



Certainty by Madeleine Thien

About the author:

Madeleine Thien's first book of fiction, *Simple Recipes*, won four awards in Canada, was a finalist for a regional Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book, and was named a notable book by the Kiriyaama Pacific Rim Book Prize. Originally from Vancouver, Thien recently moved to Quebec City.

Source: Penguin Random House Canada (<http://penguinrandomhouse.ca>)

About this book:

Madeleine Thien's stunning debut novel fulfills all her early promise and introduces a young novelist of vision, maturity, and style.

Gail Lim, a producer of radio documentaries in present-day Vancouver, finds herself haunted by events in her parents' past in wartorn Asia, a past which remains a mystery that fiercely grips her imagination.

As a child, Gail's father, Matthew Lim, wandered the Leila Road and the jungle fringe with his lovely Ani, a girl whose early bond with Matthew will affect his life always. As children, they found themselves together under the terrifying shadow of war in Japanese-occupied Sandakan, Malaysia. The war shatters their families and splits the two apart until years later, when they re-meet only to be separated again. The legacy of their connection is later inherited by Matthew's wife, Clara, in unexpected ways.

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Gail's journey to unravel the mystery of her parents' lives takes her to Amsterdam, where she meets the war photographer Sipke, who tells his story of Ani and their relationship, which began in Jakarta, a story that will bring Gail face to face with the complications in her own life and lead her closer to the truth.

Vivid, poignant, wise, at once sweeping and intimate, *Certainty* is a novel about the legacies of loss, about the dislocations of war and the redemptive qualities of love. Thien reveals herself as a novelist of rare and potent talent.

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Discussion Questions:

1. When *Certainty* begins, its heroine is dead. Why do you think Madeleine Thien made that decision? Other than the flashbacks, how does she keep Gail "alive" for the reader? How would it change the book's import if Gail were truly alive?
2. Matthew tells Ani that he longs for a life "free from uncertainty," and she thinks of their lives "unfolding like the casting of a net, when the lines left your hands, you knew where the entirety would fall" [p 166]. At its heart, the novel tells us that human beings long for certainty, but rarely achieve it. What are some of the ways this idea surfaces in *Certainty*?
3. The novel's first epigraph, about the illusory distinction between past, present, and future, is from a condolence letter written by Albert Einstein. At first, the mention of the condolence letter seems an unnecessary detail, but as the reader progresses through *Certainty*, more and more mourning customs accumulate. The novel begins with a memorial dinner for Gail six months after her death that includes an empty chair for her spirit [p 9]. Other customs in the book range from formal rituals, such as the Chinese-Malaysian custom of



leaving the doors of the house open for three nights after a death, as Ani's family does when her mother dies [pp 44-45], to spontaneous, personal practices such as the garden and sculpture memorials that are the subject of one of Gail's documentaries [pp 82-84]. Discuss the many mourners in the book and the ways — traditional and modern — in which they commemorate their dead.

4. *Certainty* is one of the finalists for the Kiriya Prize, a prestigious international award for works “that promote greater understanding of and among the nations of the Pacific Rim and of South Asia.” It's a particularly appropriate nomination, since the novel introduces us not only to Matthew's and Ani's Chinese-Malaysian families, but to their relationships with Japan, Indonesia, and Canada, among others. If you were on the Kiriya jury and wanted to make the case for *Certainty* winning the prize, what would you say?
5. Gail makes radio documentaries while Sipke and Ani work in photography — two endeavours that purport to be “true” or “certain.” How does that idea become modified in the book? How does the work these characters do relate to the novel's main themes?
6. Madeleine Thien brings so many disparate places vividly alive to the reader partly through her gift for metaphor and simile, as when Ani thinks of the boats in the Sandakan harbour, whose hulls knock together “like a great wooden chime” [p 150]. Discuss this aspect of her style, as well as others — her dialogue, for example; the many interior monologues of the characters; the way she manages to insert historical background in the narrator's voice. Which of her stylistic strengths do you find the most striking?
7. One of the ways we try to find certainty is through science and philosophy. Thien's novel is very much a novel of ideas, as the characters are preoccupied



with concepts as complex as the Mandelbrot Set, cosmology, and cryptology. How do you relate to the introduction of these ideas? How do they underline and echo some of the book's major concerns?

8. The novel moves backwards and forwards in time over half a century, over a geographical sweep that includes Vancouver, Jakarta, Friesland in The Netherlands, Hong Kong, and Samarkand. Why does Thien choose to tell her story with so many flashbacks? She seems to be playing with the idea that the conventional boundaries of past, present, and future are to some extent illusory. Do you think she is making a similar point about all the geographical boundaries in the book? How would that fit in with her theme?
9. As a radio documentarian, Gail is particularly sensitive to the shifts in a person's voice, their pauses, their silences. Also, the narrative voice points out some memorable examples of silence, beginning with Mrs. Cho, Gail and Ansel's neighbour who cuts her grass with scissors to avoid the noise of the lawnmower [p 4]. Several of the characters in *Certainty* cannot speak of the things that are closest to their hearts— Matthew, for example, thinks that "silence had become a habit for him, a way of being in the world" [p 304]. Discuss the coexistence of speech and silence in this book.
10. Two daughters in this novel are trying to understand their fathers and their wartime experience. One man, William Sullivan, is hidden in a code; the other, Matthew, in silence. Gail, who is making a documentary about Sullivan, is the link between the two quests. Discuss the two situations, and the light they shed on each other. So many survivors of the Second World War say they "don't want to talk about it." Do you think that generation's wish not to remember and their children's wish to learn more have created an especially intense kind of generation gap?



11. Two of the central partnerships in *Certainty* — Gail and Ansel, and Matthew and Clara — are challenged by the presence of a third person. Can you discuss some of the similarities and differences in these triangular relationships? Both survive, but at what cost? Does the third person strengthen the original partnership in any way?

12. Early in the novel, Clara reads a newspaper article about the origins of empathy. The article tells her that all acts of compassion spring from the individual's needs and no act is selfless, but Clara disagrees. "In her own life, Clara has witnessed acts of selflessness, of empathy, whose motivations she does not doubt. She knows that a single act, a choice, can transform all that came before. Long ago, when she was young, she risked her future on this belief" [p 16]. What is the choice to which Clara refers? Where else in the book does empathy play an important part?

13. In the last words of the novel, Matthew hopes that "what we know will finally redeem us, that we will find something that abides, even now, in the indefinite, the uncertain, hereafter [p 306]." What does "abide" mean for the characters in *Certainty*? What do they learn that is redemptive?

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