



READING GUIDE

Open Arms

Marina Endicott

Freehand Books

ABOUT THE BOOK

Open Arms is a contemporary quest story set in Saskatoon featuring a protagonist whose spirit is as strong as her heart is broken. Bessie Smith Connolly, the daughter of a rock-singer mother and absentee poet father, has lived with her grandparents in Mahone Bay, Nova Scotia, since she was small. But at seventeen - grieving the death of her steadfast grandfather and smarting from a break-up with the boy she loves - she escapes to Saskatchewan to be with her mother. Bessie traverses the vast country that is Canada, from the smoky bars of Saskatoon, to the claustrophobic retreat of Galiano Island, to the soul-scouring beauty of Western Canada's open road, all the while plumbing the depths of her relationships with her mother, grandmother and a varied cast of colourful characters. On a journey riddled with literal and metaphorical potholes, Bessie navigates grief and betrayal, making her way through her exploded family and out into the world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marina Endicott's bestselling second novel, *Good to a Fault*, was a finalist for the Scotiabank Giller Prize and one of *The Globe and Mail's* Top 100 Books of 2008. Her first novel, *Open Arms* was a finalist for the 2001 Amazon/Books in Canada First Novel Award and broadcast on CBC Radio's *Between the Covers*. Endicott's stories have been featured in *Coming Attractions* and shortlisted for the Journey Prize and the Western Magazine Awards. She was born in Golden, BC and grew up in Vancouver, Nova Scotia and Toronto. She has been an actor, director, playwright and editor, and was Dramaturge of the Saskatchewan Playwrights Centre for many years. She lives in Edmonton and teaches Creative Writing at the University of Alberta.

A CONVERSATION WITH MARINA ENDICOTT

1. At one point, Bessie’s grandmother says that “[n]o mother is ever there when you need her. My mother failed me terribly. Her mother died young, failing her. I’m sure Svetlana’s mother failed her from time to time. I don’t think anyone is naturally up to the task. It can’t be done perfectly. We just do the best we are able.” Open Arms is full of mother figures, all possessing their respective strengths and weaknesses. How do you define success as a mother? Do the mothers of Open Arms really fail?

Oh boy. If I could define it I wouldn’t have had to write the book to examine it. I think failure, and I guess I mean betrayal, is built into the relationship: one part of your job as a mother is to cut the child free, which means hurting both of you. But the failure would be much greater if you didn’t relinquish each other. The terrible thing is that you discover, when you are being a mother, how impossible it is not to fail your children. Then you ought to be able to forgive your own mother, and yet that isn’t very easy—you’ve spent a long time being mad at her!

The mothers in *Open Arms* have bad track records, don’t they? I don’t think I can be the judge of whether they really fail—but it would be interesting to hear what readers think.

2. In both Open Arms and Good to a Fault, you return to Saskatoon as a setting. What about the city do you find attractive or compelling?

Saskatoon is my favourite city. I lived there very happily for nine years, and it was the first time that I felt completely at home in a community—I love how the circles of artists and ordinary people can’t help intersecting, and how lively the arts are for such a small city. Every division of class is smudged because really nobody’s very well off, and the socialist spirit still holds no matter what the government is called. I love it physically, too, the river winding through the centre, and the peaceful streets in winter, and the long vista of neon lights on 8th Street on a summer evening. It was my first home—it’s where I began to write seriously, where I found my work and met my husband and started my life.

3. Music is woven throughout the narrative of Open Arms. Is there a particular genre of music or artist that you’re partial to? Aesthetically, has music influenced your writing at all?

I am an eclectic circus of music, I like good musicians—everything from baroque chamber music to strange Appalachian folk songs to Lily Allen. But I grew up singing with my sisters and most of the music in *Open Arms* comes from songs we sang together. Although I’m not a good singer, I play piano and harp and when I was writing *Open Arms* there was always music playing in the house. I invented that handing-along song-phrase game to entertain myself while walking my dog, and it seemed like the kind of thing a mother and daughter might do together. Now I have a daughter and we hand our iPods back and forth taking turns being DJ, but neither of my children are that keen on hearing me sing. Humph.

4. Bessie calls both Nova Scotia and Saskatoon home, and spends the latter part of the book on the road. How do you define the concept of home?

Oh I think it is a shifting concept, not at all concrete. I love being on the road, but I only get snatches of that these days. I am at home in my car, at home with my family—sometimes I’m at home with my original family, my far-flung siblings and my parents. I was born in BC, grew up in Nova Scotia and Toronto (went to twelve schools in all as we roamed around), and lived in London, England, and then out west to Saskatoon, Mayerthorpe and Cochrane, Alberta. I’ve lived in mansions and hovels, in various odd rooms and flats while working in theatre, and in a succession of houses with my husband and children, but which of them is home? Whichever one I’m cooking in that night.

5. What bottle of wine would you recommend enjoying while discussing and/or reading Open Arms? □

I'm not sure one bottle would do. I think you ought to knock back a couple of bar scotches to honour Bess's drunk in part 1, a cup of Christmassy mulled wine for part 2 (organic, of course, on Galiano), and two bottles for part 3: crack open a very cold and quite expensive Cakebread Chardonnay for Bess's grandmother, and a cheap but magnificent Don David Malbec for Bess herself, even though she should not be drinking.