

On focusing on what interests you



Writer Carmen Maria Machado discusses the complicated pleasures of writing and reading horror, the pros and cons of MFA programs, and writing about whatever you want

August 9, 2022 -

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3131 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Beginnings](#), [Identity](#).

Your body of work is varied. You've done a little bit of everything. Do you have a regimented way of working or a dedicated practice for how you arrange your time?

Annoyingly, no. I do not write everyday. I'm actually super lackadaisical in terms of my work practice. I get the most work done when I go to residencies, when I basically have tons of unstructured time ahead of me. In my daily life, I'm teaching and I've got errands to run and I'm really bad at writing. I'm good at coming up with ideas, though. I'll keep a lot of notes and I'm always thinking about things. Generally speaking, the majority of my work happens in these short, concentrated bursts and that's usually happening when I'm not teaching. My wife is a writer and she writes almost every day. She gets up early and does it. It's very disciplined. I am not disciplined even slightly, but I admire people who are.

How does teaching affect your work, other than monopolizing your time?

Intellectually, it's very fruitful because I'm talking about craft and genre and we're having these really good conversations. The students are asking me good questions. I'm also rereading the work that I'm assigning them, so I'm getting these fresh bursts of stories. In that way, it's fruitful. On a strictly energy level, the place where I write comes from the same place as my teaching energy. As a result, when I am done teaching my brain feels super run out. I can't do anything creative. It's really hard to do creative work while I'm teaching, even in the same semester. The middle ground is that I'm just taking notes for my own work during the semester. Once it becomes summer, or over Christmas break, then I can actually try and tackle whatever I'm thinking about working on.

For a lot of creative people there is that guilt that comes with ignoring your creative work because of your day job commitments, or vice versa. At a certain point, maybe you just have to give yourself license to be like, "When the semester is going on, I'm not going to feel bad about not being creative."

Totally! I don't really feel guilt because I do love teaching. It's how I support myself. It's where I get my health insurance from. I love my students. I find teaching very rewarding. Even when it's frustrating, it's rewarding. At some point I was like, "You know what, this is my career. I would probably teach even if I didn't need to." I just kind of let myself be and let myself teach, be 100% present for teaching when I'm teaching, and then 100% present for my creative work when I'm not teaching.

Your work gets talked about in the context of horror and science fiction. Those are such culturally maligned genres in some ways. They aren't always considered "literary" in the same way that other fiction is.

I feel like horror is having an interesting moment right now. In some ways, horror can be so regressive, but it can also be very subversive. Films like *Get Out*, for example, or *It Follows*, things made by people who are interested in approaching these texts with subversion in mind or with the tropes of the genre in mind, turning them over and examining them in different ways and using them to do other work.

The horror genre appeals to me because it freaks me out. I feel like a lot of my life has been about intentionally approaching the things that freak me out. I'm easily freaked out. I'm super anxious. I've always been that way. I'm a very fearful and anxiety-ridden person. I feel like part of my life project has been walking up to things that freak me the fuck out and just doing them because otherwise I'd be mad at myself. That's really important to me. I feel like that's why I'm drawn to horror.

As a kid, I read it. It scared me so bad that my mom banned [R.L. Stine](#) books in our household because I had read *Night of the Living Dummy* and I didn't sleep for nights and nights and nights. She was like, "This is ridiculous. You cannot be reading these books. They're too scary. No." I continued to just read them secretly. I would also go to the library and get [Christopher Pike](#) books. I was really, really drawn to horror and thrillers and sci-fi. I loved series. I read all those *Sweet Valley High*, *Baby-Sitter's Club*, *Nancy Drew*, *Nancy Drew/Hardy Boys* crossovers. I devoured all those books also. I was a pretty indiscriminate reader, actually, when I was a kid. I absorbed it all, but I was really drawn to things that were scary.

I was describing this to somebody recently who was asking me why I liked horror. I told him it made me feel something, almost as if it changed my temperature. I don't know if you-or anyone-did this as a kid, but did you ever get mosquito bites and then you would lean your leg against the hot bumper of a car in the summer? It would make the itch stop. I feel like it's like that. The itching is the anxiety, and you're like, "I'm going to sear the shit out of this fear until it doesn't feel itchy or anymore or the itching stops for a second." I sort of feel like it's like that. To be honest, I didn't identify as a writer of horror until maybe four years ago. Then all the sudden, I started to realize I was drawn to it creatively. I realized I was writing it in my own way. It affirmed for me that you should always write about whatever you want. Write where your interests take you, don't think about the other stuff.

