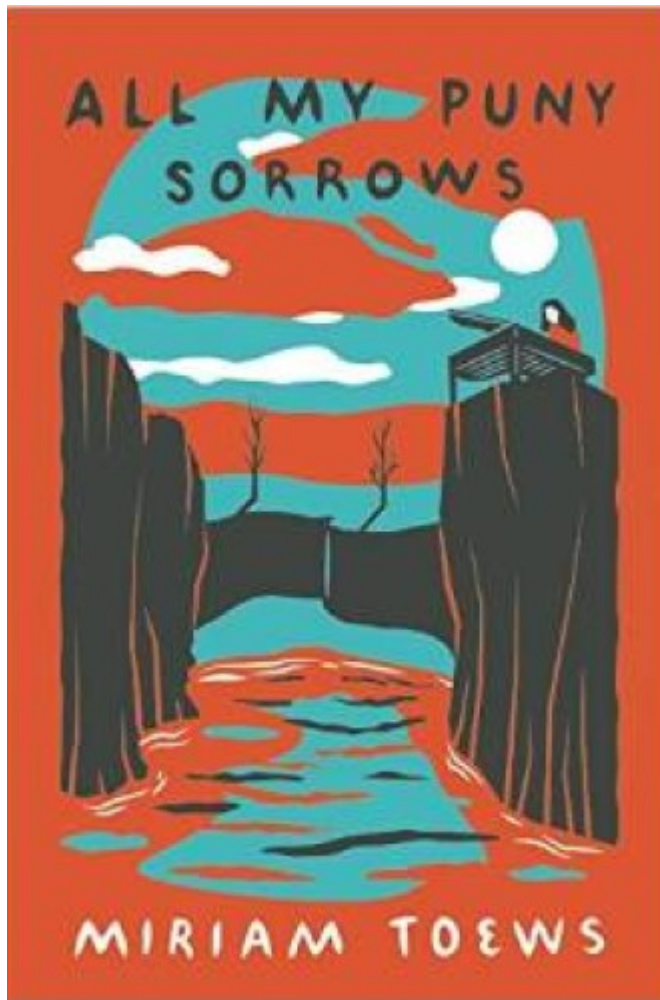


All My Puny Sorrows, by Miriam Toews

reviewed by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [October 15, 2014](#) issue

In Review



All My Puny Sorrows

By Miriam Toews
McSweeney's

I was not sold on this book until page 148, when I read these lines:

My mother tells Tina that she doesn't like books where the protagonist is established as sad on page one. Okay, she's sad! 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!

This is a book about deep, protracted, unrelenting sadness, and it knows it. Two sisters—Elf and Yoli—have each departed from the small conservative Mennonite town in Canada in which they grew up. Elf is an accomplished concert pianist who performs all over the world. Yoli is a writer of rodeo novels, in the midst of peripatetic relationships with men, and has broken all family rules by moving to Toronto. (“Nobody moves away from Winnipeg, especially to Toronto, and escapes condemnation. It's like the opposite of the Welcome Wagon. It is like leaving the Crips for the Bloods.”) Both are grappling with their father's suicide and Elf's repeated suicide attempts.

Despite her many accomplishments, her devoted husband, her physical beauty, and her enviable career, Elf wants to die, and Yoli does not know how to stop her. Sadness is Elf's constant companion, and she wants relief that she cannot find in anything but death. At the beginning of the book, Yoli is in the hospital with Elf after a suicide attempt, and the book does not move far or fast from this center. Most of the story takes place in the hospital over a short period of time. Forays into the past, descriptions of the girls' childhoods, their unusual family, and their love for one another all lead back to the endless, leaden hours spent in the hospital with someone you love. This is a book about the mystery of sadness and the “million and one ways” that sadness takes up space in a life and overwhelms it.

Without giving away too much of the slender plot, the hero of the book is Yoli and Elf's mother, who does not like books about sadness. She learns, through the course of the novel, how to live without fear and works to teach others the same:

There was a note on the table. Yoli, she'd written, I've gone to a lecture on Eritrea. There's schaubel zup and schmooa kumpst in the fridge. I called her on her cell phone and when she finally answered I heard raucous voices and whooping in the background. Where are you? I asked her. It's after eleven. She said hang on, hey guys, where am I?

Miriam Toews is the author of five other novels, the best known of which is *A Complicated Kindness*, the story of a teenager in a fundamentalist family. She has a

wry, funny voice that is the readers' steady companion. She also has an eye for the absurd and a perfect tragicomic timing in delivery. Janice, the psych nurse, "loves to tango, because, she says, tango is about the embrace. She wears light pink track suits. She has a small furry animal chained to her belt loop. It's supposed to be something that makes the patients relax and smile."

The book is, at least in part, autobiographical. Like Yoli, Toews lost both a father and a sister to suicide, and this book could not have been written without that experience. She does not appear to be projecting or imagining someone else's pain, but grappling with her own and using fiction as a form of refining and sharing that experience. Is this a good idea? At the end of the book, I still could not tell. I did not feel the urge to rush out and recommend this reading experience to other people. And yet the book is funny and tender and self-aware, full of love for place and people, and it takes as its theme the central mystery of loving someone who does not want to live. It does not answer this mystery or so much as suggest how, like Yoli's mother, to live and to love in the midst of it.