



Book Club Set

# Dogs at the Perimeter

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 Fairs 2015 Literaturpreis; and *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* (2016). Her books and stories are published in Canada, the U.S., the U.K. and Australia, and have been translated into 25 languages.

Her short fiction appears in *The New Anthology of Canadian Literature*, *The Penguin Book of Canadian Short Stories*, *The Broadview Introduction to Literature: A Pocket Anthology* and elsewhere. Her work has awarded the City of Vancouver Book Award, Amazon First Novel Award, a Canadian Authors Association Award, Ethel Wislson Fiction Prize, and The Ovid Festival Prize, and shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers Prize, Kiriama Prize for Fiction, and The Sunday Times EFG Short Story Award.

Her literary criticism, essays, and multimedia work, on topics as diverse as music and human rights, personhood, female beauty, state surveillance, visual art, race, literacy politics, neighbourhoods, and the Québec rodeo are widely available, including in *The Guardian*, *Granta*, *Financial Times*, *PEN America*, *Five Dials*, *Brick*, *Warscapes*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *National Post*, *Globe & Mail*, *Literary Review of Canada* and the *Asia Literary Review*.

She has taught literature and fiction in Canada, China, Germany, Nigeria, the United States, Zimbabwe, Singapore, and Japan. With novelists Tsitsi Dangaremba and Ignatius Mabasa, she co-edited *A Family Portrait*, new fiction from Zimbabwe. Since 2010, she has been part of the international faculty in the MFA program at City University of Hong Kong. Along with novelist and photographer Ravi Hage, she was the inaugural Shadbolt Research Fellow at Simon Fraser University, which supported the publication and presentation of their new artistic work, *Arrival*.

Her new book, *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, about musicians studying Western classical music at the Shanghai Conservatory in the 1960s, and about the legacy of the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations, is forthcoming in 2016.

Retrieved from: <https://madeleinethien.com/>

## About the Book



Set in Cambodia during the regime of the-Khmer Rouge and in present day Montreal, *Dogs at the Perimeter* tells the story of Janie, who as a child experiences the terrible violence carried out by the Khmer Rouge and loses everything she holds dear. Three decades later, Janie has relocated to Montreal, although the scars of her past remain visible. After abandoning her husband and son and taking refuge in the home of her friend, the scientist Hiroji Matsui, Janie and Hiroji find solace in their shared grief and pain—until Hiroji's disappearance opens old wounds and Janie finds that she must struggle to find grace in a world overshadowed by the sorrows of her past.

Beautifully realized, deeply affecting, *Dogs at the Perimeter* evokes the injustice of tyranny through the eyes of a young girl and draws a remarkable map of the mind's battle with memory, loss, and the horrors of war. It confirms Madeleine Thien as one of the most gifted and powerful novelists writing today.

Retrieved from: <https://www.goodreads.com/en/book/show/34068494>

## Discussion Questions



1. What different ways of understanding the self and the soul and their relation to the body does the novel explore? How do these conceptions manifest in the narrative?
2. Why is the story of Vesna Vulovic, the woman who survived a fall from a plane, so meaningful for Janie?
3. Winter, snow, and the whiteness feature in Madeleine Thien's descriptions throughout the novel. Why did she choose this imagery? How is it juxtaposed with the lushness of the Cambodian Jungle?
4. How does Janie describe her memories of the Khmer Rouge? What scenes does she paint, and what language does she use? How does she reveal her emotions about the experience and inhabit the perspectives of a child?
5. In one encounter with Khmer Rouge soldiers, Janie recalls, "Our religion was Buddhism and it taught us that life was suffering and that the cycle was eternal and would continue no matter our individual destinies. For the first time in my life, I saw the cycles, I saw its end, a lake, a nothingness on which we hovered." What does she mean by this? How does Buddhism inform her interpretation of the events and her life, and how does this interpretation vary over time?
6. How do changing identities become a mode of survival under the Khmer Rouge? Is it a practical or an emotional response? Are names necessary for a sense of self? How, as Hiroji learns, do names change their meaning to Nuong and his countrymen?
7. Responding to the Angkar's demands, Janie wanted to ask, "How can we save ourselves and still begin again, how can we keep one piece and abandon all the rest?" Did she succeed in saving herself? Is she still essentially the same person?
8. What does the book's title refer to? What are the "dogs at the perimeter" guarding?
9. Why are language and loss of language themes in this novel? What happens to the people who lose language? How does it affect their personhood?

10. How do you explain and how do you interpret the scene in which Hiroji buys food for a man he thinks is his brother? Why does he do it? How does this episode tie into the books' larger themes of memory, trauma, and identity?
11. How would you characterize Janie's relationship with her son? Why did she hit him? How did she react when she did it? Where does her anger come from, and why does it boil over in that moment?
12. How do James, Janie, and her family make decisions in the life-threatening and emotionally devastating situations they encounter? What values, instincts, and needs guide them?
13. Which portion of the narrative was the most interesting to you, or resonated with you the most? Why? Who was writing the fragments? How did they come together?
14. Why do you think Thien chose to write Hiroji, and Janie as researchers and doctors? What roles do medicine, healing, and observation play throughout the narrative?

