

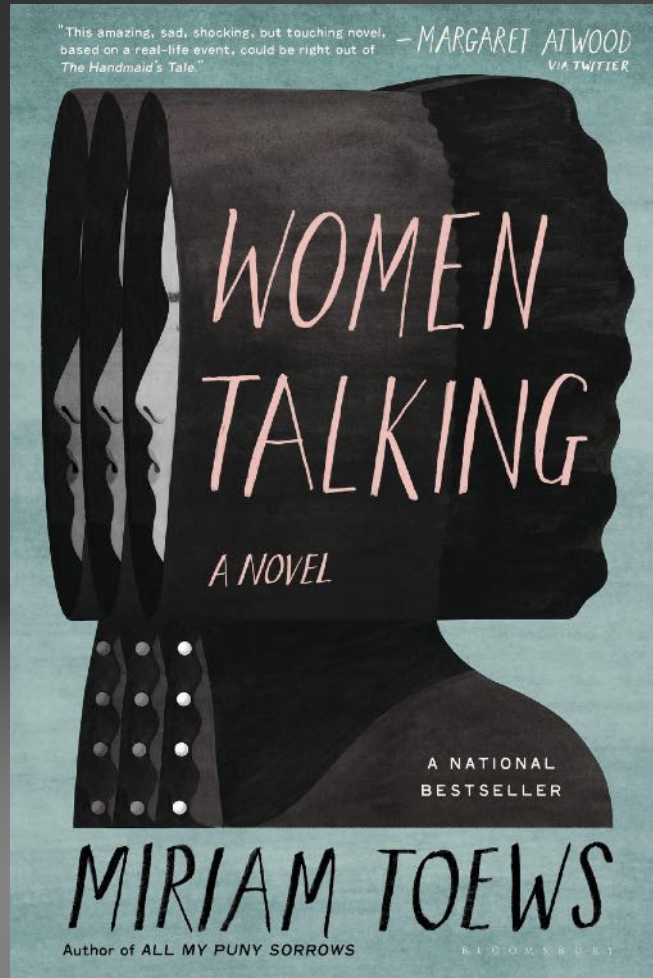
MIRIAM TOEWS' *WOMEN TALKING*: A CALL FOR ARTISTIC PROPHEHOOD

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PRESENTED AT THE 49TH ANNUAL MEETING OF THE SOCIETY FOR PENTECOSTAL STUDIES



