**Interview**

**A. J. Ashworth**

**‘Mainlining Ray Bradbury’**

**‘Mainlining Ray Bradbury’: An interview with Carmen Maria Machado**

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Carmen Maria Machado is the author of the award-winning short story collection *Her Body and Other Parties,* the bestselling memoir *In the Dream House* and the graphic novel *The Low, Low Woods.* She has been a finalist for the National Book Award and is the winner of the Bard Fiction Prize, the Lambda Literary Award for Lesbian Fiction, the Lambda Literary Award for LGBTQ Nonfiction, the Brooklyn Public Library Literature Prize, the Shirley Jackson Award and the National Book Critics Circle’s John Leonard Prize. Her essays, fiction and criticism have appeared in the likes of *The New Yorker,* the *New York Times, Granta and Vogue.* She has an MFA from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and has been awarded fellowships and residencies from the Guggenheim Foundation among others.

This interview took place via video call in September 2022.

***A. J. Ashworth (AJA):*** *Hi Carmen, can you hear me OK?*

**Carmen Maria Machado (CMM):** Hi. Yeah. Can you hear me?

***AJA:*** *Yes, I can. That’s perfect. How are you doing?*

**CMM:** Oh (laughs).

***AJA:*** *Crazy busy?*

**CMM:** Yeah, very busy. Yes.

***AJA:*** *OK, well, thank you for taking the time to talk to me for half an hour or so. I really appreciate it because I know you’re hectic busy, but thank you very much. OK, I’ll get started. I was just interested first off in what drew you to the short story in the first place? What was it about that form, in particular?*

**CMM:** It’s so funny because I feel like when you’re a kid, you don’t really learn how to read short stories. I guess I can only speak to the US public schools. But as a form, you can kind of read a smattering of famous short stories, but never read a short story collection. And no one ever really talks about the craft or the structure of a short story. It’s just kind of a weird form, so I feel like my experience with the short form on my own began when I was mainlining Ray Bradbury short stories when I was a kid. So, there was this big, fat collected Ray Bradbury book that was at the local library and I would check it out all the time. And I remember just feeling like those stories were one after the other, amazing, and I would always just have this really intense response to them. And I loved how short they were and how you kind of got to the experience of the story so quickly, to the heart of it. It was just a really pleasurable experience. And then I wrote… I mean, I did what all teenagers do – I was writing poetry and not even short stories, just sort of weird little prose pieces when I was a teenager. But then once I got to college, and then eventually to Grad School – I mean, obviously, the short fiction in MFA programmes is sort of par for the course. It’s kind of the easiest to workshop. But a lot of my classmates were working on novels – a lot of people were working on longer projects. And for some reason for me, they never took. I was always, ‘No, I love a short story.’ And, it was sort of to the point where if you told me, ‘You have to read this author’, and I’d go and see a short story collection or a novel, I’d always pick up the collection first, always. Because I just really liked seeing the range and experiencing like, ‘What does the short story look like in this person’s hands?’ And I just find it super interesting. So yeah, the short story is for me a form that has just always spoken to me, and it’s never lost its potency. It really has even gained potency, like I’m just marvelling at it as a shape. A novel has its own pleasures, it has its own things that it offers, but I feel like a short story is a really special object.

***AJA:*** *Yeah, absolutely. It’s so potent. It’s so rich, isn’t it? There’s so much potential with it. So, you started writing in childhood. When did you get more serious about writing? Was it when you went to Iowa? Or was it before that even?*

**CMM:** I guess, how do you define serious? I mean I’ve always written. I was one of those annoying kids who was always writing poetry, making little books. I was writing letters to publishers with little chapters of my books. As soon as we got a word processor and a computer, I was writing on that. I was just one of those kids, you know. So, I was always kind of moving toward it. But yeah, I mean, I guess serious in the sense that I was like, ‘This could be a thing that I do professionally’? Probably in my second half of Grad School, I would say. Yeah. And when I went to school, I applied to Grad School to get out of the Bay Area where I was living, which was a horrible place. No, I mean, it’s not horrible – people love it there. But I did not want to be there. And I really wanted to get out and I was broke as hell and I needed a place to land and that’s literally why I applied to school – or one of the chief reasons I applied. But by the time I got there, I didn’t really know what I was doing. But by the second half of that I felt like I could do something with this. It felt possible. So, I guess I’d say that’s when it felt a little more serious.