## Author Interview



**When did this book come about? Was there a gestation period, or was there a clear moment of inspiration?**

It was a long period of gestation. I've been curious about Cambodia for a long time and drawn to it as a place, as a country, and as a kind of unresolved history. I'd actually traveled that entire region without going into Cambodia because I always felt when I went I wanted to just go there. I didn't want to be passing through on my way to Vietnam or going around on my way from Malaysia. So finally in 2007 I had a chance to go there for about six weeks, and I just traveled. It's not a big country and you can travel from one end to the other in maybe eight hours, and it's not that the distance is that long, it's that the roads are so poor. I didn't write. I just soaked it up. Then the next year I came back for five months, and that's when I started writing. But even then, I wasn't sure what I was writing. I was just writing to put some pieces together.

**Is that the process that you tend to go through? There are some writers who seem to know what they want to write, make a plan, write the book, light edit afterwards and then there are other writers who seem to find out what the book is through the writing. Are you the latter?**

Yes, I'm the latter.

**I'm also interested in this other aspect, the neurology side of things. Did you come at that in a similar way? Which came first as the subject of the book, the neurology or the Cambodia aspect?**

Ah, that's interesting. They both seemed to exist for a long time. I didn't know if they were connected. The neurology interest is very old. A general interest in science started when my mum passed away, which was 2002. I started reading a lot about science. A lot about biology, a lot about the mind. It seemed to be asking some big questions that at the time I felt I couldn't find in fiction. You know, those really basic childhood questions: "What am I? Why am I here?"

**"Where does a thought come from?"**

"Where does a thought come from? Where does it go? What happens when the body shuts down? What happens to the mind?" In neurology [those questions] are so fundamental to science. It's interesting to me in terms of philosophy instilling those questions and neurology trying to answer them in small pieces, and with the kind of humility as well that you might not be able to answer that larger question, but you can find out a little bit about the process.

When I started writing about Cambodia, I really just wanted to know what people did with these other lives that they had lived, if they had survived the Khmer Rouge; and if they had left the country — as so many did — and even when they remained, how much had to be forgotten; and what happened to *those* thoughts, what happened to those experiences?

What happened to people who were there from '75 to '79 is so beyond really what a person could imagine. They lost things that we could never really comprehend. So I wanted to know how people reinvented themselves after that, or how they managed to live with those things side by side, or not. A lot of that is, for me, linked to the process of remembering, the process of thinking, the process of forgetting. All of those things.

**The period of that massacre is so recent that I would imagine that to write about Cambodia is, to some extent, to write about what happened then. There just hasn't been enough time, I would suppose, to not address it, even if you wanted to, say, write about the present. Did you know immediately that it was this period that you wanted to tackle?**

I thought I would be writing about the aftermath of that period. I didn't actually think that I would be able to write about '75 to '79 exactly, the Khmer Rouge. I didn't think I could, for all sorts of reasons. *So hard*. And not a lot of readers necessarily want to read about that, you know? But I realized as I was writing that it's almost impossible to write about the aftermath if the reader isn't aware of what happened in those four years and the lead-up to it. There is no common foundation of knowledge to draw on because it's one of those genocides that seems to be known at the basic level — when you say “Khmer Rouge,” people know — but after that, there's not a lot of knowledge. So how do you write about the aftermath or how do you write about Cambodia post-that or how do you write about Cambodian refugees if what they went through stays invisible?

The thing I had to wrestle with was how to convey what happened. How do you find words for something like that? And how to tell it in a story that the reader won't put down the book.

You make a lot of decisions along the way of how to give this experience to the reader but you really want the reader to keep going with you and stay with her [Janie] no matter how difficult it is. I guess every writer would come to that balance in a different way.

**On the *Dogs at the Perimeter* website, you have a video that you made, and I noticed one of the audio clips that you quote is from John Pilger's documentary *Year Zero*, the subtitle of which was “The silent death of Cambodia.” That documentary was revolutionary in terms of the aid that resulted, but do you think many people know what happened in Cambodia?**

No. No, I don't, and they also don't know how involved our governments were. They don't know it's relationship with the Vietnam War, or about the way Cambodia was bombed. It's something like 1.5 million tons of bombs were dropped on Cambodia to smoke out the North Vietnamese.

### **On the personal orders of Kissinger and Nixon.**

Yeah, exactly. They don't know that the government that lost to the Khmer Rouge, the Lon Nol government, was completely funded by Western interests. They don't know that when the Khmer Rouge finally fell to the North Vietnamese, we didn't support this change because we didn't want to support a Communist Vietnamese influence in Cambodia, and we actually funded the Khmer Rouge to keep fighting. That's why all the aid, as Pilger shows, went to the border. It didn't go into Phnom Penh, it didn't go into the country. If you needed aid, and this was after four years of famine among other horrendous things, you had to get to the border, which then created these camps of millions of people who were too afraid to return to their country. The only good prospects you had were to go abroad: to go to France or Canada or the U.S.