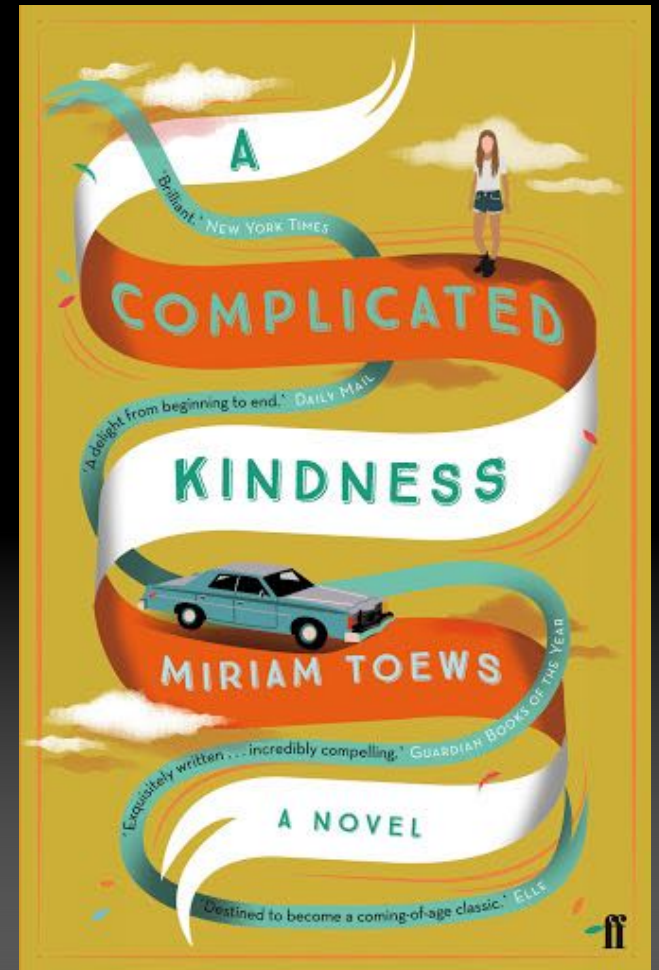
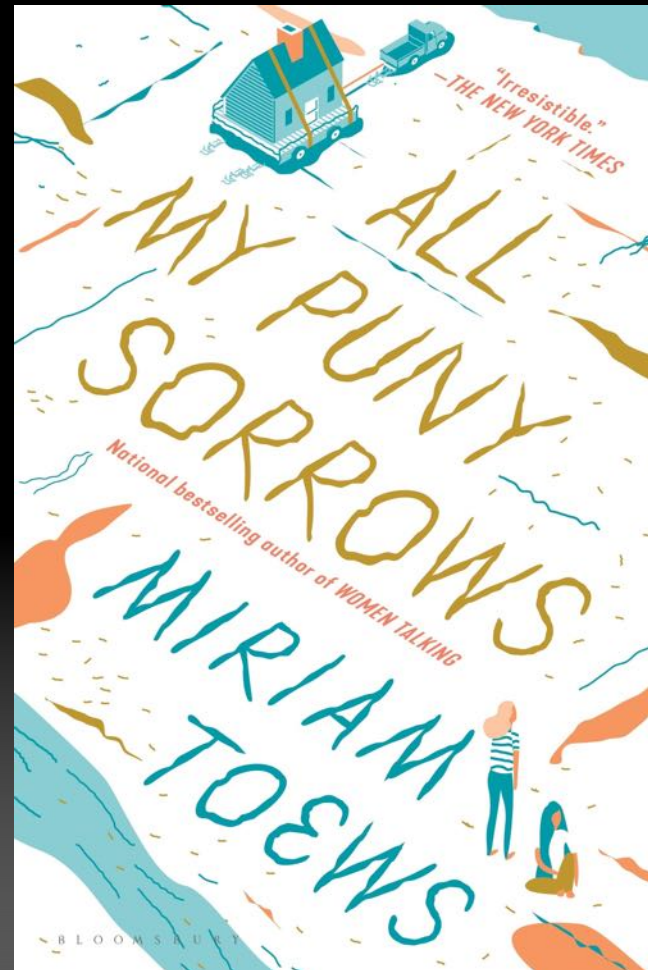
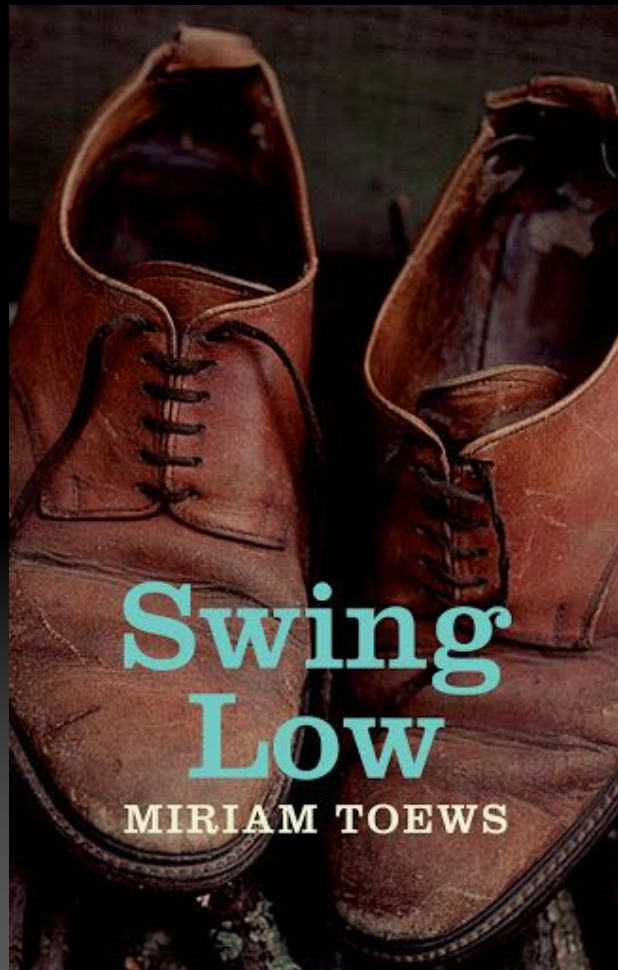
WOMEN TALKING

