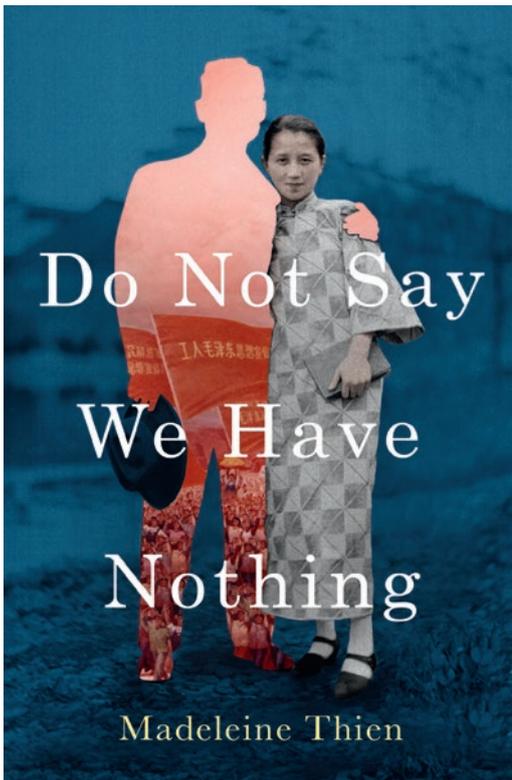


# Reader's Guide



Other books by Madeleine Thien  
*Certainty* (2006)  
*Dogs at the Perimeter* (2012)

## Do Not Say We Have Nothing Madeleine Thien

Granta Books

[www.themanbookerprize.com](http://www.themanbookerprize.com)

#FinestFiction



## About the author

Madeleine Thien is the author of the story collection *Simple Recipes* (2001) and the novels *Certainty* (2006) and *Dogs at the Perimeter* (Granta, 2012), which was shortlisted for Berlin's 2014 International Literature Award and won the Frankfurt Book Fair's 2015 LiBeraturpreis. Her books and stories have been translated into 23 languages. Her essays have appeared in *Granta*, *the Guardian*, *the Financial Times*, *Five Dials*, and *Brick*, and her story *The Wedding Cake* was shortlisted for the 2015 *Sunday Times* EFG Short Story Award. The daughter of Malaysian-Chinese immigrants to Canada, she lives in Montreal.

## About the book

In Canada in 1990, ten-year-old Marie and her mother invite a guest into their home: a young woman who has fled China in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square protests. Her name is Ai-Ming.

As her relationship with Marie deepens, Ai-Ming tells the story of her family in revolutionary China, from the crowded teahouses in the first days of Chairman Mao's ascent to the Shanghai Conservatory in the 1960s and the events leading to the Beijing demonstrations of 1989. It is a history of revolutionary idealism, music, and silence, in which three musicians, the shy and brilliant composer Sparrow, the violin prodigy Zhuli, and the enigmatic pianist Kai struggle during China's relentless Cultural Revolution to remain loyal to one another and to the music they have devoted their lives to. Forced to re-imagine their artistic and private selves, their fates reverberate through the years, with deep and lasting consequences for Ai-Ming - and for Marie.

## Discussion points

Big Mother describes her sister, Swirl, as the love of her life. How does this novel explore the bonds of familial love and romantic love? Is love a refuge or a dangerous political sentiment?

Classical music is a major theme in the novel, with Glenn Gould's two recordings of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* being one of the most importance pieces. What role does music – recorded or performed – play in the lives of the characters? Did you listen to any of the music as you were reading the book?

*Do Not Say We Have Nothing* has many important characters. There is no single protagonist, or else there are several protagonists in several overlapping stories. Who did you think was a 'main' character? Were you more interested in one particular character above others?

Is *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* a work of historical or contemporary fiction? What do you understand these terms to mean?

## Themed reading

Jung Chang *Wild Swans*  
Yu Hua (translated by Allan H. Barr) *China in Ten Words*  
Anchee Min *Red Azalea*  
Amitav Ghosh *Sea of Stories*  
Neel Mukherjee *The Lives of Others*  
Rohinton Mistry *A Fine Balance*

## Useful links

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/aug/07/do-not-say-we-have-nothing-madeleine-thien-review-china-tiananmen-square-ai-ming-marie-kai-sparrow>

<https://www.ft.com/content/be548306-4d97-11e6-8172-e39ecd3b86fc>