



Book Club Guide

# **Fight Night**

by Miriam Toews

## About the Author

Miriam Toews is the author of seven bestselling novels: *Women Talking*, *All My Puny Sorrows*, *Irma Voth*, *The Flying Troutmans*, *A Complicated Kindness*, *A Boy of Good Breeding*, and *Summer of My Amazing Luck*, and one work of non-fiction, *Swing Low: A Life*. She is a winner of the Governor General's Award for Fiction, the Libris Award for Fiction Book of the Year, the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize, and the Writers Trust Marian Engel/Timothy Findley Award. She lives in Toronto.

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## About the Book

The beloved author of bestsellers *Women Talking*, *All My Puny Sorrows*, and *A Complicated Kindness* returns with a funny, smart, headlong rush of a novel full of wit, flawless writing, and a tribute to perseverance and love in an unusual family.

*Fight Night* is told in the unforgettable voice of Swiv, a nine-year-old living in Toronto with her pregnant mother, who is raising Swiv while caring for her own elderly, frail, yet extraordinarily lively mother. When Swiv is expelled from school, Grandma takes on the role of teacher and gives her the task of writing to Swiv's absent father about life in the household during the last trimester of the pregnancy. In turn, Swiv gives Grandma an assignment: to write a letter to "Gord," her unborn grandchild (and Swiv's soon-to-be brother or sister). "You're a small thing," Grandma writes to Gord, "and you must learn to fight."

As Swiv records her thoughts and observations, *Fight Night* unspools the pain, love, laughter, and above all, will to live a good life across three generations of women in a close-knit family. But it is Swiv's exasperating, wise and irrepressible Grandma who is at the heart of this novel: someone who knows intimately what it costs to survive in this world, yet has found a way—painfully, joyously, ferociously—to love and fight to the end, on her own terms.

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## Discussion Questions

1. Think about the title FIGHT NIGHT. Why do you think Toews chose this title? What are the characters fighting?
2. Who is the book addressed to, and why is this character not present in Swiv's life? Why do you think Toews chose a letter for the novel's form? What other formal choices do you notice?
3. What kind of kid is Swiv? What makes you think so?
4. What about Grandma/Elvira and Mom/Mooshie? What kind of people are they, and does Swiv see them clearly?
5. Toews often uses exaggerations in Swiv's narration. What is the effect of this choice? What other idiosyncrasies do you notice?
6. What does Swiv mean when she refers to her family's Editorial Meetings? How do the meetings themselves differ from what we might assume based on that phrase? Why do you think she uses it?
7. Who is Willit Braun? Why is he so infamous in Grandma's circles?
8. In Chapter 10, the book changes stylistically, reflecting a transcription of Grandma's words. How did this change impact your reading?
9. What happened to Mom/Mooshie in Albania? Why and how does this discovery influence your perception of her character?
10. Talk about Grandma and Swiv's trip to Fresno. Why was it necessary for Grandma to go on the trip, despite her poor health?
11. In Fresno, the people Swiv meets talk about how strong Mom/Mooshie is. How did you understand this emphasis? How did you understand Mom's reaction when Swiv reports this back to her?
12. Talk about the first time Gord meets Grandma at the hospital. What can we glean from the scene?
13. Depression and other forms of mental illness go unnamed in FIGHT NIGHT, but they remain present in the background. How does Toews achieve this? How does she approach these realities?
14. Talk about the tone of the book in contrast to what happens in the book. How do these two elements work together?

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## Author Interview

### **What books are on your night stand?**

A biography of Fernando Pessoa, by Richard Zenith. It's a huge, heavy book. Which only leaves room on my night stand for one other slim book and it's called "Little Snow Landscape," by the great Robert Walser.

### **What's the last great book you read?**

"Real Estate," by Deborah Levy.

### **Are there any classic novels that you only recently read for the first time?**

This question makes me nervous. Sometimes in interviews people will reference a certain classic assuming I've read it, and I literally start to sweat. I'll rush home to have another go at "The Golden Bowl," or whatever.

### **Can a great book be badly written? What other criteria can overcome bad prose?**

It's pretty tough to compensate for bad prose.

