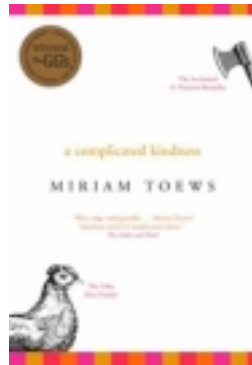




Reader's Guide to Miriam Toews' *A Complicated Kindness*



Introduction

One Book One Community is a reading program for the entire city and surrounding area. Adults and teens are invited to read a selected book and then come together for a weekend of discussion and activities surrounding the book. The book we have selected for Medicine Hat's second community-wide read is *A Complicated Kindness* by Miriam Toews. Copies of the book are available at the public libraries of the Shortgrass Regional Library System, the Vera Bracken Library (Medicine Hat College), Coles The Book People (Medicine Hat Mall), and at the Medicine Hat College Campus Store.

Meet Nomi Nickel, Miriam Toews's 16-year-old protagonist of *A Complicated Kindness*. Nomi's first person narrative shifts effortlessly between the present and the past. Within the present, Nomi goes through the motions of finishing high school while flagrantly rebelling against Mennonite tradition. She hangs out on Suicide Hill, hooks up with a boy named Travis, goes on the Pill, wanders around town, skips class and cranks Led Zeppelin. But the past is never far from her mind as she remembers happy times with her mother and sister — as well as the painful events that led them to flee town. Throughout, in a voice both defiant and vulnerable, she offers hilarious and heartbreaking reflections on life, death, family, faith and love. *Used by permission of Random House of Canada.*

Awards

Winner 2004 Governor General's Literary Award
Nominee 2004 Giller Prize
Canadian Booksellers Association Libris Award
Young Adult Canadian Book Award (Canadian Library Association)
Margaret Laurence Award for Fiction
McNally Robinson Book of the Year Award

Reviews

“Poignant.... Bold, tender and intelligent, this is a clear-eyed exploration of belief and belonging, and the irresistible urge to escape both.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Wise, edgy, unforgettable, the heroine of Miriam Toews’s knockout novel is Canada’s next classic.”

—*Globe and Mail* Books section cover

“**A Complicated Kindness** is a delight from beginning to end. The humour might be of the blackest sort (‘People here just can’t wait to die, it seems. It’s the main event.’), but the cumulative effect is liberating and defiantly joyful.”

—*Daily Mail*

“Truly wonderful.... **A Complicated Kindness** is...one of the year’s exuberant reads. Toews recreates the stultifying world of an exasperated Mennonite teenager in a small town where nothing happens with mesmerizing authenticity. . . . Toews seduces the reader with her tenderness, astute observation and piquant humour. But then she turns the laughs she’s engendered in the reader like a knife.”

—*Toronto Star*

Author Biography

Miriam Toews (pronounced tâves) was born in 1964 in the small Mennonite town of Steinbach, Manitoba. She left Steinbach at 18, living in Montreal and London and touring Europe before coming back to Manitoba, where she earned her B.A. in film studies at the University of Manitoba. Later she packed up with her children and partner and moved to Halifax to attend the University of King’s College, where she received her bachelor’s degree in journalism. Upon returning to Winnipeg with her family in 1991, she freelanced at the CBC, making radio documentaries. When her youngest daughter started nursery school, Toews decided it was time to try writing a novel.

Miriam Toews’s first novel, **Summer of My Amazing Luck**, was published in 1996; it was nominated for the Stephen Leacock Memorial Medal for Humour and won the John Hirsch Award. Published two years later, her second novel, **A Boy of Good Breeding**, won the McNally Robinson Book of the Year Award. She is also the author of **Swing Low: A Life**, a memoir of her father who committed suicide in 1998 after a lifelong struggle with manic depression. **Swing Low** won both the McNally Robinson Book of the Year Award and the Alexander Kennedy Isbister Award for Non-Fiction. Toews has written for the CBC, *This American Life* (on National Public Radio), *Saturday Night, Geist, Canadian Geographic, Open Letters* and *The New York Times Magazine*, and has won the National Magazine Award Gold Medal for Humour.