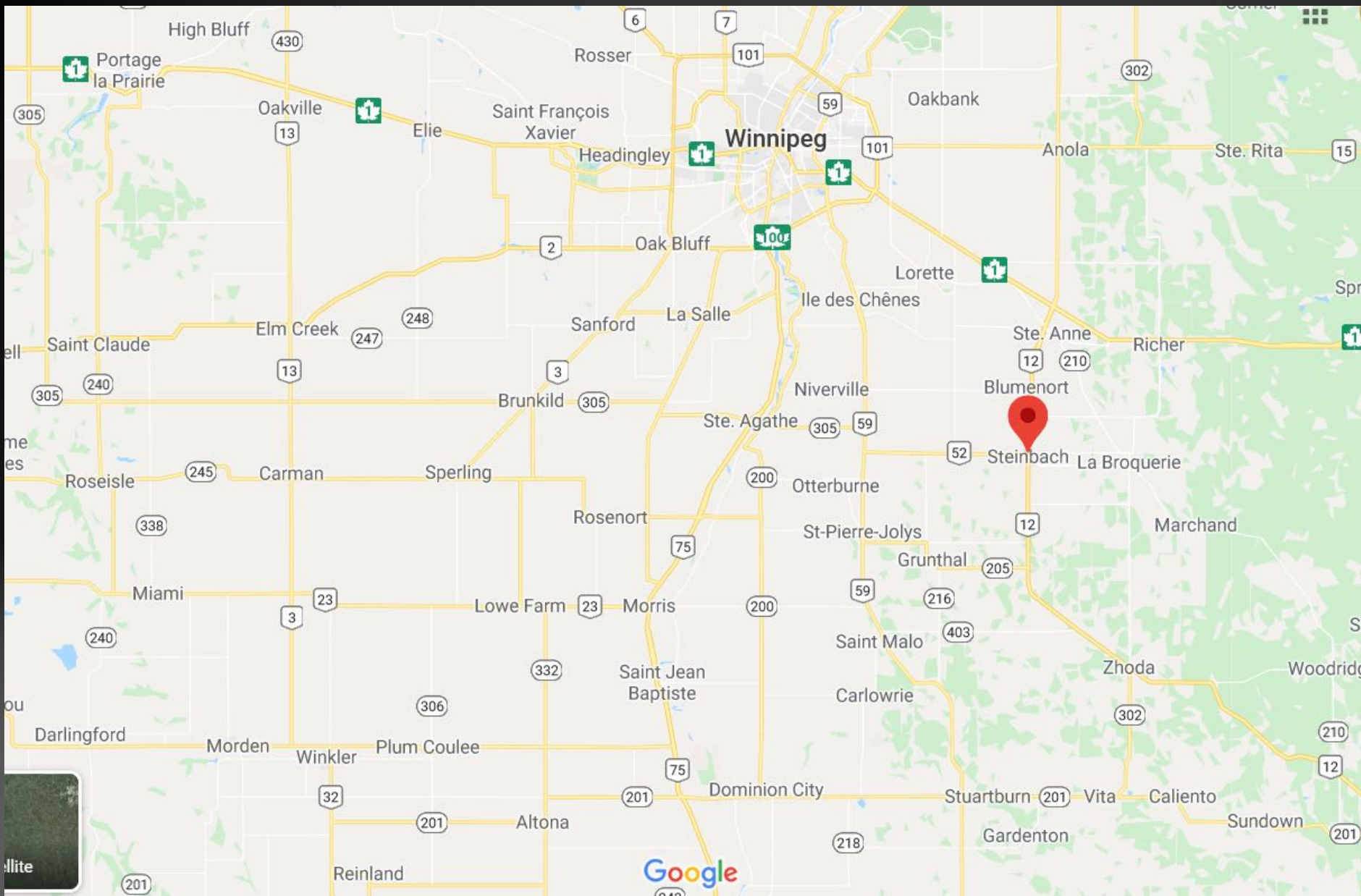
**BLOOMSBURY PUBLISHING
NEW YORK, 2018**

A photograph of Miriam Toews sitting on a dark wooden staircase. She is wearing a black long-sleeved top, blue jeans, and brown boots. She has long, wavy blonde hair and is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The staircase has a white balustrade on the left. To the right, a white door with a brass doorknob is visible. The background is a plain white wall.

MIRIAM TOEWS

- From Steinbach, Manitoba
- Education:
 - University of Manitoba:
B.A. in Film Studies
 - University of King's College
(Halifax):
B.A. in Journalism
- Awards:
 - Governor General's Award for *A Complicated Kindness*





**WO
IST
STEINBACH?**

WINNIPEG

NIVERVILLE

**MORDEN/
WINKLER**

A MENNONITE, A WRITER, AND A PROPHET?

- As Toews gains growing status on the larger Canadian literary landscape, I believe her voice warrants greater recognition in the church.
- Unfortunately, she has been forced to assume the role of a “prophet not welcome in her own town.” (See Slides Below – If time).

