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***Why I Left the Amish* Memoir Tells of Fleeing Strict Religious Community
in Search of a Life of Love and Learning**

Author Saloma Miller Furlong Featured on PBS *American Experience*

“There are two ways to leave the Amish—one is through life and the other through death,” writes author Saloma Miller Furlong, who grew up in an Amish community in Ohio. “To leave through life, one has to deliberately walk away.” Furlong tells how she made this difficult break in her memoir, *Why I Left the Amish* (Michigan State University Press, \$19.95 paper).

Furlong told her story in the recent PBS *American Experience* program, “The Amish.”

Furlong’s return to the Amish community for her father’s funeral frames the story of how she came to leave 24 years earlier. One of seven siblings in a dysfunctional family, Furlong endured the violent outbursts of her mentally ill father, lack of protection from her mother, and physical and sexual abuse at the hands of her older brother Joe. She recounts a life defined by the austere traditions of the Amish and the pressure to obey and conform. “The Amish life is not about saying no, Furlong says. “It’s about going along.”

Furlong’s desire to further her education—Amish children leave school after eighth grade—and her resistance to the oppressive strictness of Amish life, led her to run away from home at age twenty. She turned to an “English” neighbor (the Amish term for people who are not part of their community) for assistance. With \$450 in her pocket and newly shorn hair, she took a train to Vermont, where she began her new life of freedom.

In this compelling memoir, Furlong touches on aspects of Amish life that have long fascinated outsiders, such as:

- Shunning**—Though lauded for their practice of forgiveness, the Amish are seemingly unforgiving of their own. Because Furlong left the community, she was shunned. Her family was forbidden to eat with her, accept gifts from her, ride in cars driven by her, or do business with her.
- Rum Springa** (“running around”) — In Furlong’s home community, this was not a time for young people to experience the outside world and then decide whether they would stay or leave. Rather, it was a time of courting and finding a marriage partner within the community. Some parents looked the other way when their young people were playing music, dancing, visiting bars and drinking, and even when their daughters brought young men home and went to bed with them, in a centuries-old practice called “bed courtship.” At the same time they allowed all these things, the parents watched for signs that their young people were unsatisfied with the Amish way of life, such as dating someone outside the community, taking college courses, getting a job not allowed in the community, or taking trips far away from home.

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•**Community**—Performance is one factor that determines one’s place in Amish community. Ambitious people and hard workers gained respect, but anyone who was considered simple, lazy or shifty did not, regardless of mitigating factors such as depression or mental illness. The Amish way was to “shame” the person into working harder and helping himself—and likewise, if someone was simple, he should just “smarten up.” So instead of trying to help Furlong’s depressed and mentally ill father, the people in the community shamed him. “The Amish have a way of including and isolating someone at the same time,” Furlong writes.

Many people on the outside think that Amish young people have a choice about whether to leave or stay in the community, but Furlong says that is a myth: “I certainly did not feel like I had a choice.”

Furlong was pleasantly surprised by the warm welcome she received when she traveled back to the horse and buggy world she had left 24 years before. “Embracing one another in the Amish community was never done, but the effect of the support from this group steeped in community and tradition had a power of its own,” she writes.

After leaving the Amish, Furlong married and had two sons. She graduated from Smith College in May 2007 with a major in German Studies and a minor in Philosophy. While she was at Smith, she completed an internship with noted Amish expert Dr. Donald Kraybill at Elizabethtown College. During her thirty-year struggle of coming to terms with her Amish past, Furlong has gleaned a better understanding of herself and of her heritage. She brings a nuanced and balanced perspective to her memoir, which offers a rare look behind the organdy curtain that separates the Amish from the outside world.

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