



# The Flying Troutmans

*Miriam Toews*

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*"Min was stranded in her bed, hooked on the blue torpedoes and convinced that a million silver cars were closing in on her (I didn't know what Thebes meant either), Logan was in trouble at school, something about the disturbing stories he was writing, Thebes was pretending to be Min on the phone with his principal, the house was crumbling around them, the black screen door had blown off in the wind, a family of aggressive mice was living behind the piano, the neighbours were pissed off because of hatchets being thrown into their yard at night (again, confusing, something to do with Logan) ... basically, things were out of control. And Thebes is only eleven."*

—from **The Flying Troutmans**

Days after being dumped by her boyfriend Marc in Paris – "he was heading off to an ashram and said we could communicate telepathically" – Hattie hears her sister Min has been checked into a psychiatric hospital, and finds herself flying back to Winnipeg to take care of Thebes and Logan, her niece and nephew. Not knowing what else to do, she loads the kids, a cooler, and a pile of CDs into their van and they set out on a road trip in search of the children's long-lost father, Cherkis.

In part because no one has any good idea where Cherkis is, the traveling matters more than the destination. On their wayward, eventful journey down to North Dakota and beyond, the Troutmans stay at scary motels, meet helpful hippies, and try to ignore the threatening noises coming from under the hood of their van. Eleven-year-old Thebes spends her time making huge novelty cheques with arts and crafts supplies in the back, and won't wash, no matter how wild and matted her purple hair gets; she forgot to pack any clothes. Four years older, Logan carves phrases like "Fear Yourself" into the dashboard, and repeatedly disappears in the middle of the night to play basketball; he's in love, he says, with *New York Times* columnist Deborah Solomon. Meanwhile, Min can't be reached at the hospital, and, more than once, Hattie calls Marc in tears.

But though it might seem like an escape from crisis into chaos, this journey is also desperately necessary, a chance for an accidental family to accept, understand or at least find their way through overwhelming times. From interwoven memories and scenes from the past, we learn much more about them: how Min got so sick, why Cherkis left home, why Hattie went to Paris, and what made Thebes and Logan who they are today.

In this completely captivating book, Miriam Toews has created some of the most engaging characters in Canadian literature: Hattie, Logan and Thebes are bewildered, hopeful, angry, and most of all, absolutely alive. Full of richly skewed, richly funny detail, **The Flying Troutmans** is a uniquely affecting novel.

## The Flying Troutmans Details

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Author : Miriam Toews

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# From Reader Review The Flying Troutmans for online ebook

## Relyn says

I discovered this book at my favorite bookstore, The Reading Reptile in Kansas City. It's a children's bookstore. So, I really pay attention to the adult books they choose. This was beautifully, sensitively written. In all, the story has been told before. It was about the effect of mental illness on a family, specifically a mother's illness on her children and the sibling left to pick up the pieces. Not sorry I read it. Won't reread it.

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## Shane says

I know that Miriam Toews is a much beloved writer in Canada and one should be kind with one's comments, but I found this road story a bit claustrophobic at times despite the waves of humour that the writer conjures for us. Three people in an ailing van - 28 year-old Aunt Hattie and her 15-year old nephew Logan, the basketball junkie driving without a licence, and his unwashed super-intelligent 11 year-old sister Thebes - all running away from an impossibly suicidal Mum in Manitoba, and searching for Dad in California. All this travel can get a bit boring at times, despite the snappy dialogue, humorous situations, the vitality of youth exuded, and the interesting bookended parental figures. There were only so many novel things the travellers could do on the trip before I got the sense that the author was contriving dialogue and situations to keep this story moving, just like that ailing van.

Now that I have been unkind, let me speak to the part that enlightened me: psychotics should never procreate and raise families, despite how loving they are to their children; it's absolutely selfish on their part, because it's those around them who have to pick up the pieces and deal with the guilt. And Toews, in this dramatic-comedy, gets this point across very elegantly. Min is the psychotic mother, hell-bent on self-destruction, while Hattie is her younger sister, plagued with responsibility and guilt because of it. No one is spared: Min's father drowns trying to save her, Hattie breaks up with her boyfriend to come to Min's bedside and takes responsibility for Min's children while Min tries to "discover" herself yet again, Cherkis, the children's father, is chased from the family home in one of Min's rages, and the children, Logan and Thebes, are constantly on the alert for Mum's next meltdown, and trying to avoid the realization that they are alone in the world.

