



# Certainty

*Madeleine Thien*

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## Certainty Madeleine Thien

Madeleine Thien's stunning debut novel hauntingly retells a crucial moment in history, through two unforgettable love stories.

Gail Lim, a producer of radio documentaries, is haunted by the mystery of her father's Asian past. As a child, Gail's father, Matthew Lim, lived in a Malaysian village occupied by the Japanese. He and his beloved Ani wandered the jungle fringe under the terrifying shadow of war. The war shattered their families, splitting the two apart until a brief reunion years later. Matthew's profound connection to Ani and the life-changing secrets they shared cast a shadow that, later still, Matthew's wife, Clara, desperately sought to understand. Gail's journey to unravel the mystery of her parents' lives takes her to Amsterdam, where she unearths more about this mysterious other woman. But as Gail approaches the truth, Ani's story will bring Gail face-to-face, with the untold mysteries of her own life.

Vivid, poignant, and written in understated yet powerful prose, *Certainty* is a novel about the legacies of loss, the dislocations of war, and the timeless redemption afforded by love.

## Certainty Details

Date : Published March 21st 2007 by Little, Brown and Company (first published 2006)

ISBN : 9780316834995

Author : Madeleine Thien

Format : Hardcover 320 pages

Genre : Fiction, Cultural, Canada, Historical, Historical Fiction, Asia

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## From Reader Review Certainty for online ebook

### Nicole A says

This book grew on me slowly.

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### Dar says

A spare and dreamy story that twists in and out of time. I am a quiet and reserved person and I related to the silence and space that the characters in the book held around them. I am very conscious of whether to share things to unburden myself, or to withhold in order not to burden others. I don't know of other books that have treated this theme. The language created beautiful word-pictures and sensations. Such a contrast to the shouty, me-first drama-queen world out there.

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### Ruthie says

After all the discussion about this book on the CBC Goodreads page, as well as other sites I finally got a chance to read it! The novel is beautifully written, tells a compelling story about the war in North Borneo, as well as side stories about immigration, radio documentaries, and a few love stories. My issue was that I felt very removed from all of the characters because the narrative voice kept changing voices. Despite the love stories I was somewhat unmoved, and that bothered me. I found the story of the conditions under Japanese control compelling, but the details did not feel complete. A story of a coded diary, another of another character of Dutch descent all made things more scattered and took away from the main story.

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### Natasha Penney says

I adore this book. Although I've just finished it I already know I'll read it again. Thien again works her masterful storytelling and unearthly grasp of both the art of writing and the complexity of human emotion with seamless grace and fluidity. Her stories are complicated, but her characters are breathtakingly vulnerable and accessible. Genius.

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### Laura says

O poveste frumoasă scrisă prost, tradusă? și mai prostă? și cu o redactare aproape inexistentă. Mă-ai iritat la culme traducerea/redactarea, că m-am concentrat cu greu la povestea în sine. Seamănă foarte bine cu o poveste de Jan Philipp Sendker, doar că pendularea trecut-prezent-imagină-real este foarte obosită. Nu am reușit să-mi dau seama la ce se referă titlul. Oare la certitudinea dragostei dintre doi oameni, dintre prietenii? și copiii? Sau la certitudinea că îl cunoști bine pe cel de lângă? și tine? Poate la certitudinea că omul drag pe care l-am pierdut a dus o viață împlinită? Cred că trebuie să mai citesc și alte puncte de vedere să înțeleg mai bine.

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### Alden says

At its most essential, Canadian writer Madeleine Thien's resonant, richly textured first novel, *Certainty*, explores questions of how possible it is to know another person, even a person we love, and how to live with that uncertainty.

Beginning in present-day Vancouver with Ansel, a physician wracked with grief and guilt after the untimely death of his 39-year-old partner, Gail, *Certainty* unfolds through overlapping narratives that follow twining streams of memory to North Borneo during the brutal Japanese occupation of the 1940s to Jakarta in the 1960s, to the Netherlands and back to Vancouver. Thien's characters are people with pasts complicated—or, in some cases, nearly annihilated—by war and its dislocations and, in the second generation, by the reverberations of war. There are holes in these characters' lives—mysteries, secrets, infidelities—and with each change in view, one hole is mended while another tears open. Many seek to understand their lives and connect with others through the beautiful ambiguities of art, others through the sureties of science.

You can read the rest of my review of this book here:

<http://www.waterbridgereview.org/0320...>

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### Shawn Mooney says

*Do Not Say We Have Nothing* is the best novel I've ever read, so I was interested (and a little nervous) to read this, Thien's debut novel. I loved it so much too! Of course it's not the masterpiece that *DNSWHN* is, but Thien sensitively explores many of the same themes here: grief, war, and displacement tearing families and psyches asunder, an intercontinental love triangle, a near-indecipherable diary. *DNSWHN* was no fluke. I'm calling it: Thien is my favorite novelist.