WHO ARE THE MENNONITES? BELIEFS AND VALUES

- RADICAL REFORMERS / ANABAPTISTS
- NON-VIOLENCE
- BELIEVER'S BAPTISM
- IMITATION OF CHRIST (SERMON ON THE MOUNT vs SUBSTITUTIONARY ATONEMENT)
- SIMPLICITY
- COMMUNITY
- FAMILY
- LAND

AMISH > OLD ORDER MENNONITE > HUTTERITE > BIC > > MB > GC/MC USA





























WOMEN TALKING: BASED ON A TRUE CONTEXT

- In 2011, a Bolivian court sentenced eight men from the Manitoba Colony in Bolivia for “ghost raping.” Nine men, ages 19-43, and members of the colony, would routinely spray entire homes with a substance concocted by a neighbouring Mennonite veterinarian to anesthetize cattle.
- Over the course of five years, these men raped at least 130 girls and women from ages 3 to 65, married and single, residents and visitors, disabled and abled

AUGUST EPP

August Epp – also the narrator - has been commissioned to take minutes of the women talking about their response to sexual violence, not unlike the real events described above.

His minutes are an on-the-fly English translation from Plautdietsch or Low German (a hodgepodge of German, Dutch, Pomeranian, and Frisian, the spoken but unwritten language of the colonists).

Born in the colony; raised in England; returns home.

Some of his past is revealed at the end of the story.

THE QUESTION

Epp prepares to take minutes of the conversation among 8 women as they weigh three options in response to their frightening situation:

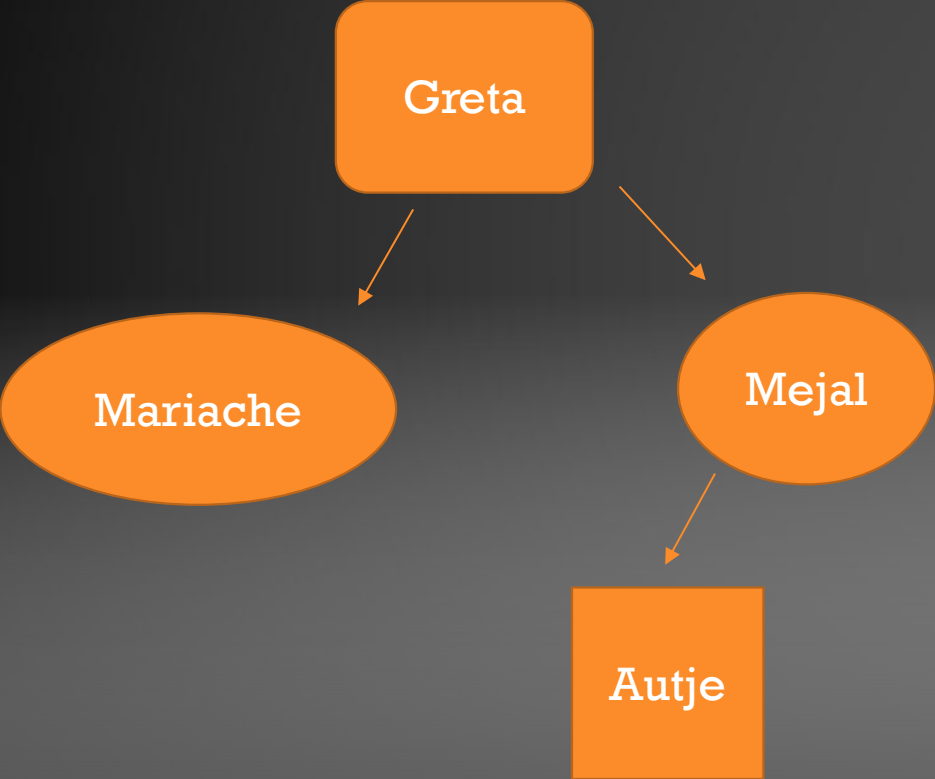
- 1) Do Nothing;
- 2) Stay and Fight;
- 3) Leave (the women refuse to describe their plan as an attempt to flee, run, or escape)

