



## *Irma Voth by Miriam Toews*

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### **About the author:**

Miriam Toews (pronounced tâves) was born in 1964 in the small Mennonite town of Steinbach, Manitoba. She left Steinbach at eighteen, living in Montreal and London and touring Europe before coming back to Manitoba, where she earned a 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 a 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. Toews's next book, *Swing Low: A Life*, told the story of her father, who committed suicide in 1998 after a lifelong battle with manic depression. Toews then returned to fiction, with the bestselling novel *A Complicated Kindness*, published in 2004, which was a Giller Prize finalist and won the Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction. Her next novel, *The Flying Troutmans* (2008), won the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize. Toews has also 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 she has won the National Magazine Award Gold Medal for Humour.

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Today, Miriam Toews makes her home in Toronto, Ontario, where she shares a big old house with her mother and one of her daughters.

Source: Penguin Random House Canada (<http://penguinrandomhouse.ca/>)

### **About this book:**

From the award-winning author of *A Complicated Kindness* comes a heart-wrenching yet wryly funny story about setting out on the road to self-discovery, and finding the strength to survive in the face of immeasurable loss.

Nineteen-year-old Irma Voth lives in a Mennonite community in northern Mexico, surrounded by desert and both physically and culturally isolated from the surrounding towns and cities. It's been six years since her family up and left Canada to escape the prying eyes of the government and preserve their religious freedom, but Irma still misses the minor freedoms she had in their small town. She even misses the cold. This new life has not been an easy one, and Irma finds herself deserted by her husband of one year, who has left to pursue a life of drug-running, instead of working her family's farm. The most devastating blow for Irma is that he didn't take her with him, take her away, so now she's left to live under her father's domineering rule alone.

Things change for Irma when a film crew moves into the empty house next door. They've come to make a movie about the Mennonite community, and have made a deal with Irma's father to stay on their land. The director enlists Irma to work for them as a translator, as she can speak not only Spanish and English but Plattdeutsch, or Low German, the language of her people. At first bemused by the ragged and absurd crewmembers, Irma comes to embrace the passion and creative freedom of their world – but in doing so brings on the wrath of her father, who is determined to keep her from it at all costs. When Irma's thirteen-year-old sister Aggie begins to come by and spend time with the crew, their father

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is sent over the edge with rage, and Irma is forced to make a hard decision to save not only herself, but her younger sister, and to break the dark chain of violence holding her family.

The girls flee to the city, not knowing where they'll find food or shelter, let alone build a life, but knowing for the first time that they are free to make that choice. And even as they begin to understand the truth of the tragedy that has their family in its grip, Irma and Aggie use their love as a source of strength to help each other move on from their past lives and work toward a future that can truly become anything they want it to be.

*Source: Penguin Random House Canada (<http://penguinrandomhouse.ca/>)*

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. What were your first impressions of Irma, at the opening of the novel? Did they change as the book progressed and you got to know her character?
2. Talk about what Mennonite life is like for Irma and her brothers and sisters, growing up under their father's strict religious rule, in their isolated community. What is life like for Irma's mother?
3. Late in the book, Irma allows herself to remember what really happened to her older sister Katie, and tells Aggie the horrible truth. Do you think Irma will be able to leave her feelings of guilt behind?
4. Wilson tells Irma that art has the power to save us. Irma's father tells her that art is a lie. Discuss the role of art in the novel, and how it relates to life. Why does Aggie react so strongly to the Diego Rivera mural in the National Palace?
5. Diego gives Irma a blank journal so she can keep notes during the shoot, so she can sort out what's going on and keep track of her questions, but she ends up using it for so much more. What does the notebook become for Irma?



6. Discuss Jorge and Irma's relationship. Why did Jorge leave Irma? Do you think they were ever happy, living on the farm? Does Irma really love Jorge?
7. At the end of the novel, Irma returns home to visit her parents and brothers. What do you think their reaction will be? Do you think her father is capable of forgiveness?
8. In the words of Wilson, "Our dreams are a thin curtain between survival and extinction." What does that mean to him, and for anyone? Discuss the importance of dreams in the novel, including Irma's dreams of – or hopes for – the future.
9. What does meeting the film crew mean for Irma? Discuss Irma's relationships with Marijke, Diego and Wilson, and why each of them is important to her.
10. Talk about the cab ride the girls take to the beach in Acapulco in between their flights, and the relationship they form with their driver, Gustavo.
11. How does meeting Noehmi and the other student protesters affect Aggie and Irma?
12. At the end of the book, Irma changes the words of the heading in her notebook from Diego's "You have to be prepared to die" to "You have to be prepared to live." And then plays around with it more, too. What does this shift in perspective mean for Irma? Could this idea apply to anyone who has lived through loss?
13. What does the future hold for Irma and her two sisters?

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