

fuel: "I, who have never eaten grass out of necessity, drive home and cook my groceries / on a gas stove."

As a Jewish New Yorker, Rukeyser was an outsider in West Virginia. Kasdorf, who teaches at Penn State University, is in some ways closer to her subject. Her earlier works, including *The Body and the Book: Writing from a Mennonite Life* (2001), examined aspects of her Mennonite identity, but in *Shale Play* she focuses not on herself but on the residents of shale country. A gap, however, remains between the observed and their observers, perhaps inevitably so. Rubin offers a grim list of reasons why local people were unwilling or unable to be photographed:

Those who work for large gas companies are often forbidden from talking to the media, and they risk losing their jobs for doing so. Those who have benefitted from wells on their land are sensitive about monetary gain in places where their neighbors struggle with economic hardship. Those who have been harmed and are now pursuing legal remedies and negotiations with gas companies must avoid publicity for fear it will jeopardize their legal cases. Those who have reached settlements with the companies are bound by nondisclosure agreements. Some people are simply reluctant to be represented in relation to an issue that has become so divisive in their own communities and even families.

A house divided against itself cannot stand, of course, and *Shale Play* portrays the deleterious social effects of fracking as well as the environmental costs—the compromises and concessions that must be endured. Kasdorf and Rubin equally show the residents' dignity and resolve, and the natural beauty that persists even as their world is transformed. Appalachia is nearly invisible from Washington and New York, as Fort McMurray and Fort Chipewyan are obscure to Ottawa and Toronto, but *Shale Play* draws attention to what is routinely overlooked. Elegant and impassioned, it is a superb work of political and environmental art.

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Miriam Toews, *Women Talking*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2018. Pp. 216. Hardcover, \$29.95.

Novelist Miriam Toews, most deservedly, has garnered an international reputation for offering intrepid witness to a range of devastations, both individual and collective. Repeated foci include mental illness and suicide as well as medical, religious, and com-

munal failures in relation to the marginalized or wounded. Fierce and often very funny, she plies hyperbole and extreme symbolism to underscore the urgency of everyday settings that inform, but do not limit, her fiction. This is a point I wish to emphasize: her writing exceeds the mimetic or realistic even—perhaps especially—in its depiction of the quotidian. However scathing her social critiques, they point existentially and ontologically beyond themselves to what could have been or should be (to rephrase the formulation of Nomi in Toews' earlier novel, *A Complicated Kindness*). For Toews, polemic is not an end in itself but rather a means of confronting real world crises in order to imagine liberatory possibilities. Indeed, the power of her writing derives in no small measure from her deft intertwining of polemic with extravagant hopefulness.

Such emphasis on the possible obtains in *Women Talking* (2018), a fictional response to harrowing events that occurred in the Bolivian, Old Colony Mennonite community of Manitoba. In 2011, eight men from this colony were convicted of repeatedly anaesthetizing, abusing, and raping one hundred and thirty women and girls at night in their own bedrooms between 2005-2009 (though the actual number of victims is suspected to be much higher, as is the number of rapists). The women, as portrayed by Toews are functionally illiterate and socio-legally subordinate to their male relatives, did not represent themselves in court. Rather, the juridical setting reinforced that of the patriarchal colony with its silencing of women's voices. Systemically precluded from civil governance and from biblical interpretation in the largely sovereign Mennonite colony, the women faced additional judgement when they first dared to whisper their experiences of awakening to nausea, vaginal pain, blood, smeared manure, rope burns, and ripped clothing. Accused of "wild female imagination," suspected of adultery, and charged with Satanic ghost rapes (presumably for their sins), they were, to say the least, stigmatized. Even when the rapists were finally apprehended breaking into a home, the women remained predominantly voiceless, admonished that their own divine forgiveness hinged on forgetting the violence and forgiving their assailants.¹

