

“AN OBJECT THAT’S NOT AN OBJECT”:

A CONVERSATION ON LITERATURE AND BELONGING WITH MADELEINE

THIEN

Recording and transcript: Stefanie Schäfer

Editing: Alexandra Ganser and Stefanie Schaefer¹

In July 2023, Canadian author Madeleine Thien joined the program of the first European Summer School in Canadian Studies (ESSCS), co-organized by the Centres for Canadian Studies at the Universities of Vienna and Innsbruck. In a reading and an author’s talk with Helena Oberzaucher, she talked about reading, writing, and literature and read from her acclaimed novel *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*.² Shortlisted for the 2016 Man Booker Prize, *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* won the 2016 Governor-General’s Literary Award for Fiction, and the *New York Times* named it a Critics’ Top Book of 2016. Thien was born in Vancouver, BC, and now lives in Montreal. Her earlier work includes the short story collection *Simple Recipes* (2001) and the novels *Certainty* (2006) and *Dogs at the Perimeter* (2011). Her books have been translated into more than twenty languages.

¹ This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 833574.

² The Vienna Centre for Canadian Studies (ZKS) would like to thank the Canadian Embassy and H.E. Troy Lulashnyk for hosting this event and for inviting the students and researchers of the first European Summer School in Canadian Studies (ESSCS) to the Ambassador’s residence on this occasion. Helena Oberzaucher, MA, interviewed Madeleine Thien in her capacity as co-organizer of the ESSCS and as a PhD student in literature.

Do Not Say We Have Nothing stretches across 20th century Chinese history, telling the story of several generations and family relations. Li-ling/Marie, a math professor at Simon Fraser University in Canada, looks back at the time her mother takes Ai-ming, a student who joined the 1989 demonstrations in Tiananmen Square, into their home. Ai-ming is the link between Marie's father and Ai-ming's extended family, and the events that join their families encompass the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the decade-long Cultural Revolution, and the Tiananmen Square protests and massacre. The figures of this extended and displaced family network become the fabric of the novel, and many of their lives are framed by the characters' devotion to music — as either professors or musicians teaching and studying Western classical music at the Shanghai Conservatory in the 1960s.

For her reading, Madeleine Thien chose a passage about the fictional “Book of Records,” a novel whose author is unknown. The manuscript is copied by hand, first by the poet Wen the Dreamer. Later it becomes an archive in which real names and lives are hidden in a fictional work. It is a key motif binding Ai-ming's and Marie's family histories together in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*.

Helena Oberzaucher: What drew you to choose this particular passage for reading on this rainy day in late July?

Madeleine Thien: I came by train from Berlin yesterday, I went to Kunsthalle today and I got caught in the rain, it was great. But while I was sheltering from the rain, I thought about what to read. Initially I planned to read a passage about the student protests in Tiananmen Square, but something drew me back to this passage about Swirl and Wen the Dreamer. It's a passage about the love of books. I was thinking about your Summer School and how, at the core, is the passion for stories, no matter which language you speak or which literature you're studying. So I wanted to read about that mysterious thing we don't often express—when a book takes over your days and nights, and when it seems to hold some key to your existence, even if the key is

more complex than it first appears. I've always loved this chapter where Swirl simply falls in love with the "Book of Records" and how that book—unfinished and never-ending—becomes so integral to this novel.

HO: Just this morning we took a library tour and went deep into the stacks of Vienna's university library. We were surrounded by all of these old books. Listening to you read about this bookstore and how the love of books brings these two characters together feels very fitting in that sense. This passage is about the pleasure of reading and writing, about stories forming connections between different people, how you form friendships with people who feel a similar attachment to the characters that you like. The "Book of Records," this book-within-the-book, also helps people make sense of the world, and there is this constant tension between books as forming connections and helping us grapple with our own lives: Sometimes they add an additional distance that might help us, but sometimes they are also a form of escapism and we become dreamers, detached from reality. In the novel, you describe books as passports or doors. They take us places, move us, but in other places they make us almost transfixed—so there is a tension between books as productive connectors versus books as a means for withdrawal from the world.

