

*A note from Reel History:* Witness *is not necessarily a historical film. However, if offers a unique cultural interpretation of Amish society. For this reason, Reel History host Jared Frederick has occasionally used the film in his Pennsylvania history course.*

1. What perspectives of Amish life does the audience immediately get from the funeral scenes?
2. How is urban life in 1980s Philadelphia depicted? Pick a particular scene you find revealing.
3. In what scenes is the isolation of Amish society most apparent?
4. How is the barn raising scene telling of Amish communities? Describe the activities characters are involved in.
5. How does the scene in which the Amish are taunted reveal the two separate worlds in which John Book is living?
6. How could the story of this film be considered a tale of forbidden love?
7. How do the depictions of family life contrast between the urban scenes and the rural scenes? Do the Amish and the “English” have greater similarities or differences?
8. Does John Book remain the man he was or does Amish society change him?
9. This film is set in the 1980s. What relevant themes can we find in its story?
10. The movie was all filmed in Philadelphia and Lancaster. How does this add to the film’s authenticity?


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Accompanying primary source:

**Amish Feelings Mixed Over Filming of Movie**

June 7, 1984 – *New York Times*

Ever since Paramount Pictures began filming the movie ''Witness'' here in Lancaster County a few weeks ago, displeasure has competed with curiosity among the local Amish.

The movie's plot mirrors a conflict the Amish face every day: the confrontation of disparate cultures.

The Amish try to lead private and plain lives in the midst of modern non- Amish neighbors, whom they call the ''English,'' and the visitors who feed a $287 million-a-year tourist industry.

The movie, directed by Peter Weir, is the story of an Amish boy, who, while traveling with his widowed mother, witnesses a murder in a Philadelphia train station. Harrison Ford plays a detective investigating the case who falls in love with the Amish widow, played by Kelly McGillis.

''We read about the movie in the paper,'' said an Amish woman, who asked that her named not be printed because it would constitute a sin of pride. ''The kids even cut out Harrison Ford's picture, but it doesn't really matter that much to them. Somebody told us he was in 'Star Wars,' but that doesn't mean anything to us.''

Sitting in her huge country kitchen, with its wood stove and kerosene lamps, she spoke of the fears of some local Amish people that the making of the movie will invade the simple way of life that reflects their religious beliefs.

''It is not of our world,'' said the woman, whose farm is just a few miles from the farm that Paramount is using as its main location. ''We wonder how we might be affected.''

The Amish have adjusted to the tourism. It has become like the ticking of a clock, said the Amish woman. ''You don't even hear it after a while,'' she said. But the movie has been like chimes, she said, reminding the Amish that the clock is indeed on the wall.

''It is an intrusion,'' said the woman. ''We will never see this movie, but it hits home. They are trying to show us and I am afraid that untruths about my people will spread.'' Film Makers' Assurances

The film makers say every effort is being made to assure taste and authenticity, but Amish bishops have admonished church members to avoid the film makers, not to work for them or to rent their farms or equipment.

The Old Order Amish, the strictest branch of the religion, traces its roots to the 16th-century Swiss Anabaptists, and the Mennonite Church that grew from that movement. The religion is based, among other ideals, on pacifism and a separation between religion and the world. The Amish stress that separation in their dress, simple, homemade clothing of mostly dark colors, their shunning of such modern devices as electricity and telephones and the use of the horse and buggy for transportation instead of automobiles.

The Amish religion also opposes veneration of graven images, and the Amish are forbidden either to see movies or to be photographed.

''We have been warned in church not to have any part of the movie, to leave the movie people alone,'' said Dan Stoltzfoos, an Amishman from Ronks, Pa., who considers himself more liberal than his neighbors and agreed to let his name be used.

But though they disapprove of the movie and ''want no part of it,'' said Mr. Stoltzfoos, the Amish are nonetheless eager to ''hear all about it.''

He said when the Paramount crew was filming at a railroad near the welding shop where his son-in-law works, Amish employees along with others punched out of work and ran to see the action. And the non-Amish family whose farm is being used in the movie, Emma and Paul Krantz, say their Amish neighbors lie in the grass and look down on the set with binoculars.

''We talked to them to get their opinion before we agreed with Paramount,'' said Mrs. Krantz. ''They said it wouldn't bother them and now they are even asking for souvenirs.''