



Miriam Toews

BY JESSICA TEISCH

In her seventh novel, *Women Talking* (reviewed on page 21), Canadian writer Miriam Toews (rhymes with “caves”), who grew up in a Mennonite family in Manitoba, Canada, exposes the dark side of the religion. Between 2005 and 2009, in the remote, ultraconservative Bolivian Manitoba Colony, more than 130 women were repeatedly anesthetized and raped. When they awakened, bloodied, bruised, and sometimes pregnant, they were told it had been the work of demons or ghosts, as punishment for their sins, or as a result of the “wild” female imagination. *Women Talking* imagines the real and philosophical response to the violence through eight women, who gather in the wake of the men of the colony’s arrests to decide the course of action—and their own lives.

“I felt an obligation, a need, to write about these women,” says Toews, who, like the Bolivian sect of Mennonites, is descended from the Molotschna colony in what is now Ukraine. “I’m related to them. I could easily have been one of them. ... I’ve always been trying to challenge the patriarchy, specifically of my Mennonite community, but I’m concerned with the suppression of girls and women especially, and any place in the world that falls under fundamentalist, authoritarian thinking” (*Guardian*). In all of her books—seven novels and a biography of her father—Toews touches on signature themes of exile, freedom, and the struggle between self-doubt, acceptance, and independence.

The shorthand for Mennonite is “like Amish, only in Canada.” The Mennonites, descendants of the early Anabaptist movement that arose out of the 16th-century Reformation, follow the teachings of Menno Simons, a radical Dutch Protestant reformist leader; members embrace a pacifist tradition, while, to some extent, rejecting the material trappings of modern life. Fleeing religious persecution in Europe, the Mennonites created isolated (though increas-

ingly diverse and assimilated) communities in the United States, Canada, and South America.

Over the last two decades, Toews has opened a window into this insular world that, to many readers, remains highly mystifying, with her characters serving as guides. In her novel *A Complicated Kindness* (2004), she explores the repression and hypocrisies that support the quaint (and tourist-driven) world of buggies and butter churning. Nomi, a rebellious teenage girl in a small Mennonite town near Winnipeg, partakes in these traditions but shaves her head, smokes pot, and dreams of experiencing “real” life in New York City. As Nomi says, “As far as I know, we are the most embarrassing sub-sect of people to belong to if you’re a teenager. ... Imagine the least well-adjusted kid in your school starting a breakaway clique of people whose manifesto includes a ban on the media, dancing, smoking, temperate climates, movies, drinking, rock ‘n’ roll, having sex for fun, swimming, make-up, jewellery, playing pool, going to cities, or staying up past nine o’clock. That was Menno all over.” Similarly, Irma Voth, the eponymous heroine of Toews’s 2011 novel, is expelled from a Mexican colony after secretly marrying a non-Mennonite native; when her new husband disappears, her life is transformed by a bohemian film crew that arrives to make a film about Mennonites.

Born in 1964 in the small town of Steinbach, in the prairie province of Manitoba, Toews has a complex relationship with her upbringing, an ambivalence she mines in her fiction. “I use my life for my art, to create some type of conversation,” she told the *Ottawa Citizen*. Her parents, both of whom had master’s degrees, were comparatively liberal, while still immersed within their tight-knit Mennonite community. Though Toews bucked the town’s culture of punishment, shame, and intolerance, she credits her religious upbringing for instilling values such as discipline, a sense of family and community, and morality.

Toews was the first in her own family to leave Steinbach—the day after high school graduation, in fact. “So people who leave, people like me—and there are lots of us, especially in this town—have very complicated relationships with the places we grew up. We want to love them, and we do love them, but there’s so much of it that’s so harsh, so unforgiving,” she told the *Guardian*. Her older sister left two years later, and her mother remained there until her father’s suicide in 1998. Toews traveled to Montreal, to London on an exchange program, and then all over Europe. She earned a degree in film studies at the University of Manitoba, studied journalism in Halifax, and settled in Winnipeg at age 28, with her partner and two children.

She published her first novel, *Summer of My Amazing Luck*, about a single teenage mom in Winnipeg, in 1996; it won John Hirsch Award for Most Promising Manitoba Writer and was adapted into an award-winning drama. Published two years later, her second novel, *A Boy of Good Breeding*, also featuring a single mother, won the McNally Robinson Book of the Year Award. “In writing fiction I can be free,” Toews explained. “I can use my life. The raw material is my experiences” (*Toronto Star*).

