



**Georgetown Township Public Library
Book Discussion Guide**
Mennonite in a Little Black Dress
Rhoda Janzen (2009)

About This Book

Not long after Rhoda Janzen turned forty, her world turned upside down. It was bad enough that her husband of fifteen years left her for Bob, a guy he met on Gay.com, but that same week a car accident left her injured. Needing a place to rest and pick up the pieces of her life, Rhoda packed her bags, crossed the country, and returned to her quirky Mennonite family's home, where she was welcomed back with open arms and offbeat advice. (Rhoda's good-natured mother suggested she get over her heartbreak by dating her first cousin—he owned a tractor, see.)

Written with wry humor and huge personality—and tackling faith, love, family, and aging—*Mennonite in a Little Black Dress* is an immensely moving memoir of healing, certain to touch anyone who has ever had to look homeward in order to move ahead. (*From the publisher.*)

From: <http://litlovers.com>

About the Author

- Birth—1963
- Where—North Dakota, USA
- Education—Ph. D, University of California, Los Angeles
- Currently—lives in Michigan

Rhoda Janzen is an American poet, academic and memoirist, best known for her three memoirs: *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress* (2011), *Does This Church Make Me Look Fat?* (2012), and *Mennonite Meets Mr. Right* (2013).

Janzen grew up in a Mennonite household in North Dakota. She earned a Ph.D. from UCLA, where she was the University of California Poet Laureate in 1994 and 1997.

In 2006, Janzen's husband of 15 years left her for a man, and she suffered serious injuries in car accident a few days later. While on sabbatical from her teaching position, she went home to her Mennonite family in Fresno, California, to heal from these crises. These experiences are recounted in her memoir *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress*.

Her second memoir, *Does This Church Make Me Look Fat?* tells the story of her experiences surviving breast cancer, becoming a stepmom, and attending her new husband's Pentecostal church. *Mennonite Meets Mr. Right* recounts Janzen's courtship with her eventual husband.

In addition to her memoir, Janzen is the author of *Babel's Stair*, a collection of poetry.

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Discussion Questions

1. Rhoda's parents are deeply religious. What are some of the more notable ways their faith manifests itself? What qualities do they possess that you admire? Were you surprised by anything you learned about the Mennonite community?
2. The lover named Bob pops up with an almost incantatory persistence, like a refrain. Do you think it would be harder to be left for a man or a woman? Given that Rhoda returns to the lover's gender again and again, what do you think Rhoda would say?
3. Consider the marriages portrayed in this book. Rhoda and Nick remain together fifteen years; Mary and Si, more than forty-four years; Hannah and Phil, eleven years. Does the book make any tacit suggestions about what makes a good marriage? Do you know of any marriages that make you say, "want what they have"?
4. Consider Rhoda's family gatherings on Christmas Eve and Christmas. Would you describe this as a functional or a dysfunctional family dynamic? Rhoda and her siblings are very different from one another — do they get along better than you would expect, or not?
5. Rhoda does not explicitly state that her parents opposed her marriage to an intellectual atheist, but we may infer that with their deeply held religious convictions, they grieved for Rhoda's future. Do you think that Rhoda's parents would have opened their home to Nick, if he had wished to become a part of the family? What should loving parents do when their child chooses unwisely?
6. Rhoda announces early on in the memoir that her husband left her for a man he met on Gay.com; however, as the book progresses, she slowly reveals that her marriage had been troubled for some time, and that she knew Nick was bisexual before they were married. Does this revelation change your perspective? Can we sympathize with a woman who knowingly entered into a marriage with a bisexual man? Do you think Rhoda's piecemeal revelations mimic the way in which Rhoda comes to terms with the end of her marriage? Why do you think the book is structured this way?
7. To what extent is this a memoir about growing up? Rhoda humorously relates her embarrassment at having to eat "shame-based foods" at school as a child — but admits that as an adult, she enjoys them. Similarly, she looks back fondly on other experiences that were likely not very pleasant at the time — setting off a yard bomb inside the van she was sleeping in on a camping trip, for one. Are there other examples you can think of? Do you think this kind of nostalgia — a willingness to appreciate and poke fun at bad memories — is something that's indicative of maturity, of adulthood? Or is it a dodge, a way to avoid facing unpleasant truths?
8. The Mennonites disapprove of dancing and drinking alcohol. Rhoda says that while growing up, radios, eight-track tapes, unsupervised television, Lite-Brites, and Barbies — among other things — were all forbidden. Does her family gain anything positive by limiting "wordly" influences? Did Rhoda and her siblings lose anything in being so sheltered? What "wordly" influences would you try to protect your children from today?

