

Miriam Toews, *All My Puny Sorrows*. Toronto: Knopf, 2014. Pp.321. Hardcover, \$29.95.

After finishing Miriam Toews's most recent novel, *All My Puny Sorrows* (*AMPS*), I closed it slowly and placed it gently on the table beside me. *AMPS* is the difficult yet very funny story of two sisters, Elfrieda and Yolandi Von Riesen, and their stalwart mother, Lottie, the "Iggy Pop of old Mennonite ladies." Elf, an accomplished pianist who has achieved all the worldly trappings of success, is determined to end her life; Yoli, who is stumbling between marriages and unable to complete her first "literary" novel, is equally determined to ensure her sister lives. They are, as Toews writes, "enemies who love each other," and their battlefield is a patchwork of hospital wards, living rooms, and memories from the Mennonite village of their youth. The result is such a volatile, impossible mix of profundity and absurdity, of vulnerability and fierceness, that the novel itself feels fragile, as delicate as the glass piano we are told sits inside Elf, just to the right of her stomach.

AMPS is a formidable achievement, certainly Toews' best effort since *A Complicated Kindness*, and the most emotionally

challenging since *Swing Low*. In fact, in many ways it reads like a sequel to those earlier books: its main characters are all Mennonites from East Village, the thinly-veiled Steinbach of *Complicated*, while its exploration of mental health and suicide recalls *Swing Low*, the memoir she wrote about her father. *AMPS* evokes her earlier books in other ways, as well, but ultimately it feels more like a culmination than a simple continuation of their concerns. The plot is still driven by the world-weary, wisecracking narration that is the hallmark of Toews' work, for example, but here it comes with a critical difference: the plucky protagonists of *Complicated*, *Flying Troutmans*, and *Irma Voth* are all teenagers, while the sisters in *AMPS* are in their mid-forties. If the youth that dominates the earlier texts is part of what makes their dialogue humorous, the hard-won life experience of the women in this most recent book is part of what makes its dialogue feel more immediate, its insights more pressing. As a result, *AMPS* reads less like a running commentary on life and more like life itself.

In much the same way, while all of Toews' novels wobble across lines of humour strung over depths of one kind or another, the particularly difficult subject matter of *AMPS* makes it something of an ultimate test case for her approach. The novel's use of humour to discuss suicide stands out, in particular, when placed beside Rudy Wiebe's new novel, *Come Back*, which refuses even a glimmer of what he has called the "elusion" of humour in its own discussion of suicide. Tom King, another Canadian author who, like Toews, is noted for his use of humour in "serious" fiction, recently suggested he uses comedy to give readers an opportunity to catch their breath as they work through his heavy material. For Toews, however, comedy functions differently. Rather than using humour as a way to avoid confronting tragedy or as a necessary break to enable readers to engage it further, Toews collapses the distinction between them. Nowhere is this more true than in *AMPS*, which forcefully recalls E.B. White's account of how comedic writing can evoke both laughter and tears: if readers are brought to a place where their "emotional responses are untrustworthy and seem likely to break over into the opposite realm," White observes, it is because humour "plays close to the big hot fire which is Truth, and sometimes the reader feels the heat."

This type of writing is not without its risks, of course. At times, for example, I found myself uneasy with the implications of the novel's stark juxtaposition of the two sisters. Elf is fearless, beautiful, and a world famous musician; Yoli is stumbling between divorces, one night stands, and broken down vehicles. Elf quotes Adorno, Coleridge, and Heidegger; Yoli carries an unfinished novel

around with her in a plastic Safeway bag. The contrast between the two sisters is memorably summarized when they attend a gala together: “Elf was gorgeous, stunning in some simple European black thing, and a total pro at these fancy gigs. Everything about her was so sharp. So crisp and defined. I looked like one of those recently discovered giant squids next to her, oozing around in slow motion and dropping food on myself.”

The novel’s juxtaposition between the enormously-successful-but-deeply-depressed Elf and her much-less-successful-but-at-least-she-wants-to-live sister is an important reminder that mental illness and depression have no correlation with economic or professional success. What is more, the exaggerated force with which this point is made is fodder for the novel’s humour. Toews is able to keep these potentially competing elements in a productive tension for much of the book, but at times the sheer scale of Elf’s success risks making her many gifts appear central, rather than incidental, to the tragedy of her struggles. Toews’ decision to navigate such charged emotional terrain through humour means that *AMPS* is full of these sorts of calculated risks, and part of the thrill of reading the novel is following her as she navigates the choppy waters that she has stirred up.

All My Puny Sorrows is straightforward in its plot but difficult to summarize in its effect, and I worry that its focus on mental health and suicide will deter many who would enjoy it immensely. Carrie Snyder has described it as “the kind of book for which book clubs were invented,” and this seems true to me: with the questions Toews dares to ask and the recklessness with which she chases answers, this is, indeed, a book that demands conversation, one that lives on after you finish it and place it gently aside. Find multiple copies then, and invite your friends, but by all means, read it – this book is not to be missed.

Robert Zacharias
University of Waterloo