

Witness

(1985) (Drama)

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Major Characters

John Book.....Harrison Ford

Detective in the homicide (murder) division of the Philadelphia police department.

Rachel Lapp.....Kelly McGillis

An Amish woman whose husband has just died, who takes her son, Samuel, to visit friends in Baltimore (See below for some background on the Amish).

Samuel.....Lukas Haas

Rachel's young son, who witnesses a brutal murder in a bathroom of the Philadelphia train station.

Eli Lapp.....Jan Rubes

Rachel's father, and one of the leaders of the Amish community where they live.

Paul Schaeffer.....Josef Sommer

John Book's boss in the Police Department.

Carter.....Brent Jennings

John Book's partner in the police.

McFee.....Danny Glover

The man who Samuel witnesses commit the murder in the bathroom, who it turns out is also a member of the police department.

Plot Summary

A note on the Amish: The Amish are a deeply religious community of about 50,000 people who live primarily in rural Pennsylvania. They are descendants of German settlers who came over to the United States before the American Revolution. They are well known for their simple lifestyle, which rejects modern technological advances: They use horses and carriages instead of cars, and gas lanterns instead of electric lights. They are also pacifists, who refuse to fight against other people, or to participate in any wars. Although the outside world has come to view them and their small villages as tourist attractions, the Amish themselves try to remain separate, and true to their traditions.

The Plot: Rachel is an Amish woman who decides to visit some friends in Baltimore with her young son, Samuel, after the death of her husband. While waiting to change trains in Philadelphia, Samuel secretly witnesses a brutal murder inside a bathroom. After the body is discovered, Detective John Book informs Rachel that she must stay in Philadelphia for a couple days because Samuel is a "material witness" to the murder. Thus Rachel and Samuel, who come from an entirely different world still living in the 18th century, find themselves stuck in the middle of a huge modern American city, with all its fascinations and troubles.

While investigating the murder, John gets a huge break in the case when Samuel identifies the murderer from a picture on a poster; It is a well known detective, in the Philadelphia police department. John suddenly realizes that the murder occurred because certain police officers have been corrupted, and thus must be working with criminals in the drug trade. The murdered man was a policeman who apparently "knew too much."

After John is nearly murdered, he takes Rachel and Samuel back to their home in Amish country, in hopes of protecting them from the police officer (or officers) who are determined to silence both John himself, and Samuel. It is now John's turn to experience what it is like to be in a completely different world, with, among other things, no phones, cars or electricity.

Over the next few days, John learns of the dignity and grace of the Amish people, and soon finds himself especially attracted to Rachel. Each learns much of the other's world, and indeed, how dissimilar their worlds are. All the while, John must do everything he can to protect himself and Samuel from the violence that threatens to spread from his own big city to this idyllic Amish community.

A final linguistic note: A small amount of the dialog is in a dialect of German, which is still the language that many of the Amish use among themselves.

Some Words and Expressions that You may not Know

Rachel and Samuel begin their trip to Baltimore, but a horrible and unexpected event occurs in Philadelphia, thus delaying their journey.

Rachel, I'm sorry about Jacob. I know he's walking with god.

Noted here to show an appropriate thing to say after somebody dies ("My condolences" would be another). The second sentence is probably a very "Amish condolence."

First time to the big city?

In this case, a reference to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, which is about an hour east of Lancaster county, where many of the Amish live.

Amtrak.

The name of the government-run national railroad service.

Be careful out there among the English!

The Amish must be the only subculture in the United States to refer to all other Americans as "The English."

Look, a cute little Amish boy!

Typical of the way many people will refer to Amish children, which is to say affectionately, but in a somewhat patronizing manner.

The train to Baltimore is delayed three hours.

A major city in the state of Maryland, an hour north of Philadelphia.

What are you doing, man?!

A very slangy and common way to end sentences, usually added to express emotion such as anger or surprise.

Let's get out of here!

A common way to say "Let's leave now."

Get Schaffer on the phone!

Noted here for the use of the verb "to get." This is a grammatically blunt way of asking somebody to have a third person call you.

There's a kid in a funny black dress.

A "kid" is a common word for child.

He says you look like the runt.

