

Friendship: Madeleine Thien

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(00:13\)](#)

I'm Samantha Rose Hill. This is "Hannah Arendt: Between Worlds", a podcast from the Goethe-Institut. In the spring of 1955, Hannah Arendt was teaching at the University of California, Berkeley, and she was miserable. The cloud of McCarthyism hung over social life. She did not like her colleagues. There were too many students in her classes and she missed her husband. She said that she felt like she was living in a desert. And it was during this time that she revised the end of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and added a chapter on ideology and loneliness, arguing that loneliness is the underlying condition of all totalitarian movements. And that totalitarianism can only come into power where people are radically isolated against one another,

Madeleine Thien: [\(01:10\)](#)

The crushing loneliness of destroying even the person's ability to speak to themselves within their private being. Because those kinds of things under the Khmer Rouge, let's say, were extremely dangerous. The, even the fact of having these private thoughts, which could surface in one's eyes, in one's face, in one's gestures, all that had to be so pushed down. If, if one had any hope of surviving,

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(01:38\)](#)

I invited the novelist Madeleine Thien on "Between Worlds" to talk about Hannah Arendt and loneliness in totalitarian states. A topic that I know is close to her thinking, but as we began our conversation, she said to me, so we're talking about friendship. And I said, yes, because friendship is the perfect counterpoint to loneliness. And because I wasn't gonna say no to Maddie. And like Arendt, Maddie also has a gift for friendship for understanding the need to create an oasis in the desert and find meaningful connection in the world. Either through the interlocutor that we carry around in our thinking that help us love the world, or in the friendships that we have with one another that carry us through daily life and help give meaning to existence.

Madeleine Thien: [\(02:38\)](#)

There is a real intimacy in the clarity of her writing and the fact that it feels like she is speaking to the reader directly, that she is to the best of her ability, explaining it and making it come alive for you. This thinking process that is within her at the same time. It's not that she draws you in with her personal reasoning for why she's exploring this subject. And I think as a woman writer, I found that really powerful. I didn't know how to occupy that space, where one could be intimate in one's thinking, but still remain a private self.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(03:18\)](#)

Madeleine Thien is a professor at Brooklyn College and the author of four books of fiction. Her recent novels have focused on art, politics and revolution. Most notably in Cambodia and China, she's received Canada's two highest literary honors, the Giller prize and the Governor General's

literary award for fiction. Her books have also been shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Please join me in welcoming Madeleine Thien to “Between Worlds”.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(04:08\)](#)

I knew that I wanted you on this podcast when we were putting it together because the organizing idea is people who think *with* Hannah Arendt, and you carried Arendt around in your thinking. And I was looking at an essay that you wrote on *Men in Dark Times*. And I love this image of you traveling with Arendt's *Men in Dark Times*, which is about totalitarianism. It's about friendship. It's about beauty and portraits. And at the end of your essay, like if I can read you a passage and then maybe we can just jump into conversation, I'd love to hear you say more, more about this. “Often these days, I worry about my own love of literature and my belief in the writing life and Hermann Broch's acceptance of the ultimate insufficiency of literature. I hear my own doubts magnified a thousand times over. *Men in Dark Times* remains in me like a corridor branching off to many unlit rooms. And in each room there is a person thinking to him or herself, a person creating work, a person in constant engagement with the ideas of others. The beauty of the book is for me that we are all in these rooms and only in the discourse and the passionate engagement. Can we find our way to one another?”

Madeleine Thien: [\(05:44\)](#)

I'm so happy you stumbled across that essay. I'm, I was trying to think how old it is. Actually, I, I feel like it's at least a decade old. I'm not sure. Um,

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(05:55\)](#)

I believe it's 2014.

Madeleine Thien: [\(05:58\)](#)

Wow. Um, and you know, it, it's interesting that even that image of the quarters, it's, it's so fundamental to the book that I'm writing now it's eight years later, but I'm, I must have been carrying *Men in Dark Times* around and reading Arendt while I was writing *Dogs at the Perimeter* which is a novel about the Cambodian genocide. So that, yeah, no, that's not true. I had finished *Dogs at the Perimeter*, 2014. You said, right?