***AJA:*** *Yeah. I’m really interested in the subject of rejection for writers. I feel it’s something we don’t really talk about an awful lot. It’s kind of a bit of a taboo subject that we brush under the carpet a little bit. Did you experience much rejection when you started sending work out?*

**CMM:** Oh, yeah, all the time. I mean, I think it’s normal. The experience of submitting work is so strange. The first short story that I wrote that I really felt good about, that I submitted places, was ‘Difficult at parties’, which is the last story in my first book [*Her Body and Other Parties*]. And I remember writing that story and having a sense that I had done something good, like having a sense the story felt special, it felt cohesive, it felt beautiful. There was something about it. And what it was, I realised later, was that I’d hit upon my voice. I’d hit upon the thing that I wanted to be doing. But I remember feeling that with that story and so I submitted it everywhere – everywhere. And it didn’t get published. It eventually got published in a very small magazine that no longer exists – this beautiful print magazine. *Unstuck* was the name of it, and it had maybe three issues and then it was no longer. But I was really grateful as it was actually a really gorgeous magazine and it’s sad it’s gone. But I remember getting lots of personalised rejections from big magazines and being, ‘Ah, that’s interesting’ and feeling like that meant something. But I did [get rejected]. I got rejected two weeks ago! It still happens. I submitted a new story…

***AJA:*** *Please tell me. It makes me feel better.*

**CMM:** I have a few white whale magazines that I haven’t been in that I want to be in. And I had a story that I thought was one of the best I’d ever written. And I was super confident, thinking, ‘Surely this magazine will take it’. And I submitted it, and just got a flat out rejection. And I was like, ‘Damn. Goddamn it. What’s a girl gotta do?’ It’s fine. But, again, it’s part of the process. I tell people this now because I’m obviously doing great. I have a great career. I’m very lucky in a lot of ways. And also, I still get rejections all the time. It’s not that uncommon. I guess I get fewer now because I’m writing slower but I still get rejections constantly. You know, it’s not that unusual.

***AJA:*** *That’s kind of pleasing to hear for me, particularly. I’ve had so many rejections, for example with novels I’ve written that haven’t got anywhere. But anyway, that’s another story. So, you spoke about finding your voice and that really clicking in at some point. Did you feel like you were imitating other writers up to that point?*