A word for an undersized animal, or the smallest baby in a litter (It can also be an insult for a small person).

Homicide.

"Homicide" means murder, and here, also refers to the division of the police department that investigates them.

Were looking for a suspect.

A person believed by the police to have committed a crime.

You have no rights. Your son is a material witness to a homicide.

A legal term for a person who has witnessed a crime and will therefore be called to say what they saw, in a criminal trial.

Back off!

What an angry person says to someone they want to stay away .

What the fuck!?

Without any more words, this is simply a crude way to express surprise or anger.

I want no further part of this.

Another way to say "I don't want anything to do with this."

The back room or the blue room?

Here, Book's sister is referring to rooms in her house, though usually a title such as "the blue room" would refer to a room in a fancy hotel or office building.

There's a folding cot for your son.

A small portable bed, usually made of canvas on a collapsible frame.

You can keep your holier-than-thou mouth shut!

A complex and interesting expression that implies a snobby or sanctimonious attitude (The person using these words feels that the one they're describing thinks they're better or more moral than others).

Who are these orphans, anyway?

"Orphans" refers to children without parents, but used loosely, can also refer to anybody who looks lost and far from home.

Samuel will have to testify.

"To testify" is a legal term meaning to make a statement under oath, usually at a trial.

You're a guy with a gun, who goes around whacking people.

"To whack" is a great verb meaning to hit or slap, with a sharp blow.

A police lineup.

A line of people who stand together, so that the police can see if a witness can identify a criminal suspect. (The word is not used in the movie, but the lineup itself is shown).

She thinks you're afraid of the responsibility.

What men are often accused of who don't have wives or children.

She thinks you like policing because you think you're always right and you think that you're the only one who can do anything.

An interesting word than can be a noun (gerund) or verb.

She says you think that none of the police could tell a crook from a bag of elbows.

This sentence doesn't make much sense. A "crook" is a good word for a thief or other person who makes a living by dishonest means, and "elbows" are the joints which allow the arm to bend.

Good appetite!

Perhaps said by the Amish, but not normally used in English. However, "Bon appetit" is a widely used French expression which means the same thing.

Captain, Sergeant Carter on line 23.

Sergeant, Captain and Lieutenant are the top three ranks in most law enforcement agencies. The "line" refers to the telephone line.

***While Sergeant Book continues his investigation,
Samuel leads him to the real murderer.***

Hey, knock it off!

One of the truly great idiomatic phrasal verbs, generally meaning "Stop it!"

"Narcotics Officer McFee Honored for Youth Project."

The headline in the paper that Samuel Reads: A "Narcotics Officer" is a policeman who works to prevent the sale of illegal drugs.

I'll get it.

Put here to remind you that when you're about to answer a door or phone or whatever, the only correct verb tense is the contracted form of "I + will," so stop saying "I will get it, " or worse still, "I'm going to get it" (!)

It's McFee. We got positive LD from the Amish kid.

A critical abbreviation meaning "identification."

It all fits, Paul.

If something fits (or "fits together"), this is a colloquial way to say that everything is logical concerning a particular theory (In this case, that Officer McFee is corrupt and working with drug dealers).

The P2P stuff was confiscated.

"To confiscate" means to legally seize (usually done by the police).
In the sentence above, "P2P" is simply the name of a chemical that is used to make a certain type of illegal drug.

They need it to make the speed, which is \$5,000 a pint.

A colloquial term for a type of popular illegal drug in pill or powder form that is known to make people hyperactive.

There's no record of 10 55 gallon drums of P2P.

That's \$22 million that is missing!

A drum (besides being a musical instrument) is a large container for storing liquids.

And guess who ran the raid! McFee!

A "raid" is a sudden military or police attack, often to seize property or make arrests.

The FBI.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation, which is the famous police force that works for the Federal Government (most police enforcement in the United States is carried out at the local city level).

Treasury.

A reference to the Treasury Department of the US Government, which is primarily responsible for financial policy, but also for certain areas of law enforcement. The Secret Service, which guards the President and looks for counterfeiters, is in the Department of the Treasury.

What do you need to clear this up?

"To clear up" something is another way of saying to take care of everything that needs to be done with it.

I want maximum security on this.

