



## **Irma Voth**

*Miriam Toews*

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That rare coming-of-age story able to blend the dark with the uplifting, *Irma Voth* follows a young Mennonite woman, vulnerable yet wise beyond her years, who carries a terrible family secret with her on a remarkable journey to survival and redemption.

Nineteen-year-old Irma lives in a rural Mennonite community in Mexico. She has already been cast out of her family for marrying a young Mexican ne'er-do-well she barely knows, although she remains close to her rebellious younger sister and yearns for the lost intimacy with her mother. With a husband who proves elusive and often absent, a punishing father, and a faith in God damaged beyond repair, Irma appears trapped in an untenable and desperate situation. When a celebrated Mexican filmmaker and his crew arrive from Mexico City to make a movie about the insular community in which she was raised, Irma is immediately drawn to the outsiders and is soon hired as a translator on the set. But her father, intractable and domineering, is determined to destroy the film and get rid of the interlopers. His action sets Irma on an irrevocable path toward something that feels like freedom.

A novel of great humanity, written with dry wit, edgy humor, and emotional poignancy, *Irma Voth* is the powerful story of a young woman's quest to discover all that she may become in the unexpectedly rich and confounding world that lies beyond the stifling, observant community she knows.

## **Irma Voth Details**

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Author : Miriam Toews

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## From Reader Review Irma Voth for online ebook

### Athira (Reading on a Rainy Day) says

Mennonite Irma Voth had been kicked out of her home by her father when she fell in love with and married a Mexican man named Jorge. Her father arranged for them to stay in a nearby house, but Jorge was to work for him for free. A year later though, Jorge is tired of Irma and the whole arrangement and leaves. Around the same time, a film crew moves into another house nearby to shoot a movie about Mennonites. Irma's father isn't happy about it, and is especially angry when Irma herself chooses to work for the film director. Soon, Irma's sister Aggie has also left home and wants to stay with Irma. One thing leads to another and Irma's father decides that Irma has to move out of her house and find her own stay. But Irma decides enough is enough and flees her home along with her sister, and tries to manage this new independent life.

I first read a Miriam Toews book - *The Flying Troutmans* - couple of years ago. That book dealt with a dysfunctional family, which was beginning to fall apart. There were elements of loneliness, sadness, family bonding and escapism lacing the book, and yet despite the heavy issues, the book was a quick read and funny at times. I don't remember feeling the urge to cry as I was reading the book, instead I felt a kind of closeness with the characters - the closeness you feel when you identify with the characters because they remind you of yourself when you hit the doldrums or felt aimless at any point in life. It was the kind of quirky sadness that everyone hits at some point - not a despairing sadness but more the-need-to-reconnect-with-self kind of sadness.

*Irma Voth* has the same elements. Although it's been two years since I read *The Flying Troutmans*, I could quickly see similarities between the two books. Both stories are as different as can be, but both tackle the same basic questions of a person's tendency towards flight in difficult situations, and how family can both be the bond holding them together and the wedge driving them apart. The characters are as usual dysfunctional and very human. Although Irma is the protagonist and the narrator, most of the secondary characters are well fleshed and lend their dynamic presence to the book. The Mennonite beliefs and ways of life was another big presence in this book. Although I was new to this denomination and reluctant to read anything with a huge religious element in it, I loved how easily and sometimes-hilariously Miriam Toews (a Mennonite herself) painted a vivid picture of the people of this faith.

As with *The Flying Troutmans*, I loved several of the characters that pass through the book - there are Irma and Aggie themselves, sisters, trusting each other, and yet always arguing with each other. There is the Russian-origin German actress, Marijke, who has her own huge baggage of issues that she drags all the way to the Mexican town, where the film crew is staying. The director, Diego, alternates between enthusiasm for shooting the movie and frustration at all the inevitable issues that crop up, both within the crew and from outside. When Irma works as the translator between Diego and Marijke, she easily feeds her own hilarious lines for Marijke to speak at each shoot. Then there are a whole host of minor characters - each one quirky enough during their brief appearances and whole enough to make those brief appearances memorable.