Your forthcoming book is described as an "experimental memoir." What does that mean?

I've been trying to write about domestic abuse in same sex relationships and I've been trying to write it for long time. It was a struggle. I would write something, and it would be really terrible. In fiction, it worked. I have a couple of short stories that are really me going at that kind of material, but it was difficult to try and do it as non-fiction. I kept trying to write essays, and they all seemed really boring and bad.

Then I had this idea of approaching the project in a more fragmented way that used different genre tropes as lenses through which to view various aspects of this scenario. Basically throughout the book, each short little chapter is using a genre trope to examine an aspect of the complication of domestic violence in same sex relationships. There are sections that are allegorical, there are sections that adopt these very science-fiction tropes. I needed to approach it all these different ways and have all of these failed experiments in order to get to the place where I could feel like, "Oh, this is actually the way I want to be doing this." Sometimes it takes a while to get there.

There are successful visual artists who have told me that art school was valuable mostly in the sense that it helped them gain professional access to the art world. I wonder if the same argument might be made for MFA programs for writing.

I went to the writing program at Iowa. If I were to say one thing that I wish I had more of at Iowa, it would have actually been a little bit of professional development. I feel like a lot of the stuff that I learned in that capacity was very informal or optional. For example, I really wish there was a money manager for writers. Or a class that said, "Here's how you pitch to magazines." I wish there was a little more of that. I think the reason there isn't, and sort of the philosophy of Iowa in particular, is because they're like, "This is funded time for you to write, so you shouldn't necessarily be focusing on the market," which I totally understand. That actually makes 100% sense to me. They definitely have a very specific reason for wanting to do it that way.

For me, the value of my MFA was I had two fully-funded years of writing. I didn't do anything else. I had time. I could go to the gym. I could go to free therapy because I had health insurance and get my mental health under control. I could live my life, be healthy, write, not feel pressure to do a lot of stuff, and not have to. I certainly wasn't rich, but I was fine. Iowa is in a very small college town. It was just great having the exposure and access to other writers and really brilliant teachers. Just having this space to experiment and be and get to know people and get to read a lot was, for me, the most valuable part of the MFA.

Obviously, every program is not like that. I think there's a really interesting discussion that hopefully will happen at some point about funded MFAs and not funded ones. I do feel like the value, there's a lot of value to the MFA program, but one of the values is that it's a funded program. If you're able to uproot your life—which obviously everybody is not able to do—but if you are, you can just go somewhere and write. Before I got into Iowa I was working a horrible job in California. I was miserable. I wanted to move away. I couldn't afford it. I couldn't find another job. I was really struggling. The only way I actually managed to get out was go to Iowa. I was like, "Yeah, sure. I'll go anywhere. I don't want to be here anymore." It actually worked out really beautifully for me.

There's something about that pure space that I really respect, where you're learning how to make art and take time for yourself. Someone described it as something like finding writers who are on their way and giving them chicken soup, just giving them stuff to make them better.

When you finished your MFA was it a shock to the system to be out in the real world?

Yeah, I moved to Philly with my wife. Back then she was my girlfriend. She was in Boston. I was in Iowa. We moved to Philly in order to move in together. She got a job, but I couldn't find a job for awhile. I applied for a job at Starbucks and was rejected because I didn't have enough "coffee making experience." To this day I'm traumatized by that entire process. It was horrible. I eventually got a retail job at the King of Prussia Mall. I was also editing for very, very little money. I was broke as hell and really struggling. I kept feeling like I missed school, but what I really missed was being able to write. I had to learn how to be an artist in the world. When you're at a program like Iowa or any kind of funded MFA program, you're in this little bubble where you're just kind of getting to dance around and be your artistic self. All of the sudden, you're like, "Oh my God! I've got bills to pay. I need health insurance. I need whatever."

So it was definitely a shock to the system. It really helped that my wife was so amazing and supportive and understanding. I think if I had been by myself or been with a different kind of person, it would have been actually much harder. I'm not sure what would have happened.

Do students ask you for advice about things like, "Where do I send my stories to? How do I get an agent? What do I do?"

Some of them do. At the end of the semester, on the last day of class, I usually have a little Q&A where people can ask me whatever. I'll tell them about things like dealing with agents, but also I try to tell them, "You need to focus on writing the best book or the best story that you can write right now." The professional development is important, but it will follow. You can't jump the gun and be like, "I need to figure out how to get an agent!" if you haven't finished a book yet, or finished a good story.

