



Author stays grounded while her characters fly; Miriam Toews tackles family dysfunction with deft humour

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As a kid, Miriam Toews had no desire to run away.

As an adult, she is fascinated with the idea of escape.

It's human nature to wonder what it would be like to disappear, "to recreate ourselves, to live our lives another way," the Manitoba writer explains, in a recent Edmonton interview.

Escape is a theme that bubbles up time and again in Toews' four novels, among them *A Complicated Kindness*, winner of the 2004 Governor General's Award for fiction. Parents are dead. Loved ones are missing. Characters run away, or long to run away, or fail to run away. In her newly released book, *The Flying Troutmans* (Knopf), a young woman named Hattie is forced to leave her bohemian existence in Paris to care for a niece and nephew in Winnipeg after her sister, Min, has a mental breakdown. Hattie, heartbroken and a guardian by default, takes the kids on a road trip in an oil-leaking van. Their mission is urgent: find the missing dad. It's a chance for Hattie to share her love of escape with the kids, and to shelter them from their mother's disease.

Toews, who grew up in rural Manitoba and lives in Winnipeg, admits she loves to see the world, to "take off." She and her husband went on numerous trips across North America while their kids were young, and she calls the experience magical, a test of tolerance in close quarters and a means of preventing loved ones from escaping. It's those road trips that inspired the scenario in *The Flying Troutmans*.

But her obsession with escape also stems from the suicide of her father, who suffered from bipolar disorder. A cousin and a friend also killed themselves. Suicide, Toews says, is the ultimate escape, and something she wonders about all the time.

"It haunts me, the 'how they can do it'," she says. "They don't want to break people's hearts. It's -- wow. You just took yourself out of the picture."

It was the facts that pushed Toews into the arms of fiction.

In her late 20s, she freelanced as a journalist in Winnipeg and made radio documentaries for the CBC. She was working on a story about single mothers, but got frustrated because she'd once been a single mother herself, and didn't feel like her radio documentary was genuine. So she decided to write a novel instead.

"I thought it would be a truer thing if I wrote fiction," she tells an Edmonton audience at a recent book launch of *The Flying Troutmans*.

"You can make stuff up, get close to a character, to reality, to emotional truth," she says. In journalism, "you're restricted to the facts."

That first book, *Summer of My Amazing Luck*, published in 1996, marked the beginning of Toews' successful writing career, though it wasn't until eight years and three books later that she was catapulted to CanLit stardom with *A Complicated Kindness*, a tale of a wry, lonesome teenage girl in a strict rural Mennonite town.

Like that book, *The Flying Troutmans* puts a comic, witty spin on heavy issues, including absent parents, dysfunctional families and mental illness.

Hey, said Thebes. She punched Logan in the arm. Remember when you burst that blood vessel in your eye from vomiting so hard when you got drunk with your basketball team?

I still have it, he said. He opened his left eye wide and looked at Thebes.

Dude! she said. You should wear a patch. I'll make you one.

They went on like that for a while. I was happy they were talking. Remembering. Reminiscing about their childhood, like it hadn't all been one long march to the frozen Gulag.

It's the hilarity as much as the honesty in Toews' writing that has earned her awards, respect and a devoted fan base.

"She makes me laugh out loud," says Edmonton book critic Laurie Greenwood, who cites the author among her favourites. "She attacks issues with a humorous and really realistic eye."

Greenwood says Toews is at the opposite end of the spectrum from more cerebral Canadian authors like Margaret Atwood, whose works can be intimidating, even depressing.

Toews' writing "is not fluff, it's not chick lit, but it's a lot more accessible," Greenwood says. "You get the feeling that Miriam doesn't take herself that seriously. Whereas Atwood definitely does."

Toews' sense of humour won over Garrett Epp, chair of the English and film studies at the University of Alberta and a practising Mennonite. Epp says Toews's portrayal of Mennonite life in *A Complicated Kindness* was hilarious, even when it was uncomfortable, and that's why he gave copies of the book to so many people, including his own then-teenaged daughter. "The laughter pulls you into a community that simply reading about a community doesn't necessarily do," he says.

Epp says making something harsh and difficult -- for example, the Mennonite practice of shunning -- into "a perfect joke" encapsulates Toews' talent: "It allows us to laugh at ourselves, and that's a good thing."

Of course, not everyone was thrilled with *A Complicated Kindness*. Some Mennonites were offended, and Toews says there were letters of complaint after it was published. "I went to such pains to explain it was a criticism of fundamentalism, not the Mennonite faith," she says.

