

Sabrina Reed, *Lives Lived, Lives Imagined: Landscapes of Resilience in the Works of Miriam Toews*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2022. Pp. 256. Softcover, \$27.95.

How can, and should, literature respond when suffering ravages lives, leaving loved ones devastated by loss? Miriam Toews explores this very question in tragicomic works of (auto)biographically informed fiction and fictionalized memoir, a tension reflected in the title of Sabrina Reed's new study, *Lives Lived, Lives Imagined*. With nine books to date, including two adapted cinematically, Toews's reputation and readership extend far beyond her Manitoban and Mennonite communities of origin. Reed's monograph, the first dedicated to the award-winning writer, therefore comes as a welcome contribution to the growing literature on Toews's corpus.

The Mount Royal professor of Canadian literature examines Toews's writing through the "interplay of trauma and resilience" (back cover), a prism refracted into four subthemes and corresponding chapters. Though these individual analyses can stand alone, the throughline of home, to which the subtitle's *Landscapes of Resilience* gestures, unites the study in a satisfying whole. Reed neither positions herself as a Mennonite nor approaches Toews as "a 'Mennonite' author per se" (5). Still, she evinces broad understanding of that religio-ethnic context. Throughout, Reed productively dialogues with a wide range of texts, from the author's many interviews, to secondary literature (Grace Kehler, Magdalene Redekop, Natasha Wiebe, Paul Tiessen, and Ella Soper being the most recurrent references), to diverse theoretical fields of study (including trauma, social and psychological resilience, life writing, and Mennonite history, ethics, and theology).

The first and longest chapter, "Home Is Where the Hope Is?," teases out Toews's representations of home—physical, emotional, communal. Both site and absence, home nurtures *and* necessitates resilience. According to Reed, the inverse trajectories regarding home and belonging in *A Boy of Good Breeding* (1998) and *A Complicated Kindness* (2004) stem from their diegetic communities' own resilience or lack thereof, differences linked to the novels' relative secularity or biting critique of "religious fundamentalism" (22). Reed's discussion of Canadian and Mennonite settler history as problematizing home proves insightful, as does her extended reading, informed by contemporary disability studies, of Toews's references to Andrew Wyeth's painting *Christina's World* as commenting

on East Village's artificial cultivation of nostalgia and stigmatizing gaze, which exacerbate Nomi's painful longing for belonging.

Reed's second chapter, "'On the Road' (with Children)," pursues home's ambiguities as both repressive and redemptive, arguing that *The Flying Troutmans* (2008) and *Summer of My Amazing Luck* (1996) "unsettle" masculine road and quest narratives (103). This second chapter interprets Toews's subversion of the former genre's ideals of individualism, freedom, mobility, and speed with "out of place" single mothers weighed down by children and material, emotional, and psychological "baggage" from home (78, 71). Reed convincingly establishes how these novels ironically play on the road narrative's trope of escape to critique "immobility" imposed by precarity, bureaucracy, and depression (80). Ultimately, these feminist tales reframe initial *external* quests in search of absent fathers as redemptive *internal* journeys toward the discovery of the maternal and communal resourcefulness needed to face the road of life's inherent uncertainties.

Home—and literal returns—are not always tenable, however. The third chapter, "'All Trauma Presents a Choice,'" examines *Irma Voth* (2011), *Women Talking* (2018), and to a much lesser degree, the film *Stellet Licht* (Reygadas, 2007), which stars Toews and inspired *Irma Voth*. Drawing on Natasha Wiebe's work and Robert Zacharias's concept of the "break event" (113), Reed maintains that in these the novels Toews "*restories*" the traditional diaspora narrative of "resilient" Mennonites migrating to escape persecution and compromise of beliefs (9, 107). Instead, guilty male characters flee "not *persecution* but *prosecution*" (108). Toews indicts religious and patriarchal systems which manipulate power and language to perpetuate horrific violence and silence truth. Reclaiming the power of imagination, female protagonists chart new "exodus stories" (10). Their survival constitutes "waking into life" (149), Reed underscores, echoing Cathy Caruth, their creation of their "own map" (*Women Talking*, qtd. in 156) demonstrating paradoxical fidelity to their faith tradition.

Yet, Toews's exploration of her father's and sister's suicides in *Swing Low: A Life* (2000) and *All My Puny Sorrows* (2014) acknowledges resilience's limits and failures. The fourth chapter, "'Coming for to Carry Me Home,'" thus shifts focus to those left behind, centring suicide survivorship as a sort of secondary resilience. Reed's connection of form and content is strongest here, as she argues for Toews's "autofiction as a reparative strategy" and cultivation of empathy to counter social stigma and condemnation (158). Reed weighs the generic and ethical complexities of narrating the suffering other, leaning on Paul John Eakin's concept of "relational lives"

(165). Of particular interest here is her deployment of death studies specialist Tony Walter's and social anthropologist Arnar Árnason's work on bereavement as (auto)biography, "creative achievements of 'emplotment'" in response to narrative "wreckage" wrought by illness (178, 179). Reed's conclusion, subtitled "The Fight against the Night," briefly considers Toews's most recent novel, *Fight Night* (2021), and its temporal and narrative distance from previous tragic "chaos narrative[s]" (201). Reed focuses on Elvira, a tribute to Toews's mother and embodiment of resilience, as encapsulated in her grandmotherly advice that "joy . . . is *resistance*" (205). In this epistolary novel, again, writing offers one possible instantiation of that fight. While attentive to intertextuality throughout, Reed does not discuss *Fight Night's* dialogue with Albert Camus, to whom the grandmother alludes in this passage central to the chapter's argument. This seems a missed opportunity, as Toews's engagement with the French-Algerian writer underscores a shared ethical impulse, adding philosophical weight to her tragicomic aesthetics and ontology. As with Camus, Toews's revolt embraces the world while resisting the absurd and celebrates art's potential while recognizing its limits as a response to suffering.

*Lives Lived, Lives Imagined* manages no small feat, appealing to the elusive "general reader," while simultaneously addressing specialists. As a scholar of francophone, rather than anglophone, literature, I somewhat straddle both positions: for the avid reader of Toews, I found Reed's interpretation broad, coherent, and accessible; as a literary scholar, I hungered at times for deeper critical dialogue with chosen theoretical constructs. Given the eclecticism of Reed's approaches and sources, both Toews enthusiasts and Canadian and Mennonite literature scholars will likely (re)discover much of interest. *Lives Lived, Lives Imagined* offers a timely, engaging contribution to the critical conversation surrounding this insightful, poignant, and utterly delightful novelist.

Erin Tremblay Ponnou-Delaffon  
Illinois State University