MT: I wanted to explore how any text takes on a life of its own, how it can grow with us. How literature in this novel and in the "Book of Records" becomes very much about who keeps the record of history. I wanted to see what would happen if the characters started extending the "Book of Records", using it as a refuge for events and people who are not permitted to enter official history — because they're censored, forgotten, omitted, or deliberately erased. Or because they're personal, private. When the Dreamer and Swirl leave hints for one another inside the "Book of Records", clues, when their family gets scattered during the Cultural Revolution and all the political campaigns. I was also interested in how one writes oneself into a novel, as

When the Dreamer does, and what happens to the person when they can step in and out of themselves, in that light. So it's a playful thing—and everything you talked about is what I hoped for. I wanted the Book of Records to always be something that surprises. It definitely kept surprising me all the time, and I liked that. It's an object that's not an object.

HO: Is this also connected to the theme of copying and calligraphy? There are many instances when somebody just copies something exactly the way it is and it becomes an art form through calligraphy, even if it's the same; through the act of copying it becomes different. There are passages when a text is copied in a slightly different way. There is also this idea of performance, almost as a kind of repetition, but with a difference. One of the characters is a violinist who performs the pieces as they have been transcribed hundreds of years ago, but each performance entails a variation of that original piece. Could you talk a little bit more about this idea of copying and performance in relation to the novel, and maybe also the larger themes of repetition and variation that are a structuring element?

MT: The copying also was a surprise for me. I remember learning to write Chinese as a child. I feel like I've studied the language my whole life without learning it properly. So much of the initial learning-to-write is the copying and even the tracing of characters. My mother put us in Chinese ink painting classes where the teacher would hold your hand with the brush, and he would paint. And you would see it coming out of your hand like this glorious thing, but it was his hand, and then you bring it home and show your mom, and she'd think, "So genius!" [laughs]. But I was interested in education, I was interested in how we learn a language that we take into ourselves, for better or for worse. And there's the copying in the text that leads to fascinating forms of personal freedom, because after having learned the skill and the craft, you have this incredible embodied capacity to then be free.

There's so much about politics in the novel as well. I was also interested in revolution, in beliefs, the power and the persuasion of different ways of thinking. I was interested in the poetry of Mao Zedong, which remains powerful. We still have these lines in our heads: "Power comes from the barrel of the gun"; or "Women hold up half the sky," and I was interested in the ways these words, these slogans, were used in the 1960s and again in 1989, by this time by students who were speaking back to the government. It was interesting to see the exact same words used in very different ways. The copying takes on many forms. Maybe it was my way of trying to think through what I've inherited in the world, and what I do unthinkingly, and what I do by habit, but also about how those habitual gestures accrue new meaning, even without my realizing it. And at other times, you consciously want to give it new meaning.

HO: The context in which the words are used again is so important, because words and signs can be appropriated, so meaning shifts continually not just on a personal level, but also depending on the way in which this kind of language then travels into the world.

MT: Yes. Some of those words were used to enact violence and then the same words would be used to find a different way. For me as a writer, I am always suspicious of language, which is maybe why I am interested in the ways it doesn't hold still, even when we want it to. It's fixed language that doesn't breathe. I'm still thinking through a lot of those questions.

HO: Before tonight's reading, you were re-working your own passage and editing it, as well?

MT: Yes, because when you read it aloud, some things aren't clear, so I just dropped in a few helpful words that didn't need to be there in the context of reading the whole book.

HO: I really like that, because sometimes we think of the novel as static: it's in print, and it's the definitive version and that's how it should be read. So this idea of a novel as a work in process is very much in line with what the "Book of Records" does in *Do Not Say We Have*

Nothing. It's alive, it's changing, we're taking our bits and pieces and we're circulating them in different ways, and then they resurface again.

MT: Yes. I haven't done an in-person event since the beginning of 2020, so I haven't actually looked at this novel since then—and it was so wonderful to be in its company again. When I was looking for this passage I was like, “Oh, there's Big Mother Knife again with her vulgarities and her jokes,” and there's these personalities that mean so much to me.

HO: Big Mother Knife has a wonderful sense of humor. “You melon” is such a funny insult!