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(06:26\)](#)

I believe so.

Madeleine Thien: [\(06:28\)](#)

Which means I had finished writing about the Cambodian, or I had finished that book and was writing about the Chinese cultural revolution. Wow. Yeah, no wonder. She meant, I mean, she does, still does, has meant so much to me. It's interesting to me how much I've revisited her over the years in different forms. Some, and you know, I was just reading some of her letters earlier this morning and there were lines in there that I realized that I had been caring for 15 years and forgotten where they'd come from.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(06:58\)](#)

Are there any lines in particular that you're thinking about right now?

Madeleine Thien: [\(07:03\)](#)

Well, the one that, that sort of made me laugh, which is actually a Mary McCarthy line in the, in her letters with Hannah Arendt. It's the one where Mary McCarthy is thinking about taking a, a commission, but she's also feeling that these years, the late forties, the, the decade of the forties and the fifties are the most transformative for a woman novelist. I'm pretty sure I read that in my twenties, but it always stayed with me that, you know, I was building towards what might be possible in my forties and fifties. And then, and then there's the Hannah's response, which is that precedents mean nothing.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(07:42\)](#)

Precedents mean nothing. Arendt published the *Origins of Totalitarianism* when she was 43, I think. And that that's her first major work. That's the work that launched her career. What do you think McCarthy was getting at in terms of the writing life of women in thinking about that transformation between the twenties and the forties? Not that that's anything I'm thinking about.

Madeleine Thien: [\(08:05\)](#)

Yeah. I'm thinking about it so much. Cuz I'm 47 now. And, and the last 10 years I've spent writing about totalitarianism. I knew in myself that what I had done in my twenties and thirties, like the groundwork for those 10 years of, of writing, because it was almost like it's that thing of the, the craft life, experience, heartache, reinvention, you know, all those things that happen in those years and then knowing one's self well enough to find the kind of courage that makes you take a leap in your work. I think that's what I felt when I read the McCarthy and the Arendt exchange. I felt like they, that there was something in both the women that had happened in those particular decades that had, it's almost like with, you know, think. And when I think of *Origins of Totalitarianism*, she had been writing a lot of course, but also been sort of in such upheaval in that decade before, but the full like flowering of that book, all the ideas from the past that come together and that she kind of, and that you can see throughout the work actually that you can see in those early letters that the, those certain elements are continuously like, uh, I wanna say a system, even though she's not that kind of thinker, but she has these components that are continuously illuminating each other and she's building all these quite extraordinary bridges and branches in her description of the, of our common world.

Madeleine Thien: [\(09:37\)](#)

I think that that part is really broad that you can see that trajectory in, in her letters, in her essays and then in the, the works,

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(09:46\)](#)

The elements, the way the constellation of her concepts and ideas and distinctions foment over time. And the correspondence in particular are interesting for that because you see her talking with McCarthy about love, about reason, two plus two not equaling four, about these characters that McCarthy is struggling to write, or the, the modern condition might be.

Madeleine Thien: ([10:15](#))

One of the reason I, I love those letters so much is because it's that conversation between a novelist and, and Hannah Arendt. And, and she gives her a wonderful sort of like conceptual, like doorways into McCarthy's thinking process. And there's an early letter where they talk about thinking itself and, and Arendt talks about that thinking is resultless that it begins with that a priori sense of a truth. And then thinking begins. I love how much that's a constant in Arendt's work.

Samantha Rose Hill: ([10:45](#))

So I love that you said doorways again because I think it, it, and, and I'm thinking of you use the word courage as well, and the kind of courage that one gets from life experience to kind of go through all the muck, to get to a place, uh, where you can write something like the *Origins of Totalitarianism*. The courage to open the doors. It seems to me in certain ways that we have these corridors, but how do we negotiate them? How do we navigate them? I'm curious, how did you discover Hannah Arendt, how did Hannah Arendt come to be someone that you, you carry around with you? And who is she for you? Who is the woman in your head?

