



## Women Talking

*Miriam Toews*

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**"This amazing, sad, shocking, but touching novel, based on a real-life event, could be right out of *The Handmaid's Tale*."** Margaret Atwood, on Twitter

One evening, eight Mennonite women climb into a hay loft to conduct a secret meeting. For the past two years, each of these women, and more than a hundred other girls in their colony, has been repeatedly violated in the night by demons coming to punish them for their sins. Now that the women have learned they were in fact drugged and attacked by a group of men from their own community, they are determined to protect themselves and their daughters from future harm.

While the men of the colony are off in the city, attempting to raise enough money to bail out the rapists and bring them home, these women—all illiterate, without any knowledge of the world outside their community and unable even to speak the language of the country they live in—have very little time to make a choice: Should they stay in the only world they've ever known or should they dare to escape?

Based on real events and told through the “minutes” of the women’s all-female symposium, Toews’s masterful novel uses wry, politically engaged humor to relate this tale of women claiming their own power to decide.

## Women Talking Details

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Author : Miriam Toews

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## From Reader Review Women Talking for online ebook

### Ariadne says

This book might be the perfect book club read for 2019. There is plenty to chew on and discuss within this slender volume. The bulk of the story is one long conversation that takes place over the course of two days - the women of an isolated Mennonite colony have been brutally sexually abused, and now they must decide whether to stay in the only home they have known or leave for the greater unknown world. The core of the story is rooted in the tension often found between religion and liberation, especially for women. A yearning for the ability to know more, be more, and even to be alone with one's thoughts, all at odds with what is perceived to be holy and proper. Ultimately it is a struggle between autonomy and community, safety and caregiving. The conversation is steeped in the spiritual as it explores the philosophical, and does not shy away from taking a hard look systemic issues of misogyny even though that word is never used. It was raw, wrenching, and thoroughly engrossing. I read it in two sittings.

So why only three stars? This was a struggle that was difficult for me to connect to. These women are very concerned with the religious implications of their quandary. The role of forgiveness, by themselves and by God. Whether it is acceptable to go against the wishes of their husbands. What is holy, godly, and righteous. This is important to them. But I'm a very different person. If someone repeatedly raped my three year old daughter staying with them would not be a question for me. It would not be up for debate. And so it was a difficult "problem" for me to invest in. This book was like a train wreck for me - I couldn't look away, but I was entirely horrified.

The other thing I bounced off of was Toews choice of narrator. I appreciated that she had a man keeping the record of the conversation, and that this man was a bit of an outsider himself. That was fine. I didn't like that he was romantically inclined toward one of the women. It cheapened the connection and the insights. I'd have preferred he care about them and their plight without being smitten. It might be nit-picky of me, but it really did bother me. Men are allowed to care about, and empathize with, women without being in love with them. It's a trope I'm tired of reading.

Here's the thing: I think this will be a deeply compelling read for anyone who has struggled with the role of faith and religion in their life while attempting to be independent and free thinking. I, however, am a stranger to that struggle so it didn't hit me quite as close. If you want a book that contrasts religion with feminism this is a really interesting read. It dives into territory you don't often see explored, and it's fertile ground. This book is going to be a great read for many people. If you have zero investment in religious dogma, however, this one may miss the mark for you.

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### Liz Laurin says

I honestly have no words to describe how this book made me feel. the scene where Agata is saying goodbye to her cousin is especially heartbreakingly though I'm not sure why in a book with so much horror. just the amount of kindness that she shows him in suggesting the mint for his bath and then watching as he leaves it's just beautiful.

I also really love the discussion of the women not staying because it might make other people violent and that their passivists was really fascinating.

either way my heart is actually broken after reading this book and for the real woman of the Manitoba Colony if you search Google you can find a vice article about them that is incredibly well-written but very hard to read.

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### **Monika says**

Powerful and heart wrenching. Women Talking comes out August 21 and I highly recommend picking up a copy.

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### **Ron S says**

A Mennonite #MeToo the author describes as "a reaction through fiction to... real events, and an act of female imagination." Those real events are tragic, and may prove to be a barrier for some, but this is a timely one sitting read not unleavened with moments of hope, forgiveness and love.

