



# All My Puny Sorrows

*Miriam Toews*

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Miriam Toews is beloved for her irresistible voice, for mingling laughter and heartwrenching poignancy like no other writer. In her most passionate novel yet, she brings us the riveting story of two sisters, and a love that illuminates life.

You won't forget Elf and Yoli, two smart and loving sisters. Elfrieda, a world-renowned pianist, glamorous, wealthy, happily married: she wants to die. Yolandi, divorced, broke, sleeping with the wrong men as she tries to find true love: she desperately wants to keep her older sister alive. Yoli is a beguiling mess, wickedly funny even as she stumbles through life struggling to keep her teenage kids and mother happy, her exes from hating her, her sister from killing herself and her own heart from breaking.

But Elf's latest suicide attempt is a shock: she is three weeks away from the opening of her highly anticipated international tour. Her long-time agent has been calling and neither Yoli nor Elf's loving husband knows what to tell him. Can she be nursed back to "health" in time? Does it matter? As the situation becomes ever more complicated, Yoli faces the most terrifying decision of her life.

*All My Puny Sorrows*, at once tender and unquiet, offers a profound reflection on the limits of love, and the sometimes unimaginable challenges we experience when childhood becomes a new country of adult commitments and responsibilities. In her beautifully rendered new novel, Miriam Toews gives us a startling demonstration of how to carry on with hope and love and the business of living even when grief loads the heart.

## All My Puny Sorrows Details

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# From Reader Review All My Puny Sorrows for online ebook

## Elyse Walters says

A laughing moment...

Yoli says to her sister Elf that she's a terrible wife ... she tells her sister she cheated on her husband and is just a whore.

Elf... Being who 'she' is, says... "Haven't I taught you anything"? "there is no such thing as a whore".

I smiled reading this!

Toews writing is superb.....viva-la-melty' richness.... (deeply satisfying as a reader to be in the care of this author)

A very sad story.... told with tenderness... and spunky style....

starting from the first page...( the family's house is driving away), to the final acknowledgments .....

Elf was gifted.....talented....brilliant.....complicated. It was hard for Elf to be Elf.

We love her and miss her too!

Yoli's love for her sister so beautiful it hurts. We love her too!

Thanks Esil.... For sharing 'your' experience with me of this book.

I, too, would like to read more books written by Miriam Toews!

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## Christine says

Miriam has become a friend, so I will have to file this under an appreciation rather than an impartial review, but I admired her work long before I met her. She has an inimitable voice that is wise and funny and always unflinching. I've seen her described as the 'queen of voice' but I think the 'queen of heart' is more accurate. In spite of terrible loss in her own family, she has a furious and abiding love of life that is apparent in every word she writes.

This is a book I would have liked to devour in a sitting or two, but life circumstances prevented that. Shortly after I started reading it, my grandmother had a massive stroke. I read most of it as I sat by her, as I did every day after the stroke for a few hours a day, as she lay dying. That's the kind of book this is. There is strength and courage in it, but there is an overarching acceptance of death that's rare and beautiful. This is the book you want at a time of grief and sorrow.

All My Puny Sorrows searches for meaning and connection while giving these qualities over as it does. The questions she raises are answers in their own right while remaining resolutely open. It's brilliant in conception and masterfully written. I was reminded of John Keats' definition of 'negative capability' as I read, from a letter he wrote to his brothers in 1817:

“At once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in literature, and which

Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”

Toews has been candid about the autobiographical nature of this book (her beloved sister, whom Miriam had been trying to keep alive, succeeded in killing herself). In the book, Yolandi and Elfrieda assume the sisters’ roles with Elf as a brilliant, suicidal classical pianist and Yoli (whom Elf calls ‘Swivelhead’) as the loving, self-deprecating, and devastated novelist sister trying to save Elf from her own despair.

The mood of the novel is somber and dark (how can a novel about imminent suicide not be?) but it’s punctuated with a wry humour that had me laughing aloud. How does she pull this off? She sees life for the grand parade of absurdity and beauty and tragedy that it is, and she can give this over on every page. Joy and humour coexist with sorrow and tragedy. There are no divisions.

I’ve turned the corner of so many pages that there is too much to quote here, and this will be a book that I go to for its wisdom. But this is one of my favourites:

‘My sister was a dark blur moving towards a rectangle of light. But now after hearing my mom’s survival dream I think maybe this is my survival dream and it’s not a nightmare. It’s the beginning of my own cure. Because to survive something we first need to know what it is we’re surviving.’

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## **Ron Charles says**

The story of Brittany Maynard, the terminally ill woman in Oregon who committed suicide earlier this month after making her intention public, forces us to consider — or repress — wrenching questions about how life ends. As that discussion continues in homes, legislatures and places of worship, please make room for “All My Puny Sorrows,” by Canadian writer Miriam Toews.