**CMM:** Oh, of course. Oh yeah. I mean everyone does, right? I mean, honestly, when people are feeling stuck, I’m like, ‘Go imitate somebody.’ When I got to Grad School, the teacher that I had in undergrad was just lovely – Professor Harvey Grossinger. And I wrote about him in an essay for *The New Yorker* a few years ago, about the power of adjuncts, because he was actually an adjunct professor. I don’t know if you guys have that but he was like a part-time gig professor who was making very little money and who was teaching in my undergraduate university, which I didn’t realise at the time. I just thought he was my professor, like he was a professor at the school I was at. And he was incredibly encouraging and kind to me, and I’m very grateful to him, and he really helped me at every step of this journey. And he was always really encouraging. He was like, ‘You’re a good writer. I think you should be applying to stuff.’ He was always really encouraging. But he was definitely an old school kind of realist, like that was his thing. And so when he was teaching and he would assign short stories they were always Updike or Raymond Carver, or Lorrie Moore, or whatever. And there’s a lot to be learned from those people, don’t get me wrong. But it was a certain genre for sure – it was realist. And so I feel like when I went to school, the work that I was reading, because I’d constantly be emailing and be like, ‘Can you recommend a book to me?’, and he would be like, ‘Oh, here’s this new short story collection.’ And it was often short story collections. He also wrote short stories, but it was always realist. And so that’s what I was reading. And it was incredibly helpful because I was sort of learning how a story was constructed. I was figuring out how to [do it]. But then when I got to school, and I was sort of writing these realist stories, a classmate of mine pointed out to me *correctly* that I seemed a little bored by what I was doing. But I had this one story about a girl whose father had died and it was truly boring, you know. But there’s a scene that I wrote where Death appears over her and speaks to her and my classmate, who is now a very good friend of mine and also a published writer, was like, ‘This is the only moment where the story comes alive. The rest of the story, you seem super bored by what you’re doing but this moment it feels really alive’. Yeah, ironically enough. So I was like, ‘Hmm, OK.’ So then he was like, ‘You should be reading Shirley Jackson, Angela Carter, Kelly Link, Karen Russell, Helen Oyeyemi…’ And I literally went on Christmas break, bought a bunch of these books people had been recommending to me, read all of them all at once and then was like, ‘Oh, yeah. Clearly, this is what I want to be doing.’ And then literally, the next semester, the first story I wrote was ‘Difficult at parties’. So it was literally like this key that I had to unlock – not in terms of how to write a short story or have a structure or character or any of that, but this way of thinking about genre, this way of thinking about the story’s relationship with reality. And so once I had that figured out, I was off to the races. So, it was just kind of wiggling out from under the direct influence of my mentor ­– again, who was amazing and I would not be here if it were not for him, but also trying to find my own stuff that I really wanted to do.

***AJA:*** *Yeah, it’s like tuning into yourself, isn’t it? And also trusting yourself – that little kernel of something that’s within you that interests you. It’s kind of trusting that, isn’t it and following it?*

**CMM:** Yeah. Totally, totally, totally. But yeah, at the time, I just didn’t know. At the time, I was just sort of like, ‘What am I doing?’ which is normal when you’re 24 and you’re, ‘I don’t fucking know what’s going on. I don’t know what I want to write.’ And the question of finding your voice, which everyone talks about ­– it’s like, what the fuck does that mean? It’s like a very vague thing. Sorry, I’m saying fuck a lot. But it’s just like, literally, how do you learn? It’s really about what you’re trying to say, and how you’re trying to say it. And, I think I knew maybe what I wanted to talk about. I knew that I wanted to write about women’s bodies and women’s lives and sex and gender. Those were all things that I already knew I was interested in but I think it was just thinking about this way of approaching the material, which was thinking about non-realism as an avenue into the depths of these stories.

***AJA:*** *Yeah. Do stories tend to come in a particular way for you, or is it just that they appear how they appear? Or are there certain ways they come?*

**CMM:** Yeah, it depends. Sometimes stories come out sort of fully formed. That’s really unusual. But ‘Inventory’, for example – I wrote ‘Inventory’ from my first collection in three hours, and it’s edited a little from that version but it’s basically the same story that I wrote. I had a really strong formal conceit and I felt immediately when I started writing it that I knew all the structure, how it was going to work and how it was going to end, so it was just a matter of getting the words on the page. And then some stories have taken much longer and have been more like a vibe – like ‘The resident’ in my first book. It was years of writing and multiple edits, and lots of cuts and lots of additions. When I sold the book, most of the stories had been published but that one hadn’t been published. My editor said, ‘I want us to work on this story in particular because it feels like it’s eight stories rolled into one’. I had to peel away a lot of other shit that didn’t belong in the story. And so I feel like that story was me kind of trying to figure out the vibe and get closer to the thing. It was this really kind of weird process. So, yeah, it can start with a form. It can start with an image or an idea or I’ll be like, ‘I want to retell the green ribbon story’ or I have this idea about… like, right now, I really want to write a demonic possession story and I’m thinking about it a lot, but I don’t know what that looks like. Sometimes there’ll be a genre I want to try, so it just kind of depends, honestly, and it’s whatever works.

