



## Rumspringa: To Be or Not to Be Amish

*Tom Shachtman*

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## **Rumspringa: To Be or Not to Be Amish** Tom Shachtman

*Rumspringa* is Tom Shachtman's celebrated look at a littleknown Amish coming-of-age ritual, the *rumspringa*—the period of "running around" that begins for their youth at age sixteen. During this time, Amish youth are allowed to live outside the bounds of their faith, experimenting with alcohol, premarital sex, revealing clothes, telephones, drugs, and wild parties. By allowing such broad freedoms, their parents hope they will learn enough to help them make the most important decision of their lives—whether to be baptized as Christians, join the church, and forever give up worldly ways, or to remain in the world.

In this searching book, Shachtman draws on his skills as a documentarian to capture young people on the cusp of a fateful decision, and to give us "one of the most absorbing books ever written about the Plain People" (*Publishers Weekly*).

## **Rumspringa: To Be or Not to Be Amish Details**

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### **Christina says**

As seem to be on an Amish kick lately, I thought I would stop reading all those Beverly Lewis novels and actually read some nonfiction on this culture. In Rumspringa, though, Shachtman makes a claim that this culture, this religion is in fact a cult, and brings readers into the fold with his dissection of the Amish way of life with a heavy emphasis placed on rumspringa, an odd but time tested practice of allowing teenagers to experience all "worldly" things in order to bring them back into the "cult."

The book covers a wide range of topics -- from the Amish's practice of removing their children from school after eighth grade to their belief doctrine to the suppression of women amongst the Amish to the use of illegal substances and underage drinking while in rumspringa -- but the fluidity from one topic to another isn't there. But what really carries this book is his interviews with Amish teenagers and the continuation of their stories in every chapter, and even then their stories are lost amidst his interviews with "worldly" doctors and psychologist about the effect of rumspringa and Amish values, in general, on teens. I would have preferred for Shachtman to follow a handful of Amish teens through rumspringa rather than just giving me a small taste of their lives.

Towards the middle of the book I began to lose interest, and just wished for Shachtman to get on with it as Rumspringa is very repetitive. He adds too much of his own opinion and not enough about his subjects' experiences. Rumspringa is very vague about the teens' lives, and I would like to see "Devil's Playground," from which this book and its interviews were derived, in order to view more about this tradition.

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### **Peg says**

"... a fascinating look at a little-known Amish coming-of-age ritual, the rumspringa - the period of "running around" that begins for Amish you at the age sixteen. ..Amish youth are allowed to live outside the bounds of their faith, experimenting with the larger world and its temptations: alcohol, premarital sex, phones, drugs, wild parties, etc."

Parents hope that the children will then make a decision to ignore the outside "English" way of life and return to be baptized in the Amish faith.

Particularly enjoyed it because during my childhood I had observed a number of Amish folks vacationing at the NJ shore. Knew very little about them except their modest way of dressing and what I had read/heard about their simple way of life. This book explained the foundations of the Amish way of life as well as the tradition of Rumspringa.

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### **JulieK says**

A book about Amish kids letting loose that's less interesting than it really should be. The Amish allow their teenagers to experience the outside world during a "rumspringa" period - driving cars, partying, etc. - so that they are able to make an informed choice about joining the church as adults (which the vast majority end up doing, although sometimes not until after a lot of drinking and drug use). The topic is interesting - how kids

from a very sheltered community deal with going out into the "real world" and how they cope with the freedom to develop their own rules instead of simply following the very strict ones they've grown up with. However, the author couldn't quite seem to decide whether he wanted to follow some kids as they went through rumspringa or write an academic treatise on the history and culture of the Amish in general. The book was written from interviews done for a documentary; I've gotten the film from the library and am hoping it's a bit more focused.