You know, the Khmer Rouge held that U.N. seat until the early '90s.

I think we'd like to think that it's isolated to that part of the world and is a kind of madness. I've been fighting against this idea that it was a kind of madness. If you could create the conditions for civil war, that civil war is going to be bloody, and things come out of a civil war that become unforgivable.

The thing is, in a novel it's hard to put all that history into the page. Because in the novel you just want people to experience this person's life, this character. And so I made a conscious decision at some point that the history is there, and everything in the book, as far as I've known, is historically accurate, but there are things that I hope the reader would then look up, because we live in an age when it's so easy to Wikipedia. If there's some piece that you don't know, I really hope that you would *want* to know.

**That must have been a pretty difficult balance, though. You must have done a lot of research, which I can imagine would not have been easy research to do, not easy stuff to read, stuff to look at.**

Right.

**And I could understand the impulse to pay testament to all the things that have come in through your eyes. But, as you say, you try to focus on a single life and a single character and to use that to draw the reader through the story. How did you find that balance?**



She kind of leads, you know? I knew that we were coming to a certain breaking point; I knew that Hiroji had disappeared — all these things I knew at the beginning when I started writing — but I didn't know how that would lead her back, and if it could. Even now, that Cambodia section that she remembers, which is quite contained, I don't know if it's her retelling the story, or if it's simply a set of memories that exist in her mind that she doesn't reply but that are there and underlie so many of the things in her present life. But whether she actually sees it unfold the way we do, I doubt it. I think it's just what's in her mind.

As I was writing I thought she doesn't have a way back — there's just no way back for her — but the way that she tries to make sense of what she lived through is to take her experience and be able to tell someone else's story. That she can understand what happened to James and what Hiroji feels in a way that no one else can, that's what she tries to make from her experience. I think she lets go of the idea that she can salvage something of her own past, though I think she does, but really it's about this act of friendship, it's about her being able to say "I actually deeply understand what it would be like to give up your name and your identity and become a new person because there's no way back." That's the heart of the book.

So I would say that to find that balance I just followed her. It seems like this is where she was going. I learned a lot. It's weird, you know, to talk about your characters like this, but it seemed that there was no other way for her.

**Was there something specifically that surprised you that she did or a memory that she had that you didn't see coming, and that was the point that she took over?**

Yes. There is a point where they've been pushed out of the city and then we suddenly know that her father disappears, but there's not a lot of detail. We kind of see that scene where he gets put on the truck. It's interesting because I felt on the one hand that she had taken the reins, and on the other hand there were things that she could only go so deeply into and she had to pass over. The strange thing about this book for me is that it was a lot about following them, but also a lot about the things that couldn't be said.

When I was writing this book I thought a lot about it. Wouldn't it be better to write a longer essay or something about what's happening in Cambodia now with the tribunal? Wouldn't it be better to focus on the challenges, really brutal challenges, that are facing the country right now? The thing is, I'm not a non-fiction writer. I'm a fiction writer, and so I had to think a lot about what it was that fiction could do that a non-fiction piece couldn't do, and what's mostly come out of the Cambodian experience have been witness accounts. There are extraordinary books about people who have survived. What I was looking for was what couldn't be said. There are things that you can survive,

and you can tell your story, but there are also things underneath that story that are so heavy it's hard to find the words. I think that's what I was looking for.

**When they're on the boat, I think you actually write, "There are no words for what happened on the boat." I'm wondering, in terms of the writing process, was that something that you just couldn't write? Or did you kind of write by elision, write by editing out what happened?**

That's a good question. I don't think I edited out. I think she came to a point of memory that just couldn't be breached. I think she didn't have the words. I think that she can only go so far, you know? Some things maybe are not meant to be shared. That's what I felt with her, and I've been criticized on that point, but I feel that it was true to her and true to the story.

**How do you think the Cambodian genocide has played into your generation's consciousness? Do you have personal memories associated with that event and its aftermath?**

I remember the refugees arriving. I don't remember Cambodia itself. I was born in '74, so by '79 I would have been five. But it was around '84 and beyond that really huge numbers of people were arriving in the U.S., also in Canada and France. I don't know what it was that I saw or read or was too exposed to, but it was the first time as a child that I recognized that my experience was such a small part of the entirety, which is I think a really big realization as a child. That there were so many other things that these children my age had experienced and lived and understood that I had been closed off from, or protected from.

Then these children were put into my world, in a sense, in schools that were familiar to me, but for them, they had to become someone new all over again. I think as a child I couldn't wrap my head around it, and I still can't. I still find it extraordinary what people bring from other lives, and in some way how they're expected to make that disappear. We also ask people to reinvent themselves, and I think it *is* a healthy thing, but at the same time, it allows us to remain a little bit blind to things. It's a big question.

Retrieved from: <https://thevarsity.ca/2012/02/27/speak-memory/>

## Other Links and Resources



Other articles on the novel:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/19/books/review/dogs-at-the-perimeter-madeleine-thien.html>

<https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/scl/article/view/23049/26747>

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As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!		It was OK...		Loved it!

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes          No          Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: