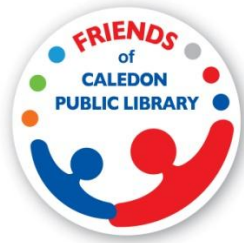
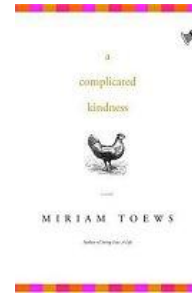


Book Club Discussion Guide



About the Book

A Complicated Kindness by Miriam Toews



A Complicated Kindness is a haunted novel rich with the longing for a life more ordinary. With this book Miriam Toews drills into the core of any religious fundamentalist community: the worship of death and the longing for the living.

This is a story that takes place in a small Mennonite village and focuses on the narrator Nomi whose mother and older sister are missing. Their lack of physical presence paints the novel, which is written like a stream of interwoven unconnected memories. This gives the book a dream like feeling, an impression of what real memories feel like. Do not expect a traditional, linear story rife with plot. Expect a story told in the way actual memories occur, unconnected and unraveling.

In any other writer's hands this could be a failing for the novel. But with Toews's stark and lucid prose the reader is kept glued to the page as the characters reveal themselves through Nomi's memories. The dreamy aspect of the novel is enhanced by the lack of quotation marks around dialogue. This gives the book a Faulknerian objectivity that makes you feel distanced and yet actually there at the same time.

Every memory is tinged with the feeling of absence. There is an overwhelming heartbreak to the story that wrenches you forward through the haunted little town. Just when you reach a point in the story when everything feels hopeless, Toews drops in a wry and sarcastic bit of dark humor that brightens everything up. Like a tarnished gem in a trash heap,



these moments of comedy bring hope to the story. She does this in a remarkable way that is not trite, nor condescending, but instead enhances the overall feeling of the story, and brings you closer to the reason why Nomi and her father never really leave their Mennonite homestead for a better life outside.

You follow Nomi's personal journey, scattered between memories of the past and the present. Everything is connected somehow, as she is in that stage of teenagerdom where we cling to the memories of our childhood and pursue a connection of our past selves to our present and future selves. There is a touching scene where she combs a barn looking for a dress she saw flutter by as a child. Both memories are connected in a realistic harmony that has its own direct tension without the need for pointless action.

Even though Nomi is a Mennonite, anyone who has grown up in a small town knows the pains she is going through. Toews makes the story real and universal, rather than small and isolated. Every friend she has, every word she speaks feels familiar. Her boyfriend acts like a guy we have met at one point or another in our real life, disgusted with the banality of school and obsessed with the certainty of their own genius.

Her longing to leave the quiet burg she has grown up in echoes the desires of every teenager in every small town in America. Her dreams are the dreams of every town USA, and the fact that she can connect our lives to those so different than ours is a testament to her writing talents.

All in all Toews pulls together an unnerving tale, filled with the haunted melodies of longing and the brilliant sarcasm that enlightens our existence. She makes a community of strangers in a strange land feel as familiar as the girl next door, and brings you into their world with such a certainty of prose that you are left wondering if you had actually entered Nomi's mind.



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.



Discussion Questions

1. Nomi frequently interrupts her narrative to comment on word choice — both her own and that of others. *Unreal, party, groovy, two-wheeler, keel, blouse* and *future* are a few examples. What does language represent to Nomi? In what way is her fascination with words informed by her Mennonite upbringing?
2. Nomi describes herself and Ray as “two mental patients just getting through another day.” The novel contains many other references to insanity. What elements of a rigidly interpreted Mennonite religion would you say are not conducive to robust mental health?
3. Mr. Quiring appears on the first page of the book then plays a seemingly minor role until the last chapter. How would you describe his presence in the novel — both in terms of the story itself and how the story is told? What does Nomi mean when she says: “You provided my family with an ending”?
4. Nomi has been described as a “latter-day Holden Caulfield.” What aspects of **A Complicated Kindness** make it a coming-of-age story that resonates with readers regardless of their ethnic or religious backgrounds?
5. Of the bloodstain on her wall, Nomi writes: “...every time I looked at it I was reminded that I was, at that very moment, *not* bleeding from my face. And those are powerful words of hope, really.” What role does hope play in the novel? How does each member of the Nickel family experience hope?
6. What is the significance of the book’s title? Would you describe the departures of Trudi and Ray as acts of “a complicated kindness”? What other scenes reveal this quality at play?
7. How would you characterize Nomi’s style of humour? What function does it serve for her? What passages stand out for you as especially funny?
8. Discuss the symbolic significance of the following images: the ugly black dresses “dancing wildly in the wind;” Trudie’s passport in the drawer; the graffiti on passing trains.
9. What is Nomi’s vision of an ideal family? How do her views change over the course of the book?
10. It seems that the people of East Village are forced to live a contradiction: the tangible world is false; the hereafter is real. How does Nomi ultimately come to terms with this contradiction? Consider, for instance, her “new religion” as she describes it in Chapter 24.