***AJA:*** *Do you often know what the endings of your stories are going to be when you get the ideas? Or is it a case of you finding your way in the dark a little bit, following stepping stones from what you start with? Because I feel like endings are really important in short stories – maybe much more than in other genres of writing.*

**CMM:** Totally. I agree.

***AJA:*** *Everything has to contribute and build towards that ending, which is why they can have such impact and such power.*

**CMM:** Yeah. I feel like, generally speaking, endings appear to me fairly early. I think, almost exclusively, I feel like they make sense. I’m trying to think of recent stories I’ve written and with all of them, I feel like I knew the endings before I knew what the middles were. I had written the ending, or some version of the ending, or I knew how the story was going to end. So, yes, I think, generally speaking, I do. With ‘The resident’, that one went through multiple edits and the ending changed multiple times, and I wasn’t sure what the story was. But also, I didn’t know what that story was about. I think that’s also part of it too. You sort of get a sense of what a story is about and then the ending becomes clear to you. And I feel like yeah, once I’ve clicked into that, I will often pause what I’m doing and make a note about the end. And I’ll be like, ‘Oh, I know exactly how this is going to end.’ I feel it’s also – and this is gonna sound so weird – but I feel like I’m a pretty intuitive person in real life. I feel I am really good at looking at a situation and saying, ‘I know how this is gonna end, I know how this is gonna unfold’. So, maybe it’s that instinct, or I’m just kind of looking at all the pieces and I feel like I have a clear sense of this for some reason.

***AJA:*** *You’re probably really good at jigsaws.*

**CMM:** I *am* really good at jigsaws in fact.

***AJA:*** (laughs) I thought you might be.

**CMM:** (laughs).

***AJA:*** *I was reading a story by Ali Smith, a Scottish writer, called ‘True short story’ and in that story, she makes lots of references to what the short story is, and she includes what other writers have said about what the short story is. And one of the things she says is that, ‘Alice Munro says that every short story is at least two short stories’. And that to me felt relevant to your writing. In particular, I was thinking of ‘Inventory’ and how you’ve got this kind of apocalyptic/pandemic-type story, but then you’ve also got this inventory effectively of somebody’s relationships. So, there is that idea of two stories working at once. I just wondered if you had any thoughts about that?*

**CMM:** First of all, what is that short story called because it sounds great and I want to write it down?

***AJA:*** *It’s called ‘True short story’ and it’s by Ali Smith, a Scottish writer.*

**CMM:** ‘True short story’. I do know Ali Smith. OK, I’ve written that down for my own reference.

***AJA:*** *She mentions Kafka as well. She says, ‘Franz Kafka says that the short story is a cage in search of a bird’. There’s some really interesting little quotes.*

**CMM:** Ooh, I love that. I think, yes, every short story is [at least two short stories], I mean in the sense that all narrative exists on multiple planes. So, when I talk about ‘Inventory’ specifically – which I again wrote pre-COVID, which people think is really funny – what’s so weird is that it’s just about how you could be living your stupid little life, so you’re like, ‘I’m sad, I’m tired, I’m hungry, I’m horny, I want to have sex, I want to go to the grocery store, I need to go work my job, I need to go do all this stuff that makes me a person… that I have to get through my stupid day, every day.’ And then while that’s happening, there are scales of narrative happening relative to me, right as I sit here and chat with you, having this normal conversation. There’s a lot of shit going on in the world right now – in my immediate neighbourhood, in my city, in my country, in the world. And some of those are horrific. And it’s all a question of scale, right? It’s like, you can write a really compelling story about someone’s stupid little life. And all they need to need is, ‘I’m hungry’, and that could drive an entire story, right? But then also I feel like people have this idea that the story needs to have these bigger, epic things, but those are always happening, right? So it’s really just a question of, where do these things exist relative to each other? And how do you sort of zoom in or zoom out? And how do you look at the story? And so for me, that story is so much about experiencing human desire and experiencing normal desire, and loneliness and trying to sort of figure out who you are and figure out what you want, which is literally the human experience, but in the context of this life altering, massive, geographic, disruptive, all the things – like a massive pandemic, and that’s what we have, right? That’s literally what’s happening at this very moment.