My next revelation was that these characters, the Troutman family, symbolize the 21st century middle class in Canada, and are so emotionally conflicted and impoverished that they almost come across as freaks: not socially responsible or socialized, leading lives that go from one self-absorbed moment to the next. Thebes does not wash herself but finds pleasure in asking questions prompted by a dictionary, or in making giant gift cheques; Logan is constantly buried under his hoodie with his headphones on, or in a pulp magazine purchased at the last gas station, or is found carving cryptic messages on the dashboard, or shooting hoops on any basketball court that comes his way. The Troutman represent the new poverty class in this country, the poverty of the soul. Is this the legacy of Min and her self-destructive nature?

In the end, some break out of this cycle of guilt and others are drawn back into the vortex the moment Min is released from hospital and her whereabouts are unknown. I liked this ending - it's true to life. It says to me that one is never free of these psychotic siblings or parents - they are a curse that you are gifted with until death do you part.

I also realized that I prefer the use of quotations marks to indicate dialogue. This book had dispensed with quotation marks and I found that Toews' conversational narrative style confuses dialogue with narrative at times and forces her to use a lot of unnecessary attributions.

Certainly a quick read, but not one of my better ones.

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## **Come Musica says**

In realtà, sono 3,5 stelle, ma ho messo 3 perché non mi ha pienamente convinta dal punto di vista stilistico.

È la storia di due famiglie che hanno tanti pezzi dispersi. Min e Hattie sono due sorelle. Min ha disturbi mentali, si è sposata e separata e ha due figli, Logan e Thebes, che non vedono il padre da 11 anni. A Hattie è chiesto di mettere insieme i pezzi di questa seconda famiglia, nel tentativo di farlo inconsciamente per quelli che riguardano la sua famiglia di origine.

Una storia commovente per certi versi. È il modo in cui è narrata che a volte è disorientante.

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## **Corey says**

If, along the way, something is gained, then something will also be lost. Those words were emblazoned on Min's bedroom wall, burned into the wallpaer with a charred wine-bottle cork. Our parents dismissed them as psuedo-profound, angsty-adolescent babble, but they haunted me. Why should that be? I wondered. How did she know that? Did she really believe it, or did she just like the way those words looked in burnt cork?  
- from The Flying Troutmans

Let's make an analogy between books and buildings. Some books, like some buildings, are mammoth in scope, appearance, and construction. You can smell the sweat of the author on the pages. You can see the mortar in the cracks. You stare at it, and are amazed. Infinite Jest. Against the Day. Underworld. Books that demand your attention not only for their overall quality, but for the effort as well.

And there's nothing wrong with this. A well-built edifice can be a thing of beauty. Underworld is a spectacular skyscraper of a novel.

But such monuments may serve to denigrate the 'simpler' buildings. Buildings of equal care and precision, and certainly of equal effort, as their more elaborate counterparts, but buildings that don't show off. Like a house that offers its residents a sense of peace and acceptance, obscuring the work that went into its construction. Or a book that quietly leads its readers along a journey, offering multitudes of pleasures, only upon reflection revealing the immense craft that went into its manufacture. Alice Munro is a grand master of such writing. And Miriam Toews is no slouch.

Enter The Flying Troutmans, Toews' first release since her monstrously successful (and damned good) A Complicated Kindness. Like her previous output, the simplicity of Toews' writing belies the artistry which lies underneath. You enjoy the work, but she makes it appear so effortless that subconsciously you may not appreciate how artful an author Toews really is. It requires monumental skill to write in such a fashion that

you don't notice the author's perspiration that undercoats every word.

The linchpin of Toews' tale is Min, a manic-depressive who has undergone complete mental collapse. Picking up the pieces of Min's life is Hattie, Min's sister and Troutmans' narrator. Hattie had always watched over her older sister, but had taken the step of moving to Paris, fleeing "Min's dark planet for the City of Lights." Now, Hattie has had to return to care for Min's children; Thebes, an eleven-year-old daughter prone to speaking in gansta slang, and Logan, a fifteen-year-old son unwillingly thrust into responsibility too soon. And before you can say "Hollywood road movie," she's loaded up the family and headed south in search of the children's long-absent father.

As I rather dismissively wrote above, the trappings of *The Flying Troutmans* is a road trip, that classic staple of Hollywood quirk. It goes without saying that the reader will be reminded strongly of films such as *Little Miss Sunshine* and *The Daytrippers*, although it is quite unfair to simply lump Troutmans in as yet another 'weird family' road movie. The travelogue may have become co-opted and popularized by the cinema, but it has its roots in literature, and as Troutmans ably proves, there's life in the genre yet (alongside Michael Winter's recent triumph *The Architects Are Here*). A good road trip narrative understands that - and here comes another old reliable stand-by - it's not the destination that's important, but the journey.

