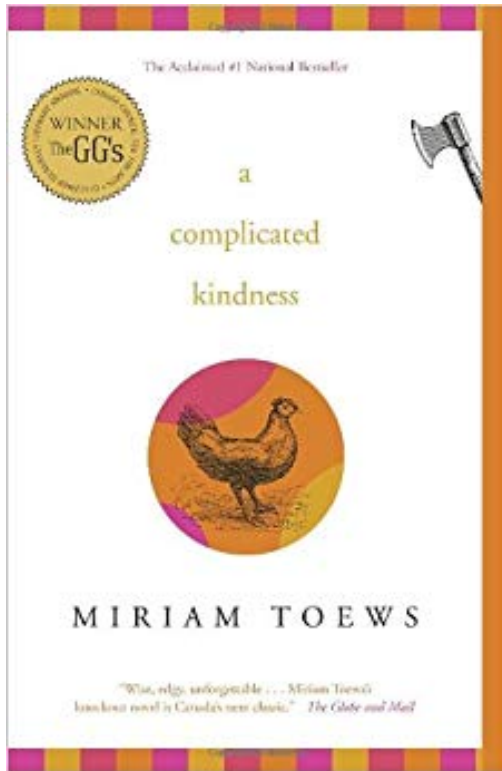


A Complicated Kindness *by* Miriam Toews



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Sixteen-year-old Nomi Nickel longs to hang out with Lou Reed and Marianne Faithfull in New York City's East Village. Instead she's trapped in East Village, Manitoba, a small town whose population is Mennonite: "the most embarrassing sub-sect of people to belong to if you're a teenager." East Village is a town with no train and no bar whose job prospects consist of slaughtering chickens at the Happy Family Farms abattoir or churning butter for tourists at the pioneer village. Ministered with an iron fist by Nomi's uncle Hans, a.k.a. The Mouth of Darkness, East Village is a town that's tall on rules and short on fun: no dancing, drinking, rock 'n' roll, recreational sex, swimming, make-up, jewellery, playing pool, going to cities or staying up past nine o'clock. As the novel begins, Nomi struggles to cope with the back-to-back departures three years earlier of Tash, her beautiful and mouthy sister, and Trudie, her warm and spirited mother. She lives with her father, Ray, a sweet yet hapless schoolteacher whose love is unconditional but whose parenting skills amount to benign neglect. Father and daughter deal with their losses in very different ways. Ray, a committed elder of the church, seeks to create an artificial sense of order by reorganizing the city dump late at night. Nomi, on the other hand, favours chaos as she tries to blunt her pain through "drugs and imagination." Together they live in a limbo of unanswered questions. 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. Eventually Nomi's grief — and a growing sense of hypocrisy — cause her to spiral ever downward to a climax that seems at once startling and inevitable. But even when one more loss is heaped on her piles of losses, Nomi maintains hope and finds the imagination and willingness to envision what lies beyond. Few novels in recent years have generated as much excitement as **A Complicated Kindness**. Winner of the Governor General's Award and a Giller Prize Finalist, Miriam Toews's third novel has earned both critical acclaim and a

long and steady position on our national bestseller lists. In the *Globe and Mail*, author Bill Richardson writes the following: "There is so much that's accomplished and fine. The momentum of the narrative, the quality of the storytelling, the startling images, the brilliant rendering of a time and place, the observant, cataloguing eye of the writer, her great grace. But if I had to name Miriam Toews's crowning achievement, it would be the creation of Nomi Nickel, who deserves to take her place beside Daisy Goodwill Flett, Pi Patel and Hagar Shipley as a brilliantly realized character for whom the reader comes to care, okay, comes to love." *This town is so severe. And silent. It makes me crazy, the silence. I wonder if a person can die from it. The town office building has a giant filing cabinet full of death certificates that say choked to death on his own anger or suffocated from unexpressed feelings of unhappiness. Silentium. People here just can't wait to die, it seems. It's the main event. The only reason we're not all snuffed at birth is because that would reduce our suffering by a lifetime. My guidance counsellor has suggested to me that I change my attitude about this place and learn to love it. But I do, I told her. Oh, that's rich, she said. That's rich. . . We're Mennonites. After Dukhobors who show up naked in court we are the most embarrassing sub-sect of people to belong to if you're a teenager. Five hundred years ago in Europe a man named Menno Simons set off to do his own peculiar religious thing and he and his followers were beaten up and killed or forced to conform all over Holland, Poland, and Russia until they, at least some of them, finally landed right here where I sit. 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, makeup, jewellery, playing pool, going to cities, or staying up past nine o'clock. That was Menno all over. Thanks a lot, Menno.—from **A Complicated Kindness***



Reviews of the **A Complicated Kindness** by Miriam Toews

Narim

I've become a big fan of Ms. Toews. Her stories are sad, compelling, moving, and funny. Built pretty unabashedly on the author's own life, though still fiction, they evocatively depict life in a rural Mennonite community in Canada, from the perspective of, in the case of *A Complicated Kindness*, a conflicted, troubled adolescent girl raised in a non-conforming family. Her characters are vivid, quirky, and interesting. One of the most intriguing aspects of Toews's writing is how she incorporates dialog. She doesn't use quotation marks. That's not all that unusual - a lot of writers do that. But with her, several exchanges between characters can occur in a single paragraph, and intermix with the protagonist's inner thoughts. That may sound like it should be confusing, but I never, ever got confused. It made perfect sense throughout. It felt to me like I was listening to a story told by a camp fire. It flows wonderfully.