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## **K says**

"Most Amish are satisfied with their lives; most mainstream Americans express a significant degree of dissatisfaction with theirs...But is satisfaction with one's life the ultimate good? And is dissatisfaction with it inherently bad?" (p. 269)

This book was an interesting and carefully researched look at the Amish, focusing on the ritual known as Rumspringa (some of the research in this book also served as the focus of the documentary "The Devil's Playground," but the book is far more comprehensive). Amish people believe that baptism should be a conscious choice rather than a foregone conclusion. To this end, though their children are raised with Amish rules and values, at sixteen they are permitted to experience "English" life with no real restrictions, Amish or otherwise. When they choose, these adolescents can be baptized and officially join the Amish church as adults. This "running-around" transitional period is known as Rumspringa.

It's a fascinating concept, one with special meaning for anyone raised in a religious enclave attempting to maintain its identity and resist the temptations of the surrounding culture. What's even more fascinating is the high retention rate – the vast majority of Amish teens choose to return to the fold after a few years of partying. The adults interviewed did not seem to express any regrets over having made this choice, with a few notable exceptions among the younger set. Schachtman offers several possible explanations for this – the desire to marry an Amish spouse, the familiarity and simplicity of the lifestyle, a wish to remain connected to their families of origin, a sense of purpose, etc.

Reading this book was an interesting experience for me. Some of the Amish values felt comfortably familiar to me as an Orthodox Jew – the emphasis on religion, tradition, and community; the continual tension with modernity and the resistance to integrating normative values if they seem to conflict with the letter or spirit of divine law. Other values were foreign to me and even disturbing. I was especially struck by what I saw as the stifling of personal ambition, particularly in the intellectual realm. I respect Amish intentions, but it's a lifestyle choice that would be extremely difficult for me in that regard. On the other hand, I'm sure there are people who look at my lifestyle and have a similar reaction. Everything's relative, I guess.

At the risk of sounding judgmental (assuming I don't already), I really wondered about the psychological soundness of offering these teenagers a Rumspringa (and my sense was that Schachtman joined me in this). Are adolescents, especially those raised in such an insular society, sufficiently equipped for this? It didn't surprise me that many of the teens interviewed had gotten involved with some dangerous activities. And, as Schachtman suggests, maybe this also explains the high retention rate – the world out there is very scary if you're not prepared for navigating it, especially if you're entering it with the maturity of a mid-adolescent. After messing around and messing up, I can see where returning to the safety and structure of the Amish religion would seem pretty attractive. As Schachtman points out, it's not as if these teenagers experience travel or higher education or other experiences with a long-term positive and personally fulfilling effect; the temporary partying is pretty easy to walk away from in comparison.

Anyway, this book should probably get five stars for its research and writing, but I'm giving it four because I must admit I got bored occasionally, despite my overarching interest in the topic. I guess I'm just not as intellectual as I want to think I am, because I got a little tired of all the detail here and there, especially during the chapter on farming. Don't let that stop you, though – I highly recommend this book. The topic is interesting, the research thorough, and the writing (usually) engaging.

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### **Jenny Karraker says**

Having lived in PA and traveled to Lancaster County on various occasions, I have enjoyed seeing the Amish working in the fields and shopping in the fabric stores. I was surprised to read of so much turmoil during the rumspringa time where teens are allowed to leave the fold and experience worldly pleasures, an experience the adults hope will allow their kids to go through the normal adolescent rebellion and then, on seeing how empty these experiences are, will return to the church which they will officially join, settle down and get married, and become a lifelong member of the Amish community. Naively I just saw them as living Little House on the Prairie lives, thinking that living in the past would solve modern problems. But as we have all discovered, the problems aren't just external; they are inside us--Who am I? What do I want to do with my life? Do I embrace the lifestyle in which I was raised, whether that be Amish, urban, upper middle class? I felt sorry for the kids--it seems harsh to shelter them so severely from experiencing things outside the Amish community and then throw them headlong into these temptations when they haven't yet internalized their own values yet. As the author suggested, with leaving school after the eighth grade, these kids are ill-equipped to find decent paying jobs. I would have found their lifestyle too confining and cheered the people who left. However, they will probably experience lifelong struggles stemming from the rejection from their families. It seems the concept of unconditional love for a family member isn't a part of their lifestyle. Like the Asian cultures, they seem to value group vs. individual identity. Having attended a Baptist church also, I was glad that these church people seemed to live out Christ likeness as they accepted these kids and tried to help these kids "find themselves." As a parent, we want the best for our kids, and navigating the teenage years are often exasperating. I guess their methods work as well as the next. The book was an easy read. I found the stories engaging, though often heart-wrenching. Adolescence is a tough time, no matter what your background.