Madeleine Thien: ([11:26](#))

I know. Great question. Um, yeah, she really lives with me, and more than ever, because I had been working on something that she plays a much more major role as herself. Um, but I was thinking about it. I, and I think the first book that I came across was the letters between Mary McCarthy and Hannah Arendt. And I picked it up because I was interested in Mary McCarthy, having never read Hannah Arendt. And I know for sure it was a used book. It came from a bin somewhere. And you know, that feeling when, and I, this is my, the joy of secondhand bookstores is somehow your hand lands on something. You don't know why. You don't know why you're drawn to it, but there's something, a feeling. And that book, these letters just, I wonder if at the time I was lonely and reading the letters between these women, seeing their friendship, seeing the way they talked about so many aspects of life and of aging and of falling into and out of love, and of just terrible decisions sometimes, you know, and all sorts of, of things and also about the work and all this is ongoing.

Madeleine Thien: ([12:36](#))

And it's sort of so fluid in these letters. I think I felt a real, I felt the joy of being in their company. And from there, the next book I read was Arendt's *Men and Dark Times*. Because I knew that I had never studied philosophy as a, as a student, as an undergraduate. And, you know, the doorway again was Arendt writing about writers. It was so illuminating for me. So, you know, with Arendt and judgment and critique, but also her the way she understands the impulse underneath the writer's work and the clarity of her writing and the fact that she's continuously sort of, um, exposing something about the work and also judging. There's something very unique about the way she does it in particular that I don't, I've never really felt that kinship with that many other writers writing about writers. There's something hard to put my finger.

Samantha Rose Hill: ([13:35](#))

Yeah. It reminds me of a story from Arendt's own biography and a way of how she discovered Rahel Varnhagen. I don't know if you know this story, but her best friend from childhood Anne Mendelsohn was the granddaughter of Moses Mendelsohn. And, you know, they became friends in a kind of wonderful fashion where Anne had been forbidden to spend time with her because her father was a bit of a, a pariah. He was in prison and Arendt snuck out of the house in the middle of the night, took the train alone, two towns over to go wake up the whole household and, and get Anne out of bed. But after she had gone to study with Heidegger at Marburg, and she was in Heidelberg working on her dissertation on love in St. Augustine and went to a bookstore that was closing, it was, they were having a going out of business sale and she bought Rahel Varnhagen's correspondence. And she gave to Arendt and Arendt said, you know, it's that? What, what is that ineffable feeling? You know, I think that, that you are describing approaching that this object, you can't quite explain what it is, but you're meeting for a reason. There's a meeting that's happening there. And in that correspondence, Arendt said that she had found her best friend, that this was the one woman who could understand her, even though she had been dead for a hundred years,

Madeleine Thien: ([15:09](#))

I feel something similar. I always have a kind of, um, friction with that feeling because I feel like I recognized in her someone who could teach me, I recognized maybe a friend, but also a mentor. I think I'm drawn to certain philosophers or writers when I can feel an openness in their spirit to transmit what they know. That there's something in them that's not just about figuring it out for themselves, but they, they want to see something come, come alive in you, some spark in you. That's what I feel with Arendt. I mean, I'm of course projecting entirely on to a person I've never met. I feel this, you know, when I read Spinoza, as complicated as he is, that he is constructing his ethics in a way that if you put the time and the effort in, he feels, he feels strongly that this path is open to anyone. And the friction in me comes from like, reading so much about Arendt and also feeling I'm quite sure that if we were in a room together, she would be so bored out of her mind that she wouldn't, she would not like I would just not register in her consciousness. Cause I think she has such a wonderful, like she loves the quickness and agility of mind and a kind of authoritative intellectual presence. I, I feel that with, with her, but anyway, that's a whole other tangent.

Samantha Rose Hill: ([16:33](#))

I don't. And I, and I said this to you and you when you said this the first time I, I disagree. I mean, I think Arendt is drawn to brilliant minds and yours is, yours is one of them. But you've brought up a few words now and loneliness and, you know, thinking about Arendt as a mentor and your first encounter with her. And I was wondering if you could just talk a little bit about that kind of relationship there, if there is one. About what it's like to be a woman, to be a writer, to, you know, you write so much about the immigrant experience about totalitarianism, about language, home. How do these, you know, if, if at all, does Arendt's work somehow provide something in your kind of thinking, conversation there? or is there a relationship between the loneliness and the mentorship and the writing?