The second half of the book is set in an entirely different setting from the first. While the first half focused on the film crew, which served as the backdrop against which Irma's family's dynamics played out, the second half was set in Mexico City, where Irma and her two sisters try to make their life work, away from their parents. Although Irma's father is shown mostly as an adamant, over-protective and strongly principled man in the first half, we begin to see other shades of his personality in the latter half, through Irma's eyes. Since Irma is rarely honest with herself and doesn't discuss what is bothering her, it takes a while before the reader catches on. There's a very ohmygodly bomb dropped in the second half that I never saw coming and

made me feel overwhelmingly sad.

In classic Miriam Toews' style, the prose is quick and easy to read. Even though there is a lot of sadness and humor, the author doesn't infuse those sentiments heavily into her writing. The feelings of the characters are never discussed - the book is a first-person account written from the perspective of Irma, and yet, Irma rarely ever says if she is feeling happy or sad due to something. She only talks of what she is doing, or what someone else is doing - people's emotions aren't the principal focus. Miriam lets the characters' actions demonstrate the inner state of their minds. This is an interesting mode of writing because a character's behavior can be interpreted in so many ways or can be too complicated for a reader to analyze in the few seconds he/she reads that passage, but this works wonderfully here because there is no ambiguity in the meanings of what any character does.

*Irma Voth* is just as much a favorite of mine now as *The Flying Troutmans* is. Before starting this read, I was somewhat worried about how much this book will measure up to the successful image the other book has formed in my mind. But when I started and eventually finished it, I was thrilled that this book worked. It felt like revisiting an old favorite - and this has made me eager to check out her other books, and especially the book she wrote about her father, *Swing Low: A Life*.

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### **Tamara Taylor says**

Toews is a literary genius who writes with such a masterly command of the English language. A wizard of words! Her characters are always so complex and vivid despite her minimalist approach to writing. I found this story disturbing and quite sad, but she still managed to infuse it with her signature dark humour. Not my fave Toews book but it was a quick read and I would recommend. My fave line was the one about the protagonist sleeping in the barn like Jesus without the entourage or pressure to perform lol

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### **Sasha Brown says**

I have read several other books by Miriam Toews and loved them. This one was my least favourite. I found it hard to follow at the beginning and it was harder to get into. It was good but I enjoyed other books by the same author much more.

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### **kp says**

Toews is adept at quiet irony and at mapping the travels we make inside our own hearts, especially as we move toward a truer understanding of other people, and this novel displays those skills in even greater measure. I find her protagonists authentic and moving, and their struggles to manage the need for connection with the knowledge that it often fails or can only be won after great forbearance rings true to me. This novel offers us an engaging central figure and demonstrates Toews' ability to knit minor characters into our heart through dialogue. I think it's a wonderful book.

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## Jennifer says

Originally published at Book Browse: <https://www.bookbrowse.com/mag/review...>

Author Miriam Toews has enjoyed modest success in her home country of Canada. Of Mennonite tradition and hailing from rural Manitoba, many of Toews's novels explore this way of life. She won the 2004 Governor General's Award for Fiction for *A Complicated Kindness*, and she was awarded the 2008 Writer's Trust Fiction Prize for her novel, *The Flying Troutmans*. All this to say, Toews has writerly chops.

Irma Voth came about when, in 2006, she was approached to star in a film by Mexican director Carlos Reygadas. He was taken with her photograph - seen on the jacket of her novel, *A Complicated Kindness* - and felt she would be perfect to play the role of a Mennonite wife living in northern Mexico, trapped in a troubled marriage. Toews studied film at university but had never acted and, initially, thought Reygadas was a bit nuts. She ignored his emails for a long time but relented when he posited that being in his film "...will give [her] something to write about." (*Silent Light*, the resulting movie was an independent darling in 2008 and won the Jury Prize at the Cannes International Film Festival that same year.)