THE MEETING – JUNE 6 + 7

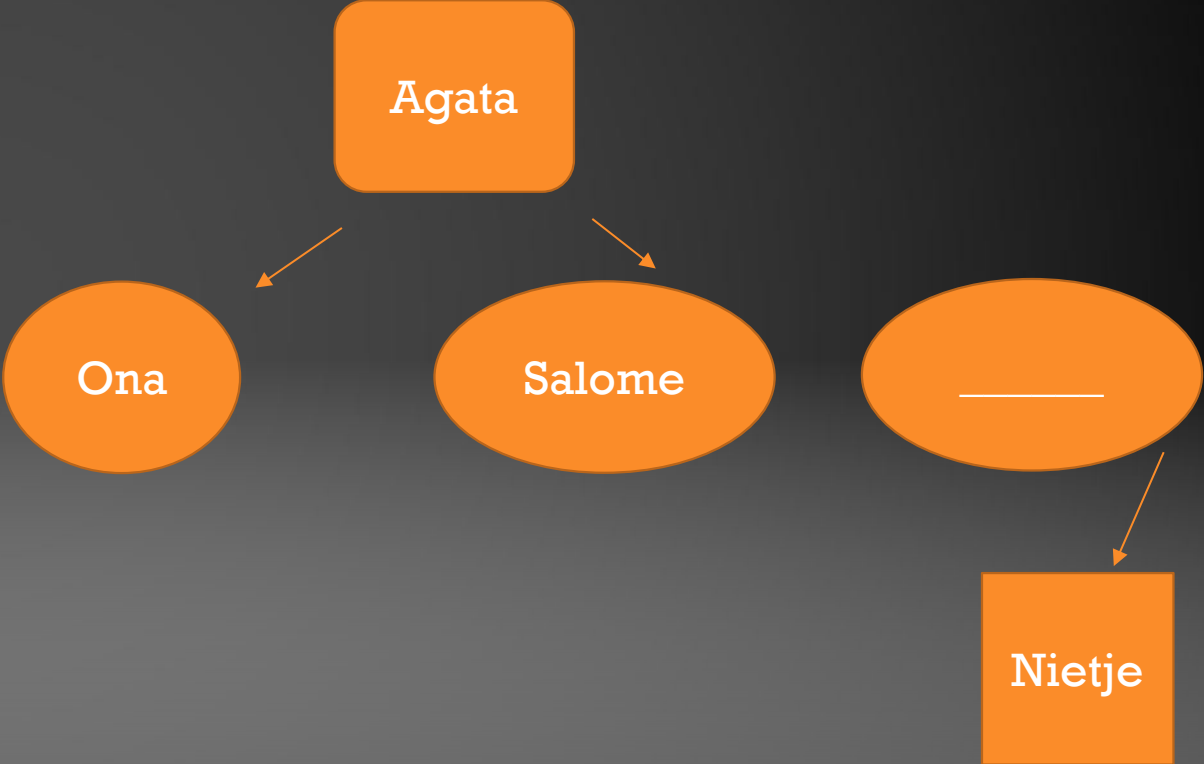
- The women meet for two days in the hayloft of a man with mental disabilities, who is oblivious to the colony's chaos.
- All survivors of abuse, these women come from two families: the Loewens – Greta, her daughters Mariche and Mejal, and Autje, Mejal's daughter; and the Friesens – Agata, her daughters Ona and Salome, and Nietje, now in the care of Aunt Salome.

EIGHT WOMEN

Loewen



Friesen





**THE WOMEN BEGIN DAY
ONE WITH FOOT WASHING.**

OPTION ONE

- DO NOTHING – Not an option.

OPTION 2 – STAY AND FIGHT... PROS

- We won't have to leave.
- We won't have to pack.
- We won't have to leave the people we love.
- We won't have to figure out where we're going or experience the uncertainty of not knowing where we are going (We don't have a map) (52-53).

OPTION 2 – STAY AND FIGHT... CONS

- We won't be forgiven [by members of the community].
- We don't know how to fight.
 - However, Salome: I know how to fight... [her attempt to murder an abuser led Bishop Peters to call in the police])
- We don't want to fight.
- There is the risk that conditions will be worse after fighting (54).

OPTION 3 - LEAVE ... PROS

- We will be gone.
- We [and our children] will be safe.
- We will not be asked to forgive the men, because we will not be here to hear the question (59).
- We want to keep our faith.
- We want to think (120).

OPTION 3 – LEAVE... CONS

- In their discussion of cons to option #3, the women lament that they have no map, they don't know where to go, and they don't even know their current location.
 - Again, the ever-aggressive Salome shouts, "None... There are no Cons of Leaving" (63).

ANY GUESSES?

THE CHOICE... LET'S LEAVE

- The women choose to leave on Thursday evening June 7.
- The young girls lure two teenage boys on a “date,” only to have the women anesthetize the boys, and leave them unconscious long enough for the caravan of women to get a solid start. The women have at least ten buggies and ten teams.

AN UNWELCOME PROPHET

- In terms of her message, Toews joins a chorus of other voices that speak to power, and to oppressive, incompetent, and unsympathetic leadership, particularly in faith communities. She calls the church to accountability. She calls the church to a higher standard for biblical interpretation.
- I want to highlight examples of Toews' prophetic storytelling not simply for ultra-conservative Mennonite colonies, but also for many Christian contexts far removed from rural Bolivia.

- **THE FAILURE OF BISHOP PETERS**

"IT WAS SATAN WHO WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ATTACK, THAT IT WAS PUNISHMENT FROM GOD, THAT GOD WAS PUNISHING THE WOMEN FOR THEIR SINS."

- "[PERHAPS] WILD FEMALE IMAGINATION."

THE DIRT ON AUGUST

#ME TOO - Toews enables boldness through her female characters and interrogates unacceptable male leaders. Any attempt to deflect the plausibility of sexual and violent abuse, to spin the events, or engage in a coverup, only compounds dehumanization.

