

”a complicated kindness” by miriam toews essay sample

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I recently read a book called *A Complicated Kindness*, by Miriam Toews. The protagonist is a teenage girl named Nomi. Nomi is growing up trapped in a small Mennonite community called East Village in the middle of nowhere, in Canada. All her life Nomi was told what to believe, with heavy emphasis on the belief that living dutifully and by the word of God in this life would guarantee salvation in the next. In Nomi's town, you were either good or bad. There was no in between, no room for individuality or mistakes. Those who went through their life there quietly, going to church every Sunday and working at the local chicken slaughtering plant after graduation, were considered to be on their way up. Those were the people who at the end of a long, uneventful life, would be greeted happily by Jesus and live forever in his kingdom of glory. Those who broke out of the mould were doomed. Since non-conformists were clearly speeding down the highway to hell anyways, they were excommunicated from the church and forced to either leave the community or live without recognition from even their own family.

As Nomi's older sister Natasha begins to question their faith, Nomi lives in perpetual terror that her sister is going to hell. Their father is a strong believer; the church is what glues his soul together. And although their mother grew up in the community, she had always been an independent thinker, and could not watch her oldest daughter suffer for a lifetime in a place she hated, following a religion she could no longer identify with. After Nomi's mother and Natasha leave East Village, Nomi is faced with living in a broken family, and begins to question her faith as well. While trying to avoid the sad existence that seems inevitable if she stays in the community, Nomi dreams of a life in the real world, but can't seem to get up the courage it will

take to leave. Soon Nomi is headed on a narrow path to excommunication as she explores the escape of drugs and rebellion.

The narrative, which is from Nomi's perspective, jumps frequently from the past to the present. It creates a whirlwind feeling that inflicts the emotions of the characters on an unguarded reader. The claustrophobic sadness of the reality of her life, paired with the desperate and almost panicked sense of urgency for her to just leave the town could have made for a pretty depressing story. Fortunately, the author keeps the tone from becoming too dark by injecting moments of strange but hilarious irony and humour into the conversations between characters, and between characters and their own consciences.

This story opened my eyes to the many different roles religion can play in a person's life. I think that for some people, it is a rock. It is a method they use to help cope with life, and answer the questions that really have no answers. By opening my eyes to that, the book gave me a profound sense of respect for those who can put their trust and faith into something so big that only faith could make it plausible. It also gave me an even bigger amount of respect, and a lot of sympathy for people who grow up in places like East Village. I think that although they have the choice to leave if they want to, if you had grown up your whole life only knowing what life and the "truth" are from what you had been told by the church, your choice is taken away in a sense. Generally, people will choose the evil they know, over one they don't.