And write about it she did. Miriam Toews has a wonderful and minimalist style, and in *Irma Voth* she explores some familiar themes - a young woman's longing for freedom, getting by on wits alone, and a road trip. She has a great ability to take readers into amazing places that are a little bit strange but a whole lot inviting, and because of her incredible skills, I was very eager to dive into her new novel.

*Irma Both* revolves around a simple question posed by our protagonist: "*How do I behave in this world without following the directions of my father, my husband, or God?*" For a young woman raised within strict, old-order Mennonite beliefs, it is a disturbing question - one that unmoors Irma but also helps to ground her. At the beginning of the story, Irma has been disowned by her very strict and rigid father for secretly marrying a man who is outside of the Mennonite faith. While still residing in a separate house on her father's property, Irma and her husband, Jorge, struggle to communicate and make a go of their new marriage. This attempt is made all the more difficult as Jorge frequently absents himself from home for long periods of time.

Metaphorically, Irma is a widow and orphan at the age of nineteen, even though her family and husband exist. Her mother is portrayed as having two main functions - making babies and being subservient to her husband. Her sister Aggie, at only thirteen-years-old, is strong-willed, and more vocal and rebellious than Irma, though Irma does take her opportunities where she can find them. It is this relationship, the one between sisters, that Toews really explores. The level of maturity and capability of both girls is astounding. There is a resilience and hopefulness in Irma and Aggie that will make you cheer for them as they try to improve their lot in life.

Toews writes honestly and with humour, and her balanced style makes her work accessible to readers. We are given a beautiful literary story that becomes much more real with her interjections of observational wit. Her narrative never seems forced, instead it feels as though you are listening to a friend relay a tale.

05 October 2011 ©

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## Dorothy says

I had been disappointed with Miriam Toews most recent book (The Flying Troutmans) so I embarked on this read with lowered expectations and was delighted to find that the author is back on form. I was completely captivated by the character of Irma Voth. Toews has returned to what she writes about best...the effects of living in a family dominated by a bigoted and powerful father. In this case, she sets her action in a Mennonite community in Mexico and weaves into the story a group of filmmakers and the struggles of 2 sisters who are trying to escape the rigours of their family life.

Irma Voth's view of the world is necessarily constrained and her inner dialogue illuminates her despair. Ultimately she is able to use her courage and intelligence to find a new way of living for herself and her sisters, and her journey towards that goal is filled with a rich assortment of characters and situations. Congratulations to Miriam Toews for another wonderful piece of fiction.

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### **Kirsty says**

*Irma Voth* deals with similar themes to the fantastic *A Complicated Kindness*. Engaging from the beginning, it is an incredibly strong novel, filled with female characters you end up rooting strongly for. There is a darkness to it which hasn't been as prominent in Toews' other work, and there isn't the wry humour here which I have almost come to expect from her novels. Regardless, *Irma Voth* is incredibly though-provoking, and overarchingly rather sad.

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### **jo says**

miriam toews is one of the best writers writing in english today. miriam toews is one of the best writers writing in english today. miriam toews is one of the best writing writing in english today. miriam toews is one of the best writers writing in english today. miriam toews is one of th ebest writerswritnng in english today. miriam toews is one oft he best bwitnerwr writing in english today. miriam woetys is one of the bst writers wirting in english today. miriam toews is onweof the best bwingwer writing in english today. miriam toews is one of the bst writers witing in english today. miriam toewws is on the best wrignerrrs wintng in english todya.

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i'm not going to read the three-star two-star one-star reviews. it's okay for people not to like this book. maybe they got bogged down at the beginning, when all that happens is a nothingness of happening in which a movie is being shot in a godforsaken mennonite community of canadian expats in mexico and there's a lot of hanging out waiting for the right light and the rain and sometimes the equipment breaks down and people watch tv or cook or eat or fuck and the woman who plays the main character is a german mennonite who feels so freaked out by loneliness and the desert she is always on the verge of losing her mind. this section is very paratactic and very small-sentencey and there's a terrible drama underneath but irma voth is a 19 year

old kid who is all alone in the world and she's not the best person to give you a sense of the terrible drama she's the driving force of maybe because drama has been her life from day one and maybe because she thinks that's how life is and she has nothing to compare it with.