MT: It's very common in Chinese: “You stupid melon!” But I don't know why, because melons are very popular.

HO: It's an insult but also a compliment?

MT: Yes! A term of endearment.

HO: In the passage that you read for us, many topics or themes of the novel surface. It covers so many emotions and experiences that are foundational for the relationship between these two characters. It starts off in the bookstore, but then later on it takes a darker turn, but it's also very hopeful at the same time—it's full of possibilities. The relationship between Jiang Kai and Sparrow is new, but also a continuation of all the previous relationships and familial relations. So he is part of worshipping or reviewing her ancestors, he shares her grief about the loss of her son; and there's this idea of family as not just the nuclear family. You're part of somebody else's previous family, it's this wholeness of experiences, and this idea of family that maybe can be extended. So even though the novel has been described as a family saga, I was wondering if the nuclear family is also something that you would like to disrupt or expand or interrogate, because there are so many relationships that are really important to the development of the characters and the plot that are not based on the nuclear family?

MT: My parents emigrated in 1974, and when they arrived in Vancouver, Canada, they were very alone: it was just the four of them, my parents and two siblings. I was born just after they arrived. I remember they seemed lonely, my father in particular. He speaks a Chinese dialect I never heard growing up, because he never had anyone to speak it to, while my mom's language is Cantonese, which you could hear everywhere. At the same time my mom was one of twelve siblings, and nine of those were sisters. She's very close to her sisters, and I think missing them was a big part of her life, and always wanting to see them all together. So I relate to your question quite personally, because it was like we were in this lonely branch of the family, kind of cut off, from what was really a very big family. And the same on my father's side; I have a zillion cousins in Australia and in Malaysia.

The relations in this novel are like moving screens. From the beginning, it feels like the narrator, Li-ling, or Marie, is going to be the central figure, she's the storyteller, but she's actually at quite a distance. Marie never really gets to know her father, who dies when she's fairly young, and the story she tells goes something like this: Can she tell the story of her father, who died when she was still a child? Can you tell their story by telling the stories of the people that they loved? That's really what she's doing with father, Kai, who has this very profound relationship with a composer named Sparrow in Shanghai. And Sparrow is Ai-ming's father. Sparrow connects us to Li-ling and to Zhuli, so the screens keep moving—you think it's about one family, but it turns out they're minor characters. The relations and the movement mean that different people step into the central space, and it's we, as readers, who keep moving, and as we keep moving, the centrality of the characters changes.

I don't know if I thought about it so explicitly, but I was interested in relation, devotion, fidelity, especially in a time of political catastrophe. What do certain characters stay true to? Who do they betray, the ideas or the passions, or the things they love? What do they burn and what do

they stay true to? It's so hard to unmesh the book because so much of it is about music, so structurally, technically, emotionally, I was thinking about the way music works, how the notes come apart and come together, and how the motifs work.

HO: Loyalty to your family, at the time when the novel is set, during the Cultural Revolution, is considered subordinate to loyalty to the state. So loyalty to your family could be a crime, whereas in the case of Marie in Canada, loyalty to the family is a very conventional idea. Depending on the context, a similar kind of act or solidarity, devotion, or fidelity can have a completely different political and personal meaning. When you say, we are loyal to these words—relation, devotion, fidelity—this reminds me of the idea of forgiveness. What can you forgive? I was very moved by what the characters in the novel are willing to forgive, considering the circumstances. So this idea of forgiveness in the novel, is that something you could elaborate on?

MT: It's difficult to pin down. One thing Marie comes to understand about her father is his inability to forgive himself. I think this is not unusual in a generation that lived through something like the Cultural Revolution, in which there are no bystanders. It's such a complex world, where you can believe in the project and you can believe that this major transformation or ideological, political, social, revolution needs to happen, but the methods are where we reveal ourselves. The methods — by which we're going to get to this idea that we have — are in conflict. What is the appropriate cost or price to pay to achieve, say, this utopian place—and who will pay it? I think many of the characters find it easier to forgive the people they love than to forgive themselves. I think that's the heart of it. There's a character named Zhuli, a teenage girl who is a brilliant violinist. She's the heart, the conscience of the novel, and I think what is so difficult about this trajectory is that she takes full responsibility for everything that she does,

and for her life, and she's a very unusual person. I like to think it's about forgiveness, but that's a very complicated space to be in.