### **Describe your ideal reading experience (when, where, what, how).**

Any time, in bed, alone. New fiction by a writer I love, like Laura van den Berg, with a decent lamp, under a warm duvet, with a slight Terrence Malick type of breeze making my curtains billow.

### **What's your favorite book no one else has heard of?**

I'd have to say it's "Ellen's Eyes," a beautiful, mournful and strange book written by David Scott, the father of my son's former high school basketball teammate. It has no margins or paragraph breaks. David and I were always at the games, but we didn't sit together. I was so intrigued with him. Every time the refs blew the whistle, or if there was some break in the game, David would read, even if it was just for one minute or 20 seconds. Eventually, I worked up the nerve to go over and talk to him. All we really talked about were books. It was such a nice antidote to the screaming parents in the stands. The game became a pleasant, thumping backdrop to our bookish conversations. David told me he lived outside of the city, in the woods. At the last game of the season he gave me a copy of "Ellen's Eyes," and I never saw him again. Then I heard he'd died. Years later his son gave my son a painting David had done, and it's on my son's living room wall. It's a painting of the cityscape of Winnipeg, with the Assiniboine River in the foreground, and it shows the things in the river that are otherwise invisible to us.

### **What writers are especially good on mother-daughter relationships?**

Toni Morrison, Claire Cameron, Elena Ferrante, Mona Simpson, Alice Munro, Elizabeth Strout ...

### **Has a book ever brought you closer to another person, or come between you?**

When I was 18 my boyfriend and I were hitchhiking around Europe. We had very little money and were always cold and hungry. We were in Oxford, pretending that we were university students there. My boyfriend discovered that John Fowles was signing his new book at Blackwell's. My boyfriend insisted on buying the book, I think it was "Mantissa," and getting it signed. I was so angry. I sat on the curb outside and refused to go in. It was a hardcover book, expensive, we could have eaten for a week with the money he spent on it, and also it was heavy, and we had backpacks that were already heavy. I was furious. We fought all across Western Europe about that book. And I have no idea where it is now. When my boyfriend and I split up we fought again about Italo Calvino's "If on a Winter's Night a Traveler," about whose copy it was and who should have it. Eventually my boyfriend was so eager to be done with me that he said: "Take it. Just take it, goodbye."

### **How do you organize your books?**

Exactly. I should do that. They're all over the place. Recently I took a door off one of my kitchen cupboards and lined some books up in there. It looks good, a break from that kitcheny feel, which just makes me feel inadequate and guilty.

### **What book might people be surprised to find on your shelves?**

"Listen Up, Girls." A book given to me by my Aunt Mary about how to be a proper Christian lady, so basically avoiding having "petting sessions" with boys (it doesn't say anything about petting sessions with girls, so I guess that's permissible?) and keeping my kids clean and silent when my hard-working husband comes home from work, etc.

### **What's the best book you've ever received as a gift?**

"Amos and Boris," by William Steig. It's an epic story of friendship.

### **You're organizing a literary dinner party. Which three writers, dead or alive, do you invite?**

Roberto Bolaño, Natalia Ginzburg and Svetlana Alexievich. Who knows what we would talk about, but I'd be thrilled to be in their presence. They're true revolutionaries and anti-authoritarians. They've been scarred, exiled, imprisoned and haunted by fascist regimes. They write intimate, funny, horrifying prose in defiance of literary convention, and of tyranny. I love all of them, but would they love each other?

### **What books are you embarrassed not to have read yet?**

“The Mennonite Treasury,” a cookbook my Aunt Mary gave me. A lot of the recipes call for ammonia. For Mennonites it’s second in importance only to the Bible.

**What do you plan to read next?**

That giant Pessoa book I mentioned. Casey Plett’s “A Dream of a Woman.” And Heike Geissler’s book “Seasonal Associate,” about working as a seasonal worker in an Amazon warehouse in Germany.

Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/30/books/review/miriam-toews-by-the-book-interview.html>

## Links and Other Resources

Interview with Miriam Toews on q on CBC:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9QXquHw2XrY>

Interview with Laura van den Berg for Powell's Books:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8a6mpG-lXig>



## Share your thoughts with other readers!

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

BOOK CLUB: \_\_\_\_\_

BOOK TITLE: \_\_\_\_\_

As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!		It was OK...		Loved it!

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes          No          Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: