack of meaningful communication, and the various social sanctions imposed on the wayward. Even when only making observations and remaining descriptive (146), seeds of subversion are planted.

13 Thus, the narrating I engages with the past on both a micro and macro level. Ira Wagler's book serves as a counter narrative to rumors circulating about him—the narrated I—in Amish communities. At the same time, it seeks a dialogue with his family, especially his father, and the Old Order Amish.[7] Even though ex-Amish non-fictional narratives are as diverse as the Amish themselves, the narrated I's formative experiences echo the trauma and suffering of former or excommunicated Amish who found or find themselves caught between the seemingly irreconcilability of secure communal, religious life and the adventure of freedom, between the love of family and personal fulfillment. Describing and overcoming this divide is the focus of part II of Wagler's book.

14 Struggling to negotiate the meaning of Amish rituals, such as *rumspringa*, baptism, marriage, and the selection of a minister, Wagler critically engages with these practices. He scrutinizes the confining over-abundance of rules, the unquestioning devotion to authority and tradition, and the fear of eternal damnation. For descriptive impact, he employs imagery to express the binary, ambivalent relationship between the narrated I/ideological I's confinement in the Amish box and his longing for freedom, conceivably the most cherished core American value:

> Think about it. You are in a box—a comfortable box, but a pretty confining one. You wonder what's outside. You peek out a bit now and then, and peer around. But deep down, you know that if you step outside the box, you are speeding directly down the highway to hell and could arrive at any instant. Boom, just like that. (86)

15 With the hard rock song "Highway to Hell" from AC/DC ringing in their ears, non-Amish readers are confronted with both a literal interpretation of eternal damnation and Wagler's genuine fear of losing his salvation—certainly a representative fear of those people considering leaving the Amish. From an Amish point of view, the box should provide protection from the perilous outside world, but Wagler equates submission to the community's will with imprisonment. Used as a leitmotif at least twelve times throughout the narrative, the box imagery is closely affiliated with the theme of freedom or self-determination. Freedom is metaphorically expressed through recalling the story of a young sparrow in a barn, which the narrated I frees instead of "twisting its head from its body and throwing it to the lurking cats" as his brothers usually do (18), or signified by the cowboy life he attempts to build after leaving the Amish community for the first time.

16 The memoir contains further examples of personal trauma, e.g. the deep guilt associated with leaving his family—especially his mother and disabled brother Titus—as well as his excommunication. Through Wagler's quiet voice, simple words, and understatement, the descriptions of trauma feel authentic, not exaggerated. When speaking of the wrong done to his soon-to-be ex-fiancée, the narrating I explains: "It was all so very cruel, so very, very wrong. But it was what it was, and I only can tell it like it was" (185). Later, when describing his public confession of misdeeds in an attempt to have his excommunication lifted, he remarks: "Now before these men, all of whom were quite familiar with my history, I was expected to confess the sins I had committed. To speak of them, recite them in minute detail. It was a harsh and bitter thing" (241). Through this "flattening," the narrating I reduces the pathos of these passages.[8]

Traumatized people often find it difficult to express their sensory experiences in rich language. There are, however, a few episodes in which Wagler uses "sharpening" in this context. In chapter 24, for example, the narrating I articulately describes his inner state shortly before breaking up with his fiancée, Sarah Miller:

> Sometime late in 1985, I entered a land of looming, fearful shadows, a mental zombie zone, from which I would not emerge for several years. And gradually, I descended into a world of real depression. There was no diagnosis, because counseling was not an option.

> Requesting counseling, back then, would have been tantamount to admitting one was insane. Not that I would ever have thought of considering it, anyway. I wouldn't have known enough to consider it. So there was no help for me. The darkness would have to be faced alone.

17 Those were surreal days, in retrospect. I walked about in a fog of pain and silence, walled off from those around me. I wasn't angry. Only sad. And not particularly because of them. It was not their fault. They were who they were. And I was who I was. They could not communicate. I could not communicate. We didn't know how. We were never taught how. So we stirred about, passing each other like blind men stumbling in the night (198).