Though Women Talking hits shelves in the spring of 2018, Toews' manuscript is in the hands of editors by early 2017. As fate would have it, her story parallels the rise of the #MeToo movement in October 2017 in the days following allegations against Harvey Weinstein. Toews' creation of a fictive response anticipates the importance of solidarity and elicits a prophetic call for accountability and justice.

COMMUNITY MEMBERSHIP? REALLY? SALOME'S TAKE

We're not *members* of Molotschna... We are the *women* of Molotschna. The entire colony of Molotschna is built on the foundation of patriarchy... [We live our days] as mute, submissive and obedient servants. Animals. Fourteen-year-old boys are expected to give us orders, to determine our fates, to vote on our excommunications, to speak at the burials of our own babies while we remain silent, to interpret the Bible for us, to lead us in worship, to punish us! We are not *members*, Mariche, we are commodities. When our men have used us up so that we look sixty when we're thirty and our wombs have literally dropped out of our bodies onto our spotless kitchen floors, finished, they turn to our daughters. And if they could sell us all at auction afterwards they would (120-121).

OPPRESSIVE PATRIARCHY AND BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Should the women decide to leave, Mejal expresses one more time her struggle:

- “It has to do with the Biblical exhortation that women obey and submit to their husbands. How, if we are to remain good wives... can we leave our men? Is it not disobedient to do so?” (156).

However, in the spirit of communal responsibility, Salome proclaims forcefully the need for interpretative skills:

- “We can’t read... so how are we to know what it is in the Bible... And what is the common denominator linking Peters and the elders and our sons and husbands?... They are all men?” (156)
“The issue... is the male interpretation of the Bible, and how that is ‘handed down’ to us” (158).

Ona concurs:

- “Our inability to read or write puts us at a great disadvantage in any negotiation over the interpretation of the Bible.”

These women may not be formally educated, but they are not ignorant. They see through inconsistencies.

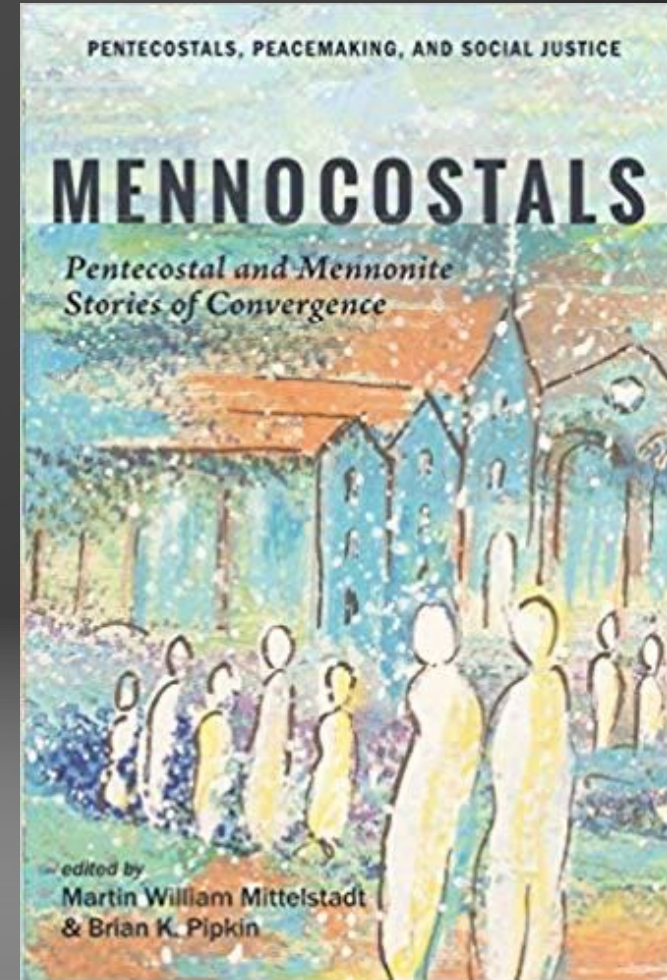
EPHESIANS 5:22 / 5:21
1 CORINTHIANS 7:10

- I am beyond astonished at the number of women (and a few men) who reveal stories of sexual trauma. For those raised in the church, these abusers are often family members or boyfriends (often from a youth group or college group). Sadly, too many of these young students arrive at our university with little biblical literacy, not least concerning passages on marriage, women, intimacy, respect, and mutuality.
- Toews challenges the church not simply to “teach” the Bible but to communicate “how to read the scriptures.”

“WHAT MIGHT TOEWS SAY
TO CANADIAN PENTECOSTALS?”

A MENNONITE
NOVEL FOR PENTECOSTALS

&
A SHAMELESS PLUG FOR....