Another way to say that you want as many police and other law enforcement agents on this case as possible.

Book realizes that corruption in the police force is greater than he ever believed, and suddenly, his life and Samuel's are in grave danger.

Get in the elevator, you idiot!

Note that the use of the pronoun "you" before an insult is commonly used to intensify it.

That's our car! I don't give a shit!!

A classic and somewhat crude colloquialism for "I don't care."

Who else knows about this? :: Just you and I.

A critical line that alerts Book to the extent of the problem he faces.

He says you have to leave now. It's urgent.

"Urgent" is a key word meaning extremely important, and usually refers to something that requires immediate attention.

I want all the paperwork on this job disappeared.

The use of this word as a transitive verb is a new development (Until a few years ago, you could only say "It disappeared").

Hey partner, watch your back. Schaffer is in on this thing, too.

If someone is "in on something," that means that they are secretly aware of and possibly actively involved in it.

What kind of trouble? :: That's a departmental problem.

In this case, a reference to the police department.

That's a God damn lie!

A crude but common expression used as an intensifier.

He should come in and clear his name.

A person who is falsely accused of wrongdoing needs to "clear his name" in order to protect his reputation.

What about Carter? He's tight, but I'm working on him.

Here, meaning "tight-lipped," which means a person who is very hesitant to talk or say anything.

Book manages to get himself, Rachel and Samuel back to the distant world of the Amish.

No doctor! I have a gunshot wound, and they'll make a report. If they find me, they'll find the boy.

The injury that a person suffers when shot by a gun.

Is the Englishman dead?

In this case, a reference to John Book (who is certainly not English).

He's lost a great deal of blood.

Another common way to say "a lot of."

The sheriff will come here and say we broke the laws.

A "sheriff" is a powerful law enforcement officer, or policeman, who works for the courts.

If he's found, the people who did this will come for Samuel!

This is Rachel's greatest worry.

Two pounds of linseed oil and milk.

This is used as a type of natural medicine.

I'll brew some tea.

If you don't "make" tea, this is the precise verb to use.

I'll have to speak with the elders on this matter.

"Elders" refers to older people, or more specifically, the older community leaders (A common term is "the town elders"). To speak on a particular "matter" is to speak about a particular situation.

As you see fit.

Another way to say "Do what you think is best."

We're talking about 20th century law enforcement.

General term that refers to all of the activities of the police and other similar organizations such as the FBI and Secret Service.

About every third Amish is named "Lap!"

Apparently "Lap" is the Amish equivalent of China's "Wong."

If the Amish are taking a man in, I wouldn't want to hang from a rope until you find him.

In this case, "to take someone in" is to give them shelter and protection. Here, this sentence is a silly way of saying that it will take a long time to find anyone being protected by the Amish.

We got upwards of 14,000 Amish in Landcaster County.

Another way of saying "more than."

There must be a directory of them.

A book that contains names, addresses and other basic information.

Since they don't have any phones, I wouldn't know who to call.

Reference to the fact the Amish never have phones in their homes.

Book begins to learn the ways of his Amish hosts.

Rest, Mr. Book. That's the ticket.

A colloquial way to say "that's what should be done"
(One of the rare times Eli will speak so colloquially).

Tell him this tea **stinks!**

"To stink" literally means, of course, to smell bad. But if something stinks in general, it often means simply that it *is* very bad.

This is a loaded gun! Never touch a loaded gun!

A gun that already has bullets inside in it.

You can handle it while I'm here.

In this case, "to handle" it is to hold on to it and keep it safe.

When you're in our house, I insist that you respect our ways.

A short way of saying "the way we live our lives."

Wars have come. They said we must kill to preserve the good, but there's never only one way.

Eli's talk to Samuel that summarizes the Amish philosophy about war and pacifism.

What you take into your hands, you take into your hearts.

A poetic way to say that you should stay physically separated from what you don't want to be a part of.

Come out from among them, and be separate, sayeth the lord.

A common way that the Bible will attribute words to God ("sayeth" is the old English verb for "say").

Go and finish your chores now.

