It is more than ten years since I took my first course in the Creative Writing Department at the University of British Columbia. That was September, 1994, and I was enrolled in a non-fiction class taught by Andreas Schroeder. I remember that, during the first class, we workshoped an essay by Marilyn Dumont, the poet and activist. Her writing was so fine, as pure and clean as air. I was twenty years old, an English literature major, and I was overwhelmed by the quality of the work, and by the confidence of the writers around me; I had to sit on my hands to prevent them from shaking. The windows looked east and, as we sat together, the room darkened until we were sitting in twilight. When the class was over, I walked out, stunned. I felt that click that I’d always imagined, when your life turns over, then sets itself in place.
The department sits on the top floor of Buchanan Block E, and consists of a long hallway that branches off into classrooms and offices. When workshops are underway, all you can hear is the ebb and flow of conversation, the occasional burst of laughter. In my memory, people loiter in the hallway for hours at a time, taking part in a conversation that continues as students come and go.

In 1995, when I was officially accepted into the undergraduate program, I submitted a story I had written over the summer. In the story, “Simple Recipes,” a young woman recalls how her brother is savagely beaten by their father. The discussion in the workshop was heated. On one side, were those who wanted to defend the piece in its entirety: the writing, the style, the intention. On the other, were those who pleaded for greater meaning. “As I read your story,” one woman said, “I kept asking myself why. Why are you doing this? Why are you putting me through this? What are you trying to say?”

Afterwards, I went to the bathroom and locked myself in a stall. It
shocked me that words I had written could live so vividly, that they could reach across the divide and take root in another person. I had always written instinctually, and stories were a kind of coming up for air. “Simple Recipes,” at that time, was raw. It was an outpouring of emotion that had yet to find its shape; that was, in many ways, meaningless. Each year, for the next five years, I rewrote the story from memory. The question of “Why?” stayed with me. I felt as if I were watching the same landscape over many seasons, learning to see the finer details, and also the core that remained, year after year, draft after draft.

This is what it was like, then: twelve people seated around a table, turning the pages of a story. The worst was when people had nothing to say, when they stared down at the pages or scuffed their feet restlessly. The best when the discussion became so fraught that they talked about your characters as if they were alive—sparring with them, bumping up against the solidity of their form.

My teachers, George McWhirter and Keith Maillard, and my classmates never told me how to fix something or get it right. Instead they told me, plainly, what I was doing, what existed on the page. They told me things so precise, things about my stories and poems, that I felt as if I wandered those hallways with my heart in my hands, exposed and pumping.
I live in Quebec City now, faraway from the writing community I had grown to depend on in Vancouver.

After years of working clerical and odd jobs, writing is now my primary occupation. Back in 2003, I sent a draft of a novel to my editor. It was as if, throughout the novel, she tapped open tiny doors, entry ways that I could choose to enter or pass by. Open one door, and the structure, the momentum, the weight of the book would shift ever so slightly, and the novel, like a dwelling, would change. I thought of the novel in the way that mathematicians describe the Koch curve, a figure that contains “infinite length in a finite space.” So, out of every doorway, another doorway; the walls of the house are set, but the richness within is limitless.

Now, the final manuscript is almost within reach. I spend long days at the computer, working on a line or paragraph. I’m waiting for that moment of pure articulation, a sentence or word that feels precise, ordained. In Vancouver, I used to sail in the waters off Jericho Beach.
This part of writing reminds me of sailing, the feeling of releasing the sheet of a catamaran, how the mast unfurls in the shape and weight that the structure demands.

Ten years ago, my teachers in the Creative Writing Department approached my work, meeting me partway along the hallway, knowing that what I brought to them was unfinished, words still trying to find their form. I had come from a home in which we had lived from hand to mouth for so long; fiction was a luxury in my family, a foreign thing. In hindsight, I’m astonished by the fullness of my luck. Stepping into the world of writing, I was met by teachers who embodied a great generosity of spirit. They never presumed to know the answers because they understood that writing is a journey of its own. Each sentence is a way of clearing the path, and each book sets one in a new direction. They taught me to open my eyes and look around, to perceive the landscape in which I stood, and finally, to trust myself.

About the Author

Madeleine Thien’s first book, Simple Recipes, a collection of stories, won four awards in Canada and was a finalist for the regional Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book. Her novel, Certainty, is set in the aftermath of the Second World War in the former British North Borneo. A Globe & Mail Book of the Year and a finalist for the Kiriyama Book Prize, Certainty has been published around the world and translated into fourteen languages. Madeleine currently lives in Montreal.

About the Artist

Maria Enns: Composition and point of view are aspects of photography and artmaking that continue to interest me, especially as my perceptions shift in a new arrangement or angle. My understanding of the world, particularly my small space in it, deepens as I consider my subject in a way I have not previously experienced. Photography allows me to quickly change the way I look at my subject, allowing for multiplicity and fluidity of meanings.