

CARMEN MARIA MACHADO

An Interview with Wesley Olivia Cohen

Wesley Olivia Cohen: Well, I just wanted to start by thanking you for talking to me about *In the Dream House*. Your work in general has been really important to me as a writer, and a woman, and a bisexual woman writer. And this memoir is just so stunning. So, I've been pinching myself for the past month that I get to talk to you about it.

Carmen Maria Machado: Oh, good. Well, I'm so glad.

WOC: The first thing I wanted to ask you was there are moments in this memoir where you reference the experience of writing certain sections of the book, and I was just wondering, at what point in the process of fixing these memories down did you realize that you were going to assemble it into one book?

CMM: Oh, that's a good question. The process of writing this book was very strange. It was very much unlike my first book. So, I spent years trying to figure out how I wanted to write about this, if I want to write about it, and it wasn't until I came up with the idea of sort of having this fragmented sort of structure that the whole thing kind of came together.

And so, when I sold the book to Graywolf, it was just these sort of memoir pieces. It wasn't any of the other stuff. And then, when I edited/added to/revised the book last year, I added 150 pages. It was a process. And that was more memoir stuff, but also it was the research, and the more sort of essayistic or historical pieces. So it came together in these weird bursts. I guess it was when I was finishing up *Her Body and Other Parties* that I was thinking a lot about *In the Dream House* as a book in particular that I was assembling.

WOC: That's interesting. Do you think there was something about the process of putting *Her Body* together that made you think about these other fragments that you had floating around, and think about how to put those together?

CMM: No, it was more like I was editing it with my editor, and I would send him all my notes, and I sent him the whole thing. And then, I had to wait for him to turn it around. And then, I was at a bunch of residencies this whole time, so I was at this residency in Washington state, then I was in Oregon, then I was in upstate New York, and I was constantly having these bits of downtime. And I was like, well, I need to work on something else while I'm waiting to hear back from my editor. And I was like, well, this is something to work on, and having the formal element sort of figured out really helped me focus my energy because before, I felt like writing about it was always sort of a haphazard process. But having the form connect meant that I felt

I could work on it.

And I usually go back and forth between projects. That's pretty normal for me. I usually am working on more than one thing at one time. And so, I had these gaps of time, and I had nothing but time because I was literally in a cabin in the wilderness, you know? And so, I just kept coming back to it. I just kept returning to it.

WOC: You talked about starting with this series of more memoir-style pieces, and then adding all of the other stuff. It's interesting that the structure feels so fragmented. It's one of the really incredible things about it. Were there any models that you were reading that helped you figure out how to put together a memoir in all of these little pieces?

CMM: Not so much the pieces. There were a lot of books that influenced me. I'm a big fan of Maggie Nelson—so *The Argonauts*, *The Red Parts*, *Bluets*—and I was like, oh OK, this is a thing. And it was very exciting to me. And then, there's this book that I really love called *A Few Seconds of Radiant Film Strip* by Kevin Brockmeier, which is a memoir that has a speculative element where, like, in the middle of the book, time freezes and his adult self comes and talks to his younger self, and it's really beautiful.

I mean, there wasn't anything in particular, there wasn't a certain book that was the model, but I was just reading a lot of more experimental nonfiction. Nonfiction that was pushing into different genre spaces and hybrid forms. Brian Blanchfield's *Proxies* was also very helpful. There's this book called *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir* by Lauren Slater that's really good. So there was just a bunch of books that I was just kind of picking out and trying to think about, OK, so if I think about this project with a little more sort of formal latitude, then how can I make it work in the way that I want it to? So a lot of different books were helping me in various ways.

WOC: Yeah, Maggie Nelson's work was definitely on my mind as I was reading this book, and I was also thinking about Paul Lisicky's *The Narrow Door*. And it made me wonder about queerness and fragmentation of the story, and whether there's some sort of connection there between trying to tell a story, your own story, when you haven't been able to hear your own story in a lot of other places. And then, having your story come out in this structure that feels different. Is that something that you thought about at all during your writing process?

CMM: Yeah. I remember when I read *The Argonauts*, the way that Maggie Nelson talks about pregnancy as the queering of the body. I was so interested because I don't have an academic background. I felt like with this book I was reading a lot of theory, and then thinking a lot about it, but also that's just not a thing that I do. And so, I was just very interested in how this reimagining of the body of the text creates a kind of a queer space or a liminal space. So, yeah, I think that makes sense to me, and I think there's probably a very good thesis in there somewhere about queer structure and things like that.

WOC: I think you're working in that space for sure, and it's so interesting to see how you're using those elements. One of the ways in which *In the Dream House* feels like it's occupying a liminal space is through these footnotes about the motif index of folk literature. I was just really curious, where did that come from?