Discussion questions continued next page

9. Some Mennonites disapprove of higher education. Do you think that a career in academia necessarily precludes one from faith? How does Rhoda reconcile the two?

10. Rhoda's mother is, as Rhoda puts it, "as buoyant as a lark on a summer's morn." Rhoda claims to be not as upbeat as her mother, but do you think that in some ways, she is? Given the seriousness of some of the issues explored in the memoir, did the humorous voice surprise you?

11. Rhoda freely discusses the problems in her marriage, and how poorly her husband sometimes treated her. Looking back on it, however, she thinks that she probably still would have married him regardless. She asks, "Is it ever really a waste of time to love someone, truly and deeply, with everything you have?" What do you think?

12. Does the memoir signal Rhoda's forgiveness of Nick? Or does the writing of it suggest that in some ways she is still hanging on to her hurt? Forgiveness isn't often explicitly taught. Some religious institutions fall short in this area, stressing that we should forgive rather than telling us how to forgive. How did you learn to forgive? How can we teach forgiveness to our children?

13. Rhoda and Hannah make a list of men they would refuse to date, and it includes, but is not limited to: men named Dwayne or Bruce; men who have the high strange laugh of a distant loon; men who bring index cards with prewritten conversation starters on a first date. What qualities might you assiduously avoid in a romantic partner?

14. Rhoda's mother tells her, "When you're young, faith is often a matter of rules...but as you get older, you realize that faith is really a matter of relationship — with God, with the people around you, with members of your community." Is Rhoda's own relationship with faith an example of this, in a way?

15. Toward the end of the book, Rhoda remarks that she "suddenly felt destiny as a mighty and perplexing force, an inexorable current that sweeps us off into new channels." Do you believe in destiny? Can you really ever escape your roots or change your beliefs?
(*Questions issued by publisher.*)

From: <http://litlovers.com>

Resources for additional information about book discussion choices and authors:

Books & Authors (Access through links to MeL Databases on Library's webpage.)
<http://bna.galegroup.com/bna/>

LitLovers.com
www.litlovers.com

Overbooked.com
<http://www.overbooked.com>

Penguin.com (USA)
<http://www.us.penguin.com/static/pages/bookclubs/index.html>

Reading Group Center
<http://reading-group-center.knopfdoubleday.com>

Reading Group Guides
<http://www.readinggroupguides.com>

Suggested print resources:

The Book Club Companion: A Comprehensive Guide to the Reading Group Experience
Diana Loevy
374.22 Loevy 2006

The Book Group Book: A Thoughtful Guide to Forming and Enjoying a Stimulating Book Discussion Group
Ellen Slezak (editor)
374.22 Book 2000

Good Books Lately: The One-Stop Resource for Book Groups and Other Greedy Readers
Ellen Moore and Kira Stevens
374.22 Moore 2004

Read It and Eat: A Month-by-Month Guide to Scintillating Book Club Selections and Mouthwatering Menus
Sarah Gardner
028.9 Gardner 2005

The Reading Group Handbook: Everything You Need to Know, From Choosing Members to Leading Discussions
Rachel W. Jacobsohn
374.22 Jacobsohn 1994

What Do I Read Next? (Multi-volume set, annual editions)
Gale Research Inc.
R 016.813 What