

Madeleine Thien

September 26, 2016

Santa J. Ono
President and Vice-Chancellor, University of British Columbia
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1958 Main Mall
Vancouver, BC
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Gage Averill
Dean of Arts, University of British Columbia
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Annabel Lyon and Linda Svendsen
Acting Co-chairs, Program of Creative Writing
University of British Columbia
Buchanan E-462, 1866 Main Mall
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Steven Galloway
Former Chair, Program of Creative Writing

Sent by email. Signed letter to follow to all recipients by post.

To UBC President Santa J. Ono, Dean of Arts Gage Averill, and to my friends Annabel Lyon (Acting Co-Chair, Creative Writing) and Steven Galloway, and my friend and mentor, Linda Svendsen (Acting Co-Chair, Creative Writing):

I hope this letter finds you well.

My name is Madeleine Thien and I hold a BFA (double major in English and Creative Writing) and an MFA (Creative Writing) from the University of British Columbia.

First, I would like to thank the University of British Columbia for the many good wishes and congratulations it has sent to me this fall. My fourth book, *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, about music, revolution and power in 20th century China, is currently shortlisted for the 2016 Man Booker Prize and the Scotiabank Giller Prize, and long listed for the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction.

As Linda, Annabel and Steven know, the Creative Writing Program at UBC has been my artistic home and community – indeed, my family – since I first entered its doors in 1994 as an undergraduate student. I came from a struggling immigrant family, and a very difficult, sometimes violent, past. At UBC, I found not only lifelong friendships, but a faculty, including Linda, George McWhirter, Keith Maillard and Andreas Schroeder, who believed in my work. I can say with certainty that I would not have had the courage to pursue the art of writing without their generosity and wisdom. It is not an overstatement to say that I loved the Program of Creative Writing with all my heart, and would have done anything for it.

In the last year, I have struggled to understand what has happened in the Program and at UBC. The University's response to sexual assault allegations, in particular the case of Dmitry Mordvinov, has been disturbing and distressing.

I have struggled all the more when these allegations embroiled Creative Writing, and the lives of people I know and love.

I trust that you know the allegations involved, and that most, or all of you, have read Mary Ellen Boyd's report.

You will know, then, as I do, that Ms. Boyd, former Justice of the BC Supreme Court, found that she could not, based on the civil standard of proof on a balance of probabilities, substantiate the primary allegations of the main complainant against Steven. I would like to be clear: no one involved in the heart of this matter is a stranger to me. They are all people I care for deeply, individuals with complex histories, and a past, like mine, that has its share of devastation and heartache. I am not casting judgment on their pain. Indeed, I believe that pain and trauma are at the centre of these events.

I will say that, when it comes to criminal and violent acts, I personally believe UBC and Creative Writing had a human and civic obligation to inform the police. I do not say this lightly, but as someone who knows the profound and lasting physical and psychological damage of violent sexual assault. When I was still a student at UBC, my first book won the Vancity Book Prize, a prize which allowed for a substantial cash donation to a charity or institution of my choice. I chose the Vancouver Rape Relief and Women's Shelter.

As a survivor of sexual assault, I do not take the law lightly, nor do I take lightly my responsibility to the law. I personally believe that we must invoke and use the legal system, even when it is flawed; we must change it ourselves. We cannot rely on institutions, including UBC, whose primary interests are self-serving, and who have never been invested with the obligation to uphold justice. My work in China, Cambodia and Zimbabwe has convinced me that we are dependent on the framework and foundation of criminal and constitutional law, the necessity of evidence, and the right to a fair hearing. Without these unassailable rights, any individual can have their life destroyed.

Unsubstantiated allegations, slander, whisper campaigns, and misrepresentations of allegations are not the domain of the law or of justice.

In November, 2015, Creative Writing and UBC went public with frightening innuendo, and they did this before any investigation of the allegations had occurred. Two members of the Creative

Writing faculty called the police in Ohio, and had Steven [REDACTED] to a psychiatric institute, claiming to be concerned for his safety. I cannot accept that UBC considers it appropriate that their employees – who are not family – should ever have recourse to this level of power over the body and freedom of another employee.