Toews’s third novel, **A Complicated Kindness**, has been called “a black humour grenade, dealing a devastating explosion of gut-busting laughs alongside heart-

wrenching sorrow.” *The Globe and Mail* quotes Toews as saying: “Sometimes I am bugged by my own tendency to continuously go for the laughs, but I am trying to be genuinely funny even if it’s in a dry, tragic way. I don’t know if there is a Mennonite type of humour, but growing up with my dad, from day one I felt it was my job to make him laugh.” The memory of her father has influenced Toews’s fiction in another profound way: “Loss inspired the story, loss with no answers. I think I needed to put that on Nomi. She was going to be the person who would take me through the process of dealing with loss and wondering where those people went.” She adds: “I have seen the damage that fundamentalism can do. The way the religion is being interpreted, it’s a culture of control and that emphasis on shame and punishment and guilt is not conducive to robust mental health.” Though she no longer attends a Mennonite church, Toews says that she still considers herself a Mennonite. And despite the novel’s exploration of the destructive elements of life in a small religious community, she says: “I hope that people will recognize that there are aspects of it that I really love and really miss.”

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Thursday, February 3, 2005

**A Little Mennonite Country and Western: An Interview with Miriam Toews
By Darren Springer, Features Writer**

This interview was originally published in **New Winnipeg: Winnipeg’s Digital Magazine** (www.newwinnipeg.com). It is reprinted with permission from the author.

What response have you received from the Mennonite community since publishing the novel?

Personally, I’ve received only positive responses and support, which surprised me, because before the book came out, I was a little nervous, thinking “How is this going to be interpreted?” But essentially, I didn’t want it to be an indictment of the place or the Mennonite people, just of religious fundamentalism. And the thing I was also conscious of was that the father figure, Nomi’s father, who would probably be considered a fundamentalist, is also very loving, unconditionally loving and accepting of Nomi, and I wanted to use that relationship to say, “Look, we actually can all get along, and we can tolerate each other’s various points of views, or levels of belief.” But oh yeah, there’s been criticism for sure, but not directed at me specifically. I haven’t received any letters or anything like that. But I know that there are people who aren’t pleased with it, and probably they’re fundamentalists.

I guess whenever you write about... well, anything organized, really, whether it be a religion or a specific culture, there’s bound to be some backlash.

Of course, and I’m used to that. And there are many other Mennonite writers who have also struggled with that and dealt with it and lived with it, and continued to write. I guess if you consider that old cliché, ‘Write what you know’, well, what do they expect? I’m a writer, and I’m writing what I know, so I’m bound to write about Mennonites at least some of the time. But I’ve also been amazed by the level of support, even from conservative Mennonites, from congregations that are promoting the book in their

church newsletters, referring to it in their sermons. I've heard that through the grapevine, and I'm really surprised and pleased by it.

I know how the Mennonite faith affected your own father. [Toews's father Mel, the subject of her 2000 memoir *Swing Low: A Life*, suffered from manic depression for the majority of his life, and eventually committed suicide.] I was wondering how much of its effect on your father made its way into the novel, or how much was your own imagining?

Well, there was some of my personal family story in the novel, but going back to your question about the Mennonite church and following its edicts to the letter, I think with my father, it was a combination of positive and negative. I have no real hard evidence to base this on, but I think the Mennonite church sustained him to a large degree, gave him something to believe in, and a code to live by. And on the other hand, while it saved his soul, it also destroyed it a little bit too, in terms of his own essential *person*, who he was. I don't think that was ever quite realized. Because of the constraints and rules he had to follow as a member of the church, and also because of the difficulties he had because of his mental illness, and maintaining that [positive] public image in a place where public image is everything, I think it would make me crazy. As for the character Ray in the novel, Nomi [the narrator] never actually says he's mentally ill, but he's depressed, and so is Nomi in a way. They're grief-stricken, they're confused, they're bewildered, they're losing seemingly everything. But I didn't want anything to be black or white. And of course, the title, *A Complicated Kindness*, reflects that. It's not a bad thing, the Mennonite church or community, it's just the interpretation [of Mennonite doctrine] by various individuals who are more interested in power, control and discipline than love and tolerance and the beautiful elements of Christianity.



Do you remember instances when you saw more of your father's individuality than his adherence to the faith?

Yeah, that would be when we were out of the town. It's almost that simple. We'd go on road trips or vacations, and he would come alive. And it would seem, literally, like he'd unshackled himself from having to be a certain person. He'd just relax, and have fun, and be happy. And certainly he had moments of being happy in the community too; it wasn't that much of a contrast. But I think when he was away... and certainly my mom gave him a lot to live for. With that strength that she had, she carried him through a lot of stuff.

