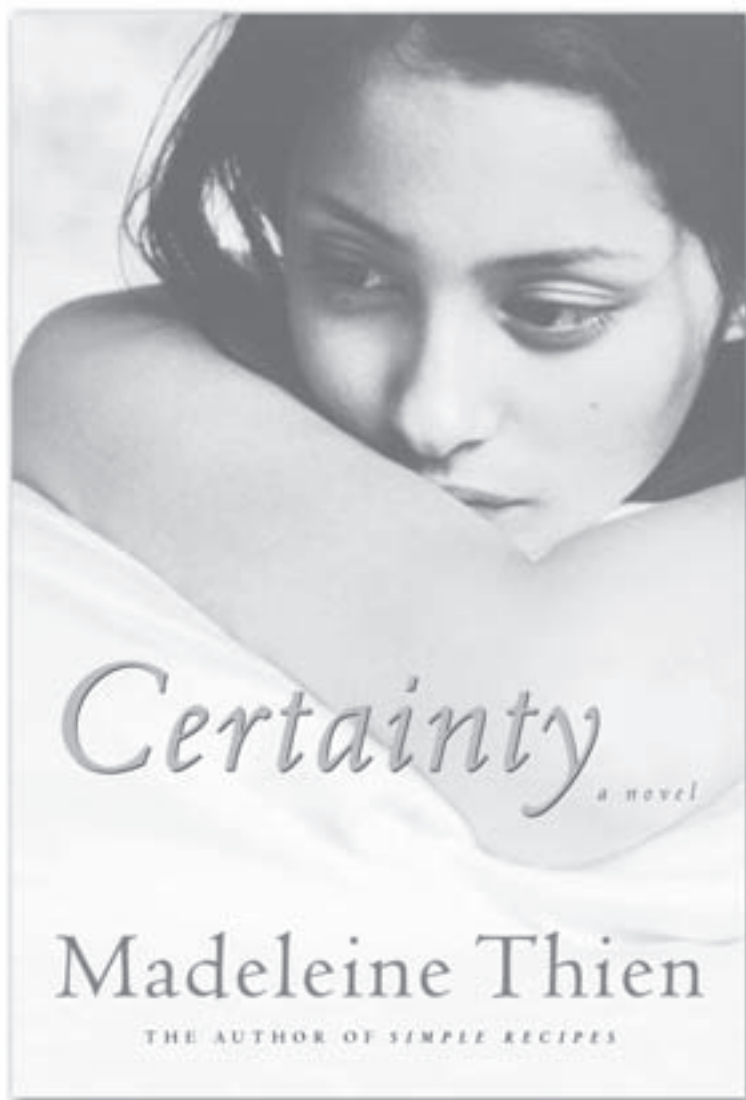


“Madeleine Thien’s *Certainty* is poised to become an international literary bestseller... the most popular Canadian novel since Miriam Toews’s *A Complicated Kindness*... and as well known as *The English Patient*.... If all that happens, it’s ever so well deserved.”

—*The Globe and Mail*



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Madeleine Thien will be reading at the Harbourfront Centre in Toronto on Wednesday, May 3, 2006 at 7:30 p.m. For tickets contact 416-973-4000.

## FICTION

# Nothing doing

**Joyland**

By Emily Schultz  
Illustrated by Nate Powell  
ECW, 295 pages, \$24.95



REVIEWED BY JOY PARKS

**Q**uick: Name a cultural phenomenon that’s quintessentially mid-1980s. Hint: It’s not Madonna’s conical metal bras or Boy George’s make-up. It’s video games. It was a time when most city streets and small-town strip malls housed at least one arcade, and public gathering places buzzed with Ms. Pac Man’s electronic chewing noises.

But that’s not the only element that sets *Joyland* squarely in 1984. There’s feathered hair and Adidas jogging shorts and a TV sit-com summer rerun kind of malaise that lingers over the Ontario rust-belt town where the story takes place. *Joyland* is the town’s video arcade, and when it closes at the beginning of the summer, the sense of displacement is keenly felt by the bored teenagers and soon-to-be teenagers that populate this distinctly artful novel.

Narrated by Chris, 14, and his 11½-year-old sister Tammy, who is at the age when the half actually counts, *Joyland* is an extremely well written but inert novel. There’s an almost palpable sense of waiting, something familiar to those who grew up in small towns where nothing ever happens, but when it does, the shock leaves you breathless.

Both characters are stuck on the edge between one thing and another, waiting to be transformed. Chris is awaiting high school and his first sexual experience; Tammy is on the edge of womanhood, awaiting her first period, and the time when her “cool” brother abandons her for good. Displacement abounds in *Joyland*: Their father is a transplanted American, their mother a shadowy, alienated figure, neither of them demonstratively parental. In fact, the death of the children’s American grandfather sits uncomfortably on top of the plot, more a vehicle to demonstrate the family’s repression and dysfunction than an element that furthers the story.

Each chapter is marked with the name of a video game of the period, names now quaintly dated. Toronto writer Emily Schultz (*Black Coffee Night*) continues the theme with a split narrative indicated by Player 1 or Player 2. This makes for a decidedly uneven narration; while Tammy (Player 2) has a far richer imaginative life (she hides in trees and bushes and unabashedly spies on people), Chris’s greater freedom makes his Player 1 narration stronger.

Moody cartoons by graphic novelist Nate Powell foretell the significant events of each chapter of *Joyland*. They work best when they reveal slightly obscure, almost symbolic items, less so when they aim for a more literal representation of a specific scene.

The best part of *Joyland* is the lushness of its language. There’s a wonderful summery-ness to it, an undercurrent of boredom and confusion that hums like telephone wires in the heat. Schultz’s prose is mesmerizing, from the details of Tammy’s childlike application of pink nail polish to the naive oddness of Chris’s sexual fantasies, the dreary days of nothing to do but make your own fun, the small-town rivalries and dangers, the indignity of menial summer jobs and the quiet house at night, hot and claustrophobic with each family member’s isolation crowding out the others.

After *Joyland* closed, the youth of South Wakefield had nothing to do but concoct ways to kill one another. “Until that point, the world Christopher Lane lived in held a faint glow, like a vending machine at the end of a dark hall, a neon sign blinking OPEN again and again. Fear was the size of a fist, and the town in which Chris lived was little more than the smell of manure and gasoline, the sound of breaking glass and midnight factory whistles, a series of houses he had or hadn’t been inside.”

Too late in the story, the plot takes an odd turn with an accidental tragedy that feels forced and too easily put away. And the author’s decision to impart the futures that await some characters spoils the sense that this is a story with a distinct beginning and end. It’s (almost too) obvious that the video games are symbolic. But of what? Skills and victories that have no real-world value? Every time you play a video game, the story is more or less the same; you simply become better at dodging the dangers. Things get tougher as you go. Is this Schultz’s prophecy of approaching adulthood?

*Joyland* is beautiful written, but it lacks substance. In this way, it’s much like the 1980s: Impossible to turn your head when you’re in the midst of it, but totally forgettable once it’s over.

*Joy Parks has spent time in small towns waiting for something to happen. She now reviews fiction and biography for big-city papers and magazines.*