



Swing Low: A Life

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“Audacious, original and profoundly moving . . . Healing is a likely outcome of a book imbued with the righteous anger, compassion and humanity of *Swing Low*.”—*Globe and Mail* (Canada) Reverberating with emotional power, authenticity, and insight, *Swing Low* is Miriam Toews' daring and deeply affecting memoir of her father's struggle with manic depression in a small Mennonite community in rural Canada. Personal and touching, a stirring counterpart to her novel *Irma Voth* and reminiscent of works by Susan Cheever, Gail Caldwell, Mary Karr, and Alexandra Styron, *Swing Low* is an elegiac ode to a difficult life by an author drawing from the deepest well of insight, craft, and emotion.

Swing Low: A Life Details

Date : Published September 6th 2011 by HarperCollins Publishers (first published January 1st 2000)

ISBN : 9780062070166

Author : Miriam Toews

Format : Paperback 240 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Autobiography, Memoir, Biography, Cultural, Canada

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From Reader Review *Swing Low: A Life* for online ebook

Joanne-in-Canada says

Tender. Sad. Funny. Beautiful.

Kirsty says

I very much enjoy Toews' fiction, and whilst *Swing Low*, which is a fictionalised memoir of her father, is a step away from what I am used to in her work, I am pleased to report that it was rather wonderful. The approximation of her father's own voice feels both candid and believable. Very engrossing and darkly comic, thoughtful and moving, *Swing Low* is ultimately a very loving tribute.

Joey Comeau says

Miriam Toews has written a book about her father's life and suicide. She has written it, however, as a novel, and in the first person from his perspective. It is completely unsentimental and yet beautiful.

Claire Cameron says

I love Miriam Toews' writing and this was one of my favourite of her books, but I admit to be biased. I wrote more about it on my blog -

<http://www.claire-cameron.com/completely-biased-reviews-swing-low-by-miriam-toews/>

Heather says

I won a copy of this book through a giveaway on Goodreads. At the time I received it, I couldn't remember having signed up for it, or why I might have, although after having read the back cover description it seemed fitting that I should win this. I too lost my father to suicide, and Miriam's writing mirrored a lot of what we went through, things my dad said (or didn't say). That same helplessness, the feeling of not being good enough, or not having done enough for the people in his life, was so familiar. And though we struggled to understand, just as Miriam and her family did, it was not enough to break through the devastating paralysis of depression.

This book was very moving. I don't know that I would have ever come across it had I not won it, but I will now share it with people who have experienced similar tragedies in their lives.

Nancy says

This had to be an incredibly difficult book to write. Miriam, the protagonist's daughter, tried to get into his head and recreate thoughts he might have been having. She began at the end. The prologue is Mel's end. He committed suicide at the age of 62. Having taught school for 40 years, sustained a marriage and a life, hiding mental illness through his work and church devotion, he ended his life before dementia took his mind.

The first few chapters confused me a bit. They were circular and difficult to follow. Apparently, Miriam's father not only suffered from being bi-polar but also had psychotic episodes. And, it would seem, a little bit of Fugue. Ergo, if he was getting lost in his thoughts, obviously the reader would, also.

About a third of the way through the book, I recognized a pattern. Mel was trying to link the events of the past few days to his life and had decided to start at the beginning. He recounted his childhood in his Mennonite community but also included his ancestral chain which hinted of depression, as well. Driven by guilt and shame which are linked to his upbringing and culture rather than religion, he becomes quiet when he can, robust when he needs to play a part.

At the same time, Mel is interacting with the reader and world. By world, I really mean his daughters and hospital staff. Mel is currently hospitalized while his daughters are working to get Mel help. But he has spent the past 62 years knowing how to answer questions and playing the part. His wife is exhausted and she needs help. Thus the interaction.

The book concludes with Mel's suicide, of course but the author offers a culmination of his life's work which is much greater than he believed and in direct contradiction of his last words to her; Nothing accomplished. As the author clearly points out in another chapter, regarding a different aspect, Mel laments that there are no windows in the house of Depression - only mirrors.