she has to milk the cows. she has to be home at a decent time. she has to get things right. she has to save her family. she has a husband she greatly loves but may or may not love her.

some moments are hilarious. miriam toews is one of the best writers writing in english today. some passages are side-splitting hilarious. irma, who narrates in the first person, has this way with language that all of toews' characters have: it's as if she saw the world in a slightly different way from the way you and i see it. she juxtaposes things you and i wouldn't juxtapose. she messes with things but just a little. she tries not to ruffle things too much. she tries to keep still but thoughts pour out of her with irrepressible life-force and that's just the way she is.

the second part is about trying to make a new life but i won't tell you anything about it because i'd spoil the book for you. this part is hilarious too. it's also tender, generous, uplifting (oh people are good), encouraging (yes, you can make it), heartbreaking (didn't i just say you can make it?), strong, and original in that miriam toews-is-one-of-the-best-writers-writing-in-english-today way that makes you want to underline a sentence in every page.

it's all very simple and very miraculous and not nearly as painful as *A Complicated Kindness*, an emotional whopper of a book that left me reeling for days. and then things happen and other things happen and for some reason, somehow, everyone ends up okay.

(a small note for miriam toews, in case you read this review. dear miriam toews, i think you are one of the best writers writing in english today and i'm so very thankful for you. this is not what this note is about. *A Complicated Kindness*, the most difficult and unyielding of your last three books, is also the book that made the bigger splash. my explanation is that it has a really good title. i loved *The Flying Troutmans* but wasn't going to pick it up just for the title. same with *Irma Voth*. at this point i'm sold. You can call a book anything at all and i'll read it. but do you *have* to go for all these un-catchy titles? with great love and admiration, jo)

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## Eva says

I initially didn't know what to think of this book- I will admit I wasn't automatically drawn in. I know nothing about Mennonites and, as the story progressed, found myself irritated with the presence of the hooligans and posers in the film crew and their related shenanigans. I guess it was the character of Irma, who simultaneously didn't believe in her abilities yet quietly refused to surrender to hopelessness, who kept me reading. When she reaches a point where she is willing to abandon the farce she has been living in, the story breaks open. The new setting, the developments in her relationship with her younger sister, and the later revelations that lead Irma to perceive and portray herself as a person who must now live with crushing guilt- these humanized what initially seemed like a stiff and uninteresting character. Part of me would have liked more, but another part of me enjoyed the restrained and understated narrative. By the end of the novel, I felt I understood Irma in ways I hadn't expected. A quiet surprise that challenges in subtle ways.

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## Gregory says

Here is a prayer for Irma Voth's husband. Miriam Toews needed a foil to Irma Voth's innocence and sheltered life so Jorge will go down in fictional history as a questionably created Mexican character who is overly sexual, negligent, and a drug-trafficking Mexican. The stereotype used on Jorge bummed me out because all the other supporting cast in this novel are rock-solid and unique.

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Questionable husband character aside, Miriam Toews can GOD DAMN WRITE and she broke one of the "Fiction 101" fundamentals flawlessly; the "Is this the most important moment of your characters life? If not, write that instead". We find that the most important moment of Irma Voth's life was in the past, but we don't know all of it until the end and the plot unravels quickly and in the page-turning pace of a murder mystery.

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When we are introduced to the college students in the novel they drop references to novels that don't really add anything and it seems like an unnecessary flex by Toews.

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## Diane says

Miriam Toews' (pronounced "Taves", please) earlier books had a charming quirky humor to lighten the story but not this one. I think she intended the younger adolescent sister Aggie to provide some comic relief but she only screws things up. If you thought Toews portrayed a dour Mennonite existence before you ain't seen nothin' yet. Irma Voth is a nineteen year-old Mennonite girl transplanted from rural Manitoba to rural northern Mexico. Apparently, some ultra-conservative Mennonites started relocating to Mexico with the blessing of the Mexican government in the 1920s when they thought the Canadian government was becoming too intrusive in their isolated way of life. Irma's family moved to Mexico much more recently. There are approximately 80,000 Mennonites living in Mexico today. When Irma is abandoned by her Mexican husband he finds work as a translator with a movie crew filming in the area. [This appears to be based on the production of a real movie, "Stellet Lijcht" released in 2007.] The book's ending is very confusing and I'm still not really sure what happened but maybe Toews intended that. A dark story with only a few rays of light.