HO: Thinking about complicated spaces to be in—the novel touches on very difficult periods of history, some of which are disavowed, like the Tiananmen Square massacre. You write about the Cultural Revolution, but also about very personal tragedies, like suicide. These are very difficult topics—obviously very important to write about, but at the same time, there's a difficult space that you inhabit in the process of writing. For you as a writer, is there something in the process of writing that you do, to take care of yourself, while you open up to the characters and their experiences? Because you have lived with Sparrow and Zhuli for years and I assume they must feel like friends. Being able to create their voices and to live in their shoes, how do you negotiate that tightrope walk between being really open and vulnerable and almost like this conduit for them, while at the same time making sure that you as a person are still okay, distancing yourself from them and taking care of your own mental health?

MT: It's so hard to talk about this. I spent about six years writing *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, and I spent about five years writing the previous novel, *Dogs at the Perimeter*, about the Cambodian genocide. The eleven years writing these books, it was a study of individual lives in totalitarian states. There's a responsibility when you write about these histories and you feel you need to look at everything, you need to know as much as you possibly can before you can walk away from the book. And it doesn't all end up in the work, but you have this density, this thickness in your head from which you distil something, a piece here, a piece there. I was devastated after writing the previous novel, *Dogs at the Perimeter*, because of the nature of the Cambodian genocide and the Khmer Rouge, and I know that after that book I found it almost impossible to think about language. I couldn't write. I spent six months drawing. I was taking this drawing class where I was just put in front of this bust, this head, this statue every day for

a couple of hours in the morning, and I spent four months drawing one picture. So I looked at it every single day for like two or three hours. And no words, that was very important.

When I started writing *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, I turned to music. I was listening to a lot of Bach, a lot of what my characters would have access to, many of the Russian composers. I think the piece of music that is so central to this book is the Goldberg Variations. I was really interested in how a very slender motif of music could be opened up like an accordion into thirty variations and seem to encompass such a vast universe of feelings, from utter despair to giddiness, to play, dance, all those things, and it's all built from the same six notes which generate a universe of variations. I climbed out of the last book and went into this book because it talks about variation, it made me ask myself how many ways can I build it differently. For me, even though *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* was a hard book to write, I learned about the human capacity to love. I thought about collective responses, how social protest in China rises with every generation — without fail. There's this longing to build things again differently.

One of the things that became clear to me was that every major demonstration in China is sparked by grief. It's about public mourning. And when the government shuts down the space or the legality of public mourning, that's when people tend to come into the streets and resist. The protests in Tiananmen in 1989 began when students gathered to mourn a reformist leader who had died, and they came with their flowers. The government took it all away, even cleared out all the flowers, and barred them from entering the square. People were outraged. For the next three months, millions of people gathered in Tiananmen Square. It started with this white chrysanthemum, the flower of mourning in China, in Asian societies. And it's not the only time that's happened—I could see how mourning, collectivity, and the desire to find a better way, is impossible to repress. It keeps springing back.

HO: It seems like you like to bring different art forms together, because one of them alone is just not enough—writing, music, science, mathematics.

MT: Yes, mathematics and science is another language, another way of thinking, another way of seeing things!

HO: That makes me want to ask a question about algebraic geometry, the discipline the narrator of the novel works in. Thinking of math as another language, what motivated you to put it in this book? And why algebraic geometry? It's very specific.

MT: I knew that Li-ling would not move towards music, her father's vocation, I knew it in my heart, and so I tried to find a way for her to be thinking in that way, and it was mathematics. I'm one of those people who loves math but can't do it. I got to age 16 and I was amazing at math, it was clear, it was vivid, and then it just—went away. I mourn that because I remember that wonderful feeling of understanding. So I felt that she had that thing that I lost or never had, and that she could reconfigure the world with that way. There's something about number theory and music.