***AJA:*** *Yeah. The other thing that interests me is you said in an interview with* BuzzFeed News*, talking about form that, ‘sometimes stories just need something to hold on to, and form is a way of doing that’. And you’re really interested in form, I think, and obviously, ‘Inventory’ is one of the examples where you’re using the idea of an inventory to talk about this pandemic and these different relationships. And then you’ve got ‘Especially heinous’ where you’ve got these capsule episodes, synopses of these episodes with titles for each one. So you’re really interested in form I feel as a writer, which is something you don’t often see with a lot of American short story writers. I think it’s maybe something that British short story writers seem a bit more interested in so I just wondered what your thoughts are about your own approach to form?*

**CMM:** I think I go through phases. It’s funny because right now I’m actually working on this new book and so far none of the short stories have an artificial structure. I mean, they all have structure and form, obviously, but none of them have that strong of a conceit, I guess. At least not so far. I’m not quite finished. But you know, I do think that there is something really interesting about that. And, for me, it really can be a way into a story in a way that’s very useful. It’s like, if I’m feeling stuck, sometimes it’s like, ‘Oh, what if I thought about it in these terms?’ or, ‘What if I imagined…?’ With ‘Inventory’, literally I was like, ‘I’m gonna make an entire story that is just sexy, which then has to be a list’. Like, it’s a list structure that I’m sort of adapting. Putting it in a list form – obviously, people do that all the time, right? It’s not that unusual of a shape, but it’s one that I find very interesting in general, whether it’s a whole story or even like a list which is within a larger story. I just find that really interesting. So, yeah, I don’t know. It’s a thing that I’ve always found really interesting. It has really spoken to me. I’ve done variations on it. I have a lot of failed form experiments, like I’ve tried a lot of things that have not worked. But I’ve never really tried to publish them. But yeah, I don’t know. It’s just a way into a story. I think there’s many ways into a story and that’s just one of them.

***AJA:*** *OK. So, you’re working on a new collection at the moment [A Brief and Fearful Star]. Is there anything you can tell us about it?*

**CMM:** It’s been announced so it’s not a secret – I just haven’t finished it yet! It’s with Knopf [in the US] and Serpent’s Tail will also be publishing the UK edition, but it’s linked stories that have the shared conceit of a comet that appears in all the stories in various ways. So, I don’t really know how to describe it because, again, I’m still finishing it so it’s kind of hard to say. But there’s a lot of moving parts. But, you know… interesting (laughs). I think it’s good… I don’t know, I’m still working on it so it’s kind of hard to say. So, it’s more short stories. It’s been really fun to work on. It’s been really interesting. It’s nice to get back to fiction. I really enjoy fiction.

***AJA:*** *Do the comets appear in each of the stories?*

**CMM:** In various ways, yeah. Some of them more than others. So, it’s a little bit like *Olive Kitteridge*? Have you read *Olive Kitteridge*?

***AJA:*** *Yeah.*

**CMM:** It appears in different ways relative to the story, in each story. So, sometimes it’s a very small piece of it, sometimes much larger. But yeah.

***AJA:*** *That sounds really interesting. I did read a novel a few years ago –* The Comet Seekers *by Helen Sedgwick – which I think does a similar kind of thing where there’s comets. It’s a novel with comets for each chapter. Quite interesting. I like astronomy, so that’d be really interesting for me.*

**CMM:** Yeah.

***AJA:*** *Your writing seems quite fluid to me with regard to the genres that you’re interested in. So obviously, there’s horror, the fairytale, the fantastical, supernatural, but also there’s a sexual fluidity in your writing throughout most of the stories. I was just wondering if you had anything to say about that kind of openness and fluidity in your writing?*