An interesting but somewhat old-fashioned word for daily or routine duties, such as taking out the trash, or cleaning the kitchen. A useful and related word is "errands," which are miscellaneous things you need to do, but usually outside the house, such as buying some milk and getting the oil changed on the car.

I'm learning a lot about manure.

A great word if you're a farmer: "Manure" is soil made with animal excrement (shit) and other waste material.

Your clothes are stained with blood.

"Stained" refers to the spots and discoloring found on clothes.

Besides, in your clothes, you'd stand out to strangers.

If someone "stands out," they are easily noticeable compared to others in a group.

Buttons are proud and vain. Its not plain.

To be "vain" is to be too proud of oneself or appearance.

The Amish prefer simple clothes that don't stand out or suggest vanity.

They seem to think were quaint.

"Quaint" is a very good word meaning odd or cute, in an old-fashioned sort of way.

They're Mennonites. They have cars.

A branch of the Christian church.

You better get going.

A good way to say "I think you should leave."

I take the bullets because the gun's not much good without them.

The metal projectiles fired from guns or other firearms.

Do I look Amish? :: You look plain.

Rachel's way of saying "simple," or without ornamentation.

Hey partner, how are you doing?

"Partner" can be a colleague or friend or just another person.

Note in rapid speech, "How are you doing?"-----> "How ya doing?"

How hot is it? :: Too hot!

In the right context, "hot" can mean stolen,

or in this case, very dangerous.

You couldn't get within a mile of Schaffer, right now.

A colloquial way to say "you couldn't get close to..."

Investigative reporters?

Reporters who often specialize in uncovering corruption.

The spring goes to the well, and the well water goes into the house.

A "spring" is a small stream of water flowing naturally from the earth.

And a "well" is a deep hole in the ground where water is stored.

This place really echoes.

"To echo" is the verb used when sounds repeats themselves due to the reflection of sound waves off a surface.

Just try to get the car started.

Put here to remind you that native speakers are be as likely to say "Get x done" as "Do x".

It's 4:30 (AM). Time for milking.

The verb (or gerund) you use when you want to get milk out of a cow. (Neither the time nor the activity seems particularly appealing!).

Pinch the top off and squeeze.

"To pinch" something is to squeeze it between the thumb and finger.

You never had your hands on a tit before?

This sounds funny coming from an Amish man. Along with "teat," it is the precise word to describe the nipple of a cow or other mammal. However, "tit" is also a pretty crude word for (human) female breasts.

You're not used to hard work. That's what makes an appetite.

"An appetite" is the physical desire for food (It is also the word from which we get the commonly used French expression "Bon appetit").

You're the Yankee they talk about.

People in the Southern States use this word to refer to those from the Northern States. Here, it is used by an Amish person to refer to all Americans who aren't Amish (just as the word "English" is used).

***As Rachel and Book grow closer, the police
in Philadelphia close in on their witnesses.***

You know carpentry!

This is the type of work to make furniture, the frames for houses and other things that are made of wood.

Whacking is not much use on a farm.

"To whack" is to hit with a big blow.

Tomorrow I'll let out those trousers for you.

When said by a tailor, to "let out" a pair of pants is to make them bigger. "Trousers" is a very British way to say "pants."

He said you'd come to the barn-raising.

A "barn" is a big house for cows and other animals. The Amish are famous for their barn-raising, where the entire community will come together to build a barn by hand in a single day.

Weenie roast.

A "wiener" is a hot-dog. A "weenie roast" is a barbecue with hot dogs.

Golden oldies.

Used a lot on the radio to refer to old rock'n'roll songs.

What is it with you?

A good colloquial way to say "Why are you behaving so strangely?"

I've committed no sin!

"Sin" is a key religious term for the violation of one of God's laws.

There is talk of going to the bishop and having you shunned!

A "bishop" is a high ranking cleric or officer in the church.

If you are "shunned," you are isolated or kept away from other people. In Amish culture, it is obviously a very official word.

That is idle talk.

A good expression referring to things that people say that shouldn't be taken too seriously.

I'll be the judge of that.

A good set expression: "I am the one who will decide if that is true."

You shame yourself.

"To shame" is rarely used as a reflexive verb. "To be ashamed of oneself" is much more common.

I want to talk some sense into him.