HO: We talked a lot about the parts of the novel that take place in China, which are actually most of the novel. But of course the frame narrative takes place in Canada partially, and I've noticed that Canada appears in your novels, but not necessarily as the most significant place. Most of the characters actually live in Canada, but they need to go somewhere else: They go to Cambodia, to Malaysia, to Asia, to realize something about themselves and their families or their friends. How is Canada represented in your novels, what role does it play for you, and how central is it to your texts?

MT: My work couldn't exist were it not for that place. Everything always comes back to Vancouver. I don't know how to describe it, it's my solid footing and it allows me to stretch.

And it's the complexity of my family: my siblings and my parents and pretty much all my family is born elsewhere, except for me, by accident of fate. My parents actually didn't want to leave Malaysia. They had been accepted as immigrants to Canada but they were torn. And a few months before they had to land in Canada, or else their papers wouldn't be good anymore, they decided to come. My mom was about seven months pregnant with me. I think it was very hard for them to leave behind families, very hard for them to know how they would sustain themselves. But it was the 1970s, the Vietnam War, the war Cambodia, so it was very complicated.

It's a hard question to answer because I don't want to make Canada into something that it can't be. The place that can house all these possibilities. But it's the only place that I accepted as my home. There is no other place. My parents gave up all their passports elsewhere, and I don't necessarily fit in anywhere else, even though I've spent a lot of time elsewhere. I don't think I could do that if I couldn't come home. It's very complicated and I have both a deep love for this place that meant so much to my parents, and complex feelings about it, too. For sure, it's the literature where I feel most at home. The way Michael Ondaatje was writing, and Rohinton Mistry, the writers that I grew up reading: They could go far away but their work belonged to this place. To me that was like: "Oh yeah—I can belong there, too." It is a very hard question and I have answered it in different ways throughout my life, and I'm sure I'll keep doing that, also because I've left Vancouver and live in Montreal.

HO: In the longer texts, Canada is not as central as in the shorter stories. They're often set almost in their entirety in Canada. Is there something about the short story form that draws you to it, for the discussion of topics like migration and actually living in Canada?

MT: I don't know! It's true, all the short stories are set in Canada, and very explicitly so! I love the short story form. I don't write very many short stories but it's where I feel I can experiment

and play and do all sorts of things. I love the heft that such a small thing can have—and for whatever reason they're only ever set in Canada! It starts right away, you have to know the ground right away, and I know the ground at home right away. So maybe that's why they grow from that place very naturally for me.

HO: You also talked about feeling at home in literature. Could you tell us a bit more about who the writers are who have influenced your writing the most—Canadian or from elsewhere?

MT: There are so many! For sure, growing up, Alice Munro: I love Alice Munro with a passion that is difficult to contain. She taught me a lot about my mother's generation, about my mother's inner life. And Alice Munro never wrote about women of color. She knew her world with a kind of exactitude and sharpness—and yet in her stories, I recognize the women I knew growing up, even though circumstances were different. Ondaatje, also. There was a point when I was reading so much Canadian literature I almost read nothing else, and now I read a lot in translation.

I also feel like I have a real home. I remember when I gave *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* to my partner Rawi to read as a draft, he said, as a compliment, “It feels like a novel in translation.” I thought, “That is the best thing you could ever say!” I just don't know what it means, but I felt like yes, because I want the English language to do something else.

HO: It's about this defamiliarization, right? To create and use metaphors that are not stale, not overused, and sometimes that happens in translation in very interesting ways.

MT: Yes! When I read novels by Korean writers or Japanese writers or Chinese writers, they are writing in their language for an audience that is in proximity to them. When I was young there were not so many books by writers of color and you always felt like they were passing through different mirrors to get to the reader. They had to explain themselves along the way.

There was something liberating about reading things that weren't trying to explain themselves along the way; there was this directness, and I thought, there's got to be a way to do that in my context. I thought that instead of having to go through these different mirrors, I just felt like there's got to be a way to pull the reader in. The reader who knows everything about China and the reader who knows nothing about China. There's got to be a space that we co-inhabit, where we coincide, and in which we are all startled together. How do you make that space in this particular language? That is what I have to work with.