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Review of: *Vignettes 2020: Anabaptist Women Writers*—Sheila Petre and Gabriella Showalter

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Book Reviews

Review of: **Petre, Sheila, and Gabriella Showalter. 2020. *Vignettes 2020: Anabaptist Women Writers*. Mercersburg, PA: Self-published. Pp. 198. \$18.00.**

By John Paul (“J.P.”) Miller, Jr.
Pennsylvania State University

Vignettes, compiled and edited by Sheila Petre and Gabriella Showalter, is a fascinating text. It is a book that was written by, and is intended for, Anabaptist women writers. The book is a collection of articles that profile around 400 Anabaptist women writers from more than 15 countries. The book provides many resources for aspiring writers; it recommends books on writing, such as *The Elements of Style*, and contains a directory of all the women profiled in this book.

I divide my review into two sections. First, I review this text for the women for whom it was intended. Next, I review the text for academics outside of the Anabaptist tradition.

I highly recommend this book for Anabaptist women writers of all levels. It is particularly useful for connecting to other writers and for finding books that other writers found helpful or entertaining. The book also contains a directory of publishers that encourage submissions from Anabaptist women writers. Finally, this book is very helpful by showing the struggles that even experienced writers have and how they fit writing in with the many demands of life.

I had the same experience in childhood that many women in this book describe. I was fascinated with books from an early age and was fortunate to be encouraged to read by the women on my mother’s side of the family. My grandmother, Rebecca Stoltzfus, particularly encouraged me, and gave me her favorite books to read at an early age. I agree with many women in this book who view reading and writing as hand-in-hand. I recommend paying attention to the books that

other women list as their favorites. For writers of all levels, I think this book is helpful to find and correspond with writers who like to read the same things you do. For example, the books that Jaleen Burkholder (p. 21) lists are very similar to the books my grandmother and I love so much, while others, such as Edith Hoover (p. 51) recommend books more in the Anabaptist tradition. Regardless of what you like to read, you are likely to find others in this book that enjoy reading the same things. I think the most fruitful writing ideas come from conversations between people who love similar books.

For academic readers outside of the Anabaptist tradition, this book provides insightful glimpses into the lives of Anabaptist women. One of the main strengths of the book is in the presentation of a wide variety of experiences that Anabaptist women have. Intentionally or not, mainstream academic literature and media have tended to portray this group of people as highly homogenous. Glossing over the variety of experiences that exist within Anabaptism has resulted in unrealistic and overly simplistic portrayals of these people. The women in this book defy simplistic portrayals

in many ways. They reside in a variety of countries, including Ukraine, Paraguay, Canada, and Thailand, to mention just a few. Besides being writers, they are teachers, homemakers, nurses, translators, missionaries, retirees, and farmers. They are from a variety of traditions, including Old Order Amish, Old Order Mennonite, and Bethel Fellowship, to again name just a few. By prioritizing the voices of Anabaptist women, this book demonstrates that differences within the Anabaptists should not be downplayed but explicitly displayed by those who work with this diverse group of people.

In terms of the quality of the writing in this book, some vignettes illustrate a markedly higher level of writing ability than others. I tend to read this book by flipping it open to a random page and reading the vignettes on those pages and the ones



around it. So far, with this method, I have always found passages that are particularly insightful, well-written, or humorous. Some vignettes are very basic and straight-forward, while others are longer and offer examples of the writer's prose. In a piece I particularly like, Heidi Clugston (p. 24) writes "I would encourage you to write openly of the grace, the grime, and the glory of your days. There is far too much written that tells only of filth and grime. There is far too much written that tells only of a daydream of grace and glory." This is a powerful quotation, one of many in this book. It will require some work on the part of the reader to find passages such as this one.

In my opinion, some of the best vignettes in this book are those that reveal the writers' wit and humor. As far as I am aware, there have been no publications examining Anabaptist comedy or jokes. This book wonderfully demonstrates the absurdist and dry humor of which some Anabaptists are fond. This book made me laugh constantly, although I am not certain that all of the humor will translate well to those outside of these traditions. To list one example, I found Michaela Stoltzfus's (p.134) writing style to be particularly humorous. She writes: "Michaela Stoltzfus (common name Kayla) is a smallish creature, resembling a hedgehog, but with longer legs and quills. When threatened, instead of curling into a ball, she produces a book (typically carried in a stomach pouch) and cowers behind it until danger is gone."

This book also presents a fascinating model of femininity within the Anabaptist tradition. The women in this book value God and family and they emphasize respect for their husbands. However, it would be very inaccurate to say they are subservient to their husbands, as those in the Western intellectual tradition might perceive them. It is beyond the scope of this review to discuss traditional gender roles in the Anabaptists, but I believe some of the complexities of femininity in this tradition are revealed through the wit of the writers. For example, Barbara Classen (p. 23) amusingly refers to her husband as "her knight in denim armor," while Marianne Jantzi (p. 58) says she appreciates the traveling provided by her writing because "in this way her husband can enjoy writing too, although he has never written more than 'be back at 5:00' types of notes." In one my favorite passages, Suellen J. Strite (p.136) writes, "She once thought it would be fun if he [husband] were also a writer

but decided she likes him the way he is: since he is not literarily inclined, he believes her writings are good." The tongue-in-cheek deference in these passages hints at gender roles in the Anabaptists; there are gender roles, and they are fairly rigid, but there is relatively low inequality between genders. As shown in this book, in terms of gender roles Anabaptists might be similar to pre-industrial agrarian families with fairly rigid roles but relatively less inequality between genders than in the post-industrial era.

Overall, I highly recommend this book. The reader will have to do some work to find the best passages, but as a book that is written by and for Anabaptist women it provides an unbiased glimpse into their experiences. This book also connects to a long tradition of woman scholars, such as Zora Neal Hurston, who provided insight into their lives through writing about their own experiences rather than translated through the perspective of a white male scholar. My biggest dissatisfaction with this book is that I frequently wanted to read more from the writers who are profiled and found many of their listed works difficult to access. I hope that in the future the editors of this book will produce a work that collects some of the best pieces of writing from these women.

J.P. Miller grew up Old Order Amish in Lancaster County, PA. He is currently a doctoral student in sociology at Penn State.

Order from:

United States: Sheila Petre, 9711 Fort Loudon Rd, Mercersburg, PA 17236; \$18 (includes shipping).

Canada: Diane Martin, 7514 SDRD3 E, Mount Forest, ON N0G 2L0; \$18 + \$6 s/h