Madeleine Thien: ([17:30](#))

You know, that's the first thing that sort of, that sort of, I was thinking about as you were asking the question, was how present she feels yet, how behind a veil. And, and I think as a woman, I find that really interesting because there is a real intimacy in the clarity of her writing and the fact that it feels like she is speaking to the reader directly, that she is to the best of her ability, explaining it and making it come alive for you, this thinking process that is within her. And at the same time it's not that she draws you in with her personal reasoning for why she's exploring this subject. And I think as a woman writer, I found that really powerful. I didn't know how to occupy that space, where one could be intimate in one's thinking, but still remain a private self. And I think that's something that's quite powerful in Arendt, and it's something I was thinking about with *Origins of Totalitarianism*.

Madeleine Thien: ([18:33](#))

I was rereading that the last section, um, about loneliness, because one thing I've always sort of been astonished with by her description of the totalitarian condition, what it feels like for everyone who enters that toward space, or the lack of space, you know, she talks about the iron band of totalitarianism. When I read it, I think, how does she describe it so precisely, and it's not on personal terms? It's not as if I experience this and this is what it's like. It's not that it's that she understands how the system functions, what it in the end is designed to do and what it does to the human. She wouldn't use the word soul,

Samantha Rose Hill: ([19:19](#))

No. she doesn't believe in the soul,

Madeleine Thien: ([19:20](#))

Yes, she doesn't believe in the soul. So I'll say psyche.

Samantha Rose Hill: ([19:24](#))

She would hate that too.

Madeleine Thien: ([19:26](#))

Oh, psyche too? What would she use?

Samantha Rose Hill: ([19:28](#))

Condition

Madeleine Thien: ([19:29](#))

Condition? What is that personality within the self like that, that innate being within the per each individual person?

Samantha Rose Hill: ([19:38](#))

Being.

Madeleine Thien: ([19:40](#))

Being yes. What it does to the being. Because alongside reading Arendt I was reading a lot of the witnessing and the history and the, uh, the confessions that were pulled out, you know, quote unquote, confessions that were pulled out of people who died under the Khmer Rouge. And it always hurt me and astonished me and how accurately she had understood what was being done to them. Yeah.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(20:12\)](#)

What had been done to the ability to think, the imagination, the resiliency of spirit. I don't know if spirit is secular enough word for being, but the, the interconnectedness, not just with others, but with ourselves, the relationship that we have with ourselves.

Madeleine Thien: [\(20:31\)](#)

Exactly. The crushing loneliness of destroying even the person's ability to speak to themselves within their private being. Because those kinds of things under the Khmer Rouge, let's say, were extremely dangerous. Even the fact of having these private thoughts, which could surface in one's eyes, in one's face, in one's gestures, all that had to be so pushed down if, if one had any hope of surviving. And I think a lot of people pushed it so far down that the recovery of it, sometimes it's beyond their means. People tended to reinvent or become a different person or, or just put it so into the past that she says it in *Origins* that they can't, you can't return to, to the place of the living, unless you disown what you live through, because it cannot, it doesn't seem real in the, in the world of living.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(21:25\)](#)

It strikes me that it is a kind of echo with what you said earlier about in writing, trying to create a sense of intimacy with a public audience or a reader while still retaining this private itself. And that seems so on the one hand, it seems, it seems really echo with what you're describing now and on the other, well, it's not even this hand or that hand, but it is so contrary to the contemporary political moment that we are living in.

Madeleine Thien: [\(22:03\)](#)

Absolutely. Yes. I do feel as a woman writer writing now the, the pressure to, to make one's claim on the right, to having a voice, by putting everything that is personal into the public space. As if it's the personal, the, the vulnerable, that gives us a right to be seen. I, I struggle with that a lot. On the one hand, yes, I know that, you know, speaking about myself, there are lots of things from my personal experience that, that, yes, I think could be illuminating of certain questions that we talk about in the public sphere. On the other hand, those are worked out in the, in the spirit of a person over a lifetime in the space of the self.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(22:56\)](#)

The space of solitude in the self

Madeleine Thien: [\(22:59\)](#)

And her description of that too. And one of the conversation I have with myself of the, that solitude, not being a space of loneliness, but a place of dialogue with one, I think that was a

very formative possibility for me when I first read Arendt. I don't think I had really encountered that in other, other things I had learned in my life. I mean, it's really interesting to think that you, you stumble upon a book so early in life, and it, you gives you a way to grow into yourself.

