

BOOK CLUB IN A BOX

THE COMPLETE PACKAGE
FOR READERS AND LEADERS

DISCUSSES MIRIAM TOEWS' NOVEL

A COMPLICATED KINDNESS

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BOOK CLUB IN A BOX

Bookclub-in-a-Box presents the discussion companion for Miriam Toews' novel A Complicated Kindness

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Quotations used in this guide have been taken from the text of the hardcover edition of **A Complicated Kindness**. All information taken from other sources is acknowledged.

This discussion companion for **A Complicated Kindness** has been prepared and written by Marilyn Herbert, originator of Bookclub-in-a-Box. Marilyn Herbert, B.Ed., is a teacher, librarian, speaker and writer. Bookclub-in-a-Box is a unique guide to current fiction and classic literature intended for book club discussions, educational study seminars, and personal pleasure. For more information about the Bookclub-in-a-Box team, visit our website.

Bookclub-in-a-Box discussion companion for A Complicated Kindness

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CONTACT INFORMATION: SEE BACK COVER.

BOOKCLUB-IN-A-BOX

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BOOKCLUB-IN-A-BOX

Readers and Leaders Guide

Each Bookclub-in-a-Box guide is clearly and effectively organized to give you information and ideas for a lively discussion, as well as to present the major highlights of the novel. The format, with a Table of Contents, allows you to pick and choose the specific points you wish to talk about. It does not have to be used in any prescribed order. In fact, it is meant to support, not determine, your discussion.

You Choose What to Use.

You may find that some information is repeated in more than one section and may be cross-referenced so as to provide insight on the same idea from different angles.

The guide is formatted to give you extra space to make your own notes.

How to Begin

Relax and look forward to enjoying your bookclub.

With Bookclub-in-a-Box as your behind the scenes support, there is little for you to do in the way of preparation.

Some readers like to review the guide after reading the novel; some before. Either way, the guide is all you will need as a companion for your discussion. You may find that the guide's interpretation, information, and background have sparked other ideas not included.

Having read the novel and armed with Bookclub-in-a-Box, you will be well prepared to lead or guide or listen to the discussion at hand.

Lastly, if you need some more 'hands-on' support, feel free to contact us. (See Contact Information)

What to Look For

Each Bookclub-in-a-Box guide is divided into easy-to-use sections, which include points on characters, themes, writing style and structure, literary or historical background, author information, and other pertinent features unique to the novel being discussed. These may vary slightly from guide to guide.

INTERPRETATION OF EACH NOVEL REFLECTS THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE BOOKCLUB-IN-A-BOX TEAM.

Do We Need to Agree?

THE ANSWER TO THIS QUESTION IS NO.

If we have sparked a discussion or a debate on certain points, then we are happy. We invite you to share your group's alternative findings and experiences with us. You can respond on-line at our website or contact us through our Contact Information. We would love to hear from you.

Discussion Starters

There are as many ways to begin a bookclub discussion as there are members in your group. If you are an experienced group, you will already have your favorite ways to begin. If you are a newly formed group or a group looking for new ideas, here are some suggestions.

Ask for people's impressions of the novel. (This will give you some idea about which parts of the unit to focus on.)

- Identify a favorite or major character.
- Identify a favorite or major idea.
- Begin with a powerful or pertinent quote. (not necessarily from the novel)
- Discuss the historical information of the novel. (not applicable to all novels)
- If this author is familiar to the group, discuss the range of his/her work and where this novel stands in that range.
- Use the discussion topics and questions in the Bookclub-in-a-Box guide.

If you have further suggestions for discussion starters, be sure to share them with us and we will share them with others.

Above All, Enjoy Yourself

INTRODUCTION

Suggested Beginnings

Novel Quickline

Key to the Novel

INTRODUCTION

Suggested Beginnings

1. The title of this novel is deceptively simple. It deals with the straight-forward concept of kindness yet presents it as “complicated” and complex. **Consider the different possible meanings for the idea of a “complicated kindness” and discuss them in light of the quote containing these words.** (see *Complicated Kinds, Kindnesses*, p.39)

2. Nomi measures everything in her life as to whether it is complicated or uncomplicated. **Consider if this helps Nomi to cope better or if it further complicates her emotional well-being.**

3. Nomi views her friend Lids (Lydia) as disarmingly pleasant and objective, a person who speaks candidly about her feelings and thoughts and who is unlike the other teenagers Nomi knows. Nomi is equally blunt, yet she feels that she and Lydia have nothing in common.

Is Nomi correct? Consider their similarities and differences in the context of their separate lives and their individual pain.

4. Nomi is the novel's only narrator, and it is through her eyes that we see the other characters and the townspeople. However, we learn about Nomi both through her own words and thoughts and by how she reflects herself in her conversations with others.

Do we get an accurate picture of Nomi and the other characters? Would the addition of other narrators add to or detract from the complex picture of Nomi's life and environment?

5. The novel ends with Nomi sitting in her empty living room. Her father has left, and there is no furniture.

With all the people and trappings of her life gone, will Nomi also leave or will she stay?

6. Some readers feel that Nomi's story is critical of the Mennonite community and way of life, but others see the novel as a broader criticism of fundamentalist views in general, which also exist in many other cultures and religions.

Discuss this in the context of your own perspective and experiences.

7. The Mennonite community is less well known than other more mainstream sects and cultures. The culture has changed greatly over the centuries.

Using the background information in this guide (p.19), consider the philosophical gap between the original vision of Menno Simons and the current practices of the Mennonite's.

8. Faith, hope, charity, and forgiveness are cornerstones of religious movements in general.

Given Nomi's perspective and experience, does she have what she would need to construct a workable balance of these concepts in her life?

9. In this guide's section on **Author Information**, p.15, Toews is described as an emotional rebel.

Can Nomi be described in the same way, or is she the social rebel that she tries to present herself to be?

10. Nomi loses everyone she loves – her mother, sister, father, her friend Lids, and even Travis, her boyfriend. Yet there is no bitterness in Nomi's voice. She chooses to trust in the *“beautiful lie”* that she will one day be reunited with them, especially with her family.

Where has everyone gone? Are her mother and father still alive? Will she continue to stay optimistic?

11. Book titles are powerful tools and often help to promote and sell a novel. Toews had originally suggested two alternative titles – *Abattoir Life* and *Swivelhead* – only to be overruled by her editor.

Discuss the title as it stands now. Would a different title have the same impact as the current one? Can you suggest an alternative?

Novel Quickline

- Nomi Nickel is in her last year of high school, a time when most teenagers look forward to new beginnings. In order to graduate, Nomi must complete one more high school assignment – to write a story with a beginning, a middle and an end. As part of this educational task, Nomi must write a story ending that fits her uniquely personal situation. Nomi's problem is that she cannot foresee an appropriate ending to her present circumstances, but Mr. Quiring tells her she will know it when it confronts her.



**Thanks for previewing this
Bookclub-in-a-Box discussion guide.**

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print or PDF format, just visit:**

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