I tell them that I was the same way when I was in their position. I was very anxious about all this weird agent stuff, and I did not need to be. I was jumping the gun a little bit, too, which is fine. I try to tell them the realities. There's a lot of misinformation about writing out there in the world. People have weird ideas about writing and being a writer. I feel like I just have to do my part to explain why maybe that those things aren't all correct.

I know you have this book forthcoming, but are you working on other projects, too? Are you someone who can work on multiple things at the same time?

I have an essay collection I've started, but that's taking forever. I have several novels. I have a young adult novel I'm kind of playing with. I'm always working on five things at once, or more. It's just more a question of what I will actually finish next.

If you have multiple things sort of percolating, is that so you can go to wherever the energy is? Like, I'm going to work on this now instead of this?

Exactly. That's the thing. If I get bored, I can just be like, "I'm going to work on that other thing now because I don't feel like working on this anymore." I basically wrote my memoir while I was editing my story collection. In between edits on the collection I had all this downtime. I was doing a writing residency at Yaddo. I was like, "Oh, I should just work on this other thing." It was amazing. I was there during the election, so it was an entire residency of artists having a collective mental breakdown all at once, which was very stressful. But besides that, it was great. I wrote a lot.

Carmen Maria Machado recommends:

Carmen Maria Machado on the books that shaped her childhood and her writing

I read a lot of [Ray Bradbury](#) as a kid and [Louis Sachar](#). He did [Holes](#) and [The Wayside School](#) books. I loved [Lois Duncan](#), she wrote thrillers for young people. The [Series of Unfortunate Events](#) books were really formative for me, these very Gothic children's books.

I'm not sure if I'd call this a recommendation exactly, but I also read [V.C. Andrews](#) a lot. My mom, who was not exactly a huge reader, had a couple of those on her shelf. I remember that I was like, "What are these about?" and she said, "I don't know. I remember them being very scary." So of course I thought, "Oh, perfect! I love scary things. Then I started reading them and was like, "Um, what is happening?" I was eleven, which was a fucking insanely inappropriate age to read those books. I loved them for their covers. There would be some sort of window or cut out on the front and you could see through to the next page, which would be some kind of dramatic portrait. It's still my dream that one day I can have that kind of cover for something I write.

Anyway, those books were also super sexual. There was one in particular with the most insane plot. I think it's called [Heaven](#). There are some kids who, after their mother dies, are basically sold by their father—somewhere in Appalachia?—because he is an alcoholic and wants the money to drink. So the children are sold/adopted by a woman and her husband. It's all so insane and weirdly offensive. The girl, who's a teenager, falls in love with the husband and they begin an affair. Then the wife gets really jealous and as punishment she disembowels the family hamster in a bathtub. I was like, "What?!" The culmination of that whole subplot is that the wife has breasts that are so large that she gets breast cancer and she doesn't know until she's basically dead. Because her boobs are so big. As a large breasted child, I was like, "Can that happen?" It was insane.

I loved those books. I devoured them. Luckily my mom (or maybe not luckily) did not stop me. I don't think she realized how bizarre they were. She would have stopped me if she realized what was actually in them. I was really into those books and I think it shaped a certain Gothic sensibility in me. Of course, I don't think I understood a lot of it—or the what the Gothic literary tradition was, obviously—but it was a kind of weird education. I got that all the incest stuff in her books was weird, but there were other things that were just like weird sex writing that I couldn't totally fathom, like references to someone's "manhood" or whatever. I was just like, "Okay, got it. It's like his penis. Okay, okay. Hmm." I was very thoughtful about it.

I was a very precocious reader. Around the fourth grade, I really started reading really, really complicated or above my age range books. I have this clear memory of being in fourth grade and reading [A Little Princess](#) by Frances Hodgson Burnett. There were a lot of words that I had to look up. I would go up to my teacher and be like, "What does this word mean?" He'd say to me, "You know there's a dictionary. You can look up words in the dictionary." I was like, "Okay, cool." I'd be reading during reading time and then I'd go to the dictionary and look up a word, and then come back. At some point, I recognized that I was reading books where I should not be asking adults what things meant. I just sort of understood that it was not a good idea. I was no longer reading sweet children's literature from 100 years ago. Now it's weird sex books that I can't stop reading for some reason.

Name

Carmen Maria Machado

Vocation

Writer



Photo: Tom Storm Photography