Creative Writing initiated an informal and questionable investigation of their own. As I understand it, a former MFA student was tasked with gathering information and potential allegations. She told the Program and/or University that a further 19 women would be coming forward with allegations of assault. None of these materialized. Yes, there were further allegations, all of which Mary Ellen Boyd found could not be substantiated, and which I think it is crucial to summarize here:

Ancillary Complainant 1 (AC1): Allegation that Steven (the Respondent) made a joke about breasts. AC1 notes “female student did not seem uncomfortable.” Decided to step forward after he heard about main allegations. “He makes no suggestion that, at the time, the Respondent’s actions caused a ‘hostile or intimidating environment ... for learning.’”

AC2: She says that Steven never misbehaved towards her but “displayed general flirting behaviour.” “She makes no suggestion the behaviour created a ‘hostile or intimidating environment for ... learning.’”

AC3: She describes playing a drinking game, and that one night, “their legs touched under the table.” She says that “nothing untoward occurred and she returned home. However the next day she was embarrassed ... particularly that she had flirted with a professor.” She says that “they continued to work together without incident.” In conclusion, “While she found he could be ‘a bit mean’ towards her, she admits he was well behaved in class, that he was professional towards her ... and that she learned a lot. Nevertheless she wishes he had been a warmer, more sensitive, empathetic professor.”

AC4: She notes she has “obtained several positions in the Department” that were not in anyway dependent on the Respondent. She says “she had recently expected the position of Undergraduate Secretary to be posted this year, a position she believes she was well qualified for and ought to have obtained. Ultimately the job was never posted and a month later, one of the Respondent’s favourites obtained the job. She surmises that that the job was not posted since faculty realized she (AC4) was obviously qualified.”

AC5: She complains that the Respondent said of a story she had submitted in class, about a girl with a crush on [REDACTED] that it was “gross.” She considers this an insensitive remark; that, while she was in the north caring for her mother, and going through a difficult time, the Respondent, upon hearing from [REDACTED] that she was having trouble sleeping, “remarked that maybe AC5 was going ‘north crazy’ – a term the Respondent had used to describe the phenomenon of coping with extended daylight,” and AC5 felt this was insensitive; she complains that while she was on leave, she wrote to Respondent who replied, “Yes, I assume you are having some kind of mental breakdown,” which she considered insensitive but which Mary Ellen Boyd finds “was signalling to her that he was prepared to assume she was suffering some stress or other mental health issue, thus not triggering any ongoing tuition obligation”; and, finally, she complains of a comment Steven made on her Facebook page, teasing AC5 and her partner who was dressed “in a [REDACTED] costume.” AC5 found Steven’s comment “sexually inappropriate and embarrassing.” Mary Ellen Boyd concludes that AC5 refused to either confirm or edit her Supplementary Statement of Evidence, and “instead returned a memorandum in which she disavowed her earlier recollections.” The investigator notes that AC5 “is the one complainant

who has most vigorously participated in this investigation, conferring with MC, speaking to CRWR program faculty prior to the November 15th meeting, and then spearheading the gathering of evidence from the Ancillary Complainants.”

AC6: She complains of three insensitive remarks, including visualization techniques used in Creative Writing workshop; joking, “Don’t worry, I’m not going to assault you,” when the door to his office was closed; and his question, related to AC8’s story about human trafficking, “Why do you know so many human traffickers?” which she felt implied “there was something wrong with her and she says she considered this a ‘stigmatizing’ statement to make to her.”

