



# Women Talking

Written by Miriam Toews

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# Women Talking

By Miriam Toews

## Women Talking A Novel

One evening, eight Mennonite women climb into a hay loft to conduct a secret meeting. For the past two years, each of these women, and more than a hundred other girls in their colony, has been repeatedly violated in the night by demons coming to punish them for their sins. Now that the women have learned they were in fact drugged and attacked by a group of men from their own community, they are determined to protect themselves and their daughters from future harm.

## Women Talking Review

While the men of the colony are off in the city, attempting to raise enough money to bail out the rapists and bring them home, these women—“all illiterate, without any knowledge of the world outside their community and unable even to speak the language of the country they live in”—have very little time to make a choice: Should they stay in the only world they’ve ever known or should they dare to escape?

## Women Talking Toews

Based on real events and told through the "minutes" of the women's all-female symposium, Toews's masterful novel uses wry, politically engaged humor to relate this tale of women claiming their own power to decide.

I have done what the verse from Philippians instructed, which is to think about what is good, what is just, what is pure, and what is excellent. And I have arrived at an answer: pacifism.

I don't understand all the starred reviews for this book.

Perhaps Women Talking works better if you go into it expecting a religiophilosophical analysis, instead of a feminist novelization of a true story. There are some echoes of Plato in here, to be sure. Readers familiar with Socratic discussions will recognize I have done what the verse from Philippians instructed, which is to think about what is good, what is just, what is pure, and what is excellent. And I have arrived at an answer: pacifism.

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Perhaps Women Talking works better if you go into it expecting a religiophilosophical analysis, instead of a feminist novelization of a true story. There are some echoes of Plato in here, to be sure. Readers familiar with Socratic discussions will recognize the repetitive circles of conversation as the women discuss what is the best, and most moral, decision in the eyes of god.

Pretty much everything that happens can be gathered from the title and description. I was intrigued and horrified to hear that this is based on a true story of a Mennonite colony in Bolivia. Over several years, hundreds of women and girls were drugged and raped in their beds by "ghosts" or "demons". These supernatural creatures were eventually discovered to be men of the colony. Bringing attention to this horrendous crime is arguably the book's strongest point.

In this book, women talk. Yes, I'm being a little facetious, but it's an accurate description of almost the entire book. This isn't a problem in itself. It's just that these discussions among the Mennonite women about whether they should leave the colony or "stay and fight" are bloodless, unbelievably rational given the circumstances, and concerned almost solely with religion and analyzing what their religion wants them to do.

They sit around, sharing cigarettes and drinking instant coffee, and weigh the pros and cons of leaving and argue about various interpretations of what their religion would ask of them. I've never heard sexual abuse approached in such a cold and emotionless way.

I also don't understand why this supposedly feminist story was given to a male narrator. I've seen some others argue that it is because the book is framed as meeting minutes, which must be kept by August Epp because the women are illiterate. This might make sense in theory, but I have no idea why the

## Women Talking

author decided to use meeting minutes at all, when this book is written in a style unlike any meeting minutes I have ever seen in my life. It doesn't read like meeting minutes; it reads like a regular first-person narration from a man's point-of-view. An odd choice.

I think this might be a book for readers who enjoy lengthy discussions about how to correctly apply religious doctrine.

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## Women Talking About Cars

This is, without a single doubt, the most important book I have read all year.

The women have three options they can choose from, but they can choose only one.

1. Do nothing.
2. Stay and fight.
3. Leave.

But perhaps one is enough. Perhaps that one option can open multiple other possibilities. If the women arrive to a conclusion, that is.

Already from the straight-forward title, you know 90% of what is happening in this book. Women are talking about their situations and trying to imagine a safer future. This is, without a single doubt, the most important book I have read all year.

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Already from the straight-forward title, you know 90% of what is happening in this book. Women are talking about their situations and trying to imagine a safer future for themselves and their children.

This is a work of fiction, and yet Miriam Toews wrote this book as a reaction to real life events that have happened in a Mennonite colony in Bolivia. In this colony, women were raped in the night by "unwelcome visitors," believed to be demons sent by the devil himself to punish the women for their sins.

But the truth came out. It was the men who committed these acts. Men who raped women, teenage girls and even young children. The accused men were incarcerated, but in this version of the story, the Priest and the majority of the other men plan to bail them out without consideration for the women.

And, in a patriarchal society, what can women "who have been oppressed all their lives by their fathers, their husbands and even their sons and whose thoughts don't matter" do to stop these violent acts against them and start leading peaceful lives?

That is what Greta, Agata, Mariche, Ona, Mejal, Salome, Autje and Neitje "the youngest in the group" are pondering. August Epp, the man who records these conversations also participates in the discussions at times. He is someone the women can trust. Everyone has a role to play and

everyone's voice is heard for once. Even the youngest ones, Autje and Neitje, gain confidence and become involved in their own ways, despite being reluctant to participate in the beginning.

I cannot imagine discouraging anyone from reading this incredible story. The format is original, yes, and the themes salient, of course, but it's also utterly captivating. If you know me even a little, you know that I don't give high ratings to ~ important books whose important ideas were poorly developed. Otherwise I would have definitely given *The Kiss Quotient* five stars. But this, this is everything.

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I had to stop And think for a little more than a day on what my rating of this would be, had to separate my feelings so I could judge what Toews has accomplished by writing this book. Quite frankly, this book made me so angry for the women in this Mennonite enclosed colony in Bolivia. Between 2005 and 2009, over 100 women and children were drugged and raped by male members of their sect. The youngest was three, a great part of what made me so angry. These women were expected to forgive their rapists and just carry on as if nothing had occurred. There is more to this, but that is all I'm saying about the men.

Toews, from a Mennonite background, much like these women, decided to give them the voice they probably did not actually have. Or maybe they did, I don't know that. So a group of women get together, to decide whether they are going to leave the colony or stay. The only man present, August, trusted, has his own back story, a very interesting one. It is while they talk that we learn of their lives in the colony, where they are so little valued that they are not taught to read or write, not allowed to express their likes or dislikes, completely powerless. Another huge source of my anger. In a short amount of pages, Toews accomplishes much, provides insights, and shows the remarkable courage of these women. Quite a revelation and accomplishment both.

Not a thrill a minute, there is some repetition as the women talk through their beliefs, their options and how their decisions will be accomplished. Yet, much is said, much is learned. Toews is an excellent author and one of my goals this year is to read the books by her that I have not yet read.

This was Angela, Esils and mine monthly read. We all agreed on this one.

This is a link to an article I found on why Toews wrote this book. Quite informative.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/201...>

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