Samantha Rose Hill: ([23:53](#))

I wanna go back to intimacy and privacy and, and loneliness and totalitarianism for a minute. Arendt draws the sharp distinction between the private realm and the public realm and it's porous. And yet it's very important for her because we have to be able to appear in the public realm for recognition, to speak and to act, to reveal who we are. And writing is a way of appearing in the public realm and the private realm where we can have that two in one dialogue with ourselves, where we can engage in a conversation with ourselves. And it's also where Arendt places intimacy and passion and love. And one of the things that I love about your writing and the story that you just published, for example, in "Lu Reshaping", is that Lu is so sensuous. So such an has this incredible sense of intimacy. There's this incredible restraint, this incredible passion. How do you think about negotiating your characters yourself in your characters, this private life, public life when writing so, so beautifully about those intimate corners of our lives that we so often keep hidden from the public realm.

Madeleine Thien: ([25:29](#))

You know, the it's the, the strangest thing with writing fiction, especially about when it comes to sex, sexuality, sex, intimacy, desire. I feel it's a kind of like feeling my way through the dark when I'm writing a character like Lu, because what I love about Lu is her confidence in her ability to feel pleasure. And that it's a, it's just a right of life. I think that this is very moving to me about her. And, and knowing early on that there many kinds of shame that one experiences and in a way, she, she wants to choose her own shame. She doesn't want it foisted on her. You know, it's like, I'll be ashamed of this, but not that. This is a choice that I make for myself. My body, my experience of this brief life, and I will not be ashamed. And of course we all know, one can tell myself will not be ashamed.

Madeleine Thien: ([26:29](#))

It's not necessarily gonna stop whatever comes into our emotions. But writing about someone like her, and, and I felt this with other characters, is I always feel that they, there is something private about them that cannot be expressed in the story. That there's a, a space in which I can get to the, to a certain something that's very vulnerable about them. But on another level, they have to retain a mystery for themselves. It is a really interesting sort of, um, a space to work in as a fiction writer, because it's like, I think we feel we know her, but I think she remains there's a Lu-ness to her. Her name is Lu there's a Lu-ness to her that is just like undefinable and belongs to Lu alone. And it's interesting to me to see if that is possible in a work of fiction and in the experience of a reader to feel intimacy, but also this space that must still exist between two people where there's something that can never be known. You know, the thing that is integral to the core belongs to that person alone, but you, you kind of shrink or expand the space between me and her. If that makes sense, you can come really close, but not all, all the way.

Samantha Rose Hill: ([27:47](#))

It reminds me. And I probably have said this to you. It reminds me a bit of my favorite Walter Benjamin passage. That's in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, a in the prologue, which is that the mode most proper to thinking is pausing for breath, returning in a roundabout way to the object of contemplation. So we can approach and we can get near, but then we have to retreat because Eros always flees before the lover who wants to possess. And I hear you describing that opacity, which is integral to having a core, to having a self, to, to the being. If we are going to submit to Arendt language in our conversation,

Madeleine Thien: [\(28:38\)](#)

It's hard not to submit to her.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(28:43\)](#)

It's also making me think about the intimate relationships that people form to Arendt and her life and work too. They, people become very attached to certain authors, not just characters, but authors. And the way that Arendt became attached to Rahel Varnhagen. And there are these relationships we have with people real or fictional, dead, or alive ghosts, people who are no longer with us. And that space, that opacity that you're describing is still there. That's the space that Arendt, I think is trying to guard in those last pages of *Origins of Totalitarianism*, that she's trying to capture that space between knowing and unknowing, about meaning and understanding about, uh, the work of thinking.