I’ve been in love with Toews since 2004, when she published “A Complicated Kindness,” a wincingly funny story about a 16-year-old girl trapped in a small Mennonite town. Her next book, “The Flying Troutmans,” drove us through comedy and pathos on a strange family road trip. And now comes this unbearably sad, improbably witty novel inspired by the suicides of her father and only sister. This is the story of a little group — “a tainted family, deranged” — that revolves around a woman determined to kill herself.

I know, I know, what could sound less appealing than an almost plotless novel about the grinding stone of suicidal depression? Even the narrator’s mom says she has had it with novels about sad protagonists. “Okay, she’s sad!” she exclaims. “We get it, we know what sad is, and then the whole book is basically a description of the million and one ways in which our protagonist is sad. Gimme a break! Get on with it!”

And yet, Canadians have pushed “All My Puny Sorrows” up the bestseller list. The novel was a finalist for the Giller Prize, and last week it won the Rogers Writers’ Trust Fiction Prize. Those readers and critics up north are responding to the alchemy of Toews’s storytelling, which looks so deceptively modest on the surface. In the crucible of her genius, tears and laughter are ground into some magical elixir that seems like the essence of life.

In the opening pages of “All My Puny Sorrows,” we meet the Von Riesen sisters, restless adolescents in East Village, a Mennonite community established as “a godly refuge from the vices of the world.” (“Our old

Sunday school teacher told us that she loved us but that God loved us more. We told her to try harder.”) Their father is “an oddball, a quiet depressive, studious guy who . . . believed that reading and writing and reason were the tickets to paradise.” That heretical attitude puts him constantly at odds with the censorious leaders of the town.

Even more troublesome, his older daughter, Elfrieda — nicknamed “Elf” — is a brilliant iconoclast who quotes romantic poetry and drives the church “elders into paroxysms of rage and fear.” Her younger sister, Yolandi — nicknamed “Yoli” — narrates the novel from a position of baffled adoration. Yoli confesses that she was “very often looking around for solid clues to what was going on and never finding them.” But whatever her beautiful older sister does seems dazzling — from literally painting the town red to pounding out Rachmaninoff on the family’s forbidden piano.

Thirty years later, everything about Elf’s promising adolescence has come to fruition: She’s a world-renowned musician with a partner who loves her. So how could she end up strapped to a hospital bed in a psych ward, with a history of suicide attempts?

That’s the question — the unfathomable mystery of the noonday demon — that Yoli struggles to answer throughout this novel. Why can’t Elf appreciate her blessed life? Is she poisoned by the genetic twist that drove their father to jump in front of a train? Is she haunted by the suffering of their ancestors who were murdered a century ago in Siberia? What keeps a successful, beloved, otherwise healthy person stranded in the darkness at noon?

All Yoli knows is that her sister had “never adjusted to the light, she’d just never developed a tolerance for the world.” Too sane to incarcerate, too deceptive to trust, Elf is that cursed patient who doesn’t want to get better, who feigns cooperation but skips her appointments, stops taking her meds and finally opens a vein or steps into traffic or resorts to any one of a number of infernal methods of self-destruction. To the truly determined, all the world’s a razor’s edge. Who are we to intervene?

The novel’s self-deprecating title comes from a poem that Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote to Charles Lamb in 1794, describing his unflagging grief:

*I too a sister had, an only sister —  
She loved me dearly, and I doted on her!  
To her I pour’d forth all my puny sorrows.*

Having rejected the Mennonite tradition and its “squad of perpetual disapprovers,” Yoli and Elf have feasted on a world of literature. “We were a word family,” Yoli says. In fact, the novel is laced with literary references, from Italo Calvino, William Wordsworth, Mary Shelley, Raymond Chandler and John Clare, to D.H. Lawrence and even A.A. Milne. But nowhere can Elf find a balm for her anguish.

There are conversations in this novel so heartbreaking that you will be tempted to recoil, but Toews is working near the emotional territory of Lorrie Moore, where humor is a bulwark against despair. Informed that among her many other problems, her house is infested with carpenter ants, Yoli quips, “Good. Put them to work rebuilding the broken door.” Yes, this harrowingly autobiographical novel sounds a bit “Harold and Maude,” but there’s little black comedy. Instead, Toews mines the frustration and absurdity of caring for someone set on self-destruction. From her own experience, she portrays the shocking indifference and ineffectuality of some mental-health-care practitioners. But what really confounds her is the depressive’s maddening self-absorption, a mind trapped in that mesmeric hall of mirrors where every affirmation of hope looks ridiculous and the only pathway seems to spiral downward.

