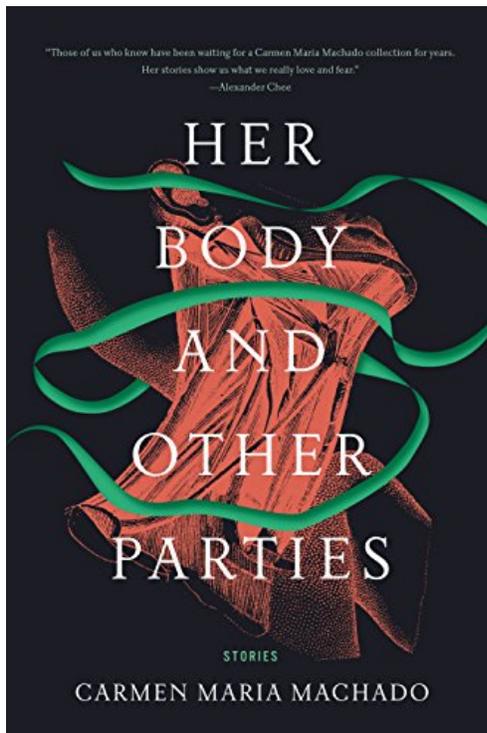


Our World Is Straight-Up Surreal: The Millions Interviews with Carmen Maria Machado

By DAVID NILSEN posted at 6:00 am on September 26, 2017 0



The literary world has been waiting for a **Carmen Maria Machado** collection for several years, and in October, Graywolf Press will oblige with the release of *Her Body and Other Parties*, a collection of Machado's haunting, graceful speculative stories that has been longlisted for a National Book Award. The Internet became aware of Machado in 2014 when her story "The Husband Stitch" was published by *Granta*. "The Husband Stitch" was something new altogether, and went on to be nominated for a **Shirley Jackson** Award and a Nebula Award, among other honors. Every new story by the Iowa Writers' Workshop grad has further stoked anticipation.

Machado's stories take place in a version of our real world that has been subtly distorted. Identities blur, women become invisible (literally), and lonely individuals seek intimacy at the end of the world. But these events don't occur in some alternate science fiction reality; Machado's spaces are recognizably our own, forcing us into the emotional upheavals of their protagonists. Machado's writing is both vulnerable and fearless, in complete control even as her characters lose control entirely, and she wields her unique voice to explore identity, marginalization, mental health, and what intimacy looks like in the light and shadow of all three.

We recently had the chance to talk over email about benevolent sexism, urban legends, and her writing process.

The Millions: "The Husband Stitch," first published in 2014, seemed to be the story that made the Internet perk up and really pay attention to the name Carmen Maria Machado. It's the story that opens *Her Body and Other Parties*. What has been the significance of that story and the response to it on your career

as a writer and the formation of this collection?

Carmen Maria Machado: I always tell people that they should write the stories they want to see in the world, and that's advice I try to take as well. I was nursing "The Husband Stitch" in my heart for a very long time—not that structure or narrative specifically, but the emotional arc. I thought a lot about benevolent sexism as a powerful and damaging force, and realized it was a critical note I needed to strike in *Her Body and Other Parties*. And then, one day, I had the story structure to tell it in a way that felt faithful to my own musings.

Of course, the explosion of interest around that story, and the persistent love of it, is really encouraging to me. I never imagined when I was writing it that it would have that kind of power and longevity. I'm not sure there's anything more exciting or rewarding as a writer. But I don't think it has much to do with me as an artist, particularly—rather, I think it was a note that needed to be struck. I think people were hungry for it.

TM: Your comment about benevolent sexism brings up a powerful piece of writing that was one of the first things I ever read by you: your essay "A Girl's Guide to Sexual Purity" for *L.A. Review of Books*. My wife and I both grew up in the Evangelical purity culture (and have since left the faith), and the essay spoke to a lot in our own pasts. While Christian purity culture is never mentioned in "The Husband Stitch" (the story takes place well before the emergence of that late-20th-century movement), it grows from the same soil from which that movement would later mushroom. Was that connection on your mind during the writing of this story? How does your background in the Christian purity culture impact your writing?

CMM: I think it serves as a constant reminder to me of what happens when people are not vigilant about the narratives young women absorb about themselves and their bodies and sex and sexuality—how catastrophically damaging they can be. I don't think I can solve that problem single-handedly or anything, but I can provide an alternate narrative for those who need it.

TM: There's this fascinating way you intertwine innocence and betrayal in that story without obscuring either. They are separate threads, braided together here—desire that is beautiful and desire that is toxic—and the reader can trace both throughout. Your use of so many old folk tales and urban legends—stories we all passed around among our friends as spooked kids and teenagers—takes the reader back to a more open, unprotected age, and then they're confronted with the ugliness of patriarchal entitlement. Can you tell me a little about how that story came about? What ties those old legends together, and what made you flip them on their heads here?