The only reason I didn't give this book 5 stars is because I don't think it's quite as good as *All My Puny Sorrows*, so I had to give it less than a perfect score. Call it a four-and-a-half.

MisterQweene

This is a well-written book, but it is horribly depressing. There is in theory nothing wrong with a

depressing book, but it was so sad I actually resented it. Some of the other reviewers seem to see Nomi Nickel as a "cute" little teen growing up, sort of a Mennonite Gidget. In fact she is a severely depressed girl who loses her mother and older sister, and whose father and best friend are kind, but clearly psychotic. In reaction to the ultra-conservatism of her sad town, she goes to the opposite extreme, and drinks, drugs, and has sex too early. The end is very well-written, but we don't know what happens to Nomi. We don't know if she leaves her town, or sits alone and spends her whole life dreaming in her head. One issue the book raises is: Do we see Nomi and her family as psychologically Disturbed, or do we see their behavior as coming from the small community they live in? Interesting, but I am still worried Nomi is alone in her house, still daydreaming.

Modar

I read this book first when I was about fifteen. I heard snippets of it on a CBC radio broadcast, and it really got under my skin. The book has shaped a lot of my perspectives and really resounded with me because I empathized with the main character's experiences in growing up in a small town.

With that out of the way, the sense of humour, the unique writing style, and the imagery are all really strong here. The author is sympathetic even to antagonistic characters, and it's great. Everyone is held responsible for their actions, too.

I do think some readers will dislike the ending, and that prose style does take getting used to as well.

All in all, it's a wonderful book by a really good author, and I have to recommend it for all ages--particularly people who think YA is all fluffy romance and post-apocalyptic adventure.
from earth

"A Complicated Kindness" is a work of extreme adolescent alienation and unalloyed angst. No mere coming-of-age novel, its subject matter, a young woman's frustrated rage against the suffocating strictures of a small religious sect in an isolated rural Canadian community, is bound to upset its readers. Its author, Miriam Toews, has created a disenchanting, bewildered and embittered protagonist whose rebellion against her tightly-controlled environment rarely produces positive results. In fact, Nomi Nickel receives no solace, spiritual guidance or moral direction from her sequestered Mennonite community. The ironically named East Village is, to Nomi, death-in-life -- everywhere from its major industry, a slaughterhouse for chickens to its otherworldly preoccupation with damnation and the afterlife.

Against this repressive milieu, Nomi's mother and sister have fled precipitously, leaving her to fend for herself with her overmatched father. Her oldest sister, Tash, wantonly flouts convention, brazenly embracing a life-style that literally predetermines her excommunication from the church and town. More intriguing is the torment her mother, Trudie, experiences. Divided in loyalty between husband, family and faith, Trudie elects an understated subversion of Mennonite tyranny. Her inability to make decisions, her unspoken support of Tash's revolt and her agonizing ultimate decision to flee make her the quiet, invisible embodiment of discontent.

In the wake of their departure, Nomi and her befuddled father Ray make do poorly. The disappearance of the home's furniture eerily mirrors the absence of Trudie and Tash. Ray, a devoted sixth-grade teacher, adheres to the structure of Mennonite behaviors, even including wearing a coat and tie to a demolition derby which he attends with Nomi. His heart, torn asunder from conflicted loyalties and the tormented love he has for both his wife and his faith, cannot expand sufficiently to take care of his remaining daughter. Consequently, Nomi's life spirals inexorably out of control. Cigarettes, drugs and rock music cannot staunch her emotional bleeding. Limited by an understandable poor self-image and resisting social pressures for too enormous to battle alone,

Nomi flounders. Even halfhearted attempts at sexual expression fail in bittersweet hopelessness.

Toews does not turn "A Complicated Kindness" into a sour polemic. Her novel crackles with humor; there simply isn't a page where Nomi's mordant sensibilities don't elicit laughter. Toews' tart observations about East Village compete with Nomi's descriptions of the malignant characters circulating through her life. Her uncle, the major domo of the church, is called The Mouth; his wife, Aunt Gonad. Nomi's friends are a rogue's gallery of teen-aged desperation -- from The Comb, East Village's accommodating pusher; Lydia, her emotionally devastated friend, hospitalized for depression; her feckless boyfriend Travis, whose callow cowardice belies his grandiose dreams.

Even though "A Complicated Kindness" is a dazzling success, it does have some inexplicable flaws. Nomi's character wanders from genuine adolescent authenticity to an unbelievable omniscient figure; the character often says things that Nobel laureates would be proud to utter. On numerous occasions, characters become caricatures, sapping the novel's gritty realism for cheap laughs and satirical overkill. Questions posed by the relationship between Ray and Trudie deserve better consideration than the pat answers "A Complicated Kindness" provides. It comes as no shock to the reader that there are several surprise twists at the novel's conclusion.

That being said, "A Complicated Kindness" is an extremely important book. Its honesty, insights and sensitivities reveal its author's enormous talents. In Nomi Nickel, Miriam Toews has created an adolescent anti-hero for the late twentieth century, one who could easily hold her own with Holden Caulfield.

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