"To talk some sense into" a person is a good way of saying that you want to try and convince them to be reasonable, or logical.

We go way back.

A colloquial way to say "We have known each other for a long time."

I trained him.

"To train" is to coach a person (or animal) in a particular mode of performance, skill or behavior.

Can you see John at a prayer meeting?

A church meeting held specifically to pray. Note this type of question is often asked sarcastically, with the implication being that there is no way John would ever go to such a meeting.

We're like the Amish. Were a cult, too.

A provocative word. "Cult" generally refers to a religious sect considered to be false or extreme. While some think that all religions are cults, most people would never use this term for the Amish.

We're a club with our own rules.

Here, the word is used to refer to both the police department and the Amish community, but generally a club has a much narrower purpose, as in a chess or computer club.

It's been a while. :: No matter. We can always use a good one.

A Somewhat old-fashioned way to say "That's not important."

Your hole is better? :: Yeah, it's pretty much healed.

"To heal" means to return to good health (The "hole" that the Amish man refers to is Book's gunshot wound).

Everyone has an idea about you and Book. :: Charitable, I'm sure.

"Charitable" often means generous in giving away money.

Here, it's sarcastically used to mean tolerant in judging others.

***Book reveals that he's not a typical Amish man,
but that he is a great policeman who knows how to protect.***

This is the most famous Amish grocery store in the area!

A typical statement by a typical tourist.

Lady, you take my picture with that thing,
and I'm going to rip your brazier off.

"Lady" is a pretty dated way to address a woman. It's better to say Miss, or mam. A "brazier" is a dated word for a bra.

I regret to inform you that Sergeant Carter died last night in the line of duty.

A person who dies "in the line of duty" has died while doing his job.

This expression usually refers to policemen or soldiers.

Calling me at home? I can't trace the call.

"To trace a call" is an important expression in law enforcement that refers to determining from which telephone a call has been made.

You know what they used to say about dirty cops? They lost the way.
 "Dirty" can mean unclean, or in this case, corrupt.

I'm going to fucking do that to you, asshole.

Note that "fuck" is used as a very crude adverb, In fact, "fuck" can be used in most parts of speech, and while few ESL teachers will discuss it, the grammatical flexibility of this word is certainly worth noticing! Calling someone an "asshole," is a very crude insult. Creep, jerk, moron, and even, ass (to name a few), would be safer.

Come on, Goldilocks.

Reference to the innocent golden-haired girl in the fairy tale "Goldilocks and The Three Bears."

He's my cousin from Ohio. :: Ohio Amish must be different!

Ohio is a major industrial state in the midwest. Although most Amish live in Pennsylvania, a few thousand have settled in Ohio and a few other states.

He's going back to his world, where he belongs.

In this case, an Amish sentiment that is probably typical of their attitude toward any "English" who stay too long in their very private world.

Come on!

The English language's most versatile idiomatic phrasal verb. Here, it means "hurry up," but it can be used for anything from "Be serious" to "Let's go."

Go to Hochleitner's farm and stay there!

Hauchleitner is Rachel and Eli's neighbor.

"Fergie"

---The name of McFee's partner in crime.

Put that gun down!

Along with "drop it!," the precise thing to say in such a situation!

Enough!

Used in the right context, this single innocent word (as in "Mom, do we have enough eggs?") can convey an entire mental attitude, basically meaning "Your behavior is no longer acceptable, and continuing it will only get you into more trouble." A favorite word among small parents screaming at their young children.

Witness

Some Possible Questions for ESL Class Discussion

1. Could Book and Rachel ever have a long term romantic relationship?
2. Will Samuel be able to lead a normal Amish life after everything he has experienced?
3. Who is likely to have greater culture shock; An Amish person who has never left her community who goes to live in Philadelphia, or someone from Philadelphia who goes to live in Amish country?
4. From what you can tell in the movie, what are the good and bad things about the Amish lifestyle? From an Amish perspective, what are the good and bad things about modern life?
5. Are there communities similar to the Amish in your country, in that they intentionally choose to live apart from the mainstream of society?
6. Is police corruption a big problem in the United States? What about your country?
6. Was the ending of this film realistic?
7. What did you enjoy most about this movie?