

Swing Low: a life by Miriam Toews

A Book Review by Zoe Bell

Swing Low: a life is an unusual biography: it is written in the first person of Mel Toews, a successful teacher and father in a Mennonite community who battles with severe mental illness – yet, it was his daughter, Miriam, who found the words her father was never able to say.

The story begins in Bethesda Hospital in Steinbach, Manitoba, the Mennonite community where Miriam Toews grew up with her family. Toews grew up to attend the University of Manitoba, and later the University of King's College for journalism, and became an award-winning author. (Grandy) Her place within the narrative, however, is only shown in brief appearances as Mel's youngest daughter.

Through Mel's first person narration, readers learn of his despair, as Mel claims in the first chapter, "I have accomplished nothing in my life, nothing at all." (Toews 11) His mental illness causes him to distrust everything any family member or doctor says to him, making him a confused and unreliable narrator. He repeatedly mentions that he has killed his wife, Elvira – building suspense for the reader as we wonder if this is true – while his family continues to convince him that Elvira is fine. Frustrated with his inability to grasp what has really happened, he decides, "there is nothing left to do now but record the facts, as I always have." (11)

Mel's obsession with writing in the hospital is why Toews was able to write this book – writing was Mel's way to escape, and a way to put together pieces of his life. Mel tells his story in a mostly chronological narrative, broken up with interruptions of present-day Mel in the hospital. As flashbacks tell readers about his childhood, his

mother's drinking, his passion for teaching, and his love for Elvira, the interruptions remind readers where he is and why. Toews suggests that this is how Mel's mind was working in the hospital: reflecting on the past before being jolted back to the present.

Mel's mind is also depicted within paragraphs of rhetorical questions, written as though they are his stream-of-conscious thinking. He asks, "Have I withheld words in anger? And if so, who am I punishing with my silence? And why?" (63) He addresses his depression with rhetorical questions multiple times in the book, trying to understand why he is inflicted with such an illness. These are questions he cannot answer, and he considers, "Perhaps depression is caused by asking oneself too many questions." (82)

Another technique for showing Mel's inner conflict is the recurring egg metaphor. Mel worked delivering eggs in his youth, and explicitly states that he could see himself as similar to an egg. He describes, "I thought of my own reasonably pleasant exterior and the yolk for brains that splashed around inside me. This yolk, it seemed to me, would always remain the same." (88) Mel reveals that his swirling thoughts about himself as an egg led to the first breakdown and hospitalization at age 17, where he was diagnosed with manic depression. As he breaks down, he says, "It's over now, it's pouring out of me, my shell has cracked and I will never have another chance." (90)

Mel's inclination to see himself as broken is one of the hardest aspects of the book to read. Mel repeatedly sees his own failure and inability to cope with life, while from the outside he seems a success. Toews manages to capture the complexity of mental illness as she contrasts Mel at home to Mel as a teacher. At school, Mel was a beloved, passionate teacher, with a loud, friendly voice. As soon as he was home, Mel's crippling depression kept him silent and bedridden for months at a time. Toews experienced this

silence as a child, and without inserting her own thoughts into the story, manages to convey the toll this must have taken on her and her sister, and especially their mother, Elvira. It is devastating to realize Mel's intense love for his children and his wife, and his inability to express it.

However, Mel's narrative includes times of happiness, and – despite the fear of depression and that this happiness was not deserved – these moments are what make this book important. Mel was a beloved teacher, a faithful member of the Mennonite church and a pillar of the community. He fell in love, was married, and had two children. To me, this is the takeaway from Toews's story: Mel was more than his illness, even if he could not see that himself. Readers experience Mel's confusion and hopelessness becoming worse until the epilogue, which reveals that after seventeen days in the hospital, Mel took his own life. As devastating as the final pages are, the most tragic fact is that Mel ended his life believing himself a failure. Toews states in her prologue that this book is her attempt to prove him wrong. She succeeds in this, as she clearly shows her father as a hard-working, loving man, who could not win his fight against mental illness.

Toews admits that writing this book was way of coping with the pain of losing her father to suicide: she obsessed over putting the pieces of his life together and finding ways to live with her grief. Writing *Swing Low* was a strategy for Toews, just like writing was Mel's strategy in his final days. This book is interesting as a work of nonfiction because Toews writes from her father's perspective, including his inner thoughts throughout his life. In the prologue she discusses her research, which included the memories of her family and her father's friends and colleagues. She also mentions that her father wrote notes to himself often and kept extensive records of his life. Toews

reveals that Mel asked her to write down things for him in the hospital – filling up pages of legal notepads with writing from his own point of view – which she extended into the writing of this book.

Toews makes it clear that these thoughts, feelings, and stories throughout the book come from her father, but ultimately, the writing is her own. She never asserts herself into the book, but as a reader it seems doubtful that every thought or word in this book came explicitly from Mel. However, I do not feel this impacts the believability of the work. She clearly did her research and was witness to her father's confusion in the hospital, his attempt to rediscover the past, and the struggle with endless questions to which he could not find the answers. Tragically, the person who could verify all these thoughts is not able to read this, but whether Mel would have said each word of narration is not the purpose of the book. Telling her father's story shows readers that mental illness is just that – an illness. Like so many others who struggle with mental illness, he was not able to silence his demons, and instead, they silenced him. Writing *Swing Low* from Mel's perspective gave him a platform to say what he never could in life. The result is powerful, touching, and for Toews herself, a way of healing.

Works Cited

Grandy, Karen. "Miriam Toews." *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Historica Canada, n.d. Web. 03 Nov. 2016.

Toews, Miriam. *Swing Low: A Life*. New York: Arcade Pub., 2001. Print.