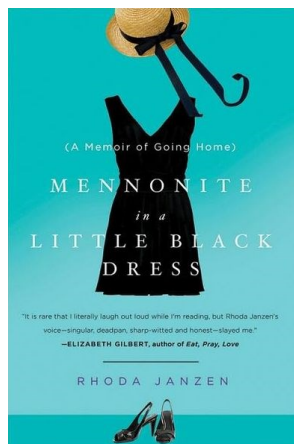




Discussion Guide

About the Book



Book Title: *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress*

Author: Rhoda Janzen

Published by St. Martin's Griffin, 2010

Author Website: www.rhodajanzen.com

Book Website: <http://rhodajanzen.com/mennonite-in-little-black-dress/>

Available: On Amazon/Kindle, Barnes and Noble/Nook, IndieBound.

Questions for Discussion

What were your general impressions of the book?

What did you most like about the book and what did you most dislike?

What did you learn about the Mennonites by reading this book? Did anything surprise you? If you are a Mennonite, or know Mennonites in what ways are her experiences similar or different than what you've known?

What ethnic or religious traditions (if any) were part of your upbringing? How have they shaped you? Did you rebel against these traditions? How has your perspective toward them changed over time?

Rhoda's husband left her for a gay man. How did she respond to this? How do you think you would respond if your partner left you for a relationship with someone of a different sexual orientation than you?

Rhoda states that she "suddenly felt destiny as a mighty and perplexing force, an inexorable current that sweeps us off into new channels." What are your beliefs about destiny?

Read over the MAMs comments. Which of the MAMs do you most agree with and why?

Would you recommend this book for other Book Clubs? Why or why not?

In what ways, if any, will this book change your life or perspective?

The author's website has many more questions at:

<http://rhodajanzen.com/mennonite-discussion/>

Nancy and the MAMs discuss the book...



NANCY: I had heard about this book, but never read it, so I was glad I finally would get around to reading it, because I identify with the Mennonites. In my 20s I met several Mennonites while working with the United Methodist campus ministry in Ames, Iowa. Together we founded the Iowa Peace Network. Later, when I moved to San Antonio I joined a Mennonite church. I chose them for their teachings on nonviolence. I very much enjoyed their focus on church as primary, alternative community, and their tradition of simple living.

At first, I felt appalled that she would dis one of my favorite denominations. As a “non-ethnic” Mennonite, I could never achieve insider status. I could still engage in the “Mennonite Game” where you begin naming and finding other Mennonites acquaintances you hold in common, but I always knew I would never really be one of them. This made me very sad, until I read Rhoda’s inside look. Now I realize there are advantages to being a Mennonite convert! I didn’t suffer some of the indignities she experienced, yet I still could call myself Mennonite. The audacity of this woman though, I continued to think, as I read on. How could she? My beloved Mennonites -- with such strong women and hard-working, kind men? Were they really as ridiculous and as human as all of that? But soon I began laughing with her, as observed the canvas she paints of the shadow side of my people, with great wit. What a wonderful writer! Each sentence brims with creative prose. Not hard to see she’s also a poet and English teacher.

Being an insider always seems to create a tendency to question the idiosyncrasies of a given system. And within each faith tradition, passing the torch to younger generations is often a difficult process. Many times the flame goes out, as it may look very distorted to the young. But as much as she decries her given tradition, I was especially taken with the great love she held for her bipolar, gay husband. She treated him reverently and seemed genuinely concerned for him. I could see her Mennonite upbringing shining through in her actions. Mennonites (and Christians) at their best are unconditional lovers, and I found her this way as she teaches us how to love. I’m looking forward to reading her next book where she rediscovers her faith and Mr. Right... *Does this Church Make Me Look Fat?*



SALLIE: Well, being an “ethnic Church of the Brethren” body, I get this book. I found it hilarious, too. An inside look is often different than Nancy’s gaze from the outside. Rhoda breaks the rules, and I find myself enjoying her immensely. When you grow up in a closed system, you either smother yourself or you go outside the box. Rhoda’s lived an authentic life and I hear she’s back in the fold now.



MOLLY: I love this creative nonfiction genre of memoir. It’s becoming more popular. I tried my hand at it a few years ago, and I want to do more. Story is what each of us have to share with the world. Janzen does it very well. She inspires me to try again. Maybe the MAMs could all do some writing of this sort sometime! Wouldn’t that be fun to share stories with each other?



PRISCILLA: I loved the way she included recipes in this book. I want to try them out! I’ve never had borscht before, or persimmon cookies! But, I don’t approve of some of the content of this book and the lifestyles. Seems she’s strayed quite a way from her Christian upbringing.



KATHARINE: I laughed so much when I read this book. I think she has a future as the Garrison Keilor of the Mennonites. It reminded me of some of the idiosyncrasies of the Lutherans in Minnesota where I come from. Laughing at your self and your roots can be very healing, as she discovered in her memoir of going home.



JANE: Now here is a woman with resolve. She obviously has quite a gift in the literary area, and kudos to her for getting her PhD, and then writing her way out of a difficult time caused by a bad accident and her husband’s defection to the other gender. I appreciate people who make the most of a bad situation and here you go. This book has sold over a million copies. My hero! Another female millionaire.



ABIGAIL: I am taken with Rhoda’s great love. Although she fights the trappings of her ethnic Mennonite upbringing, I believe her compassion for her husband and others springs from the deep well of her tradition; from the heart of God.