Madeleine Thien: [\(29:40\)](#)

It reminds me of something I think I always felt when I read her. And I felt when I was writing *Dogs at the Perimeter*, which is that the writing the passage, the description that believes it can capture that, that what people live through or didn't survive of totalitarianism or totalitarian regimes. The moment you think you've put the words to it, you've absolutely failed. And I think she's really getting to that reminder to us. That is what it, what this, this new form of terror is ravaging in human existence. And it's interesting that realm of the private takes on so many forms in her work. So many kinds of spaces and how malleable it actually can be. And at the point at which you, it can be kind of obliterated to nothing. You're right. I agree. Entirely agree with you. She's trying to protect at least that, that ring around a person that is so integral to that they can exist in this world with any kind of sense that of belonging at all,

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(30:56\)](#)

Thinking about social media, contemporary culture, thinking about the kind of space around a writer today that can or cannot exist in order to, uh, publish an essay or write a book that it seems, I think you used the word ravaged. It seems ravaged. It seems obliterated. It seems undesirable. It seems antithetical to one question that I have is, you know, what does this do to our capacity for imagination? What are the ethical implications of these trends of what's happening right now? How it strikes me that in the form of your writing, one could argue there is an ethical act that it's giving us that, that, um, opening you're not pointing. You're not telling you're inviting to thinking you're inviting to the space of intimacy and pleasure and play that can be expansive of the self, as opposed to this unmasking revelation. Look at this, look at me, look, what's happened.

Madeleine Thien: [\(32:08\)](#)

Yes. So interesting. I mean, it's, it's, um, I think it's why I keep going back to fiction rather than the essay. It's also just that, it's just my way of thinking. Fiction is my way of thinking. And if I, if I could do that in essays, I would, but it's not, doesn't come as naturally to me, but it's because it's about space. Fiction is a, is a kind of the creation of dimensional space in which you cannot actually pinpoint everything. You can kind of open up the possibility of this hallway or this corridor, this threshold in which they, something comes into contact. But you know, what that Arendt quote that Arendt quote has always stayed with me from the very beginning is how she says story....Oh gosh, and I'm gonna forget it!

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(32:55\)](#)

Storytelling reveals meaning with, without committee, without meeting, defining

Madeleine Thien: [\(33:01\)](#)

It, defining it. Yes.

Madeleine Thien: [\(33:04\)](#)

This, I, I think has been, really, has just shaped my writing profoundly. It's that possibility for the meanings that can arise and knowing that the work as it moves through time, as it meets different readers, along the way, the possibility of what can arise in that space is always going to change. And that to me is what makes, uh, fiction writing. So, so exciting. And I suspect one of the reasons she too loved literature, poetry, novels, novelists writers. She was very forgiving of them in a, in a certain way. I mean, if she's judges, she judges,

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(33:44\)](#)

She's very, she's very judgemental. She accords, she, especially the poets, the writers, they are essentially demi gods in her order of the universe. They're exempt from usual human judgment and instead are judged by their talent.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(34:04\)](#)

Yes. Which is cruel in certain ways. I think, you know, Arendt was first and foremost, a storyteller before a political thinker before a philosopher. Elizabeth Young-Bruhl, her first biographer, has this essay called "Storytelling". And she opens it by saying Arendt was always willing to sacrifice the facts for a good story. And it's true. I mean, anybody who's tried to check her footnotes knows this. She thought of herself as a kind of Penelope weaving a veil through storytelling night after night, returning, pulling the thread and then reweaving it. But it's the word, the word that she uses in *The Human Condition*, which seems relevant here that I think about a lot is, is poesis. That writing is a form of making, poeticizing, the density, the, the, the thickness, the closeness to thinking itself that you're making you are making space. You're bringing something new into the world too, in that space.

Madeleine Thien: [\(35:13\)](#)

I love that because it really, it really resonates with how I feel when I'm writing a novel, a big novel that I know I'm, it's like bring into finger pads into typing.