The story, though, is always Yoli's. She's the one left sucking on the irony of her successful sister's "weariness of life." She wants to shout, "Listen! If anyone's gonna kill themselves it should be me." After all, by most standards, Yoli is the failed sibling: no money, no job, no spouse, and a sputtering career as a writer of horsey young-adult novels. "I stare out the window," she says, "and reflect on the similarity between writing and saving a life and the inevitable failure of one's imagination and one's goals and ambitions to create a character or a life worth saving."

In the end, Yoli knows she can't make that decision for anyone else, but that's no relief from the paradox of her relationship with her sister: "She wanted to die and I wanted to live and we were enemies who loved each other." Between those distant poles, Toews hangs a tale about the unspeakable pain and surprising joy of persisting in the world, puny sorrows and all.

*This review first appeared in The Washington Post:*

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/enterta...>

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## **Petra says**

Beautifully told. This is a heartfelt, touching story.

Every page tells a loving story of a wonderful relationship between two close, loving sisters. Their love for each other shines through always. They each wanted only what was best for the other. The agonizing decision comes when deciding what "the best" means and how to define it in a meaningful, caring, understanding way.

Miriam Toews has such grace and stamina. Her love and sorrow for her sister is always present and never once does she forget the gift of her sister.

(view spoiler)

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## **Paul Bryant says**

This novel dares you not to love it. It's so awfully horribly unremittingly sad yet open-hearted and quirky and forlorn and it wags its tail furiously, all the time. This novel is all about suicide, to be or not to be. In this case, the genius concert pianist sister has opted for NOT TO BE and the narrator is trying to put the case for TO BE. And it's kind of not a novel either, it's a the high-end literary version of the misery memoir, like *Ugly* by Constance Briscoe (her mother sued over that one, and lost :

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008...>) or *A Million Little Pieces* by James Frey, which started out as a best selling memoir and then got exposed as a million big lies and then got repackaged as a novel and went straight to the top of the fiction charts, you have to love that. Because I find out this book is closely based on events in Miriam Toews' real life. I recently read *Girl, Interrupted* - and I watched *My Sister's Keeper* too. And some other movies I ended up watching recently like *Maps to the Stars*, *Requiem for a Dream*, *The Motel Life*, *Shame*, the *Three Colours* trilogy and *Miss Violence* have been all in the same ball park too. And you know, they're all good movies (apart for *Maps to the Stars* - David Cronenberg, what were you thinking?). AMPS might even be a good novel, but it was so drenched in tears and sodden with unrequited longing and remorse that it was hard to make out. It disintegrated in my hands. I tried reading it with a hairdryer blowing on each page but still they came apart. All the other reviewers in the world five star this.

They're made of sterner stuff or maybe their copies were printed on thicker paper. After page 135 I **couldn't take it any more**. AMPS was where I got overdosed. Too much is too much. I'm going to put a Leonard Cohen record on for some light relief now. Dance me to the end of love, Leonard.

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## Larry H says

So if you're thinking a book called *All My Puny Sorrows* is going to be a bit of a downer, you're definitely right, but the talent of Miriam Toews is definitely something to behold despite the harrowing nature of the book.

Elf (Elfrieda) and Yoli (Yolandi) are sisters and best friends. Growing up in a Mennonite community outside of Winnipeg, they were tremendously close as they united against the way the community's elders treated women and tried to marginalize Elf's talent playing the piano. They also tried to understand the mood swings of their father, a gentle man who felt desperately passionate about so many things.

As adults, on the surface Elf leads a glamorous life—she has a devoted husband and a successful career as a renowned concert pianist, while Yoli has been divorced twice and is struggling to cope with raising her two children as they approach adulthood, as well as financial, romantic, and career difficulties. Yet Elf suffers from a crushing depression and desperately wants to end her life, although her attempts have all ended in failure.

"It was the first time that we had sort of articulated our major problem. She wanted to die and I wanted her to live and we were enemies who loved each other."

What Yoli wants is for Elf to finally get the treatment she so desperately needs, so she can finally enjoy her life and once again be the passionate, highly intelligent person Yoli knows and loves. And more than that, Yoli really wants her confidante again, wants someone to help guide her out of the mess that she is making with her life and help her regain the confidence she needs to move her writing career in a different direction. But despite the love of her husband, her family, and her fans, all Elf really wants is to die, so her suffering can end.

As hard as Yoli fights to change Elf's mind about dying, Elf fights just as hard to convince Yoli to help her end her life. How do you convince someone you love that their life is worth living when they are unable to see that for themselves? Is it our responsibility to help those we care about end their suffering?

I've never read anything by Miriam Toews before, but I was truly wowed by her ability to inhabit these characters. This is an incredibly moving book about the toll depression and suicide have not only on the person struggling, but on those who care about them. It's also a story about finding the strength to carry on when it feels like you have nothing left, and everything seems to be going against you.