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## Andrew says

I enjoyed this tale of a young Mennonite girl marooned on a claustrophobic family compound in rural Mexico. At 19 she has already been through a lot, marrying a non-Mennonite Mexican guy called Jorge and getting ostracised by her family as a result, then being abandoned by Jorge. That's before the novel even begins. As it progresses, she gets involved with a film crew who have rented the neighbouring house to shoot a movie, steals and sells drugs, and runs away to Mexico City with her younger sister Aggie and newborn baby sister Ximena.

In some ways it's a very familiar tale of a young girl rebelling against a repressive, old-fashioned religious community. The father, especially, was very reminiscent of other crazy authoritarian fathers, for example the



missionary father in *Poisonwood Bible*. Why are fathers with strong religious beliefs so often portrayed in fiction as crazy and authoritarian? It seems a little unfair. Admittedly I don't have too much experience of extremely religious father figures, but I'm sure they're not all crazy and authoritarian.

In any case, the slightly familiar taste of the story was counter-balanced by the freshness of the language. Virtually every description, even of mundane events and sights, is beautiful and evocative. The dialogue, too, is often sharp and witty, particularly when the two sisters Irma and Aggie are sparring. The dialogue often takes quite an argumentative form, but with a strong undercurrent of tenderness. The depiction of the relationship between the sisters relies heavily on dialogue, because the first-person narrative by the young, inexperienced Irma does not contain a whole lot of mature reflection. So the dialogue has to be very strong, and it is. The relationship between the sisters, on which so much in the novel depends, is strongly drawn and utterly convincing.

There's a big secret in the family, which I won't reveal here. Again it's a slightly familiar theme, but it was handled well, and gave some extra resonance to the ending. The main interest for me, though, was in the early farm/movie scenes, the flight to Mexico City and the haphazard floundering around of the young, totally naive sisters in the city. And what held it all together was the wonderful writing, sounding a bit like a teenage diary and yet also managing somehow to be literary, often lyrical. Makes me want to read more by the same author – any suggestions?

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## **Steven Buechler says**

A must read for book lovers of either gender. Through the story we get into the mind set of a young woman dealing with serious issues and - as the book jacket says, "delves into the complicated factors that set us on the road to self-discovery and show us how we can sometimes find the strength to endure the really hard things that happen. It also asks the most difficult of questions: How do we forgive? And most importantly, how do we forgive ourselves?"

-from page 21

"I stood in my yard and noticed the lights on at my cousins' old place. The filmmakers had arrived. And then I heard voices and music and laughter and I had never felt more alone and strange in my life, which is something. I went back into my house and lay in my bed some more and tried to pray. God, I said, help me to live. Help me to live please. Please God, help me to live. God I need your help. I need to live. Please? I need help living. God. Help. I had never learned how to pray properly. It didn't make sense that God would require me to articulate my pain in order for him to feel it and respond. I wanted to negotiate a deal. I knew I wasn't supposed to talk to the filmmakers but wondered if it would be acceptable to observe them from a distance. I punched myself on the side of my head. What difference did it make what my father had said? I posed another question to myself. How do I behave in this world without following the directions of my father, my husband or God? Does it all end with me sleeping in a barn with cows and creeping around the campo spying on people from the roofs of empty grain sheds?

I got up again and went outside and crept along in the darkness towards the filmmakers' house. I leaned against the water pump in the side yard and watched while several guys unloaded a million black boxes from a truck and a car and a van and carried them into the house. All the lights were on and the filmmakers were laughing and talking loudly and music was playing from somewhere inside. A dog was barking. In fact a dog was barking and running at me in the dark and it looked like his eyes were on fire and I could see sparks,

flying out of them. I thought, well, I should run now, but I couldn't move, I was galvanized to the pump, and then I heard a man yell, Oveja, Oveja!  
Which is how I met Diego, the director of the film."

