

Kingdom of Simplicity by Holly Payne
Five Frequently Asked Questions
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1. How did you know about the Amish?

I grew up in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, with the second largest Amish population in the world. Each week, my mom would take my brothers and me to Roots, a country farm market near our house. It was a wonderful world to explore and observe as a kid --- full of Amish in their black pants and aprons and bonnets and wide-brimmed hats, buggies and horses in the parking lot along side our family station wagon. It was wild to me and always curious. We would buy fresh chicken and produce, and my favorite were the Amish baked good stands, where we'd get some of the best sticky buns I've ever eaten, and then of course, if my mom allowed us more treats, maybe a Whoopie pie.

2. Did you have Amish friends?

Our interaction with the Amish was always 'business' and we didn't chat about their farms or families the way we would if we saw one of our 'English' neighbors, but I know many people who live side-by-side the Amish share a more personal relationship. I remember that I was always more quiet around them at the market, more self-conscious about who *we* were and how they perceived us, versus how they were. Nobody every really gave us an education on the Amish, what they believed or anything. I really liked the differences even though I didn't fully understand them. I was secretly jealous that they got to drive around in buggies. I wanted to be Amish because I loved horses, and I was devastated to learn that I would never be Amish because I wasn't born into an Amish family.

3. This book is based on a true story. What was the "fiction" of your book?

The protagonist, Eli Yoder, who narrates the story, is not based on any one person I know, nor are the other characters, though their personalities are reflective of people I knew growing up in Lancaster. The actual sequence of events doesn't mimic anything I know (other than the reaction of the Amish community to the tragedy in the book, which was eerily similar to what happened after the Nickel Mine school shooting in 2006). But the entire story arch for Eli Yoder was essentially my own. Bargaining. Denial. Anger. Acceptance. Just like dealing with death, but it was a death of the way I was prior to the accident, what my leg actually looked like, etc. My perspective shifted in a huge way, too, just like Eli, though I can say I have never been a boy, at least not in this lifetime.

3. How soon after the accident were you able to forgive the driver?

I waited 12 years. I don't remember a specific moment when the lights went off. It wasn't like that. I remember waking up after the surgery and smelling lilacs outside the hospital window in Colorado. I was so happy to see the color purple for some reason, not because it was my favorite, but because I associated it with something very vibrant and alive. I *was* aware of a choice I would make from then on, however, and that was how I'd deal with that *was*, my body, the injuries, the pain. I know I didn't want to focus on the driver. I wanted to focus on healing, which I eventually did. I remember putting on a good face. I didn't want people feeling sorry. I was determined to walk again and only when that was questionable and I'd get scared did I feel angry toward the driver. It was a dull-aching kind of anger that festered for years until I was writing the book and realized that one of the characters, the driver in the story, was the driver in real life and that I had found a way to forgive him by forgiving the driver in the story first. Maybe that's the whole point of being called into this particular world, and choosing the Amish as a backdrop... I don't know. After the Amish school shooting in 2006, I pulled out the letter that the driver sent, and for the first time, I realized I had never responded to his request that I forgive him someday. I still did not write to him. I had to work my way through the story and only recently have I had the courage to send him a letter. I haven't heard back yet, but I know I have definitely forgiven him. When I say his name I don't feel anything in my body like I used to, like he was there somehow. It's over now. I honestly believe that the process of storytelling and writing this novel in some strange way shifted him from me to the book. And that's where he will always be. It's was so freeing. I hope he has the same experience reading the story as I did writing it.

4. What do you remember about the accident?

I remember everything that lead up to it, and everything that happened afterward, but I don't remember being struck and tossed over the hood of my car, flying through the air or even landing on the ground. I had stopped to give two mountain bikers a flashlight. They told me they were from the East Coast and as soon as I told them that I was, too, we were all hit. But I don't remember that exact moment. I stood beside my car facing one of the guys. The other was behind me and my arm was out, giving him the flashlight, which is why my rotator cuff tore. The truck was coming from behind so I don't remember seeing any lights. I don't remember the impact of landing either. Just that I opened my eyes and realized I was on the ground and that I couldn't hear anything. And that scared me first. I could see the spine of the mountain (Mt. Crested Butte). It was twilight. I couldn't feel anything and that scared me because I first thought I was dead. Then I thought the guys were dead, too. And I knew no matter what happened, nothing would ever be the same for us. They had been scooped up on the driver's windshield and taken some 200 yards down the road and into a rancher's barbed-wire fence but they survived. We ended up doing a lot of physical therapy together that summer, and as it turned out, my good friend from college who I was roommates with in Crested Butte had met one of the guys during our graduation weekend in Richmond, Virginia! I remember her telling me she had met some 'guy' who would be in Crested Butte, too, and that night, she came to the hospital and walked into his room and realized that was him. It was really eerie.

5. Have you ever met the driver?

Not yet. He wrote me a letter in January 1995, but I was too angry and still in too much pain and with too much uncertainty about my body and my future to respond to what was a very sincere apology and his wishes for my forgiveness someday. I had kept the letter in a file for 12 years and didn't read it until three years ago, in the middle of writing the book. That's when I realized, my god! *I've written this book to forgive him?!?* I recently tracked him down and sent a letter. I don't expect him to respond. I just wanted him to know I don't regret the events. I want him to be free of any shame or guilt he might still have, which he himself admitted in his letter that he would have for the rest of his life. I don't think it serves him to carry this anymore. We both need to let it go and move on.