I wanted to focus more on the literariness of the book rather than its themes for a moment. This is a quote from James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* [a 1938 nonfiction account of the daily lives of three tenant families in the American South]. "In a novel, a house or person has his meaning, his existence, entirely through the writer." Since your novel attempts to give a realistic portrayal of Mennonite life, would you agree with that? Do you think that any force or power your novel would have would originate from you, or would it come from those non-fiction aspects contained in it?

I think it would be a combination. Obviously, I'm writing it from my memory, my feeling about things. It's just kind of a weird combination of creating art, imaginative art, and also making it true to the actual facts.

Well, anytime you depict something with any sort of vividness or colour, you might say that that's the literary instinct at work. Regardless of how true you're being to the facts, you're still being literary and manipulative in that sense.

Right, and I could've written a journal of my life as a teenager in that community using the actual lives of my parents. But to make it art, and to keep that essential idea of what I'm trying to get across to readers, there's that constant shifting to make it fit my manipulative plan. I know, when I was making radio documentaries before I started writing fiction, I would always want to get scriptless radio documentaries. And in order to do that, I would always have to ask the right kind of question, and to ask them to speak in full sentences, so that I wouldn't have to come in as the sort of God-like narrator.

But of course, even then, you're framing the narrative.

I'm framing it, and then I'm editing it, and putting voices together to support my own agenda. In a way, that's what writers and journalist and artists do almost all the time. I don't know if it's right or wrong, but I just think that that's how we do it, for the most part.

Your novel has a very episodic structure throughout.

It's not really a novel.

It's a series of vignettes.

Yeah, it's a series of vignettes. It's the biggest joke, when they call it a novel.

Now did you have a particular model for that?

Not really. Not specifically. Probably just stuff I've read in the past that I can't even identify now. But basically, my whole thing was that I was just sick to death of the conventional novel style. And I've written in it. But I was just sick of doing that, sick of hokey, contrived plot devices. I just thought, "I'm just gonna write this blip, and move on to the next thing I feel like writing about." And not worry about coherent, connective

tissue. Plus, I was really cynical about anyone reading this book or liking it, or getting published in the first place. So I just thought, to hell with it. I'm just gonna have to depend on the reader to make sense of things, without me having to take them by the hand. But there is a timeline, a movement from beginning to end. I don't think you can just start in the middle and then go to the beginning.

There's certainly progression in the sense that Nomi is progressing as she narrates each episode.

Right, and she's writing it as a school assignment, so how could it be in the conventional novel style?

OK, this is the last question, and it's actually kind of goofy: the idea of the novel as a country song.

Yeah!

Because my sister bought "The Best of Dolly Parton", and there are so many songs about people waiting, wanting to get somewhere, from a rural area, not being able to, or actually striking out and doing it. So there's that movement that Nomi craves, and aspires to toward the end.

That's good, because I've often actually really thought that. In fact, at one point I was going to name some novel I'd written- not this one, maybe *A Boy of Good Breeding - Country Music*. So I can definitely see it as a country song. And the storytelling that goes on in country music, even if it's clichéd stuff, there's that constant yearning, that searching, knowing that there has to be something better- even if it's never fulfilled.

Other Interviews with Miriam Toews

<http://www.powells.com/authors/toews.html>

<http://www.randomhouse.ca/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780676976120&view=qa>

Web Sites of Interest

Who are the Mennonites? (Mennonite Historical Society)

<http://www.mhsc.ca/index.asp?content=http://www.mhsc.ca/mennos/culture.html>

Mennonite (from Wikipedia)

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mennonites>

Mennonite Church Canada

<http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/>

Canadian Mennonite University

<http://www.cmu.ca/>

Related Books Available in the Shortgrass Regional Library System

Fiction

Douglas, Ab	<i>No Dancing God</i>
Birdsell, Sandra	<i>The Ruslander</i> <i>The Two-Head Calf</i> <i>Children of the Day</i>
Borntrager, Mary	<i>Rebecca</i>
Martens, Wilfred	<i>River of Glass</i>
Myers, Tamar	<i>Pennsylvania Dutch mysteries with recipes</i>
Quiring, Isaac	<i>Strangled Roots</i>
Reimer, Al	<i>My Harp is Turned to Mourning</i>
Reamer, Douglas	<i>Older than Ravens</i>
Toews, Miriam	<i>A Boy of Good Breeding</i> <i>A Complicated Kindness</i> <i>Summer of my Amazing Luck</i>
Waltner-Toews, David	<i>One Foot in Heaven</i>
Wiebe, Rudy	<i>River of Stone</i> <i>Sweeter than all the World</i> Many other titles as well
Yoder, James D.	<i>Black Spider over Tiegenhof</i>