The Mennonite experience continues to influence her fiction. “I identify as a Mennonite—these are my people,” Toews told the *Winnipeg Free Press*, after publication of *Women Talking*. “I could write books about all the beautiful parts of what it is to be a Mennonite: the history, tradition, the tenets of the faith, the pacifism and so on. But it’s the job I’ve undertaken, a mission, to expose some of the hypocrisy, the negative aspects of the culture so that we can change, can improve, can protect and even educate ourselves and become better.”

So here we go.

SELECTED BOOKS

Swing Low

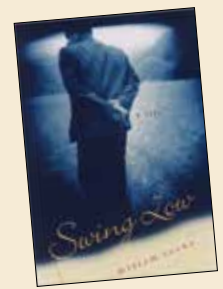
A Life (2000)

♦ MCNALLY ROBINSON BOOK OF THE YEAR AWARD, ALEXANDER KENNEDY ISBISTER AWARD

Toews’s father, an elementary school teacher and devout churchgoer, suffered from bipolar disorder for much of his life. In 1998, he killed himself on the railway tracks. (Her older sister and only sibling, Marjorie, also died by suicide on those same tracks 12 years later). Toews wrote this memoir, a poignant contribution to the literature on mental illness, in his voice, as she imagined it. The book also offers a detailed, textured portrait of a man and a community—small-town, Mennonite Manitoba.

At age 17, Mel Toews was diagnosed with manic depression (now bipolar disorder). Despite a doctor’s warnings that he would never live a normal life, he lived a quite ordinary, simple life in Steinbach: he married, had two

daughters, and was a beloved elementary school teacher for 40 years. But his strict Mennonite community and upbringing may have led to a life in which treatment was not an option. Despite outward appearances, he suffered inwardly and struggled to conceal his illness. When he retired, he fell into a serious depression and was hospitalized for the final time. Before he took his own life, he asked his daughter to write down some of his thoughts. Mel’s last words to his daughter: “Nothing accomplished.” Toews captures some of his interior world and the devastating effects of his illness on both himself and his family. “Audacious, original and profoundly moving. . . . Healing is a likely outcome of a book imbued with the righteous anger, compassion and humanity of *Swing Low*” (*Globe and Mail*).

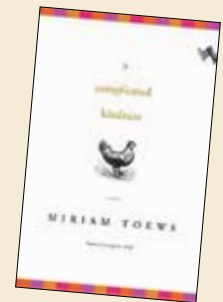


A Complicated Kindness (2004)

♦ GOVERNOR GENERAL’S AWARD

Toews’s highly acclaimed, darkly humorous third novel spent more than year on the Canadian best-seller lists. In it, she fictionalizes a small, religious community modeled after Steinbach. Told in a teenager’s cocky voice through a series of flashbacks, it is an irreverent coming-of-age story about belief and belonging—and the alternatives of each.

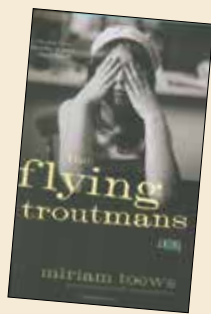
“Half of our family, the better-looking half, is missing,” says Nomi Nickel, a rebellious, restless 16-year-old living in late-1970s East Village, a small, claustrophobic, religious Mennonite community supported by a chicken processing plant and a pioneer heritage site. The town’s denizens have seemed to have learned all the lessons about discipline, but almost none about love and grace. Nomi’s older sister ditched town with her boyfriend three years ago (“she was so earmarked for damnation it wasn’t even funny”), and her free-spirited mother left soon after. Nomi lives with her gentle, but increasingly unhinged, schoolteacher father, while she and her wild-child band of teen exiles rebel against their repressive community: they smoke dope, read hipster novels, listen to Lou Reed, and indulge in minor vandalism. Told in Nomi’s voice, the flashbacks revisit moments in her life, as well as reflecting on how to find a way forward into a seemingly limited future. “The narrative voice is so strong, it could carry the least eventful, least weird adolescence in the world and still be as transfixing, but the fact is, this community is compellingly strange,” wrote the *Guardian*. “. . . Toews’s novel is a wonderfully acute, moving, warm, sceptical, frustrated portrait of fundamentalist religion.”



The Flying Troutmans (2008)

◆ ROGERS WRITERS' TRUST FICTION PRIZE

Toews drew from her family's history of mental illness and family crisis to write her fifth book. It's also a road trip novel; she and her three children often accompanied her husband, a street performer in the 1990s, on long, eventful road trips through North America. By turns hilarious and heartbreaking, the novel explores what it means to be a family in the wake of adversity.



