

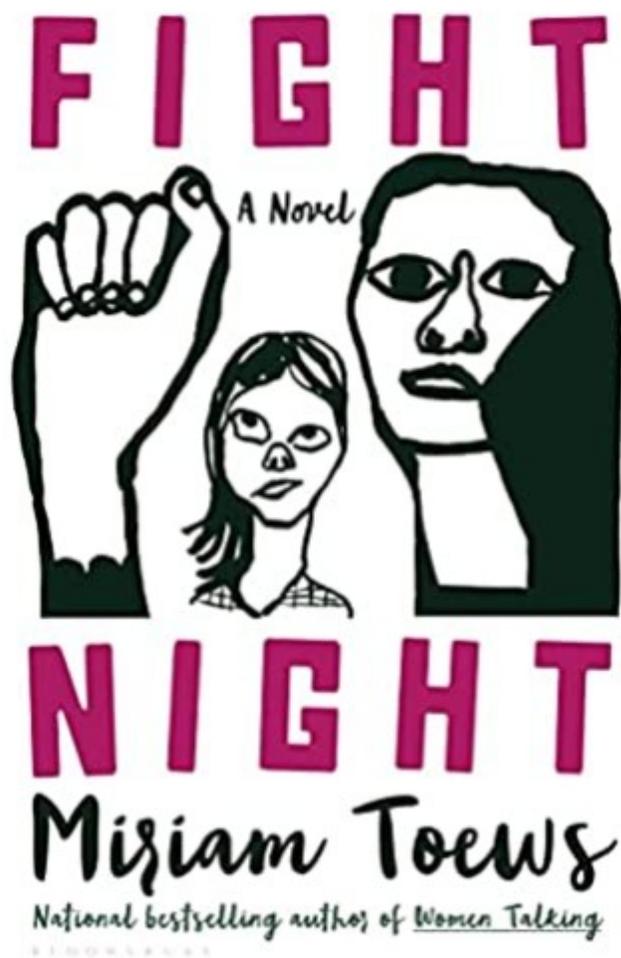
Miriam Toews explores religious trauma through the voice of a nine-year-old

**Swiv isn't an unreliable narrator, but she's living in a world that feels unreliable.**

by [Amy Peterson](#) in the [October 20, 2021](#) issue

## In Review

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## Fight Night

A Novel

By Miriam Toews

Bloomsbury

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Canadian novelist Miriam Toews is a master of voice. She's given readers the voices of eight women who were drugged and raped in *Women Talking*, the perspective of a 16-year-old desperate to escape her small town in *A Complicated Kindness*, and even a memoir written in the voice of her father after his death by suicide. *Fight Night*, her latest novel, traverses what is for Toews familiar territory: mental health, women hurt by men, and religious trauma and its aftershocks.

Voice is what makes this novel unique. Narrated by a child experiencing the effects of her grandmother's and mother's hurts, it's an account of secondary religious trauma, damage at a remove. It offers one answer to a question my friends and I are always asking each other: What do our unraveled and rewoven faith lives look like to our kids?

The narrator of *Fight Night* doesn't have a language of faith to take apart or put back together. She's still building hers, constructing it one word at a time as she listens to her mother and grandmother. The gift of this book is the perspective of nine-year-old Swiv, whose voice is by turns confused, embarrassed, blunt, funny—and always concrete. (When her grandmother sings about leaving her heart in San Francisco, Swiv wonders, “How you could leave your heart in some city and then sing about it because you'd obviously be dead.”)

Nine-year-olds don't think in abstractions, so one strength of a child narrator in fiction is a lack of pretense, a lack of fancy terms obfuscating a real meaning. Swiv isn't an unreliable narrator, but she's living in a world that feels unreliable, and she's rarely sure that she understands what people are saying.

Swiv lives with her mother, an actress in the Toronto theater who's in the third term of a pregnancy, and her grandmother Elvira, who has fought all her life against her strict Mennonite upbringing. Recently suspended from school for fighting, Swiv has daily lessons at home with her ailing grandmother. These lessons include math (“Could be! said Grandma . . . It's inexact, she said. This is actually a lesson in patience, not math”), fake Boggle (“when we make our own words from the letters, words that aren't real words, and we tell each other what they mean”), the divine feminine, fast cooking, and how to dig a winter grave.

Sometimes Swiv wants clearer answers than Grandma offers. “Grandma says fragments are the only truth. Fragments of what? I asked her. Exactly! she said.” What Swiv’s mother and grandmother have to pass on to her is and will always be fragmentary, but that’s the nature of truth, her grandmother tells her. Our always partial knowledge of the story we’re living is a theme reinforced by a running bit between Swiv’s mother and grandmother about whether it’s okay to cut up hefty paperbacks into sections to make them easier to tote when traveling.

And traveling is what Grandma has in mind. Shortly after Swiv and Grandma only somewhat successfully attempt a bus trip across the city for a doctor’s visit, they devise a plan to fly to San Francisco to visit extended family. On the airplane, Swiv holds up an imaginary microphone and “records” Grandma while she tells stories about Swiv’s mother and the abuse and depression she fought. Swiv is too young for these stories, just as she’s too young to be accompanying her unwell grandmother on an international trip.

That trip provides the narrative structure for the second half of the novel, but it’s a narrative driven not by plot so much as by character. The true action is internal; the real movement of the novel is not on planes, trains, and automobiles but in Swiv’s understanding of herself and her family. Their comical Kerouacian journey catapults the novel toward an exuberant, madcap finish.

While the conclusion feels at moments as if it ties some things up too neatly, answers to Swiv’s underlying questions remain satisfactorily and appropriately unresolved. What does it mean to live in a woman’s body in a man’s world? Why do fathers disappear without explanation? What is prayer? How do we live with the reality of death?

Swiv’s grandma “can’t really read the Bible anymore,” Swiv reports in a scene near the end,

because when she reads it she only hears authoritarian old men’s voices. But she knows so much of it by heart and repeats to herself the verses that mean the most to her all the time. And before she goes to sleep every night she sings a song from her old town called a hymn which her mother always sang to her, and it’s so comforting, and she’s always asleep before she can finish singing the song.

Her grandma sings the song to her, too, and recites a verse from Lamentations: “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” She also carries around a note that Swiv’s mom wrote at age 17 about God’s love.

Swiv wants to write a note like that for her mom to carry around, but she realizes that she doesn’t know anything about God. “I could write something hopeful from Beyoncé, though, and Mom could carry it around forever.” Swiv may not know God yet, but she understands that there are words we give each other and carry forever, and that those notes, those fragments, connect us and give us hope.

Out of the scraps of faith held onto, something new is being constructed as these three generations of women fight for lives they can live on their own terms—lives that are embodied and embedded within relationship, lives that consist of a new language they’ve formed, books they’ve split apart, notes they’ve written to each other. That patchworked faith might take more generations to sew together than it took to tear apart.

But if so, that’s something the book has primed readers for from the very first paragraphs. The novel opens with a letter Swiv is writing to her father, who has been out of the picture for a while. She tells him about her favorite class in the school she’s been suspended from, a class in which she puts on goggles and takes things apart. Halfway through the period, a bell rings, indicating that she’s supposed to stop taking things apart so she can put them back together before the class ends. “It doesn’t make sense,” she writes. “It takes way longer to put things back together than take them apart.”

It does take longer. Still, the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.