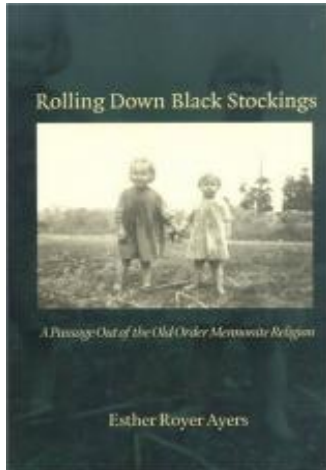


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# Rolling Down Black Stockings: A Passage Out of the Old Order Mennonite Religion

by Esther Royer Ayers

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## About the Book

*Rolling Down Black Stockings* is a personal recollection of Esther Royer Ayers's youth spent in a highly restrictive and confined religious community. Her story is as much a search for identity and a longing for a mother's love as it is a tale about a totalitarian culture that led to her departure from the Old Order Mennonite religion.

This poignant story is told in three books: book 1 describes her youth in a farm community on the outskirts of Columbiana, Ohio; book 2 follows the struggles of Ayers as she tries to fit in with another culture after leaving the church when her family moves to Akron, Ohio; and book 3 discusses the history and cultural dynamics of the religion.

Ayers recounts how the Old Order Mennonite Church came into existence. Her personal account begins when she was eight years old, watching as her mother took care of her sick father. With intelligence and insight, Ayers describes how her family coped with the burden of not having enough income, which meant that the children were expected to work instead of getting an education. When secular educational leaders closed the one-room schoolhouses that served her Mennonite community, Ayers relates her difficulties trying to fit in at the public school and how she and her siblings were required to fail classes so that they would be expelled. It concludes with reflections on what all this meant to her.

A rare and moving memoir, *Rolling Down Black Stockings* is also a valuable piece of social history that will appeal to historians as well as those interested in separatist communities and women's studies.

## Discussion Guide

1. As a child, Ayers is ashamed of her real life and tries to emulate the lives of her classmates. Discuss reasons a child does this? Does she exhibit this same behavior as a teenager and adult? Cite instances.

2. Discuss the educational trauma Ayers and her siblings are forced to undergo. How detrimental is this to them as young children, and how hobbling is it to them when they move out of the religion? Since Old Order Mennonite children once again attend one-room schoolhouses, do you think the Supreme Court ruling is good or bad for education of these children?
3. Chapter 1 relates, in story form, an example of a religious doctrine that is designed to separate members from the world. Ensuing chapters relate numerous examples. Discuss these separation doctrines.
4. Does Ayers give you the feeling that fear keeps members from leaving the religion? What other factors keep members from leaving?
5. Old Order Mennonites are pacifists and believe it is wrong to ever take another person's life. As such, they are exempted from military service. What do you think would happen in this world if everyone believed in non-violence?
6. Ayers states that Old Order Mennonites require their members to live in the past. Can religions rule this way without oppressing their members? What other religions and governments can you think of that require their members to live in the past?
7. Ayers voices deep anger and deep love for her mother in a seesaw fashion. Why do you think she voices such opposite feelings? What does Ayers eventually realize about her mother?
8. Ayers has a depressive breakdown when twelve. Discuss the event that led to this breakdown. What leads to her healing?
9. As a child, Ayers regularly visits junkyards. What does she find there? Why does she find this so uplifting?
10. Many people like to visit Old Order Mennonite and Amish communities in Ohio, Indiana, Pennsylvania and other states. Does this book help you understand these people?
11. Old Order Mennonites require their members to "live behind a wall of separation" and try to keep the world from knowing much about them. Are they successful in doing this? What did you learn in the book that surprised you?
12. When Ayers' mother moves the family out of the religion, Ayers is finally allowed to participate in worldly affairs. Yet she finds herself unable to do so, and resorts to lying. In what ways does Ayers behave similarly to children who have experienced abuse?
13. Old Order Mennonites are quite self sufficient and frugal. Name ways you spent money in the past week that an Old Order Mennonite would not have spent money for.
14. Old Order Mennonites separate themselves from secular government. As such, they are exempt from paying Social Security, and do not receive Social Security and Medicare payments. Neither do they receive welfare, food stamps, or any goods and services provided by the government. Instead, they take care of their own. What are the negative and

positive issues in living this way?

## Author Bio

Esther Royer Ayers has published fiction and nonfiction books and short stories. In addition to *Rolling Down Black Stockings*, she has published another nonfiction, *A Heritage That Money Can't Buy*, and a fiction, *Flights of the Herons*. She has a BS in Biology from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock.

## Critical Praise

Ayers' childhood was a hardscrabble place of black stockings, brimmed bonnets, a dress code so austere that even buttons were considered vanity.

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**Publication Date:** March 30, 2005

**Paperback:** 172 pages

**Publisher:** Kent State Univ Pr

**ISBN-10:** 0873388283

**ISBN-13:** 9780873388283