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### **Petra says**

At 19, Irma is ostracized and shunned from her family, living in isolation and despair. Her very strict Mennonite upbringing as a Canadian in Mexico leaves her dependent upon her father, who is the one who imposes the rejection and shunning. Her husband, leaves home for months on end, leaving Irma as alone as anyone can be on this planet: no home, no husband, no family, no friends, no community. When disaster strikes, Irma knows she must leave, for her own safety. To save her younger sister, Irma takes her alone when she runs, with the mother's blessing. What follows is Irma finding her way to independence while mothering her sister and keeping them safe. This is a wonderful story of forgiveness of self and others. Miriam Toews adds humor and darkness into her stories and manages the mix wonderfully. She brings warmth and resilience to her characters. These are people who try, then try again but never, ever lose the desire to find their way.

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### **Lise Petrauskas says**

I adored this book! Toew's style is deceptively and disarmingly simple, but these people and places came alive for me.

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### **Melissa says**

I really wanted to like this one. I truly did. The description of this novel, by new-to-me author Miriam Toews, sounded so different than anything else I'd read and seemed very intriguing.

Irma Voth is 19, married, and living in a Mennonite community in Mexico. With the exception of her younger sister, Irma is pretty much estranged from her family. A filmmaker arrives in town to make a documentary and hires Irma as a translator. Irma befriends Marijke, an actress in the film and ...well, that would be as far as I got with this one.

I can't really point to one specific element of this story that made me give up after 54 pages. My two main issues were that the plot seemed to be all over the place, kind of disjointed and unstructured. Also, as much as I tried, I didn't feel connected to any of the characters. Both of these were factors in making me lose interest.

Normally I don't have any problem abandoning books that aren't working for me, but I did with this one because I was reading it as part of a TLC Book Tour. I don't do many book tours - and maybe I shouldn't do any, period, because this is now the second toured book that I didn't quite enjoy. It left me in a conundrum about what to do about the review, but after talking to the ever-so-gracious-and-understanding Trish, I decided to treat this one like any other DNF and just be honest.

Bottom line? This one just didn't work for me. However, I'm planning to donate this ARC to my local library in hopes that Irma Voth will find a reader or two who will fall deeply in love with all that she has to offer.

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### **Nicki says**

This is an odd book. Its written in the first person and is told in conversation throughout by the main character. There are no quotation marks at all which is odd too. I felt compelled to finish it but not particularly because I was enjoying it but because it was odd and I wanted to find out the end. I haven't read anything by the author before and I'm not sure if I will read her again.

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### **Jen says**

If Miriam Toews wrote a telephone book I'd probably read it. Her characterizations and odd-weird-quirky relationships never disappoint. This one was perhaps a bit more somber but I still thoroughly enjoyed it. Loved the little bit where Irma purposely gives the lead actress erroneous dialogue translations. Passive-aggressive subversion. Heh. My only criticism it was too short with many threads left dangling. Highly readable.

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### **Megan Baxter says**

This is the third Toews book I've read, and of the two I've read previously, I really loved A Complicated Kindness and liked A Boy of Good Breeding okay. So I had high hopes for Irma Voth, and I am more than happy with what I found. Like A Complicated Kindness, this one takes place within a Mennonite family. In this case, a Mennonite family that has relocated to Mexico from Canada.

Note: The rest of this review has been withdrawn due to the changes in Goodreads policy and enforcement. You can read why I came to this decision [here](#).

In the meantime, you can read the entire review at [Smorgasbook](#)

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### **Foxthyme says**

Weeell... I am a Miriam Toews fan. And I kept doggedly reading this book, not put off by the jagged rhythms of it, or of the extreme obtuse naiveness, or what reviewers are touting as dry humour worldliness, of Irma. But when the ending happened I had a WTF moment and thought, man, why ruin a book in this way? This is not helpful.

I was flummoxed. I still am.

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