

BOOKS > FICTION

ARRIVALS

A CLASSIC REVISTED

They call them "Pirsig pilgrims" — the lonely ones on their motorcycles, who follow the 1968 Minneapolis to San Francisco run made famous by Robert Pirsig in his 1974 rumination *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Accompanying Pirsig on that 17-day ride 40 years ago was his then 11-year-old son, Chris, who was murdered in 1979.



• One of the great many who have pondered the lessons and meaning of Pirsig's book was a young man named Mark Richardson, who grew up to have two children of his own and become editor of *The Star's* Wheels section — but who never lost his love of both bikes and the bigger questions in life. So Richardson recently fired up his Suzuki dirt machine and came back with **Zen and Now: On the Trail of Robert Pirsig and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance** (Knopf Canada, 274 pages, \$29.95).

FICTION

• Fred Stenson was raised and still lives in the Alberta foothills, and most of his previous fiction, including the Giller-nominated fur trade epic *The Trade* from 2000, have western themes. There's lots of horse-ridin' and shootin' in Stenson's new novel, but it's a theatre of Canadian history seldom explored in fiction before, the Boer War. A foothills cowboy and the nephew of a famed Blood war chief are among the youngsters who sign up with the Canadian Mounted Rifles to defend the Empire in **The Great Karoo** (Doubleday Canada, 484 pages, \$32.95).



• Kingston's Helen Humphreys is back in England again with her latest short novel, **Coventry** (HarperCollins, 175 pages, \$24.95). It's a domestic drama set during the Blitz in London.

• Giller-winning David Bergen's **The Retreat** (McClelland & Stewart, 320 pages, \$32.99) is a culture-clashing love story set during the hot 1974 summer of the Ojibwa occupation of Anicnabe Park in Kenora.

— Dan Smith



CAROL LOEWEN (RANDOM HOUSE CANADA)

FICTION

Another Miss Sunshine heads out in the van

NANCY WIGSTON

Miriam Toews' *A Complicated Kindness* won hearts, minds and major prizes all over this country, and for good reason — she manages to make us laugh while telling tales of child abandonment, no mean feat.

Her new book is not dissimilar, in that one family's life is flying apart like the tornado scene in *The Wizard of Oz* (dysfunction seems too mild a term) and children are suffering, though they mightily resist showing it.

The single mother in the Troutman clan, Min, prone to bouts of serious depression (though her trouble is never labelled), has become unable to eat, move or to bear even being touched. Her 11-year-old daughter Thebes (Theodora) has been doing her best to care for Min; her 15-year-old son Logan is acting out at school, edging toward local gangs, carving angsty slogans on available surfaces with his knife.

So Thebes makes a phone call to Paris to Aunt Hattie, who has escaped her sister's madness only to be dumped by her boyfriend with the French name. (It seems everyone in Toews' Manitoba can't wait to get themselves far away, to Paris, say, or New York. Staying away proves more difficult.)

At 28, Hattie flies home to rescue — very temporarily, she wants that made clear, at least silently — this

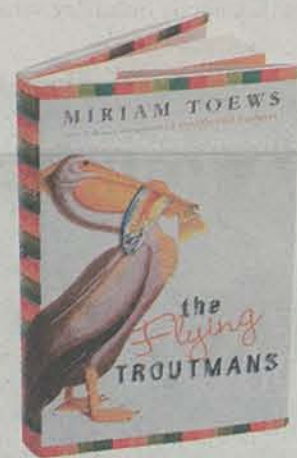
Miriam Toews may have invented a new genre, the romantic-depressive comedy — and she's very good at it

beloved sister, this life-long creator of havoc. Events that bubble up in her memory include Min's apparent attempt to drown her in Aca-pulco, an incident that resulted instead in their father's drowning.

Hattie lands in Winnipeg. Min gets hospitalized again. Hattie piles the kids into a van and sets off for America to find their father, whom they barely know. Hey, it's a road trip!

In the van, Hattie is alternately amused and annoyed by Thebes' manic talking and craft making; two favourites are her novelty-sized cheques and her wondrous kites. Logan is there, barely, buried in hoodie and headphones, shooting hoops when he can. When he gets dragged into the van's craft corner, something suitably ghastly appears. A Logan mannequin's head dripping with fake blood is so admired by the others that it assumes pride of place on the dashboard.

There is so much frantic comedy taking place that no one, apart from the increasingly distraught Hattie, thinks about such practical things as finding and paying for cheap motels, the oil leak in the van, or what to do when her sister's kids periodically disappear. Damaged by her



The Flying Troutmans
by Miriam Toews
Knopf Canada,
274 pages, \$32

childhood — her sister's smiles stopped the day she was born — she is unready and perhaps unfit to assume a mother's role.

So the novel's mystery is Min, chronically ill Min. Why do they all love her so? She is the narrative's ghost, its frightening black hole, pleading to die on Hattie's first hospital visit, thereafter unreachable on various payphone calls. (There's lots of time to think during this crazy van ride.)

Toews must sense our scepticism,

and so produces more palatable Min memories: teen wildness, jokes, kindness, love. Min may be periodically bonkers, but she is a Troutman. Inspired by the family travels, Hattie decides she'll "become a cartographer of the uncharted world of Min."

Kind strangers, most belonging to the tribe of youth, dot the Troutman odyssey, and like all voyages of discovery, the trio encounters violence, despair, stupid and/or stoned locals and love, or the versions of it that suit them at the time.

If the whole thing isn't very credible — suddenly Min is sounding rational and talking about her kids on the phone — so be it.

In one of the final within-the-van scenes, Thebes, she of the Smurf-style hair and the glitter on cheeks and eyelids, changes the wording of another of her brother's cynical dashboard carving, "the f--king Troutmans," to "the flying Troutmans" — thus perfectly capturing the circus-like balancing act of her peculiar family unit.

Toews may have invented a new genre, the romantic-depressive comedy, at which she excels.

Nancy Wigston is a frequent contributor to these pages.

STORIES

Collection helps fill gap

share a concern with what is often

larger world — a keen horniness not