**CMM:** I mean, just in terms of sex, is that it?

***AJA:*** Well, yeah (laughs).

**CMM:** (laughs) I mean, it’s so funny you would ask that because – I guess I can’t really speak to it very clearly – but Americans are so prudish. They’re *so* prudish. It’s actually kind of amazing, because it’s just such a clear antecedent to the Puritan… or you can just literally trace it back to the history of the country. Americans are so weird about sex. And it’s in a way that, in my experience, a lot of Europeans are not – not nearly as much so. There’s just a lot of anxiety around it. And yeah, I find sex as a writer to be so interesting. It’s one of my favourite avenues into a character’s mind. It’s one of my favourite ways of thinking about life and pleasure, and at some point I just had to decide, ‘I’m not going to be afraid to write about this then’. Even though realising that, as a woman and also as a queer woman, I was like it’s not the same thing as a straight guy writing about sex, right? It’s so funny. I’m also working on this separate, unrelated new project that I haven’t really… I’m not really… I’m not trying to be quiet. I don’t really know what it is yet, but I’m working on this new thing. And I was sort of talking about it, [saying] ‘I really want to read like a bunch of slender erotic novels. I love the slender erotic novel as a form. I want to check it out.’ And a lot of the porn that people suggested to me was written by men and they were interesting in their own ways but, also, were just funny. I read *A Sport and a Pastime* by James Salter… do you know this novel?

***AJA:*** Yeah.

**CMM:** And it was so funny because it was interesting structurally. And I was like, ‘Oh, I kind of love it.’ And there’s some beautiful writing in it. Then he [the character] ‘comes like a bull’ more than once and I was just like, ‘You can really tell that a man wrote this’. It’s really funny. I was just like, ‘OK, whatever James Salter.’ But, I feel like on some level, for me it’s almost partially political. Like, I know that what I’m doing is a little risky, you know, as a woman, as a queer woman, as American or as a person writing for an American market, among others, it is actually a little bit dangerous. I don’t know. It’s the only way I know how to be. It’s the only way I know how to think. It’s funny because occasionally I will write a story that doesn’t have any sex in it, and I’ll be like, ‘What’s that about?’ It’s not often but it does happen, so it’s really interesting.

***AJA:*** *I think some people shy away from it. Certainly here in the UK there’s The Bad Sex Prize so I think people are frightened of writing about sex in case they do that kind of thing and it all goes horribly wrong. But there are some writers who do it. Sarah Hall, the British writer, for example – I don’t know if you’ve come across her work. More recently, she tends to write about sex in her writing, occasionally. And there’s a Scottish writer called Kirsty Logan, who’s a lesbian writer, and she’s interested in horror/fairytale writing as well – she’s a short story writer and novelist…*

**CMM:** Kirsty Logan?

***AJA:*** *Yeah, she’s kind of in your area of writing – the horror/fairytale sort of area. But she also writes about sexuality as well at times, so she’s quite interesting. But yeah, a lot of people kind of shy away from it, I think, don’t they, generally?*

**CMM:** Yeah, I think so. Unfortunately.

***AJA:*** *We’ve briefly mentioned the pandemic, so I suppose to kind of wrap up I wanted to ask you about how it was for you? A lot of writers found it really disabling and they struggled to write during it.*

**CMM:** That was me. I was one of those people. I know people who wrote a lot. I just actually did an event with a friend a few months ago – Rumaan Alam – and he was telling me about all the stuff he’d written over COVID, and I was like, ‘Shut up. I don’t want to talk to you about this.’ It was just really intense. I did nothing. I mean, I really struggled. I really was struggling for all of COVID and just did barely anything. I was completely shut down by it, honestly.

***AJA:*** *That’s really interesting because you would think for writers, it would be perfect conditions. You kind of have to stay in and there’s not much else you can do, nothing’s open. But it’s that enforced kind of scenario, isn’t it?*

**CMM:** Right. It is, but I feel like also part of what makes writing possible is going and living your stupid little life and being able to get on a trolley and go see people. And talking to friends and travelling and just having little experiences in your day – and I felt like I was just trapped in my house, you know, and I just felt depressed and it was really hard. Yeah. Everyone had their own experience but yeah, it really took a good chunk of time out of my writing time.

***AJA:*** *OK, well, thank you very much for that. That was great. It’s really interesting to talk to you about your writing. And I’m really looking forward to the comet book – that sounds fantastic.*

**CMM:** Thank you.

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