

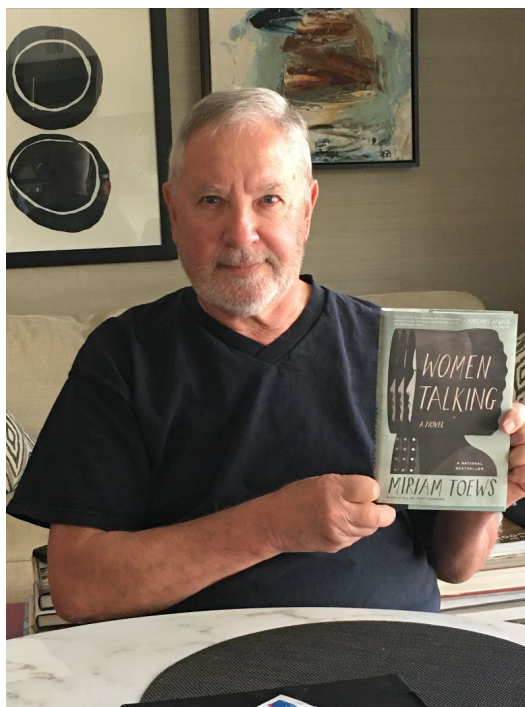


FOPSL Book Club: September 18, 2020

Book: *Women Talking*

Author: Miriam Toews

Discussion leader: Don Elder



## **Don Elder Leads *Women Talking* Discussion**

Next up: *American Dirt*, Oct. 16 @ 2pm

Don Elder, pictured above, started off the new season with our discussion of *Women Talking* by Canadian author Miriam Toews (pronounced "taves"). Published in 2018 when Toews was 54 years old, *Women Talking* is a novel based on the real-life events of a remote Mennonite colony where many of the female colonists were surreptitiously drugged and, while unconscious, sexually assaulted and raped by their fellow male colonists--all the while thinking that a devil or punishment from God was the cause of their physical pain and consequences.

Toews, now excommunicated, drew on her experiences as a Mennonite to write *Women Talking*. The suicides of her father and sister are used in characters in this story and in her 2014 novel, *All My Puny Sorrows*. In interviews Toews acknowledges many of the Mennonite women among her family and friends found roles among the colonists in *Women Talking*.

"So this is the history of the Mennonites, just kind of migration, this kind of constant movement to a place where they're given religious freedom by governments saying 'We'll let you do your own thing. You know, you'll farm. You'll contribute to the economy. You'll stay out of trouble. And you'll just exist out there in the middle of nowhere, not cause any trouble. And you can educate your kids or not. We don't care what you do. Just farm and occupy this space. Populate this country, or whatever it is.' A lot of these governments are complicit and responsible as well. And the Mennonite colonies, ultra-conservative colonies, will go to where they can get this kind of deal." (Miriam Toews from a podcast interview: <http://www.readingwomenpodcast.com/blog/interview-with-miriam-toews>).

The inherent misogyny in fundamentalism and the use of the bible and scriptures to support the oppression of women was discussed and found in much of the dialogue among the characters. Although illiterate, many of the women displayed emotional and observational intelligence and struggled with their own sense of self-worth. In another interview, Toews notes in relation to the women "the animals are worth more. You can take them to auction. They are stronger." (<https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/1340915779657>). "Patriarchal culture, random rules that have nothing to do with scriptures or faith" are concepts Toews highlights as both a burden and a way of life the women had grown so accustomed to they were reluctant to leave.

Nestled within the story is the love between Ona and August and the humor in the caricatured presentation of most of the men and some of the women. In one of the cited interviews, Toews notes her admiration of Margaret Atwood, whose style one of our members felt she mimicked. Another member brought up the contradiction of pacifism in the Mennonite faith with the violence, both real and imagined, in the story. *Women Talking* may not be a book most would readily pull off the shelf, yet it is well-written and provocative.

## Final Thoughts

Ruth Lindemann (760-218-7782) has finished reading *American Dirt* and will give it to anyone who might need it for the next meeting.

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