AC7: She states that the Respondent was “too familiar” and “too flirty” and that she consciously put distance between them. She says that “she was very physical with him, punching him in the arm or pushing him. Once she put a snowball down the back of his shirt. More than once he says she told him she thought he was ‘a really shitty writer’”. On one occasion, the Respondent says that AC7 “was particularly brazen with him and slapped him in the face, although not hard. He says that in response, he told her jokingly that someday, once she graduated, he would slap her back.” AC7 “recalls that she and the Respondent were ‘razzing’ each other and that his threat to slap her following graduation did indeed become a running joke between them. She says he was not a particularly “available thesis supervisor””. The investigator notes that “there is other evidence ... that the Respondent agreed to act as a thesis advisor for far more students than his other colleagues and that he was indeed over committed.” After AC7’s graduation, the Respondent approached her and slapped her. The Respondent “does not dispute the facts except to say the slap was not hard ...was not malicious and that he had no intention to injure.” AC7 “says that rather than being angry, she actually accepted in her own mind that she had deserved the slap. She notes: ‘In a bizarre way, I felt I deserved it because I had been a pig-headed [redacted] year old loudmouth. I now felt there was some closure with Steven on the matter. We were done and we didn’t need to talk about it anymore.’ AC7 “thought nothing more about the matter.” “Later in April 2014, when they ran into each other on the street, the topic of the slap arose again and she told him her mother’s response had been that she had deserved it. She asked if they could meet for a drink and he said he had a busy schedule but would like to try to arrange a meeting, if it could be part of a larger group ... The meeting never came about.”

AC8: His chosen genre was poetry. He says that the Respondent “ridiculed his chosen genre of writing”. The Respondent “stresses that this was a fiction class. He says the majority of AC8’s submissions were not works of fiction, but instead poems.” The investigator concludes, “I accept his evidence that he never told AC8 that ‘poetry is crap’ or words to that effect.” AC8’s other complaint involves a Facebook page featuring a Grumpy Cat meme, over which he argued with the Respondent.

Steven taught at UBC for 15 years. These are the total number of ancillary complaints, and a summary of their entire content, that were brought to Mary Ellen Boyd, and which have been anonymously and partially leaked to the media. I make no apology for knowing the precise details of the report. I was given the document to read in late June 2016, after UBC’s decision to terminate Steven without severance, and after which he had attempted suicide. I was unable to convince Steven to obtain professional help in a psychiatric hospital, due to the trauma he experienced in Ohio when he was committed against his will.

If the situation were different, and the allegations above were made against any professor in Creative Writing – against Linda, Annabel, Keith, and more – I would have exactly the same response, and *I would be defending you at this moment*. I cannot fathom that ancillary complaints

such as these should jeopardize your wellbeing and safety, that they should strip you of your employment and the writing life for which you have worked so hard. Would I have said that you must take responsibility for your actions? Absolutely. Would I have said that you deserved to be terminated without severance, stigmatized and made the target of a whisper campaign? Never.

As I said earlier, the allegations of the main complainant should have been brought to the police. I believe you have failed everyone involved. I know that if we want a world where women are believed, we must support them to give their evidence without fear or reprisals, in a context in which their identity can be protected and guaranteed by the law, in a system that is transparent and just.

In light of the above, I ask you, with all due respect, to remove my name as member of the UBC Creative Writing community and as UBC alumni. I cannot, in good conscience, be aligned with a Program that has intentionally misrepresented the findings of the University's own report, and that has chosen to erase a person's life and history in order to safeguard the reputation of the Institution. I do not believe the actions taken by UBC or Creative Writing have made an environment that is safer for women, for victims and survivors of sexual violence, or indeed for any individual.

Indeed, I believe the University has made it immeasurably worse. I cannot for a moment imagine that any of these events have made the main complainant feel safer, have contributed to her wellbeing, or protected her privacy. The University has taken a tragedy and turned it into a ugly, blame-filled, toxic mess, destroying lives in the process.

The attention to my work this year has opened the door for UBC to claim me as one of their success stories. Out of respect for the main complainant, for Steven, for the Program I once considered my home, and for the grievance process, I would have preferred to keep my silence on this subject. However, the public linking of my name to UBC has meant that I do not have the luxury of silence. The Program, in which a number of faculty members know my feelings on this subject, has backed me into a corner.

The full story will eventually come out, as happens everywhere. I hope that the Program and University will rise to the occasion, take responsibility for their share of the damage done, and make space for the difficult and heartbreaking conversation that will inevitably ensue. Should that happen, I would be overjoyed to renew my connections with the Program.

Until then, I no longer wish to be associated with Creative Writing, the Faculty of Arts, or UBC. I respectfully ask you to relay this message to your public relations staff, and to remove my name from your social media feeds, web pages, and other alumni publications, including those of the English Department and Green College, where I completed my first book and lived for three happy years.

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Madeleine Thien', with a stylized, flowing script.

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