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### **Jessica says**

I believe I would have enjoyed this book more if the author had picked a small handful of Amish teens in rumspringa and followed them for a year in their lives and then revisited back with them at a later date. The author has too many subjects he interviewed for this book. As a result you never feel you get a true sense of rumspringa and how it affects the Amish youth. At the beginning of each chapter is a short intro about a person unrelated to the people in the remainder of the chapter which is terribly perplexing. The author gives you mere snapshots of each subject through their own narrative. These narratives are short, maybe 2-4 pages at best. Each narrative is then followed up by pages of the author referencing psychological and sociological studies on adolescence. Eventually he gets back to a subject later on the book in other chapters but when he does he's talked about so many others you forget what their original story was. It gets quite tiresome after a while. I can only handle so many single incident stories that merely scrape the surface. I found myself

craving a deeper understanding on a more personal level. After each story I found myself searching for details or resolution. What happened as a result of this incident? How did the subject feel about it? How did they feel about it in regards to their religious beliefs? How did the incident change the subject? Was the change evident in future incidents? It seemed like all these questions were left dangling. I wanted to feel a bond or at least empathy with the subjects in the book. As is I didn't feel them develop into adults, or insights, or self awareness. I would be very interested in seeing the documentary a few reviewers have wrote about as alot have stated they liked it better than the book.

In the end the book title and synopsis was slightly misleading. More than anything this book appears to be a book about the Amish way of life in general as opposed to an in depth study of Rumspringa. While I do find the Amish religion and lifestyle fascinating, I was disappointed this book did not provide many insights to this time in Amish youth's life and I feel I have not come away with a better understanding of this ritual.

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### **Anne says**

I did learn a lot about the Amish in this book and I did not like what I learned basically. I had this "little house in the prairie" kind of image in head and now it's definetely gone.

Basically, it goes like this: Amish teens get to experience the "English world" before committing to the church. So, it's sex, drugs and alcohol. Without ANY parental supervision, guidance or support. In the "English world", as far as I know, 16- year olds are not allowed to drink, it's illegal to do drugs and you are responsible for your actions. The Amish teens in this book are out of control, lost, confused and/or extremely vulnerable. I fail to understand how parents could possibly think it's acceptable to let their kids act in ways that are dangerous to themselves or others. I am not surprised that so many teens decide to become Amish afterwards because being a teen is hard, but being an Amish teen is hard and lonely. Rumspringa is a rather clever strategy...

Other things I learned in the book, fathers don't speak to their children or wives, kids are out of school before they can actually learn anything and women are completely submitted to their husband. And you grow celery for weddings. The book left me rather sad and with a lot of unanswered questions.

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### **Celia says**

The topic of this book seemed very interesting to me: Amish kids are given the chance to live outside the Amish world in an effort to make their decisions to spend their adult lives committed to the Amish church. They're rebellious teenagers who do what other rebellious teenagers do, which was surprising to me. I assumed Amish kids would've been kept so far away from technology that they wouldn't have known what cell phones were.

