



## Irma Voth

By Miriam Toews  
ISBN: 9780062070180

### Introduction

That rare coming-of-age story able to blend the dark with the uplifting, *Irma Voth* follows a young Mennonite woman, vulnerable yet wise beyond her years, who carries a terrible family secret with her on a remarkable journey to survival and redemption.

Nineteen-year-old Irma lives in a rural Mennonite community in Mexico. She has already been cast out of her family for marrying a young Mexican ne'er-do-well she barely knows, although she remains close to her rebellious younger sister and yearns for the lost intimacy with her mother.

With a husband who proves elusive and often absent, a punishing father, and a faith in God damaged beyond repair, Irma appears trapped in an untenable and desperate situation. When a celebrated

Mexican filmmaker and his crew arrive from Mexico City to make a movie about the insular community in which she was raised, Irma is immediately drawn to the outsiders and is soon hired as a translator on the set. But her father, intractable and domineering, is determined to destroy the film and get rid of the interlopers. His action sets Irma on an irrevocable path toward something that feels like freedom.

A novel of great humanity, written with dry wit, edgy humor, and emotional poignancy, *Irma Voth* is the powerful story of a young woman's quest to discover all that she may become in the unexpectedly rich and confounding world that lies beyond the stifling, observant community she knows.

### Questions for Discussion

1. Who is Irma Voth? What is she like when the novel opens? Is she the same person by the book's end? What changes about her and what does not?
2. What are your impressions of her family? What is her role among the Voths? What are the dynamics like between Irma, her parents, and her siblings? Do you like her parents? Can you understand their choices?
3. Irma has been raised in a strict Mennonite community. Is religion important to Irma? Does she believe in the same God her father does? How has it shaped her character?
4. How would you describe her marriage? Why did she marry Jorge and why did he marry her? Was it love?
5. Early in the story, Irma poses a question to herself. 'How do I behave in this world without following the directions of my father, my husband, or God?' How would you answer Irma? How might she answer this question herself by the novel's end?
6. What does the film crew's arrival hold for Irma and her family? How does meeting Diego, Marijke, Wilson affect the young woman?
7. Diego talks to Irma about rebellion, and asks her a question. 'Do you feel that we can rebel against our oppressors without losing our love, our tolerance, and our ability to forgive?' What would your response to Diego be? What are they all rebelling against?
8. Why does Diego suggest Irma keep a diary of her experiences on the shoot? What does she write about? What wisdom does her writing offer her and how does that wisdom affect her choices?
9. Marijke introduces Irma to Epicurus's 'four-part cure' 'Don't fear God. Don't worry about death. What is good is easy to get, and what is terrible is easy to endure.' Is this a good philosophy to live by? Does it illuminate Irma's struggle? How do events in her Irma's life address all four tenets? Use examples from the story to illustrate your points.
10. What draws Irma to Wilson? She asks him to ponder a question. 'if you knew this was your last day on earth what kind of story would you write?' By the end, Irma has her own answer. Explain her ultimate response, and how she came to it. What would your answer be?
11. What adjectives would you use to describe Irma? What about Aggie? Irma calls her baby sister Ximena, 'honest.' Why? Can a baby be honest? Is Irma honest? What about Aggie and the rest of the people in Irma's life?
12. When they arrive in Mexico City, Aggie discovers a Diego Rivera mural. How does the mural affect Aggie? What about Irma? How does Rivera's message reflect the girls' experience?
13. What role does art play in Irma's life? Her father says, 'Art is a lie.' Why? Wilson tells her that art, 'comes from the same desire to live.' Later, in Mexico City, Hubertus joyfully tells Irma, 'When life is a shit storm your best umbrella is art.' Analyze each of these men's viewpoints. What do their opinions tell us about their characters? What does Irma think about art? How would she define it? Is art necessary for life even if it is a lie? Does it shelter us from life's vicissitudes? How? What would life be like without art?

14. A jacaranda tree saved Natalie from despair and suicide. What, in your opinion, saved Irma?

15. Was Irma right to feel guilty about what happened in Canada? Could she have known the outcome of her actions? How did her knowledge of the truth and her role transform her relationship with her father? Does Irma's revelation influence your opinion of her?

16. At its heart, *Irma Voth* is the story of young woman discovering herself and finding meaning in her life. It touches on many themes: defiance, freedom, independence, beauty, sacrifice, guilt, family, art, God, forgiveness, love. Choose one or two and trace them through the course of the story, using examples from Irma's life and those around her.

17. Towards the end of the novel, Irma sees Diego's film. How does she feel watching it? Can she ever forgive herself for all that has passed? Do you think she will ever be reconciled with the family she left behind?

#### **About the Author**

Miriam Toews was born in the small Mennonite town of Steinbach, Manitoba. She has published five novels and a memoir of her father, and is the recipient of numerous literary awards in Canada, including the Governor General's Literary Award (for *A Complicated Kindness*) and the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize (for *The Flying Troutmans*). In 2010 she received the prestigious Writers' Trust Engel/Findley Award for her body of work. She lives in Toronto.