Toews' great strength as an artist is complete empathy for her characters, combined with a subtle wit and a genuine flair for imagery. Her narrative careens from past memories to current events with nary a misstep. Her tour of the American heartland is warm and funny, complete with reliable standbys such as people who confuse Manitoba with California, and the realization that the Grand Canyon is simply an enormous hole.

In the end, it's simply a great story, wonderfully told. Sometimes, as we bounce around the post-modern world, we forget just how important and rare a skill that is.

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## **Kevin says**

Who wouldn't want to go on a road trip with Miriam Toews?

This is another top notch delight in an increasingly brilliant career. The best thing about MT's writing is that it manages to be both cool and heartbreakingly sweet. The dialogue is the best thing out of Canada since the movie "Highway 61" and the characters are complex and deeply felt. I am going to marry this book. We will be registered at Macy's.

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## **Bonnie says**

WINNER 2008 - Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize  
NOMINEE 2009 - Orange Prize  
FINALIST 2008 - Margaret Laurence Award for Fiction  
FINALIST 2008 - McNally Robinson Book of the Year

*The Flying Troutmans* is a sister-love story. It's a writer-to-reader love story. It's the only story I can remember where I laughed out loud and my laughter abruptly turned into a sob. I couldn't go on; I didn't want to stop. Miriam Toews has written that kind of book.

The protagonist, Hattie is sister to psychotic Mim, and aunt to Mim's children, the brilliant, artistic, optimistic 11-year-old Thebes, and sensitive, protective, yet angry 15-year-old Logan. At Thebes's request, Hattie flees Paris and a failed relationship to come to the children's rescue after her sister has been admitted to a psychiatric hospital.

At a loss as to what to do, Hattie piles the children into Min's van, to go on the road in search of Cherkis, the father Logan hasn't seen since three years of age, and barely remembers. It's Hattie's idea to go in search of Cherkis, yet she has no idea where he might be. What becomes central to the story is not the search for Cherkis, but what happens as they follow clues south of the border, away from Canada. The various encounters and incidents can only happen because of the dynamic, charming personalities of these three characters. Perhaps the precociousness of Thebes and the understanding-beyond-his-years character of Logan might be a stretch for some readers, but I whole-heartedly suspended disbelief, choosing to revel in their uniqueness, their zest for life, their love for their mother, and eventually, for their aunt.

Toews weaves her tale in and out of the past so seamlessly, that as a reader, I felt fully enveloped in the story throughout. Descriptions, details, and especially dialogue – all hit perfect pitch.

This book is an easy read, but much more complex than at first appears. I read it one sitting. Then I immediately reread the beginning, middle and end. I am sure I will reread the entire book in the future. For now, I want to take the time to savour the emotional impact it had on me. Bravo, Mirium!

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### **Shelby \*trains flying monkeys\* says**

The characters in this book aren't perfect but I feel like I know them. Thebes was one of those characters that will stay with you for a long time. Great story with sad mixed with funny in a way that most authors can't pull off.

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### **Barry says**

This book, with a mentally ill person as the catalyst, exhibits schizoid traits of its own. My initial reaction: unconvincing and lazy. I didn't think I'd say this about Toews, winner of the 2004 Governor General's award for *A Complicated Kindness*. *The Flying Troutmans* is my first Toews novel.

Mild quibbles kept piling up. Flurries of minor quibbles turned into dumps of significant quibbles, completely snowing under the charm of the book.

Toews uses the venerable road trip as a platform for the novel. Which is fine, some the best fiction is road-trip fiction. But she gives a really half-hearted try to explain why.

So ditzy and stunningly immature 28-year-old Hattie, sullen wannabe punk 15-year-old Logan, and flaky, precocious Thebes pile into the aging Aerostar in search of Hattie's sister's ex-husband and father of Logan and Thebes.

Hattie has fled Paris after hearing that psychotic, suicidal Min is in the psych ward and someone needs to

care for Logan and Thebes. Logan and Thebes are neglected and emotionally damaged – but in a good way. They exhibit colourful and artistic behaviour, prone to doing wacky things on impulse. Which suits Hattie just fine, because she's the same way.

"Logan took out his knife and started carving in the dashboard again. I wasn't going to try and stop him any more. I wanted to figure out what all his carvings meant. If the dashboard was his canvas, so be it."

Hattie Troutman, responsible guardian.