Non-fiction

289.7 HOS	<i>Mennonite Life</i> by John A. Hostetler
289.7 QUI	<i>Mennonites in Canada: A Pictorial Review</i> by Dr. Walter Quiring and Helen Bartel
289.7092 BAE	<i>Diary of Anna Baerg: 1916 – 1924.</i> Translated and edited by Gerald Peters
289.771 EPP	<i>Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920: the History of a Separate People</i> by Frank H. Epp

- 289.771 EPP *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940: A People's Struggle for Survival* by Frank H. Epp
- 289.771 SCH *The Mennonites: a Pictorial History of Their Lives in Canada* by Andreas Schroeder
- 362.196852 TOE *Swing Low: A Life* by Miriam Toews
- 398.20439 FRI *The Windmill Turning: Nursery Rhymes, Maxims and Other Expressions of Western Canadian Mennonites* by Victor Carl Friesen
- 641.5 MEN *Mennonite Cookbook*
- 641.566 ADA *New Recipes from Quilt Country* by Marcia Adams
- 784.49712 KLA *Singing Mennonite: Low German Songs Among the Mennonites* by Doreen Helen Klassen
- 819.154 FRI *A Broken Bowl* by Patrick Friesen
- 819.154 FRI *The Shunning* by Patrick Friesen
- 971.242FRI *The Mulberry Tree* by Anna Friesen and Victor Carl Friesen
- B REMBEN *Stumbling Heavenward* by Urie A. Bender – a biography of Peter Rempel

Related Books Available at the Vera Bracken Library, Medicine Hat College

Fiction

- PS 8589 O6352 C65 2005 *A Complicated Kindness* by Miriam Toews
- RC 537 T63 2005 *Swing Low: A Life* by Miriam Toews

Non-fiction

- PS 8131 P7 T73 1986 "Desire and Prayer: Notes on 'The Shunning' by Patrick Friesen in *Trace: Prairie Writers on Writing*
- BX 8118.5 H36 1987 *Continuity and Change: Among Canadian Mennonite Brethren* by Peter Hamm

- BX 8115 L63 2001 *Hidden Worlds: Revisiting the Mennonite Migrants of the 1870s* by Royden Loewen
- BX 8115 I57 1993 *An Introduction to Mennonite History* by Cornelius Dyck
- BX 8118.5 E66 *Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920: The History of a Separate People* by Frank Epp
- BX 8118.5 E66 1982 *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940: A People's Struggle for Survival* by Frank Epp
- FC 106 M45 R44 1996 *Mennonites in Canada, 1939-1970: A People Transformed* by T.D.Regehr
- BX 4931.3 S77 2002 *Strangers at Home: Amish and Mennonite Women in History* by Kimberly Schmidt
- BX 8115 L64 1996 *Through Fire and Water: An Overview of Mennonite History* by Harry Loewen and Steven Nolt
- BX 8128 C48 H53 2003 *Us Little People: Mennonite Children* by Carl Hiebert

Online Forum

See what other community members think about *A Complicated Kindness* and add your own comments at our online forum. Visit the One Book One Community forum at: **www.mhc.ab.ca/forums**

To keep up to date on the discussion groups and activities planned for *A Complicated Kindness*, visit our web site at: **www.mhc.ab.ca/library/oboc**

Scheduled Book Discussions and Activities

All events are free, with the exception of Saturday's lunch.

Friday 3 February 2006

Medicine Hat College Theatre

7:00 p.m. Dramatic reading of *The Shunning* (a play by Patrick Friesen)

8:15 p.m. Talk by Patrick Friesen about *A Complicated Kindness* and *The Shunning*
Reception to follow in the Courtyard

Saturday 4 February 2006

Medicine Hat College Courtyard

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| 10:00 a.m. | Coffee |
| 10:30 a.m. – 11:30 a.m. | Book discussion #1: Topic TBA |
| 11:45 a.m. – 12:30 p.m. | Traditional Mennonite lunch catered by Worlds of Women Together. (<i>Tickets are \$12 and will be available at the Vera Bracken Library and the Medicine Hat Public Library in January.</i>) |
| 12:30 p.m. - 12:45 p.m. | Local choir singing traditional Mennonite hymns |
| 1:00 p.m. – 2:00 p.m. | Book discussion #2: Topic TBA |
| 2:15 p.m. – 3:15 p.m. | Book discussion #3: Topic TBA |

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