I have to be honest that I couldn't finish this book. It's broken up into segments that make it hard to read. Some segments are about the history of the Amish church (what people believe, how they worship). There are also segments reporting on the various effect of rumspringa on different families. The author doesn't just cover one family or a few. It's family after family. It was hard for me to get a sense of who anyone was because each little snippet was only a page or so long. Then the family would be gone and he'd be on to a new story. Overall, it was just a bit too dry for my tastes.

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### **Kristen says**

Pennsylvania, my old stomping ground, is a quirky place. There are odd sayings like "I stoved my finger" instead of "I jammed my finger." "Red up your room" is to clean your room. I once had a waitress ask me, "Can I take your drinks awhile?" I'm not sure, but I think that she was asking for my drink order while I looked at the menu (??) But PA's most famous quirk has got to be the Amish. The Amish are fascinating to me for obvious reasons. I'm curious as to how they can ignore modern conveniences when they are so closely surrounded by a technology-dependent culture. But what is even more fascinating to me is how the Amish are a tourist attraction. People spend their hard-earned money and their valuable vacation time to come to Central Pennsylvania to basically gawk at the Amish as they go about their day to day activities. I was never comfortable doing that, so I choose to read about them instead.

"Rumspringa" highlights the Amish youth's "running around period" where they are set free around age 15-16 to explore modern America, eventually faced with the choice to leave the Amish fold or become baptized into the church. The idea is that Rumspringa will inoculate them against mainstream culture. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. There are narratives about both instances: teens who have "seen the light" and settle well into plain life and sad accounts of teenage pregnancy, drug abuse, and being shunned by one's own family. Toward the end of the book, I was craving more "sense making," but I did learn one little gem of information: the Amish use celery as a primary means to celebrate a wedding...yep, celery! "Rumspringa" was no "Witness," that's for sure.

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### **Mary Beth says**

This was a fascinating glimpse into the world of the Amish. The author intersperses firsthand testimonials with his own research and background information. Shachtman deals with a wider variety of issues than you might think would be encompassed by the idea of rumspringa, including the role of women, deeper matters of faith, economy, etc.

Rumspringa, in my opinion, seems a very bizarre idea. Old Order Amish shun the modern English world and yet let their teenagers venture off into it ill-prepared with no restrictions whatsoever. How any of these teens manage to come out of the other side of it without serious repercussions is beyond me. (And some definitely experience those serious repercussions!) To have the world of modern technology, fashion, and ideas opened to you all at once, including drugs, alcohol, and sex, is a completely overwhelming concept.

Furthermore, as a Christian, I have a hard time reconciling this idea of a "free pass" for these years to the idea of living your life for Christ, putting aside the old self and putting on the new self in Christ.

Anyway, if you are at all interested in the Amish, I think you would find this book fascinating and informative.

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### **Liralen says**

Fairly early on, Shachtman makes a point about the Amish being about as close to a foreign culture

Americans can get to within the U.S.—that they seem so different as to function, on some small level, as a tourist attraction.

But the broader is of the Amish as far more like the general population than not...just stricter. Much stricter. More isolated, sort of. (Excellent mention towards the end of the similarities and differences between the Amish and Hasidic Jews, too...)

His focus is on, of course, rumspringa—the period when Amish youth have finished school and are working but have not yet joined the church (which is only done as an adult), when they are exempt from the rules the Amish live by. When they can 'dress English' and drive cars and drink and do drugs, if they want, without recrimination from the church.\* When the idea is for them to decide whether or not to get married and join the church and be a good Amish Christian for the rest of their lives...or leave.

I learned a *ton* from this book. Granted, I knew very little about the Amish, but still. That each district basically determines its own rules (certain types of farm equipment are permitted in certain districts but not others, for example; ditto bicycles). Rumspringa is a much more fluid, open-ended period than I had envisioned—I knew *of* it, but I guess I'd always thought (to the extent I'd thought about it at all) that it was a finite period of a few months or a year. Not so—rumspringa is the period between a child turning sixteen and them joining the church. That might be when they are seventeen or twenty or twenty-six. In theory I suppose somebody could join the church much later, although Shachtman doesn't talk much about that. At some point in the book it hit home to me that in any given community there is *always* a group of teens who are not subject to Amish rules and who are, you know, being typical impossible teenagers. (Seem obvious? Yes, maybe. I never said I was the brightest bulb in the box...)