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### **Krista says**

Earnest puts his head on her shoulder and she smooths his wild, white hair. He asks if the women are devils.

No, says Agata, we are your friends.

He asks if the women are plotting to burn down his barn.

No, Ernie, says Agata, there's no plot, we're only women talking.

As author Miriam Toews explains in a brief foreword, Women Talking is based on real events: Between 2005 and 2009, the women and girls in a Bolivian Mennonite colony were waking up in the morning, sore and bleeding, suffering the aftereffects of rape that they couldn't remember. After the women were repeatedly accused of lying, of consorting with demons, of receiving punishment straight from God Himself for their sins, it was eventually discovered that eight of the colony's men had been drugging the women with animal anesthetic and raping them as they lay unconscious. As Toews explains, "*Women Talking* is both a reaction through fiction to these true-life events, and an act of female imagination." Raised a Mennonite herself, Toews has an insider's perspective on the environment in which these attacks occurred, and in our #MeToo moment, it feels imperative to add the voices of those women living in cloistered paternalistic societies; those women who have never been educated, granted individual rights, or asked for their consent about anything. Toews is such an interesting writer, and with an engaging format, glints of humour, and room for these women to discuss all sides of their situation, she has created a remarkably nuanced novel out of clearly evil events.

Salome's youngest daughter, Miep, was violated by the men on two or possibly three different occasions, but Peters denied medical treatment for Miep, who is three years of age, on the grounds that the doctor would gossip about the colony and that the people would become aware of the attacks and the whole incident would be blown out of proportion.

Not only have the women of the Molotschna Colony been suffering these physical attacks – and disbelieved when they complained about them – but Peters, their bishop, has decreed that the women must forgive their rapists or risk being barred from heaven themselves. As none of the women have been taught to read or write (and as the Plautdietsch that they speak has no written language), a committee of eight has asked a recently returned member (the son of excommunicated members, he is considered effeminate because of his learning and his reluctance to gut a pig; therefore no threat to the womenfolk) to transcribe the minutes of their meeting. This format allows for this man, August, to not only attempt to record every word spoken by the women, but also to add factual background to their statements, and to respectfully interject with information that the women might need about the outside world. For it is the unknown outside world that most concerns the women: After their rapists were arrested, the other men of Molotschna have gone to the city to secure their bail (the men are needed, after all, to work in the fields), and while they are gone, the women have two days to decide what their response will be to their return and Peters' insistence on forgiveness: Do nothing, stay and fight, or leave. The vast majority of the colony's women are in the “do nothing” camp (only eight of the hundred+ concerned have even shown up for the secret meeting), and those that do gather in a senile old man's hayloft have enough variance in their ideas about love and faith and obedience to provide a lively and thought-provoking debate.

We are women without a voice, Ona states calmly. We are women out of time and place, without even the language of the country we reside in. We are Mennonites without a homeland. We have nothing to return to, and even the animals of Molotschna are safer in their homes than we women are. All we women have are our dreams – so of course we are dreamers.

Uneducated doesn't mean unintelligent, and these women display deep thinking, deep feeling, and deep faith. They don't trust the repentance of their rapists, and have lost trust in Peters' ability to interpret the Bible that they are unable to read for themselves, but they know that it's “not all men” who commit these crimes, and even discuss the fact that it's the power structure of their community that raises boys to believe that they should have unfettered power over women; in a way, they are victims of that power structure, too. Through it all, these women are pious Mennonites and want for their actions to please their God – and the argument can be made that each of the three options (do nothing, stay and fight, or leave) is God's will – and although the debate can get contentious, and the disparity of their ages and temperaments makes for competing desires, the women are always willing to join hands in hymn and sweet harmony. It does seem strange that the narrator of *Women Talking* is actually a man (the women could have had their debate without anyone taking the minutes), but as their scribe, August doesn't steer the debate (only adding his asides in the transcription to make this a complete history); and as an ally who has been abroad, he gives the women information that might grant them perspective or to recognise local hypocrisy. As “an act of female imagination” in response to real-life events, Toews has given a big voice to a small community; there is an essentiality to this novel.