CMM: I was a Girl Scout for almost my entire childhood, and when we went camping I really loved the part where we told scary, theatrical stories around the campfire. I enjoyed hearing them, and I was really good at telling them. The version of “The Green Ribbon” I heard at that age—which is the one famously retold by **Alvin Schwartz**—has stuck with me ever since; I don’t know why. (I’ve been trying to explore this very question in an essay.) It’s possible that I was fascinated by the question of the ribbon itself—how did it get there? How did she go her entire life without disturbing it?—but there was something about the ending that really distressed me. Alfred asking and asking and asking, and Jenny relenting on her deathbed. Was she trying to fuck Alfred up as her final act on this earth? Was she just tired of saying “no?” Why did she give him what he wanted? Like the best folktales, the story was spare enough that a reader could project all sorts of things into it; the flatness serves as a kind of scrying pool for whoever is looking inside.

And, so years later, when I was at a residency in New Hampshire, I sat down and found myself combining several ideas: a sex-loving, midcentury housewife, the story’s title—which I’d learned about from my OB-GYN nurse aunt—and the woman with the green ribbon. I revisited all of those questions, to try and find my own answers.

The secondary urban legends and stage directions didn’t come until later drafts. When I went to go add those secondary stories, I consulted Alvin Schwartz’s *[Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark](#)* trilogy. I flipped through the pages until certain stories spoke to me as ones that could stand one of her retellings. I think urban legends (and folktales, and fairy tales) have this way of showing us what we already know to be true, and I wanted these narratives to reflect that fact.

TM: For you, the speculative elements in your fiction seem to be a way to subtly tug and pluck at the strings of reality on a very personal level. How did you get started writing speculative stories, and how do these elements play in your imagination as a writer?

CMM: I get “into” stories in a number of ways, but a lot of my ideas come from observing what’s around me and pushing into it a little. My wife and I play this game where we’ll see something and I’ll lean over and suggest a fantastic alteration to it. For example, we’ll see a little kid playing with her reflection in a large window, and I’ll say to my wife, “What would happen if the reflection stopped following her?” I do this in my own head, too, and sometimes I’ll stop talking mid-sentence and my wife will say to me, “Are you getting an idea right now?” as I run for paper and pen. (Or, if I’m driving, I’ll say, “I’m about to say some weird sentences to you, please text them to me.”)

When I teach, I talk to students a lot about “play,” and how that critical part of your young imagination can be snuffed out if you don’t feed it and take care of it. There’s been a lot of good and interesting writing about this idea of nursing one’s creative subconscious—I’m particularly fond of [this essay](#) by **Kelly Link**—and I think it’s an element of craft that doesn’t get touched on enough. Before plot or dialogue or even character, the mind needs to be observant, nimble, playful, and curious around the world around it. Without that, fiction is DOA.

TM: I’ve found Kelly Link’s thoughts (the essay you linked to) about writing from our obsessions, no matter how trivial they seem, to be tremendously helpful. Do you similarly maintain a list of these obsessions for yourself, as Link does?

CMM: I do! I make lists of obsessions, of fears, of images that strike me, of phrases that might make good titles, of potential formal constraints, of stories only I think I can tell, of memories, of sentences that come to me, of settings that give me a thrill...list-making is so satisfying, and such a useful way of cataloguing what’s going on inside my head.

TM: A number of your stories are only one degree separated from our present reality. A plague is wiping out humanity, or women are becoming incorporeal for no discernible reason, but otherwise the characters and settings are, for lack of a better word, normal. They’re what we’re all living every day, and then this awful warping occurs. What does that method open for you when you’re writing a story?

CMM: As a young woman, I did read some secondary world and/or portal fantasy (Harry Potter, The Lord of the Rings, the Narnia books), but my absolute favorite work presented a familiar world with tweaked fantasy, science fiction, and/or horror elements: [A Wrinkle in Time](#), the work of **Lois Duncan**, [Behind the Attic Wall](#), all of **Louis Sachar’s** books, **John Bellairs**. I was not leaving for another world; instead, I was being shown potential avenues of perception in my own world. I don’t think this is, like, aesthetically superior or anything, it’s just what tickled my own imagination. I think it created in me an acute sense that magic could be just around the corner. And quite frankly, so much of our world is just straight-up surreal—look at the current political climate, for example—that this kind of worldbuilding often feels very natural to me.

TM: Who are some writers, past or present, who inspire you creatively?

CMM: I’m particularly indebted to a certain generation of 20th-century writers: Shirley Jackson, **Angela Carter**, **Jane Bowles**, **Lucia Berlin**, **Patricia Highsmith**, Lois Duncan, **Ray Bradbury**, **Gabriel García Márquez**. But

there is also an incredible line-up of contemporary folks who have shaped me into the writer I am: Kelly Link, **Karen Russell**, **Helen Oyeyemi**, **Alice Sola Kim**, **Kevin Brockmeier**, **Nicholson Baker**, **Bennett Sims**, **Sofia Samatar**, **Alissa Nutting**. And I'm discovering more every day: I recently finished **Anne Rivers Siddons's** *The House Next Door* and **Kathryn Davis's** *Duplex*—the first novels of those writers I've ever read—and I feel like my imagination is firing on every cylinder.