18 The "meditative quality" that Madden assigns to the new memoir is apparent in this passage. Wagler's trauma is real. Retrospectively, the narrating I has access to information he did not have as a young man and shares it with the reader. The narrated I had great difficulty giving up the self and submitting to God as well as to the rest of the community, as Amish people are expected to do according to *Gelassenheit*. This principle requires the Amish to submit "to a higher authority" (Kraybill 29) and to "yield to divine providence without trying to change or influence history" (30). In a high-context culture—in which the ideological I operates—verbal reticence or silence, an understated tone, and indirect verbal communication are prized and public displays of emotion are rare. The tragedy of the ideological I's experience is knowing that something is wrong but not knowing exactly what it is, how to express it to others, or how to overcome it. Wagler's upbringing did not provide him with the necessary tools to name or face his problems since the Amish value of *Gelassenheit* is diametrically opposed to what Donald Kraybill refers to as "aggressive individualism of modern culture" and "personal fulfilment" (29). The narrating I indicates that the narrated I knew or could have known that his repeated homecomings to Amish life would likely end disastrously, but he felt trapped in a vicious circle, one that seemed to replay similar events over and over again in slightly altered forms (110, 130–31, 141–42, 149).

19 Wagler concludes his memoir in the epilogue with an insightful understanding of his place in the world: "And even though they no longer claim me as one of their own, I deeply respect the people connected to me by blood or background—the Amish. Their culture and their faith. With all their flaws. And all their strengths. They are still a part of me and will always be" (270). The memoirist dissolves the binary opposition between being Amish and non-Amish. Through many discussions with a Mennonite couple and an Amish convert he calls Sam, the narrated I comes to forgive himself and others (258). After coming to terms with his religious identity, Wagler leaves for the fifth time but for the first time without "running in frantic despair into some wild and dangerous horizon" (268). The memoir testifies to the idea that quests for selfhood are part of complex, active, continuous, and arduous processes of negotiation, not something one "finds."

20 However, the narrating I's identity quest is largely restricted to religious identity. Other categories of social identity involving profession, gender, class, and education play no major role. Given his Old Order Amish upbringing, the narrated I lacks experience in either setting medium or long-ranged goals (127, 226). Instead, Wagler wanders through life rather aimlessly over a ten-year period, lacking the know-how to find true freedom and contentment. The narrating I portrays the narrated I as no confident determiner of his own fate. He is, in contrast, a fallible human being or an underdog of sorts. Americans have always rooted for underdogs who rise to the occasion, especially when the struggle involves freedom. Therefore, Wagler not only tells an Amish or an ex-Amish non-fictional life story, but he also narrates a truly American one.

21 After discussing pain, suffering, and meditative reflection as characteristics of new memoir, let us now turn our attention to a third feature, namely uncertainty of memory. Wagler voices uncertainty about the story he tells numerous times throughout the book, for instance using the verb "seemed/to seem" (over 90 times); the adverbials of probability "maybe" (over 60 times), "probably" (over 50 times), and "perhaps" (over 20 times) as well as phrases, such as "I don't know" (20 times); "I'm not sure," (6 times); "I can't remember" (7 times), and "I don't remember" (14 times). These examples underscore the

author's honesty, human limitations, and self-questioning as a storyteller, notions similar to the way an Amish minister might deny any skill as a preacher before beginning a sermon (Kraybill, Nolt, and Weaver-Zercher 35). According to this line of thinking, only God could give a perfect sermon or tell a flawless story. As Donald Kraybill writes in his monumental study, *The Riddle of the Amish*, "[o]n a cultural ladder, the Amish equate high-mindedness with arrogance and worldliness. Lowliness reflects humility and weakness [in this context the uncertainty or inability to remember details completely]—the true spirit of *Gelassenheit*" (40). Thus, the ideological I's underscoring of imperfect memory can be viewed as a strategy to avoid drawing attention to himself, thus making his book more digestible for Amish readers who would be alienated by someone who confidently tells his story in a matter-of-fact way. At the same time, the extreme repetition of the expressions mentioned above might be considered elements of poor storytelling in other contexts, a view that Madden tries to counteract with his remarks on new memoir. Thus, the Amish virtue of humility conveyed through expressions for human limitation and adverbs of probability harmonize with Madden's category of uncertainty.