One of the things that so fascinated me here is the idea that until a person joins the church, they are free to do as they will—it's okay if they do drugs and have sex and get pregnant out of wedlock—and still be welcomed back, but if they commit to the church (get baptised) and then back out, it's permanent. They are put on bann, shunned.

(I was also struck at one point how commercial some churches seem—'*Equally revelatory to her is this [non-Amish] church's assertion that she can simply be baptized and will thereafter be in a spate of grace, "saved," assured of a place in Heaven. She has always been bothered by the lack of such assurance in the Amish church*' (149). Not trying to pit church against church, but it is kind of like...'we offer the better deal! Pick us!')

There's a really interesting back-and-forth, though, about the good things about rumspringa (like the chance to experience both sides of things before committing) but how it is also inconsistent. 'He also tells them [church elders] he is bothered by the contradiction of the Amish church permitting him in *rumspringa* to have a motorcycle thought it was forbidden before he became sixteen and will again be forbidden if he joins the church. How can they both condemn and condone a behavior? To DeWayne, the Baptist stance on sin is less ambiguous and more understandable: a sin is a sin, no matter what the circumstances. For a Baptist, there are no indulgences, no time-out periods during which something usually forbidden is permitted' (134). Most of the people interviewed in the book don't seem to have quite as much of a dilemma there (if they head for the Baptists, etc., it often seems to be because they want religion but also non-Amish material things, or because they want to worship in a different way), but the question of what makes sense about rumspringa and what doesn't comes up over and over again in different forms. (I would have loved a better look at what rumspringa looked like for older generations, though.)

I did wish that Shachtman had spent more time on the 'tamer' side of rumspringa. He says early on that

'many, maybe even a majority, do not go to the parties or otherwise engage in behaviors that Amish parents and church officials consider wild. Rather, they attend Sunday singings, occasionally go bowling, take part in structured activities supervised by church elders...' (11). Probably not as interesting to read about, but the amount of time spent on that end of thing is tremendously slim in comparison to the time spent on parties and drugs and uncertainty about whether or not to go back to the Amish. If 80 to 90 percent of Amish-raised youth end up joining the church (251), I would expect that a lot of those are youth who never strayed far in the first place.

I also had a tremendously difficult time keeping the different individuals straight; although it's not the sort of book that follows just a few people through a given time period, I wouldn't have minded more detail. In some cases I think the lack of detail was to preserve privacy/anonymity, which is fine, but even when reminders were given I could dredge up only the most basic of memories. Maybe following fewer people but in more depth would have helped...wait, I just acknowledged that it wasn't that kind of book.

And a lingering question: One of the individuals in the book mentions that 'he knows that Amish young men do not treat women well—he admits to not having done so well himself in that regard—and doesn't feel that his female friends "need to be put through that kind of situation"' (195). And then the subject is dropped. Umm, what? That deserves a great deal more detail. (Shachtman does talk, elsewhere, about general abuse rates in Amish communities—that several studies have indicated that they are lower than in the general population, but this is separate, I think.) There's a whole trove of material to be considered on the topic, not just in terms of people being treated badly but in terms of what relationships tend to look like during rumspringa—which is largely, now that I think of it, ignored beyond the fact that there are relationships, they are sometimes sexual and sometimes not, and they sometimes end in marriage and entry to the Amish church (and sometimes not).

\*From families and from the law—that's another matter.

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### **Antoinette says**

I read this book after watching the documentary film of the same topic and research- The Devil's Playground- this was additional information and had limited Amish youth's self analysis, which was interpreted by the author. The Amish youth who were the subject of the film made reappearances and others who were not had their stories incorporated into this work.