I gave Toews a bit of latitude with her wildly inconsistent characterizations of the two children. My recent experience with teens and tweens is limited and I'm aware that many kids exhibit childish behaviour and remarkable adult insights. But the swings of Thebes just aren't plausible to me, even allowing that her chatterbox style causes her to spout random thoughts unedited. Like many 11-year-olds, she plays sax in a ska band at school. She boasts a comprehensive knowledge of R-rated and old movies, yet rarely watches TV.

Toews mentions a couple of times that "someone had written 'Deborah Solomon, be my girlfriend' in the thick layer of dust on the screen." According to Wikipedia, "Deborah Solomon (born August 9, 1957) is a journalist and cultural critic with a weekly Q&A column in *The New York Times Magazine*." Of course. Every tortured teen soul has a crush on her. At least the boy's well read. Probably peruses the Times while listening to the Crucifucks on his Discman. (Toews gives us a list of edgy punk and rap acts on his CD.) A lot of hip kids seem to listen to iPods these days, but never mind.

The whole novel feels like Toews has injected a list of interesting details that she has gleaned over time:

1) Logan practises his picks and rolls with his basketball. How do you do a pick and roll by yourself? In Toews's hands, it sounds like he's putting spin on the ball.

2) Min as a 15-year-old not only read *Quotations from Chairman Mao* but *The Anarchist Cookbook* as well. Really? She's lulling on a beach in Acapulco reading recipes and instructions for the manufacture of explosives and phreaking devices?

She doesn't know exactly what they are, but they sound good. This is where the lazy tag comes in. She's content skate by on her easy charm. Toews needs to do more than toss a random series of tics together.

I know this is nitpicky, but the Troutmans were on the road "for hours" and they only got to Mexican Hat from Moab – it's a short hop, maybe 30 km. Toews's little "facts" can confuse someone who was actually there. I think she likes the names of the towns.

So a complete waste of time? No, around the mid-point Toews surprises me. Her description of a Winnipeg cold spell is sharply observed. It's two very good paragraphs and this marks the turning point. Thebes dials down her zaniness a couple of notches, Logan's cynical façade cracks a little, and Hattie ruminates about her past and her relationship with Min. Toews seemingly effortless prose gives us telling details of Min's problems, something she neglected to do in her haste to get on the road. She articulates well the almost universal feeling of regret that haunts the mentally ill and addicted people. This is honest pain and emotion, never maudlin, simply and directly told. This is what won her the GG. In sum, the second half of the book is everything the first half is not. Toews redeems herself and earns a passing grade – but just barely.



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## Jilanna says

I loved this book. I love the people in it and the way MT tells the story. Not sure if I like this or AMPS better. TFT might be my favourite. I feel like I'll miss these characters more.

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## Lynn says

Oh I loved this book - funny and disfunctional and terrible sad in places, but nevertheless a delightful journey with a family battling crazy in all it's manifestations. I'm definitely going to make the students read this one - they will love it's humour, it's honesty and despite all the crap that life deals the Troutmans - they'll like the beam of hope that comes out of the pages of their roadtrip. Have they made this in to a film I wonder? The way Toews writes is so visual and colourful I can see the entire trip through these characters like some lucid art work Thebes would make. So entertaining and relevant. Fabulous read.

Ok, and just adding this link to a fascinating article about Toews which adds a lot of insight in to why the book is feels so honest and non-judging. She gets it, she knows it. Love it even more. Thank you Ms Towes.

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

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## jo says

i have this gr friend i won't say their name and they read this book and told me jo you should read it it's sort of like Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* which if you don't remember is the 2011 national book award winner and describes a poor rural black family before and during hurricane katrina

as you can imagine i was intrigued on account of what can this little canadian romp of a book *possibly* have in common with *salvage the bones* which is dead serious and sultry and racked with tragedy and so sticky hot you want to take a shower after reading each chunk what can these two books possibly have in common

and the answer the short answer is nothing

the long answer can get pretty long on account of ink, paper, library of congress headings, title page, page numbers, you get the idea

but this here book this here slim book is a thing of beauty even though it's not a thing of beauty in the way in which *salvage the bones* is a thing of beauty which it is and the reason is that it's one of those book they are a genre really that give you the pain of kids with tons of humor and quirkiness but it's still a lot of pain and it could be really sad but what makes it less sad and maybe not even sad at all is that it allows you to *contain* it you feel you are making a difference you are there reading the book and the kids are not alone because you are there and you are *getting it* and as long as you are there loving the kids they will be okay

now the first and forever best in this genre is *The Catcher in the Rye* and another masterpiece in this genre is *Someday This Pain Will Be Useful to You* and i must say that unlike in these two previous books in this here