22 In order to avoid appearing arrogant or self-aggrandizing, self-criticism is, therefore, an integral part of facilitating author-audience trust in a post-modern world and a fourth characteristic of new memoir. Instead of the greatness of an individual who has made noteworthy experiences that he or she believes should be preserved for posterity, the universality of experience is underlined. Wagler's criticism of his father, the Amish church, its leaders, and various traditions are offset by his self-censuring disclosures. An especially striking example is the story of the poor, marginalized Amish school boy Nicholas Herrfort, whom the other children taunt mercilessly. At the risk of potentially tarnishing his reputation, the narrating I takes responsibility for passively witnessing the bullying that eventually would end in Nicholas's suicide:

> Several bullies took a particularly twisted joy in making Nicholas's life miserable. They delighted in torturing and actually hurting him physically. The rest of us did not, but we did stand by and watch. We did nothing to stop it. And it was wrong of us, so very, very wrong. All of it.
>
> The mocking.
>
> The tricks.
>
> The jokes.
>
> The laughter.
>
> The torment. (39)

23 These are the words of a modest, vulnerable man, who speaks out on a universal social problem in society. A further example can be found in chapters 24–25, where the narrating I self-critically recounts the story of the narrated I's engagement to Sarah Miller and remorsefully shares the suffering that he caused her, as previously mentioned. As a core Amish value shown in foot-washing ceremonies, plain dress, and public confession of sin, humility also is reflected in the ideological I's confession of guilt, shame, and remorse.

Concluding Remarks

24 Wagler finds the right balance between art and craft, between subversion and inclusion. The narrating I is acutely aware of his readership and responsibility as an ex-Amish writer. As a construct of socially situated knowledge production, memoir serves a complementary function to evidence-based or empirical modes of knowledge production. The dialectic between the objectivity and subjectivity of the particular displayed in *Growing Up Amish* not only creates an alternative perspective to those of the social sciences and popular media, but also fosters empathy for the complexities of Amish and ex-Amish

life. In telling others about his experiences, Wagler simultaneously gives a voice to the Other, often "invisible" ex-Amish, while seeking a dialogue with the people of his heritage—a way of communicating the narrated I had longed for as a teen and young man. He delicately criticizes but does not censure the people of his heritage.

25 Wagler leaves the confines and protection of Amish community and goes out into the world to take charge of his life. Yet ironically, he finds self-understanding through candid conversations with Plain People and much reflection. On his fifth and successful attempt to leave his Old Order Amish community, he finally comes to terms with his place in the world. He ultimately constructs a hybrid identity, an identity to which the writing certainly contributes. Finally, some Old Order Amish qualities reflected in Wagler's storytelling conventions, such as humility and self-doubt, are on par with aspects of new memoir. Yet, he approaches this new genre in his own unique, authentic way, paving the way for further ex-Amish life narratives.

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Notes

[1] See Weaver-Zercher for more a detailed survey on Amish romance novels or the so-called "bonnet books" and Courser for a detailed explanation of the growing popularity of memoirs (3–6).

[2] Life writing is the umbrella term most commonly used to refer to the various forms of creative non-fiction that chronicle and reflect on a person's life. They mainly include letter writing, journals, diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, biographies, blogs, and personal essays. Couser prefers the inclusive term "life narrative" as it "also covers accounts that are oral, rather than written" (24–25).

[3] See Eakin 22–31.

[4]"I-then" and "I-now" are terms used by Couser to convey the changing sense of identity over time (69). However, these designations do not entirely reflect the complexities of narrative identity.

[2] Italics appear in the original.

[3] Couser has established chronology as the most common type of sequencing events in memoir (64).

[4] In a guest lecture at Leuphana University on May 7, 2013, Wagler revealed that his father had finally read *Growing Up Amish* in January 2013, possibly out of curiosity as a result of his son's first lecture tour to Germany.

[5] Some other uncomfortable topics are also flattened, such as the descriptions of Wagler's life as a wild cowboy (107–08) and the "juicier details" of the sins Wagler committed and confessed to the Bloomfield congregation (241).

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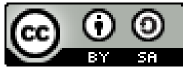
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