This is a hard book to read because of the emotional nature of the subject matter and the suffering that the characters endure (and I've only scratched the surface in my description), but Toews' prose is so lyrical, almost poetic at times, and it truly immerses you in the story. At times it got a bit difficult because the hits kept on coming, and it was hard to watch Yoli make such a mess of her own life at the same time, but the beauty and power of Toews' writing compels you to soldier on.

See all my reviews (and other stuff) at <http://itseithersadnessoreuphoria.blo...>

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## Jen says

This was a wonderfully written book. Yet, as well as it was written, it was also a heavy read I had to put down frequently and take a step back from. It's a story about 2 sisters who love each other dearly, Elfrieda and Yoli. And as much as that love runs through the novel, it's not strong enough to defy the feelings of depression and darkness one sister feels, to the point of trying to commit suicide several times. It's Yoli's story and her struggle with guilt for not being able to pull her sister from the darkness of despair. This was an exhausting and at times a seemingly endless, emotional roller coaster; it's raw. Having never suffered from depression myself, it's hard to imagine how anyone can feel so dispirited when surrounded by people who have an abundance of love and time and are willing to do anything, including putting their own lives on hold, to pull someone out of a place that is so desolate. I think Toews did an amazing job in capturing the helplessness that surrounds depression: not only for those who suffer from it, but for the loved ones who are also impacted by this mental illness. 4 stars.

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## Diane S ? says

The bonds of sisterhood and the struggles of depression and suicide are fully explored in this brilliant story. Yolanda and Elfrida are sisters, originally living in a Mennonite community in the east end. Depression runs in their family, something both Elf and her father suffer from.

It is a novel about love, loss, and living told with wry and ironic humor. Yolanda is a wonderfully flawed and self-deprecating character, trying to keep her sister alive, while managing or not managing her own life.. She has amazing and amusing insights and opinions on many things. Their mother is another amazing character and it is easy to see where Yolanda got her sense of humor. Elfrida is a concert pianist, but we hear very little directly from her, most of what we know we get from Yolanda or other characters. She has struggled long and hard.

So if someone says, "Isn't this book just sad?" I would have to say no, it is so much more. It is funny, celebrates books and poetry, Coleridge's poem is where the title come froms. Celebrates love and how much we will do for love. It is survival, and how we keep on living, finding tiny moments of joy, in which to hold. I never thought I would be reading a book that had me sniffing one second and in the next laughing. A book that holds the joy of living, right next to the face of mental illness.

If you loved Me Before You, this book should suit as well.

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## Eve says

**"Where does the violence go, if not directly back into our blood and bones?"**

I'm not sure what to write about this book. It's equally ironic, sad and humorous. I listened to the audible version of this book, and could really feel the conversational style of the writing. My only regret is the timing.



I knew this was going to be a sad story. I had read this was semi-autobiographical, and touched on themes about Toews's religious upbringing as a Mennonite, as well as the tragic relationships she had with both her father and sister. I planned this read during a time when I was especially upbeat and jovial.

Then things changed overnight. I lost one grandmother a month ago, and spent this past week in the hospital waiting for news about my beloved maternal grandmother. I couldn't bring myself to finish the last two hours of the book until today, after my grandmother was sent home under orders from hospice. After her long battle with ALS, something as "puny" as a bedsore will have the last word. It's ironic, just like this book.

Although mental illness and its "violence" torture the sufferer, its effects are always far-reaching. Grief, guilt, sorrow, anxiety, anger and depression are all natural things humans experience when they lose a loved one. What compels a person to take their life? Why are some individuals so stubbornly optimistic despite crappy hands they're dealt in life, while others have the world and are gifted beyond compare, and yet suffer tremendously with each renewed day of life? This is a wonderfully personal novel, and I'm glad Toews deemed us a worthy audience.

**"Ours is essentially a tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically. The cataclysm has happened, we are among the ruins, we start to build up new little habitats, to have new little hopes. It is rather hard work: there is now no smooth road into the future: but we go round, or scramble over the obstacles. We've got to live, no matter how many skies have fallen." - D. H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover***

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## Kiley says

I loved this book hard. All My Puny Sorrows is both incredibly moving and a page turner, because despite so much talk of death, there is so much LIFE in this book. So much painful, magnificent life, and so much love. The book has a pulse, which strengthens and weakens with perfect pacing so you get a little time to breathe before the next plunge into the characters' dilemmas. One of my favourite parts of the book is when the narrator (Yolandi) moves from resignation to anger – flailing, explosive anger that leaps off the page. Toews manages the transition so masterfully, it's nuts. Also: somehow she conveys Yolandi's almost-drowning in her sister's predicament as well as her steely resolve to reclaim her own life and happiness. Also: Toews is brilliantly funny, delivering it right when you least expect it, without fanfare, and to great effect. This one's going to stay with me.