Against these multiple forms of violation and violent silencing, Toews imagines an alternative. She shifts her attention—and that of her readers—from the male elders who govern the colony and the eight men who committed night-time atrocities against unconscious women, to eight highly alert, talking women. Toews envisions two days of colloquy among the colony women after the apprehended men have been charged, but not yet convicted, and

the other male colony members have travelled to the city to provide bail for the incarcerated. In Toews' imagined account, the women have 48 hours to determine a course of action not only in practical terms (should they do nothing, stay and fight, or leave?), but, as importantly, in theological ones. In fact, the women's lively exchanges—recorded by the schoolteacher August Epp, the only man admitted to their secret meetings—beg to be read in terms of their theological complexities. As Lynn Henry suggests in her brief preface to the novel, Toews' novel can be understood as drawing on the tradition of biblical parables, which, as Paul Ricoeur has noted, are set in the everyday, extravagantly mixing the extraordinary with the ordinary, hinting at the infinity of divine openings to new horizons of human possibility (99). Utopian in their reach, parables take us to limits of the real, calling for nothing less than a total re-imagining of what ethical behaviour should entail.

In *Women Talking*, Toews captures the utopian extravagance of the parable form in the dialogues of the women, who, gathered in the symbolically peripheral space of a hayloft, contemplate and vigorously debate what Christian faithfulness and love might require of them given their experience of extreme violence within a purportedly pacifist community. Their discussion ranges widely, from homely animal stories to scriptural contemplation, as they come to assert themselves as beings made in the image of the divine and thus as necessarily accountable revitalizers of a failed faith tradition. Such revitalization, they conclude, entails assuming guardianship of their own (violated, animalized) bodies, souls, and minds and those of their children, and requires them to reach for new horizons of possibility for genuinely loving, peaceable lives. As the debate ends and the women decide their course of action, Toews bravely imagines a possibility that parabolically and paradoxically signals a (re)turn to a faith-based existence. The novel's account of these events, of course, did not literally take place, but in its imaginative response to this most horrific of crimes, the narrative compellingly captures two parabolic truths: that the irruption of the divine in the everyday leads away from socio-religious traditions to the conventionally implausible, and that theological revolutions originate among those who conceive of faith as a restorative practice based on mindful, creative interchanges, rather than among those who unquestioningly submit to or assume unjust authority.

Fiction offers an expanded range of engagement with the past, but several of the novel's representational strategies do raise questions for me about how to witness the trauma and the resilience of others. If, as I would certainly contend, the impetus of the novel is

to dignify women who have lived isolated, restrictive lives, does having them discuss their crisis in the heightened (not to mention secular) rhetoric of what one character calls a “pernicious ideology that has been allowed to take hold of men’s hearts and minds,” and having them put forth a revolutionary “manifesto”/ “mennofasto” not come uncomfortably close to effacing the potential that theology can derive from the uneducated and the oppressed? And does the novel’s hopefulness at times risk flattening the lived complexities of the historical lives of both the Manitoba colony’s women and men? Jean Friedman-Rudovsky, a journalist who conducted several interviews in the colony, draws attention to the fact that entire families were anaesthetized in their sleep, not just women and girls, and that the story of the violence against men and boys has yet to be told. She notes, as well, that the rape crisis in the colony was not resolved by the incarceration of a few men. Still, what lends Toews’ story its force is parabolic hyperbole and intensification through fiction with these still-unfolding events. In the parables, as in the novel, what matters most is an orientation towards new beginnings and horizons, the parables re-describing human experience not as an impossible but as a beckoning utopia.

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Notes

- ¹ My description of these events is drawn from Jean Friedman-Rudovsky's reporting for *Time* and *VICE* news, as well as the helpful book reviews and interviews with Toews about the novel, including those by Joseph Brean, Dory Cerny, Ben MacPhee-Sigurdson, and Katrina Onstad. The narrator of *Women Talking* recounts many of these incidents in the opening section of the novel.