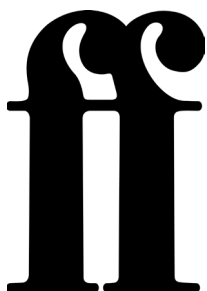


Reading Guide

The Flying Troutmans by Miriam Toews

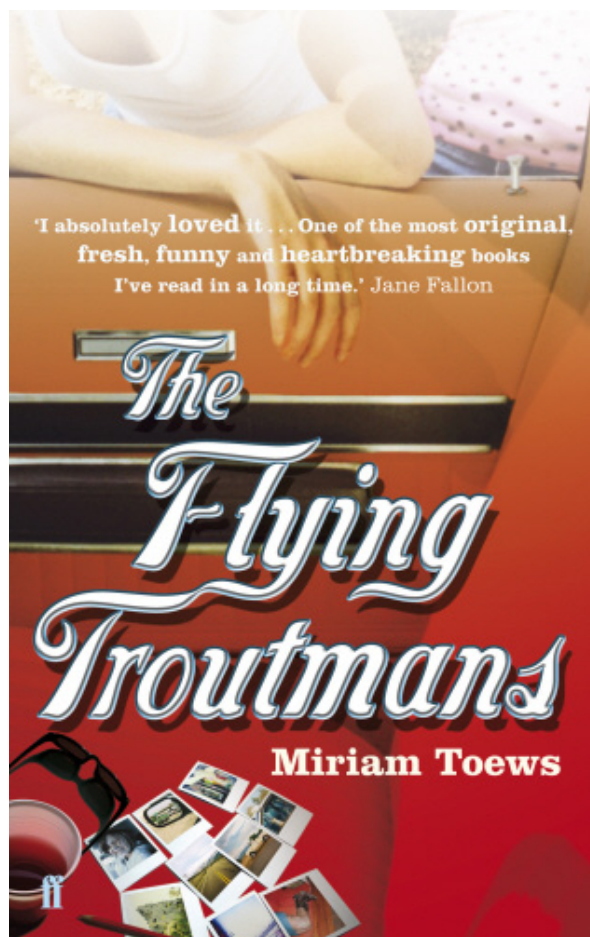


The Flying Troutmans by Miriam Toews

In brief

Hattie is living in Paris trying to live the life of an artist when she is dumped by her boyfriend Marc, who has decided to visit an ashram. Shortly afterwards she is telephoned by her niece Thebes, who needs her help: Min, Hattie's sister has been checked into to a psychiatric hospital, and things are falling apart at home in Canada. Hattie promises to get there as soon as possible, but when she does, she realises that she is not equipped to cope either. So she takes Thebes and her older brother Logan in the family van – and decides to find their father.

They do not have many clues as to where their father might be, so what begins as a simple attempt to solve a problem becomes a journey for everyone – both literally and emotionally. Combining the real heartache of having a loved-one suffering from mental illness with the natural joyfulness of childhood impulsiveness, *The Flying Troutmans* is as original as it is heart-warming.





Background

The Flying Troutmans has all the hallmarks of a classic road trip story, but beneath the quirky hippies, the teen preoccupations and the Hattie's informal but engaging voice, the novel is dealing with some deceptively hard-hitting issues.

Miriam Toews grew up in a rural community of Mennonites, a sect of about 130,000 in Canada. Similar to the Amish, they consider what are usually seen as commonplace modern-day activities such as drinking and divorce to be gravely sinful. Those who are guilty of serious or repeated transgressions are shunned from the community. Toews' best-known novel, *A Complicated Kindness*, followed a teenager who had been shunned by such a community, and *The Flying Troutmans* deals with similar issues of abandonment. Marc is escaping Hattie, Hattie has escaped Canada, Min is trying to escape life itself and Cherkis, the children's errant father seems to have escaped them all.

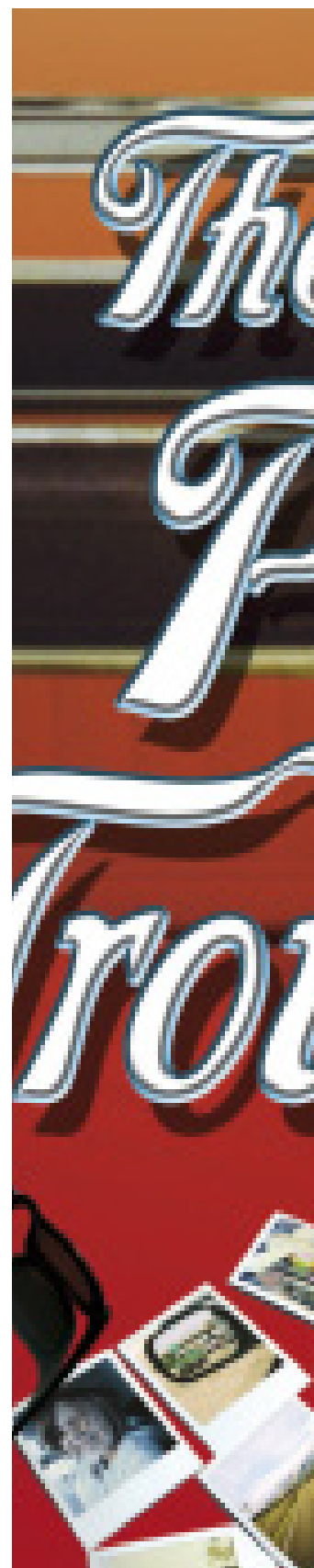
Journeying is the novel's central theme: from the physical travels that the characters are making, to the emotional shifts that occur as a result of their trips. From *The Canterbury Tales* to *On The Road*, the idea of characters learning as much about themselves as the destination they seek to see is not a new one, but here the characters and the issues that they are dealing with are as timeless as the take on them is modern.