Through the internal dialogue and memories, the author paints a picture of a faithful Mennonite man, a father, a husband, a teacher, a sufferer of Bi-Polar Disorder, at times psychotic, other times clever and witty. Well connected and loved member of the community, he found it exhausting to live up to others' expectations (loved that nugget). He was a man of extremes and afraid of change.

Speaking of change, how many Mennonites does it take to change a light bulb?

Answer: Change?

Not my joke, I got it from the book.

Objectively written for such a personal subject. Nice work!

Joanne Seitz says

I gave this 5 stars because I loved the character - Toews' father. The book is a wonderful description of bipolar disorder afflicting a (generally) lovely person. Perhaps not the best book for people looking for a good novel, but a great read for anyone looking to understand this form of mental illness. Also, Toews is a terrific writer.

John Senner says

Miriam Toews' father was a silent, closed, man at home but an exuberant elementary school teacher and community activist away from home. When he kills himself by stepping in front of a train, his daughter attempts to reconstruct his life and let him narrate it from his hospital bed. Part of the problem is the Mennonite culture of "not talking about it."

Lydia Presley says

Original review posted here

Let me just say ... I did not enjoy Irma Voth – the fiction novel that Miriam Toews wrote and I reviewed just a few weeks ago. So it was with some trepidation that I picked *Swing Low* up off my shelf.

I was blown away.

Seriously, this book was nothing at all like *Irma Voth*. It was clear, concise, and a beautiful tribute to her father. Miriam's voice, as she speaks from her father's point of view, is crystal clear, heart-breaking and filled with love. I never once got the sense that he was, in any way shape or form, a bad man. I understood that he was sick, broken in a way, I understood that he loved his family – his wife and his children, and I wept when we came to the point of his last decision.

All through the book what spoke loudest to me was his daughters forgiveness. Miriam shows with complete clarity that, while she loved her father dearly, she cannot hate him for what he did. How powerful is that forgiveness? It spoke to my heart, it made me weep, it made me appreciate my own parents more and think about just how serious, how dreadful and how dangerous mental disorders can be.

Take the time to hug your family. Tell them you love them. Read this book if you need a good kick in the pants to remind you of how special they are.

Edith says

This was quite an amazing book. This (former Mennonite) gal is an excellent writer. In an unusual manner for a memoir, Miriam writes from her father's point of view; it took me a chapter or so to habitually think in the right frame of mind. When "he" writes about his state of mind (he was manic-depressive), it is actually Miriam writing what she surmised his state of mind might well have been. He was such a productive man in his manic phase, a 6th grade teacher, and yet when asked by his daughter the day before he took his own life what he was thinking of, his reply was two simple words- "Nothing accomplished". It is enough to make you weep...that inability to recognize and acknowledge all the rigorous efforts of your life. He had retired and his teaching job (where he poured ALL his manic energy) was gone. It was all downhill from there. Miriam Toews (pronounced Taves-long "a") writes a respectful tribute to her father; I was very moved. She portrays her mother as a remarkable woman whose natural ebullience and joy, not to mention patience and intelligence, carried the family's activities forward and helped to stabilize her father. This woman got several

degrees when her children were older.

I also learned, (surprise, surprise!) that Miriam was the sad, mournful wife in the "Silent Light" movie about Mennonites in Mexico. The director saw her photo in one of her books and said that he wanted her for his movie. I was struck by her role as the silent, suffering wife and felt that the most moving scene in the whole movie was her breakdown on that (interminable) ride during the rainstorm. She cannot only write; she can act. Her great-grandfather migrated from Russia to Manitoba, Canada as a baby when large groups of Mennonites were given land to farm by Queen Victoria in the late 1800's. Her father's sister and family were missionaries to Mexico.

This author has won lots of writing awards already and we will probably see a lot more of her work.

Uncle says

I will make a sign for my doorknob that reads: C'mon in, patient is already disturbed. - Miriam Toews, *Swing Low*.