*flying troutmans* book there actually is an adult who cares and is there just like you are seeing and hearing and getting the kids' pain the problem being *however* that this adult is also a bit fucked up so you are needed too which feels good because you are there and you care consequently everyone will be okay

now the thing about this book is that like those other two i mentioned it's very funny but unlike the other two i mentioned is really really **fast** well let me qualify it has parts that are really fast and those are the parts that have to do with little 11-year-old thebes a character that easily rivals holden caulfield as the best kid character ever to appear in the history of quirky kid character literature but then there are parts in which the focus is on the other kid her brother logan and those parts slow the book way down like you had your car in fifth gear and you forced it into third gear

there's a loud RRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR and the car slows way down

and i could totally talk about what the story is about and how the pain of the kids is described and all that and i also could talk about how unrealistic this story is how it doesn't make sense at all but this would be boring and what i really want to say is that Miriam Toews' prose is nothing short of virtuosic and this little deceptively simple book could not have been written by anyone other than a genius writer and i also want to say if you decide to read it give it a minute get in the groove and then let yourself be delighted by how amazing the writing is and how big the heart producing it is and thank you miriam toews for having given me a good sane ride along with people who love each other because to tell you the truth i kind of needed it

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## Rita says

This is my favorite book. For all this time, whenever I've been asked that question, I've said, "Oh, there are so many that I love, it's impossible to pin down just one and call it my favorite."

Now, it's possible.

The characters, the storyline, the writing, the dialog all comes together so that every word is necessary and there aren't any to spare. It is just perfect.

Hattie is on a road trip with her 15 year-old nephew, Logan and 11 year-old niece, Thebes. The kids' mother, Min, is mentally ill and admitted into a psychiatric hospital again. Hattie is called back to help out. She feels inadequate with these kids and with her quest and with herself every step of the way. It was a lot like a Hornby book in that I could relate to none of the characters in particular, but could take pieces from each of them and see some part of me reflected. From the 15 year-old boy, to Hattie, to her sister, to the judgmental strangers who stared at them when they stopped. Because while I fell in love with these little freaks, I did have to pause and wonder how I would really react to these people if I met them at a restaurant or gas station.

It's funny and deep and insightful. If you liked Little Miss Sunshine at all (and really, who didn't), then you'd like this.

Here are some of my favorite tidbits:

"Admittedly, I would have preferred to keep roaming around Paris pretending to be an artist with my moody,

adjective-hating boyfriend, Marc, but he was heading off to an ashram in India anyway and said we could communicate telepathically. I tried it a couple of days before he left. I love you, don't go, I said silently, without moving my lips. He was standing next to me, trying to photograph a gargoyle. You're a little in my way, he said. Can you move? No amount of telepathy worked with him, but maybe you have to be thousands of miles away from someone in order for your thoughts to work up the speed and velocity required to hit their target."

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"Logan Troutman, [Thebes] said. You've experienced a lot of failure in the past. What makes you think this venture will be a success?

Logan: I have a very positive mental attitude. Plus, it helps that I really don't care."

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"Word, said Colt. I'm down. I wish I lived on Moralia. Thebes had found a soulmate in this homicidal cosmonaut. Impeccably, somberly united in their mutual, impossible longing to live in places that weren't real, they high-fived and punched and slapped and then gazed for a while out the window at the real world, the one they'd had it with."

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"Hey, isn't the Grand Canyon around here somewhere? She said.

*Hey, another chunk of the world missing from our lives. Another giant hole in the surface of our universe. Let's find it!"*

The whole book is full of treasures just like that. All lined up one after another. The copy I just finished is on loan from the library. I'm going to hold onto it until I can buy my own. I want to have it around here, if only so I can every once in a while read this:

"Min was in the universe. She was a dim and falling star, but she was alive. She hadn't loved watching the sun's eclipse as much as she'd loved watching it reappear. If she had really, truly wanted to die, she'd have succeeded a long time ago. She loved the brink, going to it and returning from it. Or maybe she didn't love it. Maybe she hated it. But, it didn't really matter. Maybe going to the brink made her feel like she'd accomplished something extraordinary, like there was a purpose to her life, if only to prolong it in spite of herself. She was the captain of both teams, waging war against herself but always pulling back from any decisive victory because that would also mean a decisive loss."

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## **Ron Charles says**

Miriam Toews saunters along the line between comedy and grief as if she might lose her balance at any moment. But she never does. The precarious tone of her novels about fractured families is the crafted effect of a nimble writer. Raised by Mennonites in a small Canadian town, Toews has developed an irresistible sense of absurdity leavened with real affection for the quirky characters who inhabit her stories.