TOEWS. THE MENNONITE > PENTECOSTAL > MENNOCOSTAL

- “What has Miriam Toews to say to Canadian Pentecostals?”
- She inspires prophetic imagination.
- She serves notice of violence against women not only through her content but thorough her craft.
- She embodies Pentecostal passion for vocational prophethood. If indeed we believe in the potential of the prophethood of all believers and the many tongues of Pentecost, Toews proves exemplary as an artist, a writer, and a prophet not behind a pulpit!

WRITING IN TONGUES

- Roger Stronstad, coined the axiom, “the prophethood of all believers.”
- Amos Yong has focused his prolific career upon Acts 2 as a metaphor for “the many tongues of Pentecost. He invites his readers, not least Pentecostals, to employ our "pneumatological imagination."
- Many artists including writers, poets, filmmakers, or musicians, employ their craft to speak against injustice. Many use their work not primarily for fame and fortune, but to interrogate the status quo.
- They are prophets.
- Pentecostals should be on board with this, right?

THE PROBLEM OF LOCATION: PROPHETS OF PENTECOST

- Toews is a prophet of Pentecost. She gives voice to “many tongues.” And in the Spirit of the Hebrew prophets, Jesus, the Twelve, and beyond, she speaks for those who are marginalized due to the failure of community life, oppressive leadership, and corrupt biblical interpretation.
- Prophetic messages generally emerge not in the polished sermons given at “General Assemblies” or conferences, but in the marketplace.

FROM THE FRINGE

Prophets generally work, write, speak, produce, and sing from the fringe. Where the church stumbles, prophets stand. When the church no longer listens to cries of injustice, the prophets turn to other venues.

If I am right, Toews speaks in the tradition of Pentecostals, perhaps a Mennocostal.

Our churches are at our best and most effective when we employ a countercultural voice to our communities and our fellow churches!

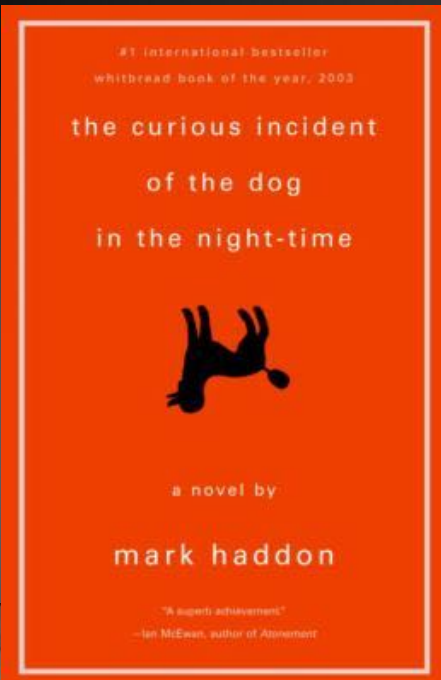
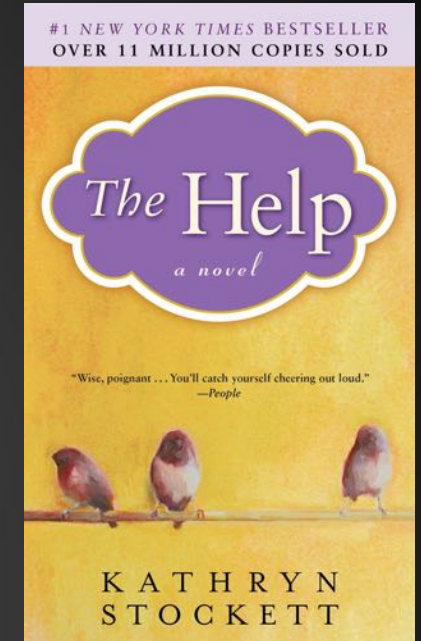
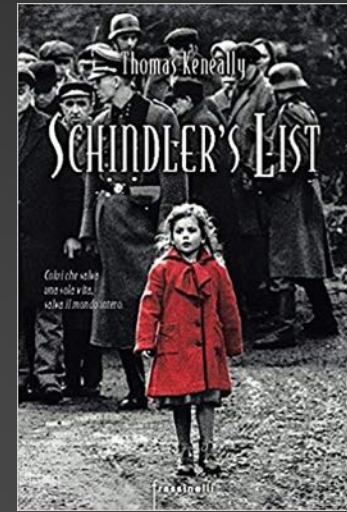
WHAT'S OUR JOB?

- I charge Pentecostal scholars and pastors to utilize their vocations as educators and preachers to inspire writers (poets, musicians, filmmakers, and more) like Toews.
- We must affirm the artist's call to speak, and we must recognize that prophetic witness comes through their complexity (think Jeremiah, Hosea, Amos, John the Baptist).