Madeleine Thien: [\(35:26\)](#)

But I feel like I'm making something with my hands, like a sculptor, what I feel like that's the sensation that I have in it. And what you're saying really makes sense with what I feel when I'm reading her is that she wants me to come along. She wants to keep me with her as she unthreads this thing. You, you feel when you're reading her, like you are in the process of discovery with her, even though I know she's planned it all out and she's she, but still it unfolds with that quality, you know? And I came across something in her letters that I loved, which was that she was, I think if she was writing about *The Human Condition* and she was talking about how she didn't, maybe it was a different book, but I think it was, she didn't wanna get to the end. And so she was distracting herself by getting really into the footnotes so that she wouldn't have to write the end of this, the story.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(36:18\)](#)

Yeah. The footnotes in *The Human Condition*, it might be just worth adding here, um, are, are mostly poems. She was adding poetry to the footnotes of *The Human Condition*. So I know that this might be a bit of an unfair question, but speaking of big novels, you are working on a new book right now that Arendt may or may not appear in, in some way. Can you talk a little bit about it? You don't, you, I know it's unfair.

Madeleine Thien: [\(36:48\)](#)

Yes, no. I mean, it takes up 99.9% of my brain right now. So it's, it's, it's okay. I'm writing a kind of speculative historical in which there's a place in which that has become a refuge from time. And somehow people have ended up in this building. And different hallways seem to lead down different centuries that people from different eras live side by side, without any sense that this is not possible. And one of the people living in this building is Hannah Arendt. And she's down the hallway from Spinoza. They occasionally play chess or argue, but we go back into her time. So I've been spending a lot of time with her voice and it feels, it does feel a bit like trespass. I do sometimes wonder what she would think, but, but I keep thinking she gave up some leeway to the to the artist.

Madeleine Thien: [\(37:50\)](#)

And I, and I think the joy for me has been with working with her and working with the other people who populate this novel. It forces me into a whole other syntax and way of thinking and different kinds of humor and different kinds of, like, responses to things. And it's been so expansive personally. I, I love being with her. I feel like I've been with her for the last five years in this building.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(38:16\)](#)

Can I ask you what her room is like?

Madeleine Thien: [\(38:19\)](#)

So all the rooms in this place are small, so she wouldn't. I don't think it would look like anything she had in New York or anything like that. More, maybe more like the little room she was living in, in Paris when she was stateless, more like that kind of room. You know, she talks about how she and Heinrich, um, elevates some of the appliances to household gods. I mean, I play a lot with the little funny little things she has in the letters, little objects that she mentions. Even like, Heinrich had a sponge for his head that she brought to him to vinegar's head. That was in one of the lists of things she brought him when he was interned. And so little things like this are popping up all in her, her room. The texture of this world is made of historical things. Um, so that's what her, her room looks like. It's a bit of a hodgepodge

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(39:08\)](#)

Hodgepodge. Does she get to smoke?

Madeleine Thien: [\(39:10\)](#)

She smokes all the time.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(39:11\)](#)

That was really where my question was, was going. Yes.

Madeleine Thien: [\(39:19\)](#)

Yes.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(39:21\)](#)

You know, in *The Human Condition*, Arendt talks about the pleasure of small things. This kind of idea of thinginess is Heideggerian, of course. But I don't understand Arendt's understanding of things to be necessarily or essentially Heideggerian. But she's interested in, in objects. You know, Marx was interested in the alienation of the labor from the object that was being produced in the world, that of these objects, but Arendt interested in the alienation from the perspective, not of the person, but the object. So she's talking about objects and the pleasure of small things and I'm, and I'm now, like, thinking about her record player and her, her cigarette case and her Mark Cross wallet and her initialled briefcase. And she loved objects. She loved the kind of aesthetics, the tactile, of being among beautiful sculptures, paintings, music. And I'm wondering how, what the relationship is or isn't, or might be between the kind of, you know, Arendt was a stateless refugee for almost 20 years. You know, what's the relationship between homelessness home and these objects and the way in which we think about, you know, what fills our rooms?

Madeleine Thien: [\(40:50\)](#)

And is it in *The Human Condition* where, isn't there something where she talks about that the things we make are our way to humanize the world? That we have these objects to help us belong to this place. It's a kinda interaction with the things of this world, too, that we take them into our care. It's interesting because the objects also, they come from this external world, but we invest them with our humanness that we give them, meaning we give them shape, we reshape them, reconfigure them, give them away, all those things. I think that's something I feel quite strongly with in her room that I'm imagining. Um, and just her interaction with the things

themselves, you know, there's that other line that she has that I have always thought about when she talks about humanizing the wilderness of experience that feels like that it's sometimes when she talks about the wilderness, that, that that's, that image crops up here and there in different places over time. And with Arendt whatever demon she had, if she had, whatever haunted her, whatever very painful, dark, disturbing memories came back to her, they don't, she doesn't share them, I think, in her writing. And, but you feel that knows the presence of these things. And when she talks about artisan's crafts, the making of things and the humanizing of the wilderness of experience yeah. That all seems to come into, into play.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(42:26\)](#)

