

# Miriam Toews: Survival Through Art [C1]

Nata nel 1964 a Steinbach, una piccola comunità nella provincia canadese del Manitoba, Miriam Toews è l'autrice di nove libri di successo. Due dei suoi romanzi sono stati adattati per il cinema: l'ultimo film, uscito nel dicembre scorso, ha avuto ottime recensioni.



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Until the age of eighteen, when she moved to Montreal, Canadian author Miriam Toews lived in a small religious community on the eastern [edge](#) of the Canadian [prairies](#) with her parents and sister. Although the community's rules were rigid and patriarchal, her parents [encouraged](#) their daughters to develop their creative [skills](#). Toews took a degree in film studies at the University of Manitoba and later studied journalism. She worked on radio documentaries and only began writing fiction when her younger daughter started [nursery school](#).

## [THE PRAIRIES](#)

Religious fundamentalism, familial [bonds](#) and mental health are among the themes Toews explores in her novels. She wrote her debut book *Summer of my Amazing Luck* (1996) while still a freelance journalist. The geographic

area of her [childhood](#) also plays a prominent role. The vast, isolated [prairies](#) of central Canada [shaped](#) her imagination and still influence her writing. Now living in Toronto, Toews describes the remote landscape that defined her early years. \*\*Miriam Toews (Canadian accent): \*\*I'm from the [prairies](#) in Canada, and for me that's a very distinctive place that [looms large](#) in my imagination all the time. I don't live there anymore, now I live in eastern Canada, but I think of the [prairies](#) where I'm from every day. I look west to the [prairies](#) and the big sky and that [flat, flat, flat](#) terrain is something that has influenced me and really [shaped](#) me, and as a result, also impacted my work, my writing. When I imagine my characters in my stories, I'm always imagining them in a prairie [setting](#). It's a kind of place where you feel very, very small, very insignificant, in a way, so [tiny](#) under that giant sky and the vast, vast [expanse](#) of land. It's a little bit like being on the moon. It's a place that's isolated and remote and a place in Canada that's really ignored by tourists and by Canadians. It is geographically the centre of the country, but people generally want to live in other places in the country. But I love the [prairies](#) and that's where I'm from and it absolutely figures into my novels and into my writing.

## **MENNONITES**

In her acclaimed *A Complicated Kindness* (2004), as in all her books, Toews [draws on](#) her experience of growing up as a Mennonite. The Mennonites are post-Reformation Anabaptists; rather than baptise infants, they believe that only adults can make a conscious decision to be baptised. They are named after Menno Simons, a 16th-century [Dutch](#) priest. Originating in Germany, [the Netherlands](#) and Switzerland, of the two million Mennonites worldwide most now live in communities in the US and Canada. They live in [settlements](#) in remote areas, away from modern-day commodities. They have their own schools, churches and shops, and live a life defined by discipline. They follow ultra-conservative doctrines: rules are based on their interpretation of the Bible and are [enforced](#) by the community. Growing up in this protective yet suffocating patriarchy profoundly [shaped](#) Toews life, as she explains. **Miriam Toews:** I grew up in a Mennonite community, a small Mennonite community in the [prairies](#). I had a

wonderful [childhood](#). I felt free and safe and everybody knew who my parents were, who my grandparents were, where I [belonged](#). We kind of had the entire community as our home in a way. When we were kids we were all related, it was a very homogeneous society. When I got older, however, and became a teenager I started to realise what was happening, and I started to understand what that was like, the Mennonite patriarchy and then of course the [broader](#) patriarchy in the world. But the Mennonite patriarchy, the authoritarianism, the fundamentalism, and basically this culture of control, and a culture where the roles for women and men were very, very rigid. Of course, women and girls [are] expected to submit to husbands, fathers, etcetera, to remain silent in a sense and to serve. This gradually [dawned on](#) me and I rebelled against that, and [eventually](#) realised that I would have to leave that community, that I wouldn't be able to be myself there and I wouldn't be able to be free there. But it was difficult. That was the world that I knew and loved in large part, so it was hard to leave, but I left when I was eighteen.

## **VIOLENCE**

One of Toews' novels particularly caught the attention of critics and readers. *Women Talking* (2018) [arose](#) from the writer's reaction to a terrible true story: between 2005 and 2009, a group of men in a Mennonite community in Bolivia systematically [raped](#) girls and women during the night, having first anaesthetised them. This traumatic news led the writer to reflect upon and condemn the violence [concealed](#) by such communities. **Miriam Toews:** Living in these types of communities one experiences violence every day. You could say that we're constantly experiencing violence, a type of violence towards the soul in a sense, the body absolutely, and the mind, too. There's a [policing](#) of women's bodies, and of minds and souls. This culture of control and [punishment](#) and [guilt](#) and [sin](#) and [shame](#) and silencing. That absolutely is a type of violation; physical assault, physical domestic violence. I didn't experience violence in my own home but certainly in the schools. The numbers of domestic violence and sexual assaults were so high — continue to be so high — in these types of communities because essentially that kind of violence that kind of patriarchal violence is [condoned](#) by the church, and

then of course [sanctioned](#) by God in their eyes. And so there's very little [recourse](#) for the victims.

## **WOMEN'S VOICES**

Toews believes that misogyny is [ever-present](#), even in the most progressive of societies. She says it is vital for women to find their voice and tell their stories. **Miriam Toews:** Traditionally, of course, it's been men who have told stories, reflected our lives back to ourselves, created art, culture, and traditionally men who have also told women's stories, and so it's absolutely essential and time that we women tell our own stories.

## **WOMEN TALKING**

Two of Toews' novels have recently been adapted for the big screen. All My [Puny Sorrows](#), based on Toews' 2014 novel of the same name, focuses on her older sister's suicide, which took place four years before the book was [released](#). Earlier this year, the adaptation of Toews' novel Women Talking , directed by [fellow](#)-Canadian Sarah Polley, and starring Rooney Mara, Claire Foy and Frances McDormand, was nominated for the Oscars in both the best movie and best adapted screenplay categories.

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# Glossary

- **edge** = limite, confine
- **tiny** = piccolissima
- **skills** = abilità
- **shaped** = dare forma
- **dawned on** = far prendere coscienza
- **arose** = emergere
- **policing** = sorveglianza
- **ever-present** = sempre presenti
- **bonds** = legami
- **childhood** = infanzia
- **Dutch** = olandese
- **settlements** = insediamenti
- **broader** = più ampio
- **eventually** = alla fine
- **draws on** = attingere a
- **the Netherlands** = Paesi Bassi
- **guilt** = colpa
- **condoned** = tollerare
- **Puny** = insignificanti
- **Sorrows** = dispiaceri
- **setting** = scenario
- **enforced** = far rispettare, imporre
- **raped** = violentare
- **concealed** = nascondere
- **prairies** = praterie
- **nursery school** = scuola materna
- **punishment** = punizione
- **sin** = peccato
- **shame** = vergogna
- **released** = pubblicare, distribuire
- **fellow** = connazionale
- **encouraged** = incentivare, spingere

- **looms large** = acquisire una grande importanza, avere una grande influenza
- **flat** = piatto
- **belonged** = sentirsi parte di
- **sanctioned** = sanzionare
- **recourse** = risorsa
- **expanse** = estensione, immensità