The style of writing is easy to read, with direct quotations of the teenagers, which are better heard than read, like, um, you know what I mean, yeah, uh huh, I knew you'd see.

At any rate, the book gives the feel of a prolonged interview with various young people in the midst of their rumspringa: the time when young amish teenagers are permitted to behave as they have no rules to abide and experience the "English" world, without being bound to Amish religion as they are not technically Amish until they decide to be baptized of their own freewill. If they choose to be baptized after their rumspringa they will be Amish and live the rest of their lives according to their religion and often hard working families (or be shunned).

Sadly, being able to do things of their freewill is often interpreted as a modern life of drugs, alcohol, and sexual activity, while doing other things that their Amish culture ordinarily forbids, like driving motor vehicles wearing modern clothing.

There is relief in some of the stories in this book, which were not as developed in the documentary film- such as the girls who choose to continue their education beyond the 8th grade, much to the chagrin of their parents, or the girls who decide to play basketball at the public high school which they also attend against their religion.

There are also interviews with those who have chosen to live separate from their families, but are still permitted to visit. And there is mention of certain Amish relatives of those interviewed, who have continued their education into college. Some of the young people who long for careers as lawyers or doctors are interesting to contemplate that their parents are discouraging them, as those of us living a non-Amish life are experiencing the opposite, often with pressure from parents to become doctors, finish high school, etc...

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### **skein says**

Very, very poorly written. Yes, it's nice to realize that the Amish youth do not speak in thees and thous, but one more "like, it's like, you know?" and I was ready to throw this book out the window. The quotes were often so incoherent (and interviewees so jumbled together), I really *had no idea* what they were talking about.

More annoying than the usual teenage nonsense is the lack of narrative. Shactman is no scholarly author, and the ideas presented are all over the place, with no organization - ramshackle, to be sure. The documentary is far more coherent, & far more conclusive - this reads like a collection of interview notes.

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### **David Rim says**

around page 166, i realized that i don't give a crap about the amish. i think i was hoping for a more nuanced look at the lives of the amish in rumspringa, some sort of beautiful search for meaning in contemplating leaving everything they've ever known. No, nothing like that. This is a poorly written, uninteresting look at a phenomenon that is interesting in and of itself. Again this is one of those books that I wish were written by someone else. Michael Lewis maybe.

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### **Petra X says**

The book is a measured, thoughtful and well-researched view of the period between childhood and commitment to the church (or leaving the church) that the Amish call rumspringa - literally 'running around'. Everything is permitted for these teens and early twenties, or if not exactly permitted, then not forbidden. As an anabaptist sect, the Amish believe that baptism must be entered into freely by an adult, in full knowledge of the alternative, 'English' or mainstream America. This baptism is an unbreakable commitment to the Church and not, as the Baptist sects believe, any guarantee of an eternal dwelling in heaven.

After reading the book, which is written from the point of view of an interested and not-unsympathetic mainstream American, I have a great deal of respect from the Amish's ideas of community and how to maintain it, of their pacifist and non-judgmental stance and forgiveness of all acts by their children, no matter

how against their ethics and even the law, during their rumspringa. It is difficult, however, to sympathise with the extreme submissiveness and abnegation of all self-determination of the women, and their insistence on only the most basic of formal education ending at 14. The various bans on electricity, telephones and motors in most circumstances but not all seem hypocritical. It strikes me as ridiculous that ownership and driving of cars (outside of rumspringa) are forbidden, but riding in them and hiring them with a driver isn't. Needless to say, most religions have these strange little peculiarities, but generally they aren't so obvious as with the Amish.

This is a good book, deep, interesting and well-written. Its a slice of America that is generally regarded as quaint, antiquated and a bit of a tourist show. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Amish are a thriving, growing religion that is deeply introspective and cares little what the world thinks of it.

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