In her family memoir *Swing Low: A Life*, Mennonite author Miriam Toews reconstructs the life and death of her father. It is a beautifully written book, yet one dealing with difficult subject matter: mental illness and suicide. Her memoir of her father's life touches upon the ties of family and community, and the struggle between faith and despair.

Mel Toews (Miriam's father) was a respected member of his church and community in Steinbach, Manitoba. An enthusiastic and innovative public school teacher, he was beloved by his students. Yet his wife and daughters knew the private truth behind the public life, a secret which left him drained to the point of exhaustion. The anxiety and depression he had felt since childhood, though medicated, were a constant threat. His two daughters grew up with a father, who was often remote and silent and frequently bedridden. (Tragically, Mel's daughter Marjorie Toews took her own life in 2010.)

Though she draws upon her Mennonite experience for both her fiction and non-fiction, Toews would eventually leave her community and faith behind. Her relationship with both is strained. *Swing Low* is not a book about blame, but the author raises difficult questions. Could her father's faith, steeped in so much guilt, silence, and denial, be responsible for his mental illness? During his final stay (in the local Steinbach hospital), he receives visits from well-meaning friends and relations. Yet, strangely, no doctor ever appears at his bedside to treat him, despite his family's desperate pleas.

Toews tells her father's life story in the first person, from his viewpoint. At first I wondered whether I might find this aspect of the book to be overly-intimate, perhaps even a bit creepy. But she succeeds in conveying his voice and personality, including his understandably sardonic humor. *Swing Low* is ultimately the author's version of her father's life. Yet what makes this book so moving is the author's quiet understanding and forgiveness of the parent whose illness cast such a pall over her childhood.

Nicolien says

"There are no windows within the dark house of depression through which to see others, only mirrors."

Petra says

"There are no windows within the dark house of depression through which to see others, only mirrors." I found this to be the most telling sentence of what it must be like to be fully and deeply depressed.

This is a lovely tribute to one's father. It's warmly, lovingly and tenderly told, with understanding and compassion. It's beautiful in this context.

Mel's story is a remarkable one. His life was successful in every way: a job he loved, a wife he loved, a family he loved, friends he enjoyed.....yet the darkness never left him and he wasn't able to enjoy his successes. He didn't feel he had any; to him, he was a failure. This loving, successful man thought he was a failure. I wish him nothing but peace, wherever he is.

However, this story, well-told as it is, is a daughter's attempt to enter the mind of her depressed father to try to understand what happened. It's a loving thing to do but it leaves a disconnect as well. One can't enter the mind of a depressed person that easily (David Foster Wallace did it best in one description of depression in *Infinite Jest*). Having that person be a loving father makes it harder yet to do, I think.

This is a beautiful story and a loving tribute. There are a couple of questions that I'd be interested in having answered (perhaps they can't be; perhaps there are no answers): where are the doctors in the hospital? why did none of the psychiatrists over the years listen to the family?

Clif Hostetler says

This is a memoir of a man (Mel Toews) who suffered from life long bipolar disorder, commits suicide, and then tells his story from beyond the pale (i.e. beyond the grave). Do I have your attention yet? Obviously he couldn't write his memoir after committing suicide. But his memoir did get written in his own first person voice--by his daughter. The very concept causes me to shudder from its haunted poignancy.

The day before his suicide his daughter, Miriam, asked him what he was thinking. His answer was, "Nothing accomplished." Her goal in writing this book was to prove him wrong. She did an admirable job. Miriam Toews used her skill as a writer to get inside his troubled mind to explain why he decided to end it all.

In the Prologue and Epilogue Miriam writes in her own voice. All of the rest of the book is written as private thoughts of Mel during the final days of his life while being hospitalized as a result of an apparent recent psychotic break. The narrative switches between current hospital scenes and recollections of earlier years. The reflections of earlier life are filled with interesting tales of growing up on a farm, delivering eggs, courting a wife, becoming a teacher, and rearing a family in the midst of private torment. The author's writing skills transforms accounts of a rather plain life into an interesting book; I especially enjoyed the account of a six week family trip to South and Central America. The descriptions of the current hospitalization experience contains elements of suspense by mentioning blood and killing his wife. But he's not thinking clearly, and his daughters assure him that his wife is fine and has moved to the City (Winnipeg). But the cause of his most recent admittance to the hospital remains ambiguous.