OTHER EXAMPLES

We must encourage a new generation of prophets like Toews, Kathryn Stockett, Mark Haddon, Steven Spielberg, Bono, Tupac Shakur, and Ava Duvernay.

May we not run our prophets out of town. Instead, let us nurture their passions and their voices. They will revive our churches.



WHY DOESN'T SHE
EVER WRITE ABOUT
PROGRESSIVE
MENNONITES?



MENTAL ILLNESS,
ABUSE, OPPRESSION
— WE LIKE TO THINK
THAT THESE THINGS
DON'T HAPPEN TO US,
BUT NOT TALKING
ABOUT THEM DOESN'T
MAKE THEM GO AWAY.

SHE'S PART OF A
TRADITION OF MENNONITE
WOMEN WHO TELL HARD
TRUTHS.



SHE WRITES ABOUT
MENNONITES FOR
NON-MENNONITES.



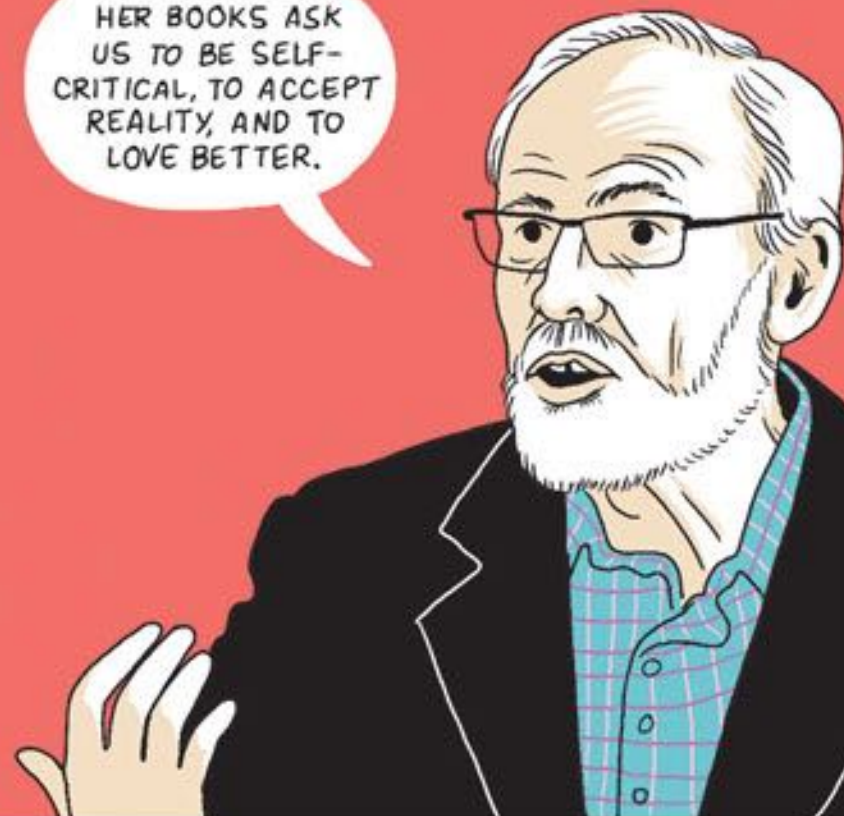
SHE'S THE ONLY REASON
I CAN STILL CALL
MYSELF A MENNONITE.



NO ONE KNOWS HOW
TO PRONOUNCE HER
LAST NAME.



HER BOOKS ASK
US TO BE SELF-
CRITICAL, TO ACCEPT
REALITY, AND TO
LOVE BETTER.



WELL, SHE'S NO RUDY
WIEBE, THAT'S FOR
SURE. HE'S ALWAYS
BEEN ACCOUNTABLE
TO THE COMMUNITY
HE WROTE ABOUT.



NA OBA! WAUT ESS
DAUT?*





HER BOOKS ARE ALL THE SAME.



I WAS SO GLAD SHE CAME BACK FOR THE STEINBACH PRIDE PARADE.



I CAN'T KEEP THE DIFFERENT KINDS OF MENNONITES STRAIGHT EITHER.



MENNONITES HAVE ALWAYS HAD A PROBLEM WITH ART.



I GREW UP ADMIRING HER FATHER AND LEARNING ABOUT ALL HE DID FOR STEINBACH.



I KNOW THOSE PEOPLE AND THAT'S **NOT** HOW IT HAPPENED.



I'M SO TIRED OF MENNONITES TALKING ABOUT IDENTITY.



YOU CAN'T ESCAPE YOUR LAST NAME.



I LIKE HER STORIES BECAUSE THEY ARE ABOUT FINDING THE HOPE THAT'S THERE.