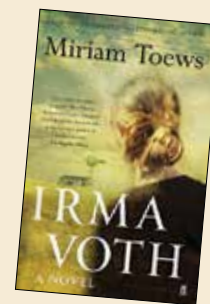
An artist living in Paris, Hattie Troutman, 28, receives a frantic call from her niece, who claims that her mother, Hattie's older sister Min, is sick. Hattie rushes home to Manitoba to find the situation worse than she had expected: Min has had a psychotic breakdown and must be hospitalized immediately. Refusing to turn her eccentric, 11-year-old niece and her 15-year-old nephew Logan over to foster care, Hattie hatches a plan to locate the children's father, whose last known address was Murdo, South Dakota. Following the trail of clues, the ad hoc family zigzags through the Western United States in a dilapidated van, getting to know each other—and themselves—in the process. "Yes, the road trip storyline is a little tread-worn, but Toews has created such an engaging cast for this 2,000-mile trek that you'll never be tempted to ask, 'Are we there yet?'" Most of the novel's success stems from the fact that Min's two witty children are irresistible characters, alternately vulnerable, affectionate, terrified, brave and annoying" (*Washington Post*). (★★★★ Jan/Feb 2009)

Irma Voth (2011)

Irma Voth emerged from experiences in Toews's own life: after reading *A Complicated Kindness*, Mexican filmmaker Carlos Reygadas invited Toews to do a screen test for the role of a conservative Mennonite wife in his drama *Silent Night* (2007). Filmed in the northern Mexican state of Chihuahua, it won the Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival, and Toews was nominated for best actress at Mexico's Ariel Awards. *Irma Voth* explores familiar themes of freedom, familiarity, self-determination, and estrangement, and the difficulties of moving between different worlds, as a naive Mennonite girl considers a life without her father, her husband, or God. "Funny and skilfully drawn, this novel shows the real appeal of tales set in unknown communities: that underneath the unfamiliar surfaces are the exact same people—a teenage girl trying to find out who she is and how to live, driven by familiar dreams and desires, and the same need for security, love and some sense of fulfilment" (*Guardian*).

After the death of her older sister, 19-year-old Irma's family relocates from the Canadian prairies to an old-order Mennonite settlement in Mexico's Chihuahuan desert.

Irma, after secretly marrying a non-Mennonite Mexican, is banished to a neighboring farm by her dictatorial father. Involved in the drug trade, her husband promptly leaves when she fails to be a good wife. Then a bohemian film crew arrives from Mexico City to shoot an art-house film about Mennonites and hires Irma as both cook and translator for the project. Her involvement ultimately brings her into greater conflict with her father, while, at the same time, helping her to clarify her own direction. As the violence and the tragedy that have defined her family come to light, Irma, with her mother's blessing, flees and takes her two younger sisters, one a newborn, with her to Mexico City. As Irma's mother tells her in a dream: "Just begin."



All My Puny Sorrows (2014)

◆ ROGERS WRITERS' TRUST FICTION PRIZE

The title of Toews's best-selling, acclaimed, and highly personal sixth novel comes from a Coleridge poem: "I too a sister had, an only sister ... / To her I pour'd forth all my puny sorrows." Toews's only sister, Marjorie Anne, committed suicide in 2010, at age 51, and it is upon this tragedy, coming a dozen years after her father's death, that Toews draws. She surprisingly imbues one family's history of suicidal depression with beauty and unexpected humor. "I don't see any division between the comic and the tragic," Toews told *Maclean's*. "I feel like I'm writing about serious things and humour is one of my tools. It's not contrived, just part of my world, part of the way things are to me." The novel also poses an acute moral dilemma about assisted suicide.



The novel centers on two loving sisters, Elfrieda and Yolandi Von Riesen, the only children of an intellectual, relatively free-spirited family from a conservative Mennonite community near Winnipeg. Elf, a world-class concert pianist, is married; her Toronto-based younger sister Yoli, a twice-divorced, single mother to two teens, continues to screw up her life despite some moderate success as a writer. Ironically, it is the enviable Elf who, prone to depression, vows to take her own life, just as their father did. Over time, her suicide attempts and psychiatric hospital stays weigh on this close-knit Mennonite family. When Elf begs Yoli to accompany her to Zurich, where assisted suicide is legal, Yoli must decide between sisterhood and conscience. "[I]t's actually a book about what it is to be a sibling, and particularly about what it is to be a sibling to only one other sibling," reported the *Globe and Mail*. "It is one of the most moving and accurate representations of that complicated situation I have ever read." (★★★★ SELECTION Jan/Feb 2015) ■

BOOKMARKS SELECTION



Women Talking

By Miriam Toews

Women Talking was a finalist for the Governor General's Literary Awards.