Greenwood said it takes a gutsy writer to tackle faith. "Whenever you write about any particular religion, whether it's Salman Rushdie or Miriam Toews, you're going to make some people angry," she says. Compared with Rushdie, whose book *The Satanic Verses* inspired death threats and forced him into hiding for a decade, Toews got off easy with hate mail. In Winnipeg, a Mennonite heartland, she feels comfortably anonymous and at home. "Mennonites are quietly disapproving," says Toews, who grew up in a Mennonite family, but is non-practising now.

Toews calls Winnipeg "a modest city." And like her hometown, there is a disarming modesty about Toews that strikes you when you speak with her.

She mocks herself, jokes that she's a bad interview, that you're better off writing the quotes yourself. Her dishevelled shaggy blond hair, black backpack and pink fashion sneakers convey a certain innocence, a certain laid-back attitude.

She wears denim and wool, muted shades of grey and black that contrast her colourful, striped book jackets. She is tall, lean, plain but pretty, absent of makeup and self-importance. Youthful, too. You struggle to believe she is 44, mother of three adult children.

At her book launch in Edmonton, she is smiley and vivacious, yet decidedly awkward, even bashful, when she reads excerpts from her book. She holds the novel in her left hand, tucks her right thumb into the back pocket of her jeans, casually leans into one hip, and reads clearly, but hurriedly, like she doesn't want to bother her audience for too long. After a few passages, she steers the spotlight away from herself to the readers and their questions.

That modesty resonates when Toews talks about winning the Governor General's Award. It was a lovely moment, she says, surprising and fun and special, but she doesn't ever expect to repeat it. And with so many deserving but unrecognized writers in Canada, "it's hard to take any of the prize stuff seriously," she says.

By far, the highlight of her writing career so far was back in the mid-'90s, when a small Winnipeg press accepted her first novel for publication. "I just couldn't believe it," she says. "That was thrilling." Toews hadn't even told anyone she was writing a book -- "it seemed like it would be a preposterous thing to do," she says -- and, after calling publishers (anonymously), she knew her chances were slim. "We get 1,000 a year and we publish two," they told her.

Now, with five books under her belt, Toews is not only a leader among new, young voices in Canadian literature; she's a major player on the scene. "She's got an incredible sense of humour and her characters are so richly drawn, especially the young people," Greenwood says. "She has this wonderful way of showing that children are so much smarter than adults."

Toews' novels are set in Manitoba, but Greenwood says the themes are universal. "It's not so much about place as it is about character." The writer spends a long time getting to know her characters before she starts writing a book.

"I wouldn't say it's a mysterious process, but it is, in a way," Toews explains. "They slowly, slowly come to life. I see a process developing. It's like a pregnancy, in a way, but less important."

Often, Toews has drawn inspiration from her own children, who are 18, 21 and 23. Sometimes, the kids see themselves in one of the make-believe characters. Sometimes not. Take Thebes in *The Flying Troutmans*, an

11-year-old girl who never washes. Toews' daughter read the book and said to her mom: "I was NOT that dirty as a kid."

Toews has grown accustomed to criticism -- "it used to bum me out more than it does now," she says -- but apart from the drag of a negative review, she struggles to identify the challenges she faces. Being disciplined, sure. Sleeping and eating properly, sure. "It's like saying, what are the challenges of staying alive?" she says.

"Writing is something I have to do to make sense of the world. It sounds cliché. I'm not the first writer to say that."

It is a touch ironic that Toews writes about escape but has yet to escape herself. The author grew up in Steinbach, Man., and lives in Winnipeg -- but she doesn't want to stay in Manitoba forever. Where to? Hard to say. "I would love to live in Montreal, but I can't because my daughter just moved there," she says. "It would cramp her style a bit." Toews jokes that maybe she and her husband could move there in secret.

Without giving away any secrets, there is a flicker of a happy ending in *The Flying Troutmans*, a shift from the frustrating lack of resolution in *A Complicated Kindness*. Greenwood says the new book is more uplifting and redeeming than its predecessor, and Toews acknowledges that hint of optimism. But she makes no apologies for unsatisfying story ends. "Lots of my endings are quite ambiguous and I like them that way," she tells the crowd at her book launch. "Kinda like life, really."

Toews says she has to be honest, and funny, to attempt to make sense of the world -- "an absurd and ridiculous place," as she calls it. And that means she can't write happily-ever-afters: "I don't believe in conclusions or in closure, certainly not." Writing is a process of constantly moving forward, she says, wrestling with issues that bewilder and confuse her: "A writer's work is just one continuous, endless conversation with themselves and their readers."