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### Jonathan Pool says

I was at the 2017 Baileys shortlist group reading in London, ahead of the winning book announcement. I overheard the comment that the reading style, body language, and general interaction of the authors with their fellow finalists, and their audience, is a good marker for the writing style that each brings to their craft. That's certainly true of Madeleine Thien who is such a gentle, giving and sincere person. *Certainty*, her first novel is a gentle, rather sad, story. It's one centred around loving relationships, whose sadnesses are the consequence of ill fated circumstances rather than human selfishness.

Some of the themes that have brought Thien to a wider audience in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* are also explored here. Canada, Thien's own adopted country of residence, is geographically and spiritually far removed from the Far East in which much of *Certainty* is set.

Thien writes movingly about one's familial country of origin and of cultural identity; the playgrounds of childhood memories. The human displacement brought about by war and regime change is a sorrowful experience that millions of forced migrants continue to experience today.

Thien borrows from Nietzsche: "The ability to forget is what brings us peace" (85)

Certainty is an uncomplicated, wistful novel that doesn't have the greater ambition and sweep of the authors later works. It's a good introduction into the subject matter of global diasporas.

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### **Andrea says**

Not worth working through the 300 pages. The book had the potential of being interesting with the need to uncover a mystery and I would even say I liked the way it was written in flashbacks. But the characters were lacking. There were several times where I would stop and ask who are we talking about this time? And the plot with Gail seems incomplete. I feel as though there's more to the story that was forgotten. Disappointed on this one.

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### **Baljit says**

I felt the pace got too meandering and too slow, and the main characters were emotionally disconnected from each other

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### **Kyla says**

Ah - award winning Can Lit. Yawn. If it is multi-ethnic, multi-generational, is written poetically and is dull as dishwater - bring on the Canadian Writing Awards! Of course I love Canadian writing but this is SO completely Can Lit pleasing and not interesting at all. The only bits I liked were the ones set in Strathcona because I recognized the neighborhood.

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### **Jennifer says**

3.5 stars. The main problem with this book is that it's overly ambitious. It jumps from character to character, present to past, and country to country to tie together storylines about love, trauma, and unwieldy memories. As a consequence, most of the characters end up flat and forgettable. But the thing that makes this book special is the main "present" storyline, which examines the loss of a young woman with understated, incredible beauty. One of the best portraits of grief I've ever read. And as in all of Thien's books, you can trust that the writing will be fluid, elegant, and chip away at the pieces of your heart. Not a perfect book, but still lovely.

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### **Hugh says**

Madeleine Thien first came to my attention when her brilliant third novel *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* was shortlisted for the 2016 Man Booker prize. This one is her debut novel, which shows that most of the key ingredients that made it so special were there from the start.

This book is also ambitious and wide ranging - its events span five decades and four continents, from the

north of Borneo during the Second World war through to modern Canada.

Once again Thien weaves a complex tapestry of the personal and the political - a moving family story that touches on many other elements and ideas.

We start with a doctor Ansel, grieving for his wife Gail who has died young a year earlier, and a dinner party he attends, given by her parents Matthew and Clara, which allows Thien to introduce many of the characters.

Each section of the book focuses on a different character. The second takes us to Matthew's childhood in Japanese occupied Sandakan in what is now the Malaysian part of Borneo. He and his friend Ani hide from Allied bombs in the jungle. When the Japanese leave, his father, who runs a rubber plantation, is killed because he has collaborated with them to avoid the prison camp where Ani's father died. Matthew and his mother are forced to flee.

I won't even attempt to summarise the rest of the plot, which touches on subjects as diverse as photography, tuberculosis, sound recording, cryptography and fractals, and takes us through Java, Hong Kong, Australia, Holland and eastern Europe. The central love stories are moving and the whole thing is very cleverly structured.

A debut novel that is well worth reading.

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### **Tiffany says**

If I wasn't so obsessed with keeping my books in such pristine condition, I would have read this book with a highlighter in hand, ready to set apart those passages that demonstrate the written word as a true art form. There were many, some that moved me to tears, which hasn't happened since I read *The History of Love* by Nicole Krauss, one of my favourite books of all time.

Thien clearly has enormous talent; as stated on the back of the book, Thien has a flair for imagery, and I wholeheartedly agree. This book is incredibly sad but meaningfully so, and I believe it's a testament to how people can somehow find a way to move on after the most tragic events. At the same time Thien manages to describe the most mundane events to the point where they become extraordinary and beautiful in their regularity.

I can definitely understand why this book won the Amazon/Books for Everybody First Novel Award. Thien is a talent that should be recognized for years to come, and I'm proud this book has been added to the Can Lit roster.

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### **Megan Baxter says**

I have not always been thrilled by the list put out by the CBC of the Top 100 Canadian Books. I mean, I'll read the whole thing if it kills me, but the list itself was far to heavily weighted towards books that had come out in the five years before it was compiled. And so, many of the books on it have left me a little baffled as to why they're there, other than that they're recent, and it probably pleased the publishers.

Note: The rest of this review has been withheld due to the changes in Goodreads policy and enforcement.  
You can read why I came to this decision [here](#).

In the meantime, you can read the entire review at [Smorgasbook](#)

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