THE STORY: Between 2005 and 2009, more than 100 girls and women in the ultraconservative Mennonite colony in Bolivia regularly awoke bruised, battered, and sometimes pregnant. While some of the women believed that demons were attacking them for their sins, the ugly truth eventually emerged: eight Mennonite men had been drugging and raping their own women. They were arrested for their own protection after one woman took a scythe to the man who violated her toddler daughter. When the men go to the city to raise money for bail, eight women from three different generations of two families conduct clandestine meetings in a hayloft to discuss their plan of action: stay and fight, leave the colony, or do nothing. August Epp, the trusted colony schoolteacher who had once himself been excommunicated, transcribes these meetings for the illiterate women as they reveal their thoughts about their families and religion, roles in society, and hopes for the future—and how to continue to survive, in or out of the only place they've ever known.

Bloomsbury. 240 pages. \$24. ISBN: 9781635572582



Wall Street Journal



"The book's confined setting and its tight timeframe combine to superb dramatic effect—indeed, *Women Talking* could be adapted without much difficulty into a first-rate play. Ms. Toews condenses an unstable array of emotions into the meetings, from bickering and lamentation to riotous laughter and the uplift of communal prayer." SAM SACKS

Boston Globe



"[The novel] also has action: arrests, thefts, beatings, practical jokes, even love stories. ... At the heart of *Women Talking* lies the question of how women can create a better world for themselves and for those they love amid a culture of male sexual violence, the continued power of patriarchy, their own differences, and the limits of language itself."

Financial Times



"The weight and authority carried by language and speech lies at the heart of this novel. There's power in being able to name something for what it really is, and Plautdietsch has no words for 'patriarchy,' 'toxic masculinity,' or the notion of women as 'commodities.'" LUCY SCHOLES

Guardian (UK)



"Rather than dwell on the crimes, Toews wrings unexpected

drama from her protagonists' moral and theological to-ing and fro-ing, as they spar over how best to remain faithful to a system that has been used to betray them so brutally. The improbable, almost magical result creates something redemptive from a subject that seems anything but." ANTHONY CUMMINS

New York Times



"[The book] that most firmly directs its gaze at the moral failings of—and her hopes for—the small Protestant sect in which she was raised. ... The book is a feminist manifesto that delicately unwraps the horror, but also bubbles with the love and wry humor that has endeared Toews to readers." CATHERINE PORTER

New Yorker



"In place of plot, she creates pressure, steadily intensifying the novel's atmospheric conditions until it becomes clear that something must either collapse or explode." ALEXANDRA SCHWARTZ

Toronto Star



"The trope of female hysteria versus male rationality is also subverted: here, logic is the prime tool the women can wield against the men's deepest animal urges. ... Counterintuitive as it sounds to use a male intermediary in a book called *Women Talking*, as fictional strategy it's brilliant, for reasons that slowly become apparent." EMILY DONALDSON

Winnipeg Free Press



"In this depiction of an isolated and authoritarian community, there are parallels with *The Handmaid's Tale*—Margaret Atwood herself has made the comparison—and a reminder that Atwood has always seen her 1985 book not as dystopian fantasy but as a distillation of the actual conditions under which many women and children live." ALISON GILMORE

CRITICAL SUMMARY

Lodged somewhere between fiction and nonfiction, *Women Talking*, an account of two days of practical and philosophical discussion, is as revelatory as it is compelling. With a small but riveting cast of characters thinking for themselves and, perhaps for the first time, questioning their male-dominated colony and their personal and religious beliefs, the novel raises issues of power and resistance, freedom and forgiveness, inequality, and the impossibility of positions and choices. As he records the women's discussions and his own story emerges, Epp becomes the heart of the novel; so, too, does Ona, Epp's unrequited love who lost both her father and sister to suicide. As in previous novels, Toews leavens the serious weight of this novel with wit and humor: If the women are gone, someone asks, who will do the milking and make the men supper? "Although not born from the #MeToo movement, this beautiful battle cry of a novel is in urgent conversation with the contemporary moment" (*Financial Times*)—and as such it is a must read. ■