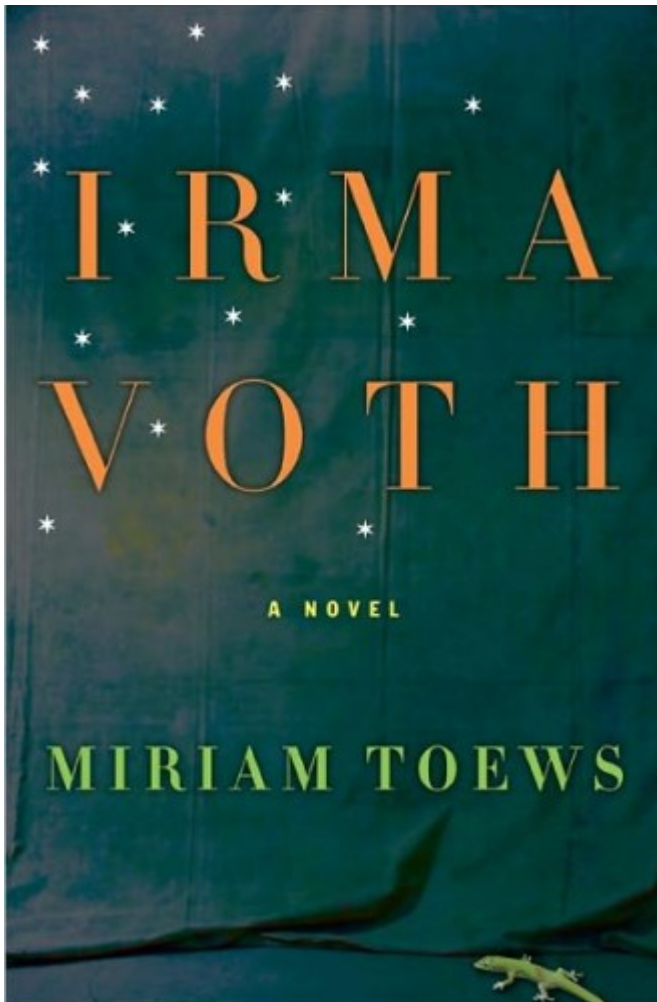


Irma Voth, by Miriam Toews

reviewed by [Janet Potter](#) in the [October 18, 2011](#) issue

In Review



Irma Voth

By Miriam Toews

Harper

Many, many things happen in Miriam Toews's slim new novel—drug dealing, a shotgun wedding, filmmaking, filicide, teenagers running away, political protests—and all of them happen in a year of the life of Irma Voth, a 19-year-old

Mennonite living in Mexico.

The Voth family, headed by a bullishly strict father, live in Manitoba until the death of Irma's older sister prompts their move to an isolated Mennonite community in the Chihuahua desert. The isolation isn't sufficient, however, to prevent Irma from meeting and marrying the delinquent and forgettable Jorge. Irma's father disapproves of the marriage. He stops speaking to Irma, but he also insists that Jorge and Irma live in the house next door and continue to work on the family farm.

Jorge seems to regret almost immediately the situation he's gotten into and spends the bulk of his time driving to Mexico City in pursuit of disreputable business ends. Irma, estranged from her father and her community and largely abandoned by her husband, at first spends the bulk of her time alone with her wry observations. Her life, already full of regret and broken relationships, has made her cynical and quite funny. This is how she talks about an aunt and uncle who left the community, to her father's horror:

If my dad's assessment was accurate this place was teeming with narcos, and not just garden-variety narcos but narcosatanics in search of sensations, . . . poised to bolt for bigger thrills while the rest of us were in it for the long haul, working hard and honestly for very little money, the way God meant for us to be. But I didn't believe it. I think my uncle got a job selling cars in Canada and Wilf wanted to study the violin and my aunt thought it would be cool to get a perm. But who knows. Maybe they're a family of drug lords now, throwing bodies out of helicopters and bowling with the heads of double-crossers. That would be my father's theory.

Not content with just the ill-advised marriage and the family rift as outlets for Irma's disillusionment, Toews introduces a Mexican film crew, who have arrived in Chihuahua to make a movie about the lives of Mexican Mennonites. Living in a house in the neighborhood and using members of the community as actors, the filmmakers tell the story of a Mennonite man who has an affair. Irma is hired as a translator for the crew and actors, and before long she and her younger sister Aggie are spending their days with them. As the shoot draws out and the director has to provide larger and larger bribes to maintain the cooperation and tolerance of the locals, Irma and Aggie are caught between the lure of their artsy new friends and the increasing wrath that the friendship provokes in their father.

In this highly populated scenario, the novel starts to feel a little crowded. Irma is charming the film's director, Diego, bonding with its lead actress, a German hippie, flirting with one of the crew, bickering with her sister, exchanging silent glares with her father, wondering about her absent husband, helping to smooth things over with the film's cast and narrating her own crisis of faith. Irma's descriptions of it all are consistently pithy. When Aggie, who frequently sneaks away from their father's house to visit Irma, asks if she can move in with her, Irma replies, "Well . . . are you looking for a quick and easy way to complicate your life forever?"

This raises the question of why Irma's life is so complicated. For a teenager living in the desert, she's got a lot going on. The film depicted in the novel is based on—and is almost identical to—the 2007 film *Silent Light*, which costarred Toews herself as the jilted wife. *Silent Light* is a slow, calm, meditative film, in which several minutes frequently go by without audible speech. Fictional filmmaker Diego's depiction of the Chihuahuan community is similarly bucolic and makes Irma's life look like vaudeville in comparison.

"I felt like I should have said other more important and unique things," Irma thinks once, during a late-night talk with one of the film crew. But as is common in the novel, the meaning of the moment barely lands before Toews whisks off to other things.

Toews occasionally reiterates the idea that people use others as props for their own emotion. This is certainly in evidence in *Irma Voth* in the way Irma's father uses his daughters to exercise his faith, Diego uses the locals as marionettes, and Irma uses anyone who's not her family as an object in her trying on of new identities. Perhaps this whirl of projection and lopsided relationships is why the many characters feel omnipresent and yet disposable—so many of them are pictured only insofar as they are useful or cumbersome to someone else. Irma and, to a lesser extent, Aggie are the only characters given room to breathe. But the biting and funny voices of the two sisters are worth focusing on, and it's understandable that Toews would push others to the side to make room for them.

Irma cycles through four identities in the short span of the novel. Starting as a stifled daughter, she becomes a rebellious young wife, then finds herself part of a film crew, until she throws over even that for a new life. One fewer incarnation might have fit more nicely.

When Irma meets her baby sister for the first time, her sister "had fallen asleep all wrapped up in the towel, soaked in sweat and with a sweet expression on her face that underneath it seemed to say fuck you all, I possess vital intangibles and when I learn to talk the world will know its shame." This mandate could belong to Irma herself. Her wise and resilient narration, cutting through the tangles of the story, is the book's greatest achievement.