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## Jennifer (aka EM) says

If someone you loved wanted you to help them die to avoid unavoidable pain, would you? If you knew they would find a way to do it no matter what, and that way would be painful, and terrifying, and they would be all alone, would you? If they asked you directly, more than once; if it was the one, single thing they wanted from you and it was within your power to give, would you?

Does the fact that the unavoidable pain is psychological not physical in origin change your mind?

These are the questions at the heart of Miriam Toews' *All My Puny Sorrows*: a work of fiction.

This *work of fiction* is receiving a massive number of accolades. And I love, I mean LOVE, Miriam Toews and all that she writes. Let me go on record saying that. I've read all her fiction.

So I can say this:

AMPS is the book that Toews needed to write, and it's the book that all of her previous work was leading her to write.

AMPS deserves all the accolades\* it's receiving, and so does Toews, but this is not her 'best' work - if by best you want to rank them in some kind of hierarchy of literary quality. Because:

AMPS is not a work of fiction.\*\*

AMPS is also not the book I would recommend starting with for those new to Toews.\*\*\*

\* These accolades are kind of like an Oscar awarded for an actor's minor roles just because she's widely regarded as brilliant but has been overlooked. That's not to say this is a minor work. Nor that Toews is not a well-awarded Canadian author. Despite these awards, however (which include Rogers Writers' Trust x 2; Governor General x 1; Canada Reads; Giller noms x 2; many more), she remains under-the-radar for many Canadians, and certainly most Americans. AMPS is poised right now to be her breakthrough book in terms of the U.S. market, at which point it circles back and those Canadians who don't know who she is will find out about her. And I have some serious doubts about this - and feel a little concerned that this will be the book that many new to Toews will read first. (see \*\*\*)

\*\* Toews' entire body of work (for which she has received the Findley/Engel Award - she's also received the Margaret Laurence Award for fiction, and failing Atwood and Munro having Canadian writing awards named after them, that's enough to tell you where she sits within the Canadian literary establishment), includes fiction, memoir, biography and journalism. This book is all of those genres.

As fiction, this book is different to Toews' others in a lot of ways. The humour is toned down, much darker, and the sadness ramped up. The dialogue is much more intellectual, less whimsical. The characters—even tho' Yoli is a self-defined basket-case (and I don't think she really is)—are more 'mainstream' successful, more fully-dimensional photographic, and less character-sketchy portrait. The book is less Winnipeg/Mennonite, more Toronto/international. The literary, musical and artistic pursuits of the characters are all more 'high-brow' (even though Yoli has built her career on cowgirl rodeo YA novels, she has a "real" novel in the works which she carries around with her in a Safeway grocery bag). The whole tone, as a result of these differences in combination, is different.

As fiction, the book continues the sisters theme that is so prominent in her other major works: *A Complicated Kindness*; *The Flying Troutmans*; and *Irma Voth*.

But this book reads more as memoir: Toews the writer is in this book in a way that she's not in these other three. AMPS is directly about Toews' relationship with her sister, and the request her sister made of her. She's been up-front about that in every interview she's done. It's also about her mom and Toews' relationship with her. And of course, about her dad and his legacy. It's about how he and her suicidal sibling defined the

family's dynamics. It's about those dynamics.

The book is also journalism, adding material to the debate and fitting in with the discourse around assisted suicide. This is a big issue in Canada (as elsewhere); right-to-die legislation passed in Quebec in mid-2014 has brought it to the fore. I'd say that Toews has been deliberate in the timing of this work within the context of this ongoing public debate.

AMPS is not the work of a writer early in her career creating characters and a novel from her real-life experience with perhaps a little less subtlety, or too much transparency, than is required. This is a master writer, a literary powerhouse in full control of her pen, creating something NEW. Some hybrid of fiction/non-fiction.

\*\*\* If you don't know/haven't read much Toews, my recommendation is: do not start here. You're going to get the wrong impression of who she is, what her fiction is and does. You may not see the humour, or feel the incredible love and compassion every single one of her characters has for each other. The humour and love in her work is ... it's everything. It's here, too, but it's subtle and sometimes overshadowed. You've got to make your way through the book; you've got to trust her to lead you there. She will, she does. But you have to trust her, and if you haven't read much of her - you might not.

If you *have* read her (at minimum, *A Complicated Kindness* and either or both *Irma Voth* and *The Flying Troutmans*), then read this. You might not love it as much, for any number of reasons, as her others. But I bet you will be left in awe, in freaking absolute AWE - at her artistry. At her accomplishment. At her astounding generosity - the gift she is giving us with this novel.

Because this is not fiction. This is something so much more.

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**ETA:** About those accolades.