The Flying Troutmans, her fourth novel, invites immediate comparison with the popular indie movie "Little

Miss Sunshine." Like Michael Arndt's film, it's about a collection of oddball family members on a cross-country road trip toward a highly unlikely goal. Deadpan irony and hip cultural references abound. But Toews steps over the camp and sentimentality of "Little Miss Sunshine" and displays a sharper sense of the grinding tragedy of mental illness.

The story is narrated by Hattie Troutman, a young woman who's just been dumped by her flaky boyfriend in Paris when she gets word that her older sister, Min, has fallen into a deep depression -- again. Hattie would rather wander around the City of Light feeling sorry for herself, but somebody has to take care of Min and her two kids back in Canada. She's been trying to kill herself for years, Hattie explains. "I had no choice. There was no question." But she finds the situation at home even more alarming than she'd feared. Bedridden and suicidal, Min needs to be hospitalized immediately. "Please help me die," she asks Hattie, and then tells her not to let the kids visit. "It's too hard."

Unable to let her niece and nephew know the truth and realizing that they'll be sent into foster care, Hattie devises a half-baked scheme to find their father. With only a vague sense of where he might be -- somewhere in California, perhaps -- the three of them set out in a rickety old van.

Yes, the road trip storyline is a little tread-worn, but Toews has created such an engaging cast for this 2,000-mile trek that you'll never be tempted to ask, "Are we there yet?" Most of the novel's success stems from the fact that Min's two witty children are irresistible characters, alternately vulnerable, affectionate, terrified, brave and annoying. They're also very bright, not like the "gifted" children of every parent in the Washington area, but scarily precocious, burdened with that alienating sense of insight that can wreak havoc on young lives.

Hattie's 11-year-old niece, Thebes, who never bathes or changes her clothes, has fake tattoos all over her arms and dyes her hair intense purple. She wears a toy holster, practices martial arts, makes "oversized novelty cheques" for everyone, and greets strangers with gangsta salutations: "What's shakin' homies?" All sticky from cotton candy and covered in glitter, she's a tear-your-heart-out character.

"I'm on thin ice in the social hierarchy department," she tells her aunt, with her usual degree of disarming self-knowledge. Hattie notices that "Thebes had become a talking machine. Maybe she was attempting to use up all the words that Min had left behind, taking whatever popped into her head, any thought, idea or fact, and transforming it into sound, noise, life. She was talking for two, in double time."

Her brother, 15-year-old Logan, seems a little better adjusted, but he's moody, teenage-quiet and in love with Deborah Solomon, the weekly Q&A columnist for the New York Times Magazine. Mostly, he's cloaked in a grey hoodie, listening to music on a pair of "giant air traffic controller headphones." But there are cracks in that impenetrable façade, times when Hattie can feel him screaming, "Rescue me."

Toews is a genius at recording the everyday weirdness of young people, their capricious vacillation between screw-you sarcasm and tender pleading for affirmation. Some of the funniest parts of *The Flying Troutmans* describe the word games, art projects, true confessions and circular arguments to which a long, mind-numbing car trip can drive people of all ages. "Conversing with children is a fine art," Hattie realizes. "An art form that demands large amounts of both honesty and misdirection."

"Can we not talk?" Logan pleads.

"Let's have a quiet contest," Hattie suggests.

As this "ad hoc family" wanders through one comic encounter after another on their way to California, Toews keeps the story grounded with flashbacks of Hattie's childhood. Min suffered from a frightening range of symptoms of manic depression and suicidal, even homicidal, behavior that their parents struggled to ignore or laugh off. We're never allowed to forget for long that, beneath the comedy, this is a story of loving someone who is mentally ill and of standing by your responsibilities no matter what.

Hattie believes she has no idea what she's doing, but her instincts are right. "There is not one single thing that I am certain of," she confesses, "except that I have to make sure Thebes and Logan are taken care of." There is no false promise in this story, just an awareness that in this chaotic world the only stability comes from our love for one another, quirks and all. In Toews's hands, that can be funny or heartbreaking, usually at the same time. When Hattie describes Logan as "all badly disguised tenderness and tentative joy," you know just what she means.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/...>

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## **Kelly says**

I've found a new favorite writer, methinks. This is one of a string of books that all but destroyed my own will to write. But in a good way.

This book is hilarious but also hits you where it counts. Here's a little taste, after the narrator Hattie has been picked up from the airport by her (underage) nephew Logan and niece Thebes:

"Logan ended up driving back to their house because I didn't know how to tell him not to and because he hadn't seemed interested in relinquishing control of the wheel anyway. Logan and Thebes yelled at each other all the way back, the music cranked the whole time.