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**Hannah Fenster says**

We are so lucky to have **WOMEN TALKING**, which offers a window into the intricate details of a women-centered decision-making process in a community that does not have a word for patriarchy. Toew's brilliant blend of history with thematic relevance reminds us that this setting—which feels so otherworldly—has already come and gone, time and again. With deliberation as the central action, rich, layered meanings emerge, and the women's milestones are marked by the acquisition of language. To use one of these words, **WOMEN TALKING** is a *\*manifesto\** of language as a true tool of revolution, an opportunity to watch the gradual reclamation of independent thought and action. It is devastating, and a miracle.

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### **Hanna says**

I have truly never read anything like this before. What a cool and creative concept of reading someone's time-keeping & translations from an outside perspective. The horror of this story is that it is loosely based on real events. It begs the question, what did the real women of this story do? I'm inspired to do some research. This is an easy, short, fast-paced read that leaves a lot to be pondered. A story about systemic abuse, faith, and what it means to be a woman in a fundamentalist religious congregation. How do you escape abuse and maintain your faith? Should you escape abuse or fight your oppressors? I'll be thinking about this one for a while.

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### **Naomi says**

4.5

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### **Sarah says**

Beautiful, heartbreakng, powerful, stunning. This book had it all. A heavy read but I enjoyed it immensely and I definitely recommend everyone read it when it comes out on August 21st.

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### **Jenna says**

I don't really know how to review this book. I feel like if I try I will start crying - from sadness or rage. I wish we didn't live in a world where we need this book but oh my god how I needed to read this book. It broke my heart and made me feel like I wasn't alone in my anger.

In the last year with so much finally coming to light and so much finally being talked about in more than whispers about rape, sexual harassment, the silencing of women and the gap that still (STILL) exists between men and women a day didn't go by when I didn't feel anger at some point or another. This book was like feeding that anger through a sieve - a sieve of beautiful, intelligent, human, flawed women just sitting and talking through the implications of such evil being done to them and how they can fight back or understand it or just move past in the hopes of finding a better life - and after reading these women talk it through, I felt like I had talked it through and came out (just as angry) but more hopeful, more composed, more peaceful on the other side.

Damn this world for being one in which this book could be plausible but thank god for this world in which Toews wrote it. I can't imagine another book topping this one in 2018.

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### **Sarah says**

Women talking, supporting, debating and arguing to decide how to take agency over their lives. What to do when the men they love; fathers, husbands, sons, are also the men they fear. Do nothing? Fight back? Leave?

“None of us have ever asked the men for anything. Not a single thing, not even the salt to be passed, not even for a penny or a moment alone or to take the washing in or to open a curtain or to go easy on the small yearlings or to put your hand on the small of my back as I try, again, for the twelfth or thirteenth time to push a baby out of my body.”

A startling novel with similarities to A Handmaid’s Tale but this one is inspired by a disturbing true story. Brilliantly paced with tension slowly building. But there are even light moments of laughter, as there always is when women gather. This is a novel women will be thinking about and talking about.

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### **Lauren says**

Still thinking about this book days later. Tragic yet still hopeful. Definitely a must-read when it is released in August.

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### **But i thought says**

The premise of this book is probably one of the most fascinating I have encountered all year – think, The Handmaid’s Tale, combined with the violence of Westworld and the claustrophobia of Dogville (2003).

The story takes place in an ultra-conservative Mennonite community in Bolivia. Over the course of five years – from 2005 to 2009 – numerous women have reported waking up in the morning, feeling groggy, bruised, disheveled and often bleeding. They are told by community elders that they are likely being attacked by “demons” in the night as punishment for their sins, or suffering from “wild female imagination”. However, the women start talking with each other. They describe the dreams they’ve been having and note the disturbing similarities. Over time, they come to realize that they are being systematically anesthetized and raped by a gang of men in their own colony.

