

Mennonite Mystery Writer By Cathleen Hockman-Wert

Study the cover of *Three Can Keep a Secret* to find the first clues that this isn't a typical mystery novel. A grainy black and white photo pictures a plainly dressed woman with covering strings dangling from her hair. Holmes-caliber sleuths will identify the drawing underneath as a bit of folk art *fraktur*.

Open the book, and before the story begins notice a pair of scene-setting quotations: the first a 1755 Mennonite statement against taking up "Arms to defend our King, our Country or our Selves," the second the motto of the Hell's Angels: "Three can keep a secret, if two are dead."

If this isn't enough of a study in contrasts, read on and meet Stella Crown: a prickly Bucks County, Pa., dairy farmer with a special place in her heart for motorcycles—and for her Franconia Mennonite Conference friends. She's the hero of a new series of mysteries by Judy Clemens, a member of Grace Mennonite Church in Pandora, Ohio.

Breaking further with tradition: neither *Three Can Keep a Secret* nor the series' award-winning first book, *Till the Cows Come Home*, opens with a corpse in the first chapter.

Is this a kinder, gentler, Mennonite way to write mysteries? "Not really," Clemens says. "I love mysteries, but I can get bored real quickly with that formula where the main character is always stumbling across dead bodies. It's just not real. I wanted to try something different."

Part of that difference is to create characters and scenarios that break down stereotypes—such as the image of big, bad motorcyclists. In their prechildren life, Clemens and her husband, Steve Smucker, were avid bikers. And as she puts it, "None of the people we rode with finance a string of brothels, produce methamphetamines or publish hard-core porn. They are simply nice folks who love the feel of the wind in their hair and the rumble of their bikes in their ears." She wanted to portray the good guys beneath the leather.

Clemens wasn't necessarily planning to focus on another group of folks often stereotyped by their clothes. "But after my first book, when my editor found out that I'm Mennonite, she said, 'Oh, you have to write about Mennonites. People love to hear about Mennonites.'"

Thus developed *Three Can Keep a Secret*, in which an outlaw biker gang and an MYF youth group play key roles, and Harley-Davidson chrome contrasts with a Mennonite pastor driving, naturally, "an ancient Corolla." *Scrapple*, *Martyrs' Mirror*, Mennonite Disaster Service, hymn #606/#118, MMA, Lancaster Conference, "welcoming" congregations, funny cake, national assemblies, "healing and hope" and Herr's potato chips all make appearances.

Yet the book presents more than the trappings of Mennonite life.

"I wanted to talk about some of the things Mennonites don't talk about," Clemens says. A prime example is conflict. As one character puts it: "Mennonites ... are not good at confrontation. It's much more common to keep everything inside or to talk to everyone but the person you have an issue with."

The book acknowledges disagreements among Mennonites today, such as over women in church leadership. Such struggles or flaws are simply part of being real, Clemens says.

Sometimes it's easier to raise this kind of issue in a fictional story than, say, a letter to The Mennonite or at an assembly. "If I get up to talk about things like this, I just cry," Clemens says. But, she continues, if the Stella Crown books get difficult topics out in the open and prompt discussion about actual relationships and congregations, all the better.

While not painting an overly rosy picture of Mennonite culture, *Three Can Keep a Secret* highlights what Clemens considers Mennonite strengths: how Mennonites come together in times of crisis, creative, peaceful ways of working through problems (“I’m going to do this the Mennonite way,” one woman states grimly. “I’m going to kill them with kindness.”) and the portrayal of a loving pastor.

“I grew up as the daughter of a minister,” Clemens says, “and my dad—well, he’s my dad, of course he’s going to be supportive—says he wishes all ministers would read *Three Can Keep a Secret* because of the way it talks about issues of the church, and how the different congregations in the book relate to each other.”

While the series doesn’t contain much violence (few references to blood and guts are more graphic than the first book’s opening scene: a cow C-section), it does have a sprinkle of profanity. Readers from eastern Pennsylvania will spot familiar landmarks. Telford, where Clemens used to live, is never named, but Perkasio and Bethlehem Pike are.

Boosted by enthusiastic fans, *Till the Cows Come Home* was nominated for two “best first novel” mystery awards, the Agatha and the Anthony. After finding a publisher for the first two Stella Crown books herself, Clemens has now, with the help of an agent, signed a contract to write three more in the series. The next, *To Thine Own Self Be True*, takes its name from the Shakespearean quote tattooed on Stella’s arm and continues Clemens’ stereotype-busting work with a focus on the tattoo industry. It is scheduled for release in August.

In June 2004, Clemens’ one-act play “Attics” was performed at Bethany Christian Schools’ 50th-anniversary celebration, and it too is now being published. To learn more about it and the Stella Crown books, visit www.judyclemens.com.

For someone rooted in a church that once banned the reading of such novels, it is a twist to become a mystery writer, Clemens admits. “But I hope the message the books get across is about Christian morals—about love, taking care of each other, being honest, having integrity,” she says. “The second book doesn’t have the intensity a lot of mysteries have, but most people say they like it better than the first. It’s a book about family.”

Cathleen Hockman-Wert is a member of Corvallis (Ore.) Mennonite Fellowship.

Stella Crown’s take on Mennonite dress

A few elderly women still bore the coverings Mennonites had worn for so long, a white mesh bonnet pinned lightly to the backs of their heads. Not practical for anything, the coverings are merely a symbol of submission to God. Ma had chosen long ago to stop wearing hers, but it was mostly because she was ready for a more stylish hair-do. She thought her hair would work better in a short cut, and once she got it done she decided the covering looked ... well, a bit silly.

I thought the whole idea of coverings is ridiculous, but then, no one cares what I think.—From *Three Can Keep a Secret* by Judy Clemens (Poisoned Pen Press, 2005)