Yeah. And I I'm thinking of when I was researching the biography, I, I stumbled across this. It was the list of items that Martha Cohen could take with her when she fled Nazi Germany. And there was a certain weight limit and she could only take one like one spoon, one fork, one knife, one watch. And it was this, it's this itemized list. That's, you know, what is it that you can pick up and take with you, or I think of a flee the Gestapo. And she had to put what she deemed worth saving in that suitcase, her poems, her marriage papers, her diploma from Heidelberg. I mean, we had, we can see what she took and with her, when she went into exile and she talks about the use value of these things, the way that, you know, we use them, that we have this relationship with them, that they, you know, for, for somebody like a, who, you know, fled through Prague to Zurich, to Paris, to Lisbon to America, you know. I can't help, but think that these things are also what we gather near us. Like our friends, our tribe, what you can take with you, but then things have this very human quality because they're made by human hands and they wear out over time. And there's this economy of relation with them in a certain way. No matter how much of ourselves we invest in them,

Madeleine Thien: [\(44:00\)](#)

But I seem to remember. She also, when she left Czechoslovak, was carrying her husband's unfinished novel. Is that true?

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(44:07\)](#)

Yes. Yes. Disguised as a piece of bacon.

Madeleine Thien: [\(44:11\)](#)

Yes, that's right.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(44:12\)](#)

Which was wrapped in a ham

Madeleine Thien: [\(44:14\)](#)

Wrapped in a ham that's right. It must have just smelled, like,

Speaker 3: [\(44:18\)](#)

I know

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(44:19\)](#)

It was one of, you know, a ham like, like drawing in the attic,

Madeleine Thien: [\(44:22\)](#)

Some of her manuscripts of her own, she lost along the way, like, did she lose the Rahel manuscript at a certain point or other things?

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(44:30\)](#)

So she had one copy of the Rahel manuscript, but she dropped it in the bathtub in Paris. And the waterlogged copy, I've touched it. It's at the Library of Congress. I mean, why was she reading her? Why was she reading her manuscript in the bathtub? One can only, uh, imagine, uh, which is lovely, but Scholem sent her the Augustine and the, and the Varnhagen. So she had them.

Madeleine Thien: [\(44:55\)](#)

And I love that. So she carries her husband's novel, she loses her Rahel in the bathtub, but she's carrying Walter Benjamin's last essay when she herself travels across Spain and into Portugal and then to the US. She's carrying, and I think, if I remember she and Henrich were carrying a poem from Brecht, uh, for a while also. That they were carrying the words of others strikes me as so moving. Apart from when we talk about the things that I made, it's not just the objects and the things that have these value, but the, the written words of others, she was also carry at the same time she was losing her own in the bathroom. I think this, this reveals a lot actually about, about what she valued and what she, it is fascinating. Yeah.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(45:42\)](#)

That's, that's a beautiful image.

Madeleine Thien: [\(45:44\)](#)

Yeah. And I do actually have her in my novel. Yes. In my novel, she does drop the, the Rahel in the bathtub and she does it because she's smoking and she reaches out to, to catch her cigarette rather than the manuscript.

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(46:01\)](#)

Thank you. Thank you so much. I wish we had more time and I hope to see you in person in the world of appearances,

Madeleine Thien: [\(46:10\)](#)

Definitely

Samantha Rose Hill: [\(46:14\)](#)

Between Worlds is a co-production of the Goethe-Institut and Brooklyn Institute for Social Research. It was produced and edited by Lisa Bartfai. Music by Dylan Mattingly. Project management by Kathrin Engler and Lena Joehnk. And it was hosted by me, Samantha Rose

Hill. We have seven more episodes for you on storytelling, friendship, eros, Hannah, public rights and memory. Until next time!