

# Symbolic representations of a complicated kindness



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Miriam Toews' *A Complicated Kindness* tells the story of a Mennonite teen, Nomi Nickels, and her response to the rise of conflict and tragedy in her family. This novel, however, explores not simply the life of a fictional coming-of-age young woman, but also of the author herself. The novel exists symbolically as representation of Miriam Toews and her past experiences, specifically the disintegration of her family. Writing this novel was both therapeutic, and an attempt to understand and reimagine her past life. The parallels between the story of fictitious Nomi Nickels, and that of her creator, Miriam Toews, are effectively illustrated in the similarities of narrator's voice, fatherly figure, and many aspects of setting.

Firstly, parallels between the author and the protagonist she created reveal not only that authors may lend their own voice to that of their narrator, but also that Miriam Toews purposefully created Nomi Nickels as symbolic representation of herself. In a recent interview with *The Guardian*, Miriam Toews stated, " I have a problem with beginnings... and endings... and middles. I find it very, very difficult to write. It takes everything." Similarly, *A Complicated Kindness* begins with Nomi Nickels introducing herself through a brief commentary of her writing. " I've got a problem with endings," she explains. " I feel that there are so many to choose from. I'm already anticipating failure" (1). Furthermore, throughout the novel, Nomi Nickels refers to her desire to leave her Mennonite town for the larger cities of New York or Prague, building a strong theme of dissatisfaction with community. Miriam Toews was similarly eager to leave behind the confining values and way of life of her hometown; upon her graduation, she travelled around Europe as a self-described ' punk' for three years before settling in

downtown Toronto. In addition, the representation of Miriam Toews in the protagonist and narrator of *A Complicated Kindness* is further strengthened by the presence of a similar parallel in her other novels. For example, when asked about *All My Puny Sorrows*, a novel following the story of two sisters – one’s struggle with depression and suicide, and the other’s battle to keep her alive, – Miriam Toews openly speaks about the inspiration she took from the same battle with her own sister, publically placing herself as the protagonist. These examples clearly illustrate that beyond coincidence, Miriam Toews created her protagonist, Nomi Nickels, as an image of herself.

It can be said that *A Complicated Kindness* was an attempt to reunite a family permanently estranged at the hands of depression and the confinement of religion. The writing of this novel could be seen as an opportunity for Toews to revive her father’s existence and recall the quirks of his personality. On May 13, 1998, Melvin Toews, father of Miriam Toews, stood upon a railroad track near his Mennonite community, waiting for an incoming train (Winnipeg Free Press, 2010). This marked the end of his life, therefore also ending a lifelong struggle with mental illness. However, Melvin Toews made a re-appearance to the world, brought back by his daughter as Ray Nickels, a character in *A Complicated Kindness*. In the novel, Ray Nickels lovingly supports his youngest daughter, Nomi Nickels, in an attempt to hold loosening strings of a once happy family, years after hope has been lost with the departure of his eldest daughter and wife. This character, unlike Melvin Toews, is not openly suicidal or expressive of the presence of a mental illness, but hints of such a similar struggle do appear throughout the novel. For example, Ray Nickels spends much of his time “ sitting in his yellow lawn

chair by the front door staring off at the number twelve highway," (27) as Nomi Nickels observes with curiosity, also commenting on the hopelessness and despair in this act. Moreover, the parallels between Miriam Toews' and Nomi Nickels' father are further strengthened by the similarities in their personalities, careers, and relationships to family. In *Swing Low*, Miriam Toews' memoir of her father, Melvin is described as "a much loved and respected teacher, known especially for his kindness, exuberance, and booming voice" (4). Ray Nickels was a similarly dedicated and praised schoolteacher at the local high school. "He never talked about his past, even his childhood, and often he simply didn't speak at all," Miriam continues in description of her father. The father of Nomi Nickels was likewise relatively silent; when he did have interest in communication, it was often through writing. Ray Nickels brings the story to an end in his ambiguous disappearance; his daughter is troubled by the uncertainties surrounding his departure, but thinks it best to leave this undefined and open to possibility. The death of Melvin Toews, however, was foreshadowed by years of battle with depression and bipolar disorder; it was clear that he had indeed committed suicide. The ambiguity of Ray Nickels' disappearance was perhaps the ending Miriam Toews had preferred to the reality. Ray Nickels was created in an attempt to both capture and recreate memory; his story is symbolic of the life of Melvin Toews, as Miriam chooses to remember it.

Although the Mennonite town of "East Village" in which *A Complicated Kindness* takes place is fictional, many of its elements have been taken directly from Miriam Toews' hometown of Steinbach. Both the real and fictional Manitoban towns are of Mennonite background, populated mainly by

Mennonites, or as Nomi Nickels calls them, “ the most embarrassing sub-sect of people” (5). Moreover, despite Toews’ claims that the book is entirely fictitious, and only its texture is paralleled with her own early life, those familiar with both her other works and the town in which she grew up reveal otherwise. On his way to Steinbach, Manitoba, Reverend Moon, a close friend of Miriam Toews, invited a Guardian reporter to join him. “ Why don’t you come along?” He asked, “ you can see all the places from the book, [A Complicated Kindness].” Furthermore, “ Highway Twelve” is mentioned multiple times by Nomi Nickels as a major route cutting through the town of East Village; upon observing her father gazing out over the road, she mentions it as the path chickens take after meeting their fate on iconic ‘ assembly lines of death.’ A similar highway, Provincial Trunk Highway Twelve, runs through the town of Steinbach. “ There’s a blinding white light at the water tower at the end of it,” (47) Nomi explains in description of “ Main Street”. A Main Street also exists in Steinbach and similarly has a water tower at its end. As much as Miriam Toews tries to deny it, more than the mere ‘ texture’ of her book was borrowed from her own life, family, and hometown.

A Complicated Kindness serves as a symbolic representation of the childhood and family history of its author, Miriam Toews. This is illustrated in the parallels between narrator’s voice, fatherly figure, and many aspects of setting. Miriam Toews created this fictional coming-of-age story as an opportunity to reinvent her own life. “ In writing fiction I can be free. I can use my life. The raw material is my experiences. But in fictionalizing it, I can set the tone, the voice, the pace. I can embellish. I can exaggerate. I can

create,” explains Miriam Toews. Her words reveal characters as an image of their creators, shedding a light on the writing of many other novels.