TM: Your book's title directly reveals a theme that weaves through every story in the collection: women's bodies, the ways they both serve and betray these women (or are used by others to do the same), the ways they are both pleased and violated. Can you tell me a bit about that theme and how it defines so much of this collection?

CMM: I am singularly obsessed with the body; even my interest in the mind is rooted in the body, since the two are inseparable from each other. I'd be lying if I said this interest didn't stem from my relationship with my own body: with moving through the world as a fat, queer, not-quite-white woman, experiencing physical ailments and struggling with mental illness. My mind is housed in my body; my body is flawed and also falls outside of specific culturally-acceptable parameters and is also actively oppressed. It experiences pleasure and brings me joy and it suffers; I fight against it and love it and accept it and loathe it. How better to grapple with these contradictions than write a book about it?

TM: Full disclosure: I have never seen a single episode of *Law & Order: SVU*. I wasn't sure what to expect going into your story "Especially Heinous," which creates a fictional episode listing for the show's entire run. I found it absolutely fascinating. What was the inception of that novella, and why did you choose such an unusual structure?

CMM: I often tell people that its root was years before, when I'd spent a severe bout of swine flu in front of a *Law & Order: SVU* marathon, and drifted in and out of feverish consciousness in front of my computer. Whether or not that's the actual place where it began, during my second year at grad school, I had the idea of writing a story using a television show as its anchor. I initially toyed with idea of taking existing episode capsules from IMDB and simply altering them toward fantasy, but I realized pretty quickly that this format was far too limiting. I did, however, notice that *Law & Order: SVU* only had single-word titles, which seemed to be as good a jumping-off place as any. The story came together pretty quickly after that—the titles provided a kind of mental springboard, and I bounced between plotlines and pulled everything together. Up until that time it was the longest singular project I'd ever written. (I should add that I intend the story to be readable to folks who haven't seen *Law & Order: SVU*; but if you

have, there might be some small Easter Eggs you can enjoy.)

I think the structure works for this story for a few reasons. First, we're very accustomed to marathoning TV nowadays, what with Netflix and other online streaming services, and so in some ways this is like a Netflix marathon from hell. The format also allows the pleasure of cutting one-off "episodes" with continuing storylines, which taps into the reason people enjoy shows with formulas like *Law & Order* to begin with. This structure doesn't work for everyone—I received the meanest workshop letter in my entire MFA from a student who very much disliked every element of this story, and derisively referred to it as "fanfiction"—but obviously some folks respond to it very strongly. I don't mind writing aesthetically divisive work; on the contrary, it's a real pleasure.

TM: In "The Resident," you toy with the trope of the misunderstood madwoman forced together with other, "saner" folks (Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* came to mind), but in this case you redeem her from that relegation to insanity. That story seemed to come from a very personal place?

CMM: When I workshopped a very early version of this story, a reader said, reluctantly, "I tire of 'madwoman in the attic' stories." I felt bowled over by this note, because I, too, dislike sexist tropes about mad women, particularly mad lesbians, and here I'd created a story that centered around them. So I asked her, "What happens if you want to write a first-person story about a woman with mental illness? What do you do then?" She just shrugged.

So I had this massive, sprawling story that felt important to me but ran up against this trope, and I didn't know what to do about it. As someone who has mental illness—acute, debilitating anxiety—I've always been very interested in trying to snatch back narratives that have seemingly been taken away from me.

So I decided during my many rewrites—and there were many!—to try and address this idea more forcefully. I reasoned, as long as the story took on these tropes, and she had agency and intelligence and context, she could be as mad as she needed to be. (I should add that I don't begrudge the note that led me down this path—it was, in fact, critical to the story's development.)

It also helped that I did a ton of editing for this story under my editor **Ethan Nosowsky's** guidance. Many of the other stories in the collection were functionally finished by the time Graywolf bought the collection—they'd been published elsewhere, and had already received thorough edits—but "The Resident" had never seen anything except that very early workshop. Ethan gently told me he thought this story would need the most work out of the entire book, and he was right—we went back and forth on it for ages. There was even a period

of time I didn't think it would appear in the collection at all. Ethan is brilliant, and also not prescriptive—he simply looked at each draft and suggested to me where he thought my subconscious was leading me. And then one day, it all snapped into place.

TM: What's next for you after the release of *Her Body and Other Parties*?

CMM: I recently sold a memoir to Graywolf—*House in Indiana*—which will be coming out in 2019, so next year I'll be revising that. I'm also at work at a ton of other projects—a new story collection, an essay collection, and a few different novels, though whether or not those take is yet to be determined.

<http://themillions.com/2017/09/our-world-is-straight-up-surreal-the-millions-interviews-carmen-maria-machado.html>