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Symposium review: *The Highway and Me and My Earl Grey Tea*—Emily Smucker

Julia Martin
Washington & Franklin Counties Mennonite Conference

Karen Conley
Old Order River Brethren

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Book Review Symposium

Review of: **Smucker, Emily Sara. 2020. *The Highway and Me and My Earl Grey Tea*. Harrisburg, OR: Muddy Creek Press. Pp. 237. \$14.99.**

Review 1: Julia Martin
Washington & Franklin Counties Mennonite
Conference

With its poetic lilt, *The Highway and Me and My Earl Grey Tea* beckons with the lure of travel, comforting drink in hand. To Conservative Mennonite author Emily Smucker, it is time to explore. Her world of 28 years has been Willamette Valley, OR, a place of faith and family while dealing with West Nile Disease and finishing college. Moving beyond the educational structure to pursue a career in writing posed new questions. “Where should I live? Where do I belong? What is my purpose? What is my identity?”

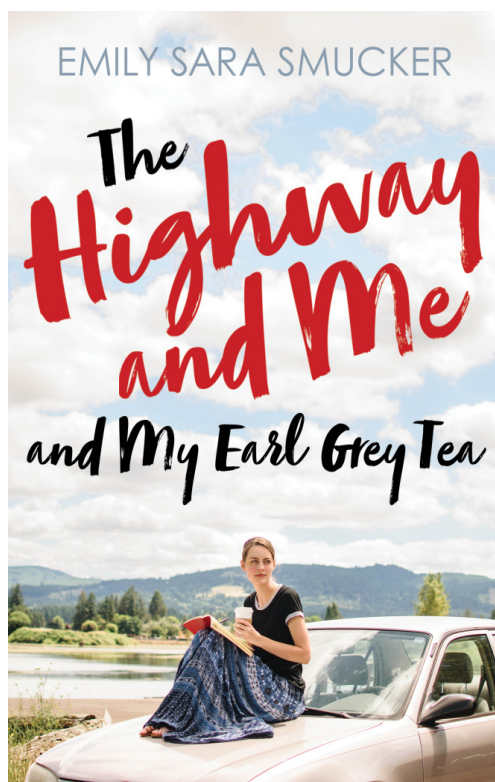
Using the Mennonite part of her identity, Emily introduces one of the culture traits - the ‘Mennonite Game’. Through various connections, she forges a trail to visit Mennonite communities scattered across the United States to discover what they can offer to answer her questions. But her plans abroad are countered with the graveside service for a stillborn baby in the family. Still grieving, Emily drives to her first destination in Paris, TN. In new territory with only a smattering of friends, loneliness comes knocking as she sits and writes. Spending a weekend with cousin Jason sustains her through the month.

Holmes County, OH, is the next stop, teeming with Amish and tourist attractions. Name dropping and articles for Anabaptist Financial paves the way for conversations and activities. Pondering the nuances of various Amish groups, Emily peruses a Plain Communities Business Exchange

magazine and gains an insider view of Amish home life and businesses. Innovation collaborated with tradition; the Sunday lunch of bread, meat, cheese, pickles, and Amish peanut butter were just as Emily’s mother remembered it. Family ties pulled eastward for Thanksgiving in “Mennonite Mecca”, Lancaster Co., PA. The cultural questions about siblings and marriage popped up. If marriage was so revered, where was the value of college degrees, careers, or volunteer work? And yet marriage created network, and seated at her cousin’s husband’s parents’ table, wandering Emily is grateful indeed.

The sense of belonging continues at her new monthly “home” in Dover, DE. Her hostess has a comfortable friend group, and Emily contemplates the changes in her own circle of friends. She feels lonely in Washington, D.C., over Christmas, but New Years Day with Aunt Barb in southern PA alleviates her solitude. Then, blessed time with her family on the west coast before resuming her travels along the east coast, this time in Sarasota, FL.

Despite her worries about living with wealthy old people, Emily soon adapts to their routines. A hearty breakfast, going to work at a library or Starbucks with Wi-Fi, and then coming home to another substantial meal. But not always. Sometimes they ate out. Unsure of their price range, Emily opts to stay home and eat leftovers until she realizes their frugality - the fine house furnishings were rescued from the curb and 4 for \$4 meals at Steak ‘n Shake has been their dinner choice the night before. The elderly friends of her host and hostess become hers as well, connecting through games more than people. The night before her departure, Emily revels in a conversation with the host couple’s granddaughter, relieved not to be in anyone’s way.



After a long trek, Myerstown, PA offers both family and friends. Close to Lancaster County culture, and close to grief, a friend is killed suddenly in a head-on collision. As Emily spends time with the family, she remembers her own upside down feelings after her cousin Leonard's suicidal death. Unanswered questions about that incident have disturbed her ever since and presently there are more unanswered questions about herself. In college, the path to a goal had been clear. Now, the sense of belonging, purpose, and identity is muddled. Attending a REACH mission conference and spending a week with kindred spirits in Philadelphia satisfies her longing to know and be known.

Local lingo and friend groups abound in Lancaster City, PA. Emily weighs their inclusive and exclusive natures as she maintains individual friendships. Could she even be part of a group without feeling guilty for letting someone out? Did any of her feelings matter? In a series of small events, doubt changed to belief. God cared about her feelings.

Through social media, familiar faces greet Emily at her final stop in Hutchinson, KS. Investing in the local community and attending a singing are two highlights. As she begins the rough draft of her travels, one thing becomes clear. It is not writing articles that gives her life but writing books.