Jared Bland in *The Globe & Mail*: *When her mother asks her why the teenage heroines in her rodeo novels are all so sad, if their struggles are because Yoli has so much sadness in her, she has a simple answer: "no, no, everyone has all that sadness in them."*

*And that is the book's great gift: its reminder that feeling such things is normal. In a world where everyone has that sorrow in them – which is to say, a world like ours – we find permission to embrace that sadness, rather than a rallying cry to escape it. And we witness the possibility of making a life that can accommodate incredible intimacy without denying the fundamental bleakness of existence.*

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Stevie Davies in *The Guardian*: *I can think of no precedent for the darkly fizzing tragicomic jeu d'esprit that is Miriam Toews's sixth novel. Its compulsive readability is all the more remarkable since the story issues from such a dark place in the author's heart. ... Can a work of mourning be a comedy? Uniquely, Toews has created a requiem with an antic disposition.*

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Ron Charles in The Washington Post: *In the crucible of [Toews'] genius, tears and laughter are ground into some magical elixir that seems like the essence of life.*

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Catherine Taylor in The Telegraph: *Elf is so thin that Yoli believes she can see the outline of her heart: Toews's great generosity as a writer is to have opened up her own and shared it with us.*

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Andreas Vattliotou in The Puritan Magazine: *Toews achieves with this novel what so few are able to do: she fearlessly "organizes her sadness through writing" to generate a wealth of insight, and provide consolation to, and kinship with, those of us who share her experience. Rarely does one sit with a novel and feel the presence of the author so acutely—an author who refuses to point a finger accusingly at life or death, but ponders the insurmountable question of why we choose one over the other, and provides a complex, if not resolute, defense in support of either choice. There is no judgment or blame in All My Puny Sorrows—only a love letter to sisterhood, and a heartfelt goodbye.*

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## Rebecca says

**“She wanted to die and I wanted her to live and we were enemies who loved each other.”** This is a powerful autobiographical novel about sisters and suicide. Hard to believe, but Toews even injects humor quite successfully, mostly through Yoli and Elf’s mother and aunt – another great pair of sisters. I enjoyed the peek into the Canadian Mennonite community, and was glad to extend my meager knowledge of Canadian authors in general. This was certainly a cathartic labor of love for the author; as Yoli says, “I reflect on the similarity between writing and saving a life and the inevitable failure of one’s imagination...to create a character or a life worth saving.”

If I have one criticism, it’s that, because the novel is from Yoli’s perspective, readers don’t always get a clear sense of Elf’s despair. Yes, you get lines like this: “She told me her loneliness was visceral, a sack of rocks she carried from one room to the next, city to city.” However, I might have liked a bit more from Elf herself, whether letters or stories or just more dialogue. The fact that there are no speech marks can make it seem like everything is in Yoli’s head, even when the words come from other people.

“*How do you go on?*” Elf writes. As you come to the end of this sobering but enjoyable novel, you might question what it is that keeps you going and what it is that makes you want it all to be over. Toews makes good ironic use of the differences between her fictional sisters, but in the end it seems that it might be more a matter of luck than genetics. (view spoiler)

**Related reading:** *Sisterland* by Curtis Sittenfeld

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## Darlene says

"I too a sister had, an only sister-  
She loved me dearly, and I doted on her!  
To her I pour'd forth all my puny sorrows."  
-Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Before I even opened this novel, *All My Puny Sorrows* by Miriam Toews, I expected to be immersed in a world of sadness and of course, that turned out to be true. But along with the sorrow, I was surprised to find a sharp humor as well.... not a laugh-out-loud kind of humor but rather the dry, dark humor that people sometimes develop when trying to cope with a life that is full of struggles and pain. Perhaps this is the humor that people use to step back from their sorrow and recognize that there is an absurdity to life's tragedies and not knowing what else to do.. they laugh.

At the center of this story are two sisters... Elfrieda (Elf) and Yolandi (Yoli) Von Riesen. The two grew up in a Canadian Mennonite family. The Mennonites are similar to the Amish in that they typically live isolated from the rest of society in rural communities. Elf is successful, according to all externally measured societal standards. She is beautiful, a world-renowned concert pianist and is in a happy relationship with a man named Nic. There is just one problem with this happy picture.. Elf finds her life unbearable and she wants to die. Yoli, by comparison, is far less successful than her sister. Yoli is a struggling writer of young adult novels about horses and although she carries the unfinished pages of her latest story around with her in a plastic bag, she can't seem to finish the project.. She has two teenage children to different fathers and falls in and out of relationships with men, without giving it much thought. Most of all, Yoli is bewildered by Elf's death wish and she becomes determined to keep her alive. This simple but profound conflict between these two sisters is at the heart of this novel.