At age 17 Mel had been diagnosed with manic depression (as it was labeled then). The seriousness of his disease is indicated by the following advice from his psychiatrist:

"My psychiatrist had, when I informed him that I was planning to get married, expressed no small amount of shock and dismay. He told me that those who suffer from manic depression have a lot of difficulty making marriages or any long-term relationship work, and when I told him that I was also planning on becoming a school teacher, he almost hit the roof. The responsibility, Mel, the consistency, the patience, the endurance . . . all these things are extremely difficult to maintain with an illness like yours . . . won't you reconsider?"

Mel did not take the aforementioned advice and got married and became a teacher. One could say that he proved his psychiatrist wrong by maintaining a long marriage, raising two daughters, and having a long career as a sixth grade teacher. But it can be argued that the psychiatrist had a legitimate concern. Maintaining the external appearance of normalcy was excruciating work for Mel, and his family life sadly suffered as a result.

He says in the book that he had monthly appointments with a psychiatrist and took psychiatric drugs all his life which indicates that he must have been a compliant patient. However, the following quotation from the book indicates that he didn't fully accept the concept of Freudian psychology.

"Never, ever did I admit or acknowledge even to myself that I was sick. My lapses into depression, I felt, were due to a weakness in my character, and my disappointments and failures in life, thought they were rather typical of any average life, were what I felt I deserved. And so I resolved, with steely determination, to become a better human being."

Both of his daughter's were anxious to leave their home town of Steinbach, Manitoba as soon as they finished twelfth grade. Mel admits that he modeled a life that they apparently wanted to avoid for themselves. Miriam (the actual author) had very strong feelings on the matter as indicated by the following quotation:

"She [Miriam's sister] wasn't as quick as Miriam to denounce everything about this place as being backward, soul-destroying, hypocritical, or excruciatingly dull."

I considered this to be a biography. But I found the book in the library placed in the 616 Section (diseases, within section for medical sciences). It was on the library shelf next to other books about mental health and depression.

I learned much about Miriam from this book. I had often wondered while reading her novels how much of her writing came from personal experiences and how much was imagined by her creative mind. I think I can now find traces of her life's history in all of her novels. Her novels have creatively rearranged the characters and experiences of her life into a variety of settings. But it is no accident that almost all her stories somehow involve a strained father-daughter relationship. There's more I could say here, but I'm getting off the subject of this book.

My previously mentioned haunted poignancy became stronger when I recently learned that Miriam's sister, named Marj, committed suicide near the 12th anniversary of her father's death, at the same place and in the same manner. [\[LINK TO STORY\]](#) I told this story to some friends recently who instead of being shocked

told me that they had known of similar occurrences in other families.

B. Mason says

I was first drawn to this book because of the challenge of a daughter writing in her father's voice. With characteristic elegance, Miriam Toews reveals the humor and tragedy of her father's life. And in a few beautiful moments in the book, her voice breaks into his and, far from being jarring, captures intense love and grief.

Jocelynn says

Really good book, Miriam Toews does not disappoint. I love the way she writes. This is of course a very emotional book, but what a way to honour her father and bring about alternative perspectives to mental health in a society that drastically needs these alternative perspectives and validating people are they are.

MEGAN C says

Miriam Toews memoir of her father's struggle with manic depression in a small Mennonite community is astounding. Written from her father's perspective the book is both beautiful and sad. I would recommend it to anyone.

David Townsend says

There are no windows within the dark house of depression through which to see others, only mirrors.

Alex says

Very, very sad but also very, very funny in a lot of ways. Well written, easy to read and very likable narrator. Didn't think I would like this book as much as I did--not usually a fan of Canadian lit but this was great.

C Valeri says

Wow this book was really heartbreaking at the same time it was uplifting and hilarious. Not to be undertaken lightly! But a really beautiful story and nice tribute to her dad. TJ you may like this book!