Her surprise homecoming marks the beginning of summer but not quite the end of the journey. Her view of Mennonite identity and customs is challenged by reports of a Christian Aid Ministries employee's alleged sexual abuse to Haitian boys. Does she want to be part of a culture where this evil could co-exist with good and yet be intentionally shrouded? However, as she helps her family with harvesting in Oregon, she knows she belongs. When her mother's family gathers in Minnesota for her grandfather Yoder's funeral, she finds the word that answers her questions. Connection. Her realization brings further clarity. "You can't grow connections when you're always escaping." As her loosely woven story unfolds, sprinkled with fad phrases and amusing anecdotes, the old adage rings true – "East and west, home is best," with a comforting drink in hand.

At first glance, this book seems to happen on a whim. But moving past the Tinkerbell blanket and earl grey tea, deeper issues surface. As a Mennonite reviewer, I can identify with the

thought patterns of connection, mourning, and forgiveness. However, the strong Mennonite link is a weak link to a broader audience. Detailing the sights of Washington, D.C., and other places that Emily visited would appeal to any traveler.

Julia Martin continues to hone her writing skills. After publishing several articles, this is her first book review.

Review 2: Karen Conley
Old Order River Brethren

The Highway and Me and My Earl Grey Tea is the story of a young Mennonite girl, an aspiring writer, who takes a year off to experience living, a month at a time, in other Anabaptist communities across America. It reminds me of *Through Painted Deserts* (Donald Miller) or even *Under the Overpass* (Michael Yankoski), other books of the travel/adventure/finding oneself genre by young Christians, and based in America. The glaring difference is that this is a feminine, demure, Mennonite version.

Miss Smucker is from the Willamette Valley in Oregon where her family has lived for several generations and farms grass for seed. She got her Bachelor's degree in seven years, slowed down by ill health and finances. As such, she explains that her plans have always been "uncertain", submitting as they must to these hurdles. Conversely, her sheltered life in Oregon defines her world and there's a certain stability in being a part of the incredibly interwoven social network of Anabaptism, which she unabashedly enjoys.

Her mother Dorcas Smucker is a published author and doubtless an inspiration for her daughter. Their writing is markedly different in that most of Mrs. Smucker's content comes from her roles of wife and mother. Interestingly, Miss Smucker barely alludes to her own mother's accomplished writing. Where does she belong? Can she develop as a writer and figure out with whom she wants to identify if she stays rooted in a corner of the Mennonite universe? This book chronicles her adventures and ruminations during a year of travel. And yes, the scope is limited by her health and finances: she does not explore Mennonite communities overseas.

Several themes emerge and are revisited in cyclical fashion, as is typical of the feminine mind.

What are the pros and cons of living in the middle of an extended, complex Anabaptist community (example: Lancaster, PA)? What about the opposite (Paris, TN)? Miss Smucker expresses the dismay she feels; consternation and some indignation when her presence is largely ignored in the Anabaptist metropolis. Even in Sarasota where people should be “in relaxed and friendly vacation mode,” plain people fail to give basic friendly greetings while out and about. Her analysis of this is fascinating, as she describes the difference between a small community where Mennonites band together versus a large one where everyone has their “group” and can’t logistically keep up with everyone—even those in close vicinity. This means that large populations leave the newcomer isolated and perceiving the people as unfriendly.

What does it mean to be connected to community? Is it close personal friendships? Belonging to a Group? Miss Smucker is not questioning whether or not she wants to be a Mennonite. She spends much time though, pondering how she fits in. Oregon has never been a “hub” of Anabaptism and finding her way into a different community demands more work than those there by birthright.

Sorrow and loss. Miss Smucker opens the book with a graveside service for a stillborn infant. She soon introduces the reader to the life altering effect that her cousin’s suicide had on her when she was just 16. Midway through the book she attends the wake and funeral of another young man she had only just met, and finally the book concludes with the death of her 102 year old grandfather.

Family. Romance. As one might expect, a young, single woman also has romantic relationships on her mind. However, Miss Smucker points out that Grandpa Yoder married late, none of her five siblings is married, and many/most of her cousins have also delayed marriage and childbearing. She doesn’t seem to pine for marriage—though that (traditionally) answers many questions about where one belongs and in which

community to invest. Because she is taking the road less traveled—that of a single writer—she is faced with questions and decisions married women largely avoid.

Mental health. Miss Smucker discusses how her great-great grandfather’s suicide has become an identifier to this day in meeting far-flung relatives. His descendants still remember it and connect with each other by that data point. More recently, her cousin’s suicide has left indelible marks on her character. She visits another male cousin who struggles deeply with depression—and they actually talk about it. When a female friend is struggling to process the shock and grief of her cousin killed suddenly in a head on collision, she deliberately lends her physical presence as support, despite the discomfort of barely knowing the deceased. She manages to brush aside worrying “what will people think?” because what is needed is healthy grieving and honesty with emotions.

Miss Smucker’s thoughts are presented in a candid and winsome manner. Intellectually curious, and kind to others’ viewpoints, the presentation of her opinions is clear but humble. She has the poise and tact of a traditional young Mennonite woman, even as she follows the non-traditional path of an itinerant adventurer. It’s refreshing to read a book by a (fairly liberal appearing) Conservative Mennonite who is not actively bashing and recklessly questioning the entire system. True to her introverted nature, she does not aspire to influence or bring change. Instead, she desires to learn and ultimately to be a supporter. If the reader approaches the book in the same way, wanting to learn and explore connections within the extended, less conservative Anabaptist world through the eyes of an educated writer, they are certain to enjoy this book.

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