Literary Reviews

Miriam Toews, *Fight Night*. Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2021. Pp. 251. Hardcover, $29.95.

In *Fight Night,* Miriam Toews has written a work which continues many of the concerns of her previous novels, all while introducing a fresh perspective through the voice of Swiv, a precocious nine-year-old striving to deal with very adult problems. Expelled from school for excessive fighting, and with a mother distracted by the aftermath of her sister Momo's suicide, a disastrous stint on a movie set in Albania, a marriage breakup, and an unplanned pregnancy, Swiv takes on the role of caring for Elvira, her ill yet irrepressible grandmother. Over the course of the novel, Grandma Elvira teaches Swiv that fighting involves more than being the winner in games of King of the Castle. We must fight "to find joy and to create joy," she explains. "All through the night. The fight night" (159).

As one expects of a book by Toews, *Fight Night* combines laugh-aloud humour with poignant descriptions of family trauma. Much of the novel's comedy stems from interactions between Swiv and her grandmother, as Toews hilariously captures the excruciating embarrassment of a nine-year-old who squirms at the antics of a woman who grew up being shamed within her fundamentalist community and consequently decided that shame is a useless waste of mental energy. Swiv faithfully records Elvira's colourful way of talking, with its individualistic phrasing, Plautdietsch epithets, and pithy expressions. Who but Elvira, tasked with being Swiv's tutor while Swiv is expelled from school, would set the following math problem after telling Swiv about a man who abused his wife: "If it takes five years to kill a guy with prayer, and it takes six people a day to pray, then how many prayers of pissed off women praying every day for five years does it take to pray a guy to death?" (31). Elvira may be teaching mathematics, but she is also delivering a lesson about righteous anger at oppression and the somewhat ambiguous power of prayer.

It is the interplay between strong voices—Swiv's and Elvira's, and later Swiv's mother's—that makes the novel such a pleasure to read. Swiv narrates her tale in a letter to her absent father, filling him in on her life since he went away. As in *A Complicated Kindness,* this letter is a homework assignment of sorts, and Swiv's writing has about as much chance of being read by her father as Nomi Nickel's account of her life might have of being read by Mr. Quiring. Toews's decision to have her characters resort to letter writing, diaries, and

personal accounts gives their voices an immediacy which diminishes the barrier between narrator and reader. In confessing her deepest thoughts on paper, Swiv, like Nomi in *A Complicated Kindness*, August Epp in *Women Talking*, the titular Irma Voth, and even the fictionalized version of Mel Toews in *Swing Low: A Life,* mimics the casual flow of language: the intimacy of writing in a semi-private letter or diary, seemingly without editing or revision. Toews, of course, crafts her words very carefully, including multiple synchronicities which show her attention to plot and detail, but here, as in her earlier work, her art gives her characters' voices a freshness and spontaneity which contributes to the ongoing popularity of her writing.

Elvira's "life force," to use Toews's description of her own mother (also Elvira) in the acknowledgements to *All My Puny Sorrows*, fills the reader with admiration, even as Swiv, who loves her grandmother deeply, cringes at the spectacle she seems to make of herself. In Toews's early novels, mothers are either dead (*Summer of My Amazing Luck, The Flying Troutmans*), missing (*A Complicated Kindness)* or downtrodden by their life circumstances (*A Boy of Good Breeding, Irma Voth*), but in her most recent works (*All My Puny Sorrows, Women Talking*, and now in *Fight Night*), Toews celebrates the strength of older women whose experience and perseverance in the face of great troubles provides younger characters, not to mention readers, with inspiration. One suspects that *Fight Night* is an affectionately bemused love letter to Toews's own mother, cloaked by fiction and yet, from what Toews has said in various interviews, in many ways an accurate depiction of Elvira Toews. Swiv may exclaim, "Why can't we just do things normally!" (166), but no doubt she will grow to appreciate her grandmother's ability to speak for herself and carry on in the face of others' judgement or disapproval.

Readers of Toews's earlier novels will find the world of *Fight Night* warmly familiar. In fact, Toews's autofictional novels—that is, novels that clearly contain fictionalized elements of the author's biography—often serve as paratexts for each other, so although Swiv never mentions Mennonites by name, her talk of her grandmother's "secret language" (101) and Elvira's accounts of life under a tyrannical religious leader in "her town of escaped Russians" (106) connect *Fight Night* to Toews's ongoing critique of the damage caused by religious fundamentalism and generational trauma. Once again, the novel asks questions about how one survives the suicide of first a father and then a sister, as well as the fears that go with knowing that the "horrible disease" of mental illness is part of her characters' "*genetic legacy*" (147). In *Fight Night,* however, Toews's raises the

stakes once again: Swiv, at nine, is well aware that she may yet be vulnerable to the hereditary depression which runs in her family, as might the baby her mother carries.

Early in the novel, Swiv recounts Grandma Elvira's philosophy: "She said that what makes a tragedy bearable *and* unbearable is the same thing—which is that life goes on" (66). Toews's great achievement in *Fight Night* is to show how life does indeed go on, fostering resilience even in the face of tragedy and pain. As Grandma tells Swiv's unborn sibling in a letter, we all must learn to fight, even if we cannot always win.

Sabrina Reed
Mount Royal University

Julia Spicher Kasdorf, Christopher Reed, and Joyce Henri Robinson, eds., *Field Language: The Painting and Poetry of Warren and Jane Rohrer*. University Park, PA: Palmer Museum of Art and Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020. Pp. 248. Softcover, $39.95 US.

Jane Rohrer, *Acquiring Land: Late Poems*, ed. Julia Spicher Kasdorf. Telford, PA: DreamSeeker Books, 2020. Pp. 54. Softcover, $12.95 US.

Field Language testifies to the power of a good collaboration. In a project that moves easily between visual art and poetry, religious and cultural histories, biography and history of the land, the organizers of this exhibition and publication do a remarkable job of gathering a transdisciplinary group of authors to reflect the depth of the lives and works of Warren and Jane Rohrer, two artists who move across many boundaries.

Jane and Warren Rohrer both hailed from Mennonite backgrounds, meeting during their studies at Eastern Mennonite College (now University). Jane left school after two years to work as a secretary; Warren completed a degree in Bible at EMC and then went on to earn a second bachelor's degree, in Art Education, from the neighbouring Madison College (now James Madison University). The Rohrers settled in Pennsylvania, raising a family in rural Lancaster County, from where Warren commuted to his high school teaching job, a schedule that allowed him to take painting workshops