Based on a true story and written by an ex-Mennonite, this book is a fictional reaction to the event, exploring the aftermath to the shocking discovery. Since Mennonite colonies are self-policing, the community bishop gives the victims the choice to forgive their perpetrators (ensuring a place in heaven for all involved) or leave the colony for the outside world, of which they know nothing. If they leave the colony, they automatically forfeit their place in “heaven”. In short, the choice is – forgiveness or eternal life.

In the hands of an author like Naomi Alderman, this book would have been a fuming, action-packed thriller. In the hands of Miriam Toews, however, we get a work of quiet philosophical enquiry, an examination of the psychology of oppression, the nature of free will, faith, forgiveness, the tentative genesis of revolution. Not

surprisingly, the author's lens is focused almost exclusively on the conversations these women have, post-crisis, in clandestine hayloft gatherings as they hatch their course of action. Heated debates ensue, revealing the agonizing, and often non-linear, process of questioning one's faith, one's core ideology. Despite the harrowing subject matter, however, the book is leavened with a generous sprinkling of warmth and humour.

For all its strengths, the novel isn't perfect. The pacing is at times out of sync with the urgency of the situation and the narrative often veers too far into the abstract, becoming an exercise in Socratic dialogue. At times, I wanted to implore the characters to stop debating semantics and start acting!

Think of this thus as a work of ancient Greek theatre – deeply investigative, heavy on the dialogue, tragic and hopeful to equal degrees.

Mood: Philosophical, harrowing

Rating: 7.5/10

Also on Instagram.

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#### **Links to media coverage on the true story:**

'The work of the devil': crime in a remote religious community

The ghost rapes of Bolivia

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#### **Lola says**

**This is, without a single doubt, the most important book I have read all year.**

The women have three options they can choose from, but they can choose only one.

1. Do nothing.
2. Stay and fight.
3. Leave.

But perhaps one is enough. Perhaps that one option can open multiple other possibilities. If the women arrive to a conclusion, that is.

Already from the straight-forward title, you know 90% of what is happening in this book. Women are talking about their situations and trying to imagine a safer future for themselves and their children.

This is a work of fiction, and yet Miriam Toews wrote this book as a reaction to real life events that have happened in a Mennonite colony in Bolivia. In this colony, women were raped in the night by "unwelcome visitors," believed to be demons sent by the devil himself to punish the women for their sins.

But the truth came out. It was the men who committed these acts. Men who raped women, teenage girls and even young children. The accused men were incarcerated, but in this version of the story, the Priest and the majority of the other men plan to bail them out without consideration for the women.

And, in a patriarchal society, what can women—who have been oppressed all their lives by their fathers, their husbands and even their sons and whose thoughts don't matter—do to stop these violent acts against them and start leading peaceful lives?

That is what Greta, Agata, Mariche, Ona, Mejal, Salome, Autje and Neitje—the youngest in the group—are pondering. August Epp, the man who records these conversations also participates in the discussions at times. He is someone the women can trust. Everyone has a role to play and everyone's voice is heard... for once. Even the youngest ones, Autje and Neitje, gain confidence and become involved in their own ways, despite being reluctant to participate in the beginning.

I cannot imagine discouraging anyone from reading this incredible story. The format is original, yes, and the themes salient, of course, but it's also **utterly captivating**. If you know me even a little, you know that I don't give high ratings to "important books" whose important ideas were poorly developed. Otherwise I would have definitely given *The Kiss Quotient* five stars. But *this*, this is everything.

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### Alex says

3.5

Toews tells a haunting story of a Mennonite community rattled after several of the men in the community are arrested for drugging and sexually assaulting the women and girls. The story, ironically is told by a male narrator taking minutes for the

Women as they deliberate their next step since the women cannot read or write. The women must choose whether to forgive to men or be exiled. As the women intensely debate the world view that had tied them to the rigid patriarchal order begins to crumble as the hypocrisy of the town's leader becomes apparent.

The story is both haunting and infuriating, as Toews explores themes she has broached many times before, namely the fucked up nature of the Mennonite communities, but I am not convinced by how the story was told. Obviously using a male narrator is an intentional device but it ends up mediating the anger of the women's voices and I felt that resulted in the story losing some emotional punch.

Nonetheless a solid book that will make the awards circuit in Canada over the next few months.

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