



# Commissioner's Book Club: All My Puny Sorrows

## Discussion guide

### Introduction

The prompts and questions that follow are meant to encourage discussion and support reflection. Human rights-related books highlight challenging issues and topics—take care of yourself in the ways that you need while you dig in.

For more suggestions, including different ways to reflect and share, check out [the Book Club How-to resource](#).

### Author bio

[Miriam Toews](#) is the author of the internationally acclaimed and bestselling novels *Fight Night*, *Women Talking*, *All My Puny Sorrows*, *Irma Voth*, *The Flying Troutmans*, *A Complicated Kindness*, *A Boy of Good Breeding*, and *Summer of My Amazing Luck*, and one prior work of non-fiction, *Swing Low: A Life*. She is the winner of numerous awards, including the Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction, the Libris Award for Fiction, the Atwood Gibson Writers' Trust Fiction Prize, and the Writers' Trust Engel Findley Award. Several of her novels have been made into feature films, including *All My Puny Sorrows* and the Oscar-nominated *Women Talking*. Miriam Toews lives in Toronto.<sup>1</sup>

### Summary

*All My Puny Sorrows* follows two sisters, Elfrieda (Elf) and Yolandi (Yoli), raised in a strict Mennonite community in Manitoba. Now adults, their lives have taken different paths: Elf is a world-renowned classical pianist, admired for her brilliance and beauty

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<sup>1</sup> "Miriam Toews," Penguin Random House Canada, accessed December 2025, <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/authors/55356/miriam-toews>.

—and she wants to die; Yoli is a struggling writer trying to keep her family afloat—and her sister alive. Despite Elf’s extraordinary talent, she lives with severe, persistent depression and a long history of suicide attempts echoing their father’s death by suicide years earlier.

After a suicide attempt early in the novel, Elf is hospitalized. Yoli becomes her primary support person, visiting her daily and trying desperately to keep her safe. Elf begs Yoli to support her wish of a medically assisted death, for non-terminal psychological suffering. Yoli, torn between love, fear, anger and grief, struggles to protect her sister while also honouring her agency. Their conversations move between humour, tenderness, childhood memory and vulnerable confrontation with pain.

Through Yoli’s narration, the novel explores the emotional labour of caring for someone with mental illness, the complexity of suicide prevention and the ethical tension between saving someone and respecting their autonomy. Ultimately, Yoli must confront the limits of what love can fix, the meaning of dignity and the painful question of what it means to witness—and love—someone who may not want to live.

## Linking the book to human rights in B.C.

**Mental health is a human right.** International frameworks, including the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, affirm everyone’s right to the highest attainable standard of mental health, and B.C.’s *Human Rights Code*<sup>2</sup> protects people with mental health-related disabilities from discrimination in employment, housing and services. All My Puny Sorrows brings these principles to life, showing how chronic depression, stigma and gaps in care can limit a person’s dignity, autonomy and safety.

**The novel also reflects ongoing conversations in Canada around Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD)**—particularly the tension between self-determination and protection for those living with mental illness. The Supreme Court’s decision in *Carter v. Canada* (2015)<sup>3</sup> recognized that an absolute ban on assisted dying violated Charter rights to life, liberty and security of the person. Parliament responded with

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<sup>2</sup> “Human Rights Code,” BC Government, current to Dec. 16, 2025, [https://www.bclaws.gov.bc.ca/civix/document/id/complete/statreg/00\\_96210\\_01](https://www.bclaws.gov.bc.ca/civix/document/id/complete/statreg/00_96210_01).

<sup>3</sup> Carter v. Canada (Attorney General), 2015 SCC 5 (CanLII), [2015] 1 SCR 331, <https://canlii.ca/t/gg5z4>.



*Bill C-14* (2016)<sup>4</sup> and later *Bill C-7* (2021),<sup>5</sup> which expanded access to MAiD but delayed eligibility for cases where mental illness is the sole underlying condition. This evolving legal landscape highlights the complexity of ensuring autonomy while safeguarding people who may be vulnerable due to inadequate mental health supports or social conditions.

**Caregivers' experiences also raise human rights considerations.** In B.C., provincial mental health strategies and caregiver-support frameworks recognize that families carry significant emotional and practical responsibilities. Under the *Human Rights Code*, the principles of equality and accommodation apply when caregiving affects access to work, housing or services. The novel illustrates the burden that falls on families when systems fail to provide adequate mental health support or culturally safe care.

Together, these themes remind us that protecting human rights in B.C. requires strong, accessible mental health systems; respect for autonomy and dignity; and meaningful support for families who provide care.

## **Discussion guide questions and prompts**

Here are some questions to ignite discussion or thought on the connections between the book and human rights. The provided prompts are not the only or complete answers, but some ideas you might want to incorporate into your conversation:

1. What does the novel show us about the difference between how someone appears on the outside and what they may be carrying on the inside? What assumptions might we make about those who experience mental illness and think about suicide?
  - Elf is admired and globally renowned for her talent, success and beauty. Yet, she lives with profound and persistent suffering. You might reflect on how public impressions, expectations, accomplishments or family roles can mask deep pain. How does this shape our understanding of mental health, stigma and the right to access care when someone is struggling?

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<sup>4</sup> "Bill C-14 : An Act to amend the Criminal Code and to make related amendments to other Acts (medical assistance in dying) / Julia Nicol, Marlisa Tiedemann," Government of Canada, date modified Dec. 10, 2025, <https://publications.gc.ca/site/eng/9.867253/publication.html>.

<sup>5</sup> "Bill C-7: An Act to amend the Criminal Code (medical assistance in dying)," Government of Canada, date modified Nov. 27, 2023, <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/csj-sjc/pl/charter-charte/c7.html>.



2. How does the novel portray the emotional and practical realities of caring for someone living with mental illness?
  - You may reflect on the ways in which Yoli navigates the love and fear she holds for Elf, the responsibility and the exhaustion and what the story suggests about the supports caregivers need from family, community and systems of care.
3. Both sisters carry the unresolved trauma of their father's death by suicide. How does the novel explore living with difficult family histories while still trying to show up for one another in moments of crisis?
  - Consider how past trauma shapes relationships, how to navigate old wounds while facing new experiences of harm and what it means to find connection, even in the face of debilitating pain.
4. Elf asks Yoli to help her pursue a medically assisted death. What tensions does this reveal between agency and autonomy, and protection and compassion?
  - Consider how the novel humanizes this issue without offering one "correct" answer.
5. All My Puny Sorrows repeatedly presents moments where systems of care—hospitals, mental health services, community supports—fail individuals and families. What barriers to care appear in the story? How are these compounded by the stigma of mental illness and suicide?
  - Access to timely and on-demand services; stigma may silence individuals, families and professionals working in the field.
6. The sisters grew up in a strict Mennonite community. How do culture, family and community shape their views of suffering, responsibility and belonging?
  - Cultural or faith-based teachings shape ideas about life, death, illness and disclosure. These, in turn, shape both connection and conflict within families and communities.
7. If you had to describe the central human rights question raised by the novel, what would it be?
  - There may be more than one—mental health support, discrimination on the grounds of mental health and illness, dignity and autonomy in death, caregiving, access to adequate care.