When we meet Elfrieda, she has been hospitalized because of a suicide attempt and we also learn a bit of the family's back story. This is not Elf's first suicide attempt and it seems apparent it will not be her last. We also learn that Elf and Yoli's father committed suicide years before, after a lifetime of struggling with depression; and much to Yoli's frustration and dismay, Elf seems destined to follow in her father's footsteps. Yoli tries desperately to gain an understanding of her sister's anguish and the despair that plagues her family. She even begins to wonder if somehow the collective suffering her family experienced in Russia before migrating to Canada could have been passed on to the generations as a kind of cell memory. Yoli's attempts to be understanding of her sister's pain are in constant conflict with the frustration she feels with her. Inevitably, those frustrations boil over and she ends up accusing her sister of being selfish....

"Have you ever thought about what I might need? Has it occurred to you ever in your life that I'm the one that's colossally fucked up and could use some sisterly support every once in a while?.... Has it ever occurred to you that I'm not okay, that everything in my life is embarrassing?.... Has it ever occurred to you that I have also lost my father to suicide, that I'm also having a hard time getting over it, and that I am also trying to find meaning in my pathetic, stupid life and that I also often think the whole thing is a ridiculous farce and that the only intelligent response to it is suicide but that I pull back from that conclusion because it creates a certain onus that is unpalatable?"

Those words DO sum up Yoli's feelings and also signify the profound difference between the two of them... which is the difference between choosing to live despite the ridiculousness of life or choosing to end things.

What we learn about Elf in this story mainly comes from what we are told by Yoli and what we see through her eyes. We see Yoli struggling to understand her sister's sorrow, fighting with herself over the anger and guilt that she feels and finally, a dawning recognition that her sister may just be a part of a group of human beings who are never able to develop a "tolerance for the world." But what is also on display is the closeness

between these two sisters and the deep abiding love they share; and this, at times, makes the heartbreak of the story feel immense.

Yoli knows that Elf refuses to take her medications and she wonders if the prescriptions could provide her with the thought that "there really is meaning to life or do they make her feel as if she doesn't care if there is meaning or not." She can't help but wonder if Elf's medications (if she would just take them) might "make it all right so that Elf could conceivably jump out of bed some morning and say hooray! it's true, there is no meaning to life but it's okay and now that I really know it and have had it confirmed and can stop searching for it, I can go on living."

This story ends in the only way it can, really, and it leaves the reader with many questions... does society have the right to try to force someone to continue living, such as by keeping them confined to a hospital room? Is it even the responsibility of society to intervene in such personal and private decisions? Are there people so resistant (like Elf) to psychiatric and pharmacological interventions for their mental illness and anguish that they should be assisted in ending their lives? And could it ever be morally correct to think that assisting someone in their death might actually be the kinder, more loving and humane course to take? Of course, I don't have the answers to these questions but they are questions that society struggles with.

This novel was heavy and uncomfortable to read. But since the story was told in Yoli's voice, the reader COULD maintain somewhat of an emotional distance from what Elf was feeling and experiencing. Yoli's self-deprecating manner and her glibness when dealing with the chaos of her own life also provided some much needed relief from the drama and sadness that was ever-present in the story.

I became curious about the author, Miriam Toews, and read an interview with her in which she admitted that the novel is semi-autobiographical. She lost her own sister to suicide in 2010 and her father also took his own life. Ms. Toews has struggled to understand the severe depression experienced by her sister and father and of course, she struggles with her won sorrow and guilt.... which is apparent in the compassionate way in which she wrote this novel.

'All My Puny Sorrows' by Miriam Toews is a powerful novel and one I highly recommend.

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## **Chrissie says**

For me this book was amazing. Usually books of fiction fall short for me, and so when I run across one that is superb I want to give it the acclaim I think it deserves. It was a roller-coaster ride. Very, very sad and then when I couldn't stand another second the author had me laughing.

The humor is ironic. We laugh **and** cry at today's world. The humor focuses upon our whole contemporary lifestyle. We have made such medical advances and yet our medical institutions fail us. Why? It has to be us humans that are doing something wrong. Cellphones make us accessible 24/24, right? Yeah, except that our phones are always turned off. Sure we have sophisticated telephone switchboards, but when you are trying to get ahold of someone you never can. There is a conversation with a nurse through a hospital's switchboard that is sure to crack you up. I promise you, when you read this you will recognize snapshots from your own life

Suicide is a choice. In choosing, we must evaluate the beauty and wonder of life as well as all the hardships it brings. But do we choose, or is it that one's propensity to choose suicide over life is in fact in our genes? It

was this question that made me pick up the book, but I never guessed that the writing would so emotionally draw me in.

