



A Complicated Kindness: A Novel

By Miriam Toews

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“Half of our family, the better-looking half, is missing,” Nomi Nickel tells us at the beginning of *A Complicated Kindness*. Left alone with her sad, peculiar father, her days are spent piecing together why her mother and sister have disappeared and contemplating her inevitable career at Happy Family Farms, a chicken slaughterhouse on the outskirts of East Village. Not the East Village in New York City where Nomi would prefer to live, but an oppressive town founded by Mennonites on the cold, flat plains of Manitoba, Canada.

This darkly funny novel is the world according to Nomi, a bewildered and wry sixteen-year-old trapped in a town governed by fundamentalist religion and in the shattered remains of a family it destroyed. In Nomi’s droll, refreshing voice, we’re told the story of an eccentric, loving family that falls apart as each member lands on a collision course with the only community any of them have ever known. A work of fierce humor and tragedy by a writer who has taken the American market by storm, readers will find this searing, tender, comic testament to family love difficult to forget.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

A 16-year-old rebels against the conventions of her strict Mennonite community and tries to come to terms with the collapse of her family in this insightful, irreverent coming-of-age novel. In bleak rural Manitoba, Nomi longs for her older sister, Tash ("she was so earmarked for damnation it wasn't even funny"), and mother, Trudie, each of whom has recently fled fundamentalist Christianity and their town. Her gentle, uncommunicative father, Ray, isn't much of a sounding board as Nomi plunges into bittersweet memory and grapples with teenage life in a "kind of a cult with pretend connections to some normal earthly conventions." Once a "curious, hopeful child" Nomi now relies on biting humor as her life spins out of control—she stops attending school, shaves her head and wanders around in a marijuana-induced haze—while Ray sells off most of their furniture, escapes on all-night drives and increasingly withdraws into himself. Still, she and Ray are linked in a tender, if fragile, partnership as each slips into despair. Though the narration occasionally unravels into distracting stream of consciousness, the unsentimental prose and the poignant character interactions sustain reader interest. Bold, tender and intelligent, this is a clear-eyed exploration of belief and belonging, and the irresistible urge to escape both.

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From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review Sixteen-year-old Nomi Nichol is a Mennonite, which, she wryly observes, "is the most embarrassing sub-sect of people to belong to if you're a teenager." Because Mennonites shun modern ways, Nomi's repressively fundamentalist community on the plains of Manitoba is a tourist attraction for Americans searching "for a glimpse backwards in time." Half of Nomi's family, "the better-looking half" as she puts it, is missing. Her older sister has fled the stifling strictures of their hometown, while her mother has also vanished after having been excommunicated by her own brother, the local minister, whom Nomi dubs "The Mouth of Darkness." That leaves the 16-year-old to look after her gentle, bewildered father and to deal with her own loneliness and persistent memories of how her family came undone. For Nomi, coping becomes an exercise in increasingly rebellious, sometimes self-destructive behavior, punctuated by pot-fuelled fantasies of escaping to New York to become a roadie for Lou Reed. Canadian author Toews, who grew up in a similar community, raises a number of fascinating, beautifully dramatized questions about the toll unquestioning faith can take on the human spirit. Her episodic, highly introspective first novel--part of an emerging subgenre of crossover adult books that might have been published as YA--maintains a careful balance between hilarity and heartbreak that most readers will find unforgettable. *Michael Cart*

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Review

"'Toews' novel is a wonderfully acute, moving, warm, sceptical, frustrated portrait of fundamentalist religion.' Guardian; 'Toews deserves to be up there with other top-notch writers - Margaret Atwood, Rohinton Mistry, Yann Martel - who have come out of Canada over the past few years.' Scotland on Sunday"

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Andrea Toliver:

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