Issues of mental health are also a driving force in the novel. It is clear that Min – whose unpredictable moods Hattie ran away to Paris to get away from – is much more than a 'difficult' person and is struggling with a history of psychotic behaviour and suicide attempts. The impact of this is seen rippling throughout those closest to her, particularly in some of her dialogue with Hattie.

Family is also crucial to the narrative. The idea of being 'stuck' with relatives no matter what they throw at you is one that Hattie feels keenly, as is her inner conflict as she assumes the parental role over Thebes and Logan. They are each desperate to be seen as able to cope, but equally enthusiastic to have someone take care of them. 'After all, aren't we all?' seems to be Toews' response...

For discussion

- What do you think the significance of the title is? How do you feel about the title once you have finished the book, compared to beforehand?
- Do you find the book funny? If so, what do you find is the funniest scene?
- Do you have a particular favourite scene in the novel?
- Do you consider Hattie is looking for things or running away from them?
- What do you think about Marc, Hattie's ex? And what do you think about his role in the narrative?
- What do you consider are the key themes of this novel?
- Do you think that this novel could be described as 'quirky'? If so, is that a good thing or a bad thing?
- How did the novel deal with the issue of depression, in comparison to any other novels you have read that touched on the issue?
- Did you find that Toews made complicated or difficult issues approachable, or easier to deal with? If so, how do you think she did this? If not, what do you think she could have changed?
- The novel combines upsetting and traumatic experiences with joyfulness and exuberance, showing that they can exist concurrently. Do you agree with this?
- Do you think that the dialogue brought the characters to life effectively?
- Did you get a sense of the landscape that the family cross? Are there any particular parts that stood out for you? Do you think that this works as a 'road trip' novel?
- Are there any other 'road trip' novel or films that you could compare this too?
- Who would you like to see play these characters in a movie adaptation? Do you think that it would make a good film?
- How do you feel about the ending? Is it what you expected? Did you think it resolved things properly?
- Would you recommend this book to your friends? If so, why – and if not, why not?



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. She later returned to Manitoba, where she earned a B.A. in film studies at the University of Manitoba. She went on to freelance at the CBC, making radio documentaries.

When her youngest daughter started nursery school, Toews decided it was time to try writing a novel. Her debut, *Summer of My Amazing Luck*, was published in the US in 1996; it was nominated for the Stephen Leacock Memorial Medal for Humour and won the John Hirsch Award. Her second novel, *A Boy of Good Breeding*, won the McNally Robinson Book of the Year Award. Her third, the best-selling *A Complicated Kindness*, which was a Giller Prize Finalist and won the Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction.

Toews has also written for *This American Life* (on National Public Radio), *Saturday Night*, *Open Letters* and *The New York Times Magazine*, and she has won the National Magazine Award Gold Medal for Humour.



Resources

http://www.quillandquire.com/authors/profile.cfm?article_id=10195

Miriam Toews interview

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/01/arts/01iht-idbriefs1B.17383858.html>

New York Times review

Suggested further reading

Fiction

Getting Rid of Matthew – Jane Fallon

The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie – Alan Bradley

Blonde Roots - Bernadine Evaristo

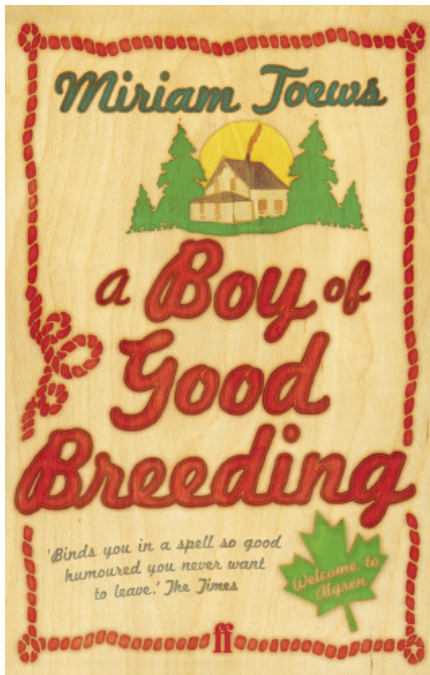
What Was Lost – Catherine O'Flynn

The Private Lives of Pippa Lee – Rebecca Miller

His Illegal Self – Peter Carey

Non-fiction

The Devil Within: A Memoir of Depression – Stephanie Merritt



Other books by Miriam Toews

Summer of Amazing Luck

Swing Low: A Life

A Boy of Good Breeding

A Complicated Kindness