Thebes: Stay in your lane, moron!

Logan: Don't lose your f\*\*\*ing sh\*\*, man!

Thebes: I don't want to die, loser! Use two hands!

Logan: Do NOT grab the steering wheel!

Then Thebes went into this strange kind of commentary thing she does, quoting the imaginary people in her head. This time it was a funeral director, I think. She said: With an impact this severe there is not a hope of reconstructing this kid's face. She banged the back window with her fist.

What was that? I asked her.

The lid of my coffin, slamming down, she said. Closed casket. I'll be unrecognizable anyway."

Man, I loved those kids. They broke my heart and cracked me up at every turn.

I will definitely be reading more by this author.

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## Jennifer (aka EM) says

This thing got me from the very first paragraph – it threw me in the back of its van in Winnipeg, and sped off down a dusty, prairie road with me, across borders temporal, geographical and emotional, and it didn't let me go until it had wrung me out, surprised me, made me laugh, made me cry, made me FEEL oh so much, and then left me on the tarmac in San Diego heading back home, with a grain of hope that yeah, the kids (will be) alright.

First up: the voice. A kind of early Tom Robbins whimsy describing a similar cast of misfits, but simpler, less metaphor and simile-filled. Straightforward. Full of wacky details, raw and honest, but most of all – spare and direct and rich with poignant, perfect detail in describing the three central characters (aunt and sister, Hattie; her niece Thebes and nephew Logan), what they think feel and have been through, and through them, the one around whom they all revolve: mom, Min.

And second: the characters. A motley crew of wounded, gentle souls – united by blood, family ties braided thick with love and guilt and obligation and understanding and shared pasts and genes and brain chemistry and ways of being in the world that are both the stuff that saves them, and the stuff that destroys them. But they never destroy each other.

They are doing all they can to lean on and help each other just keep it together. Just get through and be okay. Hattie, 28-yrs-old – returning after breaking free from orbiting “Min’s dark planet,” confused, trying to do the best she can, not knowing what that is, operating almost solely by instinct and love tinged with guilt. Feeling responsible for her sister’s decline into mental illness. Feeling the tremendous burden of being the only adult around, feeling barely like an adult herself, feeling as cracked and torn and vulnerable as the rest of them, but doing the right thing.

**WARNING:** The rest of this review may contain minor spoilers - some I've caught; some I haven't. So read at your own risk.

And it's the voice of the absolutely wonderful 11-yr-old Thebes, her niece. Full of gangsta-rapping, dictionary-reporting, pearly nuggets of wisdom. Thebes is an old soul sparkling with remnants of glitter and blazing with purple hair, in a ragged, increasingly-dirty blue terry cloth outfit, writing songs and poems and creating enormous publisher's clearing house-style cheques from the back of the van, to bestow upon the ones she loves what fortunes she can, caring for everyone, holding everything together with her charm, her wit, her love, her crazy-ass chatter, her artsy-crafty creative force, her manic energy and anxiety that propels this book from start to finish. Thebes is the most colourful character – quite literally – that I've come across in literature in a long time. She (view spoiler) can't be contained by stark, white, convention. She can't be cleaned up. She shouldn't be. Thebes's kind of crazy is the kind upon which the core of resilience and survival rests.

And finally, it's Logan – quiet, he sneaks up on you. He's 15 yrs old, a basketball-playing, sweetly-sensitive poet. He's acting out, and going deep within – expressing his pain (they all do it slightly differently) by carving non-sequitur couplets into the dashboard with his switchblade and creating paper maché heads (view spoiler) – to be propped up at the front of the van like a figurehead on a ship, a guardian to protect them on their journey.

Did I say this book lacked metaphor?

Huh, maybe not.

So much more ... so much. The tenderness, the sweetness between Logan and Thebes and where that goes. The finding of (view spoiler) - how freaking beautiful – unexpected, unlikely - was that? (I've been raging about coincidences in novels that are too big to be believed; this one wasn't). (view spoiler)

The pit bull – The Beef-renamed Lucille-renamed Rajbeer – who needed more love than her mechanic finder-owner could give her. So he gave her to three people in a broken-down van whose journey was fuelled by it. (view spoiler)

Right, not a metaphor in any of these 274 pages.

Family. Love. Resilience. Hope. Survival. Recovery. Hope. Kindness. Hope. Family. Love. Hope.

I just upped it to five stars. And realize, yep - I need to read it again. Slower, this time.

