

Book Club Discussion Guide



Do Not Say We Have Nothing by Madeleine Thien, Page 1 (March 20, 2018)

Do Not Say We Have Nothing

By Madeleine Thien

About the author:

Madeleine Thien was born in Vancouver. She is the author of the story collection *Simple Recipes* (2001), and three novels, *Certainty* (2006); *Dogs at the Perimeter* (2011), shortlisted for Berlin's International Literature Prize and winner of the Frankfurt Book Fair's 2015 Literaturpreis; and *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* (2016), about musicians studying Western classical music at the Shanghai Conservatory in the 1960s, and about the legacy of the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations. Her books and stories are published in Canada, the U.S., the U.K. and Australia, and have been translated into 25 languages.

Do Not Say We Have Nothing won the 2016 Scotiabank Giller Prize, the 2016 Governor-General's Literary Award for Fiction, and an Edward Stanford Prize; and was shortlisted for the 2016 Man Booker Prize, the 2017 Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction, and The Folio Prize 2017. The novel was named a New York Times Critics' Top Book of 2016 and longlisted for a Carnegie Medal.

Source: Author's website (madeleinethien.com)

About this book:

Madeleine Thien's new novel is breathtaking in scope and ambition even as it is hauntingly intimate. With the ease and skill of a master storyteller, Thien takes us inside an extended

Book Club Discussion Guide



Do Not Say We Have Nothing by Madeleine Thien, Page 2 (March 20, 2018)

family in China, showing us the lives of two successive generations--those who lived through Mao's Cultural Revolution in the mid-twentieth century; and the children of the survivors, who became the students protesting in Tiananmen Square in 1989, in one of the most important political moments of the past century. With exquisite writing sharpened by a surprising vein of wit and sly humour, Thien has crafted unforgettable characters who are by turns flinty and headstrong, dreamy and tender, foolish and wise.

At the centre of this epic tale, as capacious and mysterious as life itself, are enigmatic Sparrow, a genius composer who wishes desperately to create music yet can find truth only in silence; his mother and aunt, Big Mother Knife and Swirl, survivors with captivating singing voices and an unbreakable bond; Sparrow's ethereal cousin Zhuli, daughter of Swirl and storyteller Wen the Dreamer, who as a child witnesses the denunciation of her parents and as a young woman becomes the target of denunciations herself; and headstrong, talented Kai, best friend of Sparrow and Zhuli, and a determinedly successful musician who is a virtuoso at masking his true self until the day he can hide no longer. Here, too, is Kai's daughter, the ever-questioning mathematician Marie, who pieces together the tale of her fractured family in present-day Vancouver, seeking a fragile meaning in the layers of their collective story.

With maturity and sophistication, humour and beauty, a huge heart and impressive understanding, Thien has crafted a novel that is at once beautifully intimate and grandly political, rooted in the details of daily life inside China, yet transcendent in its universality.

Source: Publisher's website (penguinrandomhouse.ca)

Discussion Questions:

1. How did you experience the book? Were you engaged immediately, or did it take you a while to "get into it"? How did you feel reading it—amused, sad, disturbed, confused, bored...?

Book Club Discussion Guide



Do Not Say We Have Nothing by Madeleine Thien, Page 3 (March 20, 2018)

2. Describe the main characters—personality traits, motivations, and inner qualities.
 - a. Why do characters do what they do?
 - b. Are their actions justified?
 - c. Describe the dynamics between characters (in a marriage, family, or friendship).
 - d. How has the past shaped their lives?
 - e. Do you admire or disapprove of them?
 - f. Do they remind you of people you know?
3. Are the main characters dynamic—changing or maturing by the end of the book? Do they learn about themselves, how the world works and their role in it?
4. Discuss the plot:
 - a. Is it engaging—do you find the story interesting?
 - b. Is this a plot-driven book—a fast-paced page-turner?
 - c. Does the plot unfold slowly with a focus on character?
 - d. Were you surprised by complications, twists & turns?
 - e. Did you find the plot predictable, even formulaic?
5. Talk about the book's structure.
 - a. Is it a continuous story...or interlocking short stories?
 - b. Does the time-line move forward chronologically?
 - c. Does time shift back & forth from past to present?
 - d. Is there a single viewpoint or shifting viewpoints?
 - e. Why might the author have chosen to tell the story the way he or she did?
 - f. What difference does the structure make in the way you read or understand the book?

Book Club Discussion Guide



Do Not Say We Have Nothing by Madeleine Thien, Page 4 (March 20, 2018)

6. What main ideas—themes—does the author explore? (Consider the title, often a clue to a theme.) Does the author use symbols to reinforce the main ideas?
7. What passages strike you as insightful, even profound? Perhaps a bit of dialog that's funny or poignant or that encapsulates a character? Maybe there's a particular comment that states the book's thematic concerns?
8. Is the ending satisfying? If so, why? If not, why not...and how would you change it?
9. If you could ask the author a question, what would you ask? Have you read other books by the same author? If so how does this book compare. If not, does this book inspire you to read others?
10. Has this novel changed you—broadened your perspective? Have you learned something new or been exposed to different ideas about people or a certain part of the world?

Source: *LitLovers* (litlovers.com/run-a-book-club/questions-for-fiction)

Other formats available at Halifax Public Libraries:

- eBook