The author's lines knocked me over. She does this with her choice of words. Words are important. In fact this is also a theme of the novel. Authors and poets and music are referred to – Virginia Woolf and D.H. Lawrence and Wordsworth and Goethe and Percy Bysshe Shelley, to name but a few. Through the author's words important themes are explored, humor is drawn, and the characters come alive. Each one's personality feels genuine.

This book let me experience the deep bond that can grow between sisters. I don't have one. So that is what sisterhood is all about!

The audiobook narration by Erin Moon is s-t-u-p-e-n-d-o-u-s! You recognize immediately who is speaking and the tone she uses for each is pitch-perfect. Each character is given a voice that magnificently matches their personality. The narration is as tremendous as the author's written words. I am not going to say the narration improves the book, because the lines are fantastic in themselves, but if you choose to listen then choose this narrator.

I wholeheartedly recommend this book to everyone. It covers important issues. It will move you. It contains humor, deep sorrow and excellent writing.

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I must say the very last couple of pages confused me. (view spoiler) Well anyhow, my confusion at the end in no way lowered my appreciation of the book.

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ETA: I had no idea that this book had biographical content, until my dear friend Petra told me! Petra also gave me the two links which I think are important for those who have read the book. They may be considered spoilers.

- <http://www.vancouversun.com/news/miri...>

- <https://www.theguardian.com/books/201...>

Thank you, Petra!

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## Julie Christine says

During a tearful eulogy at a funeral service, a toddler boy wobbles up to the altar and begins to eat his great-grandmother's ashes from the memorial urn. This scene is so emblematic of this luminous, adorable, wrenching book. Miriam Toews balances perfectly between giggles and sorrow—keeping the reader off-kilter yet never once losing control of her narrative.

*All My Puny Sorrows* is a tragedy that uses humor to convey a deep sense of humanity. That a novel with suicide as a theme can be rich with irresistible silliness is its central brilliance. Toews invites us in, allows us to love her characters, but shuts the door firmly on mawkish displays of sentimentality.

Elfriede “Elf” Von Riesen is a celebrated concert pianist who has battled severe depression throughout her adult life. The story opens with brief flashback to the early 1980s and the small Mennonite community in rural Manitoba where Elf and her younger sister Yolandi “Yoli” were raised. Then we are in present-day Winnipeg, where Elf has survived her latest suicide attempt just weeks before a concert tour is set to open. The plot of *All My Puny Sorrows* can be thinly described as Yoli’s attempts to keep her sister alive and her inner struggle to deny Elf’s pleas to end her emotional pain forever. “*She wanted to die and I wanted her to live and we were enemies who loved each other.*” Yoli’s voice is rich with irony and self-deprecation and carries a fierce but tender love for her mother, sister, her son and daughter, her friends.

Depression seems hard-wired into one half of this small family: Elf and Yoli’s delicate, introverted father stepped in front of a train a few years before the present narrative. But Yoli and her mother, wise-cracking, sloppy, determinedly, vibrantly present, are built from different stuff.

Where her sister is a prodigy, Yoli is a fuck-up. Two marriages almost behind her (she can’t quite bring herself to sign the divorce papers to end the latest), she maintains half-hearted affairs with two other men. A modestly successful writer of rodeo romances, she carries around her latest manuscript—a first attempt at literary fiction—in a plastic grocery sack. Embarrassed by her own work, she agrees to read only the first letter of the novel to Elf: “L”. Elf declares it a triumph. The connection between the sisters is gorgeously, fully rendered in flashbacks and present-day tenderness. It is a breathtaking revelation of sibling angst and unconditional love. And a work of fiction based on Toews’ own tragedies: her father and her sister committed suicide in the decade before she wrote the novel.

A reader berated Miriam Toews for not telling us *why* Elfriede Von Riesen is depressed. A facepalm-worthy criticism. As if somehow the problem sat just off-stage and if we knew what it was, the mystery of this talented, wealthy, beautiful woman who wants so desperately to end her life could have been solved without having to put the reader through such an existential crisis.

Criticism like this shows how far we have to go in understanding mental illness. Depression is not sadness. Depression is not the blues. It is not a temporary state that if one tries just a little harder, looks on the bright side, chins up and offers the world a little gratitude, it will all be okay.

Toews does not try to answer the question of why Elf is suicidal. For there are a thousand whys churning in the biological, genetic, environmental, chemical stew pot that shapes our brains, our moods, our ability to resist, to move forward, to hang on. Instead, she shows the frustration of loved ones who are bewildered and angry in the face of inexplicable sorrow. Toews also shows the hapless approach by some medical practitioners—their inability to solve mental illness becomes indifference and exasperation toward the patient and guarantees despair for the family, who have nowhere else to turn.

Despite its heavy premise, *All My Puny Sorrows* is life-affirming, full of joy and (wincing, at times), humor. It is a shout-out to possibility and hope. It is a novel that makes me want to read everything Toews has written.

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