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## **Dianne says**

Interesting. I think that's the word I'd use to describe this book. I didn't love it, but the story is quite original and there's a lot to be said for that. The characters are fresh and funky and vulnerable and they left me curious to take a look at her other novels.

It is about a woman, Hattie, who comes home from Paris after her boyfriend dumps her. She has come to take care of her sister, niece and nephew when the sister, Min, is hospitalized for the depression that has plagued her throughout her life. Hattie doesn't really know what she's doing but Logan, 15, seldom says anything and Thebes, 11, talks nonstop and Hattie needs help. She decides they should all take a road trip to find the father they haven't seen in years. She has no clear plan, just a desperation to find someone who can take responsibility for the kids.

Logan drinks, smokes pot and drives without a license; he writes poetry about death and is withdrawn and anti-social. Thebes talks constantly and like a 60 yr old. She doesn't like to wash. Hattie smokes pot with Logan and doesn't argue when he carves a picture of a bashed up head into the leather dash of the car with a knife. Issues all around. It's a very...troubled...family dynamic.

Their drive across country, with the odd assortment of people they meet and the even odder situations they find themselves in makes up the bulk of the story. As a mother I was horrified at some of the things she had the kids doing or allowed them to do, but I could also relate to the tired, sad state that finds it easier to say "sure, why not" than to argue and lose. It got a little far-fetched but never boring.

As with many of the books I've read lately there was more bad language than I really needed, but I found the writing good - very easy to read - and the story moved along quickly. I just realized as I've been writing that this book is very sad. It was touted as "hilarious and heartbreaking" but I didn't find the hilarity. The characters make the best of a bad situation and there are a few ironic moments but I can't recommend it as a funny book. I do recommend it though if you're ready to read something a bit raw and gritty. It will pull you

in and maybe, like me, it will get you interested enough to check out some more of Toews work. I like her writing and her thinking.

I, for one, am ready for a lighter read. The steady literary diet of tragedy, illness, perversion and cynicism I've been on is taking its toll. Fortunately, [abebooks.com](http://abebooks.com), has just offered a list of "feel good" reads that I think I'm ready to sink my teeth into. I just have to finish posting on the books I've already read and then I'm going to move on to something light and maybe even fun.

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### **Petra says**

Another wonderful story by Miriam Toews.

The road trip to find Churkis after Min is hospitalized gives Hattie, Logan and Thebes the chance to determine how to move forward in their lives. In the process, they learn, grow and gain strength.

As always, Miriam Toews' writing is funny and heartbreaking. She manages to balance between these two extremes with grace and finesse.

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### **Natalie says**

Stole my heart, and boy how I would steal little Thebes and keep her forever.

Miriam Toew, if I were a writer, I would want to be you.

Absolutely astonishing ability to write pathos, black comedy, brave beauty and the most searing of agonies.

Favorites!

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### **Simon says**

A beautiful book, both heart-rending and heart-warming at the same time. The three central characters, Hattie (aunt), Thebes, 11 (niece) and Logan, 15 (nephew) are all fantastic but Thebes is the star of the show, with a motor mouth that can't stop producing the weirdest, quirkiest, sweetest things. In what I find just about one of the absurdest, funniest things I've ever read, Thebes dreams there is, previously unbeknownst to her, a thirteenth month, "squeezed somewhere in between February and March". And the month is called Shtetl! And her birthday is in it, so her birthday is Shtetl the Eighth. (In case you don't know, a shtetl was a Jewish village in Eastern Europe.)

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### **Melki says**

*My birth triggered a seismic shift in my sister's life. The day I was born she put her dress on backwards and ran away towards a brighter future, or perhaps toward a brighter past. Our parents found her in a tree next*



*door. Had she been planning to jump? She's been doing that ever since, travelling in two opposite directions at once, towards infancy and death.*

Hattie and Min have never really been close, but now, Min is a mess - wasted and lethargic. She needs hospitalization and her kids need someone to care for them. Panicky at the thought of being their long-term guardian, Hattie takes the kids on a road trip in search of their father. With only the vaguest idea of where he may be located, our intrepid group of Canadian citizens ventures into the American west, meeting memorable characters and acquiring a pet along the way.

Though for me, Hell is *other people's children*, I actually liked Min's kids - garrulous Thebes, who is fond of making over-sized novelty checks for her loved ones, and Logan, quiet and introspective; he's in trouble at school for writing *disturbing* short stories. I could stand spending some time with these two.

All in all, this was a fun story about enjoying the universe...even when it spins out of your control.

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