CMM: Well, I had written a bunch about fairy tales in this book, and I was really interested in folktale taxonomy because part of the project of the book is thinking about what does it mean when you have a story to tell that sounds like a story everybody else has told? What do you do about that? And I was really interested in the way in which fairy tales and folktales exist in these set number of spaces to the point where people have cataloged subsets of subgenres of fairy tales, and folktales, and things like that. And there were a bunch of different ones. I used Aaron Thompson, and then another one, and those are only two of many. A lot of people have tried to do this. And the thing about the really detailed one, whose name is escaping me, is that it was, like, a thousand pages long. It was very, very long.

It was almost found poetry or something, like, I remember looking up for the ways of conception, and then obviously I just selected some of them because the actual entry was pages, and pages, and pages long. And I was like, this is so beautiful and weird, and it's so weird that it just reads like a very bizarre poem. It's so beautiful, and it just felt like it added some kind of texture to certain parts of the book. Or they were just sort of funny or strange, and yet, they also capture some very essential things about stories, and about the way we talk about our experiences.

WOC: Yeah. Something that's fascinated me about your work since *Her Body* is the way that there's an awareness of the way people talk about women, and you know the way people talk about violence against women where even in telling what happened to you, you are also running through a catalog of other stories in your head at the same time, or the different ways your story could be retold by other people. That sort of multifaceted awareness of the story as both concrete this is what happened, and also as this multiplicity of here are all the different ways that we could talk about, or look at, or respond to what happened feels like a really central sort of reckoning point in *In the Dream House*.

And one of the ways that that comes into play is talking about stories about queer woman. There are a lot of moments where you write into good or bad PR for queer women, how deciding to tell this story, you also have to decide whether it's worth to tell a story about a queer relationship that's abusive. And I guess I wanted to hear more about your thoughts on that.

CMM: Well, I think one of the really complicated things about writing this book is that you write toward specificity in order to write toward a lot of people. I feel like people who aren't writers don't understand that. It's counterintuitive, right?

WOC: Yeah.

CMM: And yet, you find that telling, again, a highly specific story is actually going to reach a lot of people. So I was having so much anxiety about what it meant to be a queer woman putting this story out in the world because the reason I wrote it, or one of the reasons I wrote it, is because I didn't see the story anywhere. I looked for writing about queer abuse, and I couldn't find any, and I was like, well, I know it happens. So, why is it that these stories aren't being committed to the page.

But, then I was like, what does it mean that, individually, I am bringing this story to a fairly public sphere? What does that mean for me? Am I doing some kind of harm to my community? And then, I was like, no, of course you're not. But then, I would doubt myself. It was just this weird back and forth, and back and forth. It was endless. It was just really endless anxiety that was really, really hard to sort of parse.

And I think ultimately what I decided was, well, I have to just tell the story that I need to tell. And then, that's my half of the conversation, and then people can have whatever half of the conversation they want to have. And that doesn't have anything to do with me particularly, I just get to write the books that I want to write.

It sort of felt like when I was writing *Her Body and Other Parties*. When I was writing "The Resident," I got really turned around in my head about writing sort of a quote-unquote crazy female character, or rather a crazy lesbian character. And I was like, oh, I'm just sitting under this stereotype of the blah, blah, blah, you know? And it's this very weird anxiety. It's that sort of model minority pressure anxiety that I didn't realize I had internalized quite so much until I began to work on this book, and then I was like, oh my goodness. So, I don't know if that answers your question, but . . .

WOC: It totally does, thank you. Also, I think this sort of ties into this model minority pressure, but there are moments where you describe the information you were passing on to other people in your life at the time. One of the moments that stuck out to me the most was at the end of the "Dream House as Comedy of Errors" chapter where you say that you're going to stop pretending like none of these things are happening, but by the time the ground is coming toward you again, you are already polishing your story.

It's interesting to me how in this book, language feels like a source of freedom, and truth, and power, and also it can be a source of self-oppression, or hiding, or murkiness. I think there's something really interesting about the idea of polish as a tool in a book where, if you're looking for a memoir in a standard structure, this book is unpolished. I don't think that's actually a fair way to describe it because it's actually got an extremely fine polish on a very innovative, interesting structure. But it does feel like there are some ways that this book is trying not to put a polish on its story by appearing as a series of fragments. So I was wondering if you could speak to that idea of deciding when to polish and when to not polish.

CMM: So, I guess the first thing I want to say, because you're talking about language, right, and language as a source of power, but also as a source of self imprisonment or whatever? And

it makes me think about how I talk about in the book when I watch the movie *Gaslight*. I think about how the mind can also be a prison. You don't actually need to tie someone up physically or put them in a cage to make them do what you want them to do, to make them stay, to make them . . . you know? All it takes is such a keen understanding of the mind.

So my brain is a boon to me, and also a prison. Language is a source of power, and also a source of self-degradation, and can be manipulated in lots of ways. And that's a very essential thing that I have come to terms with as a writer and as a person.

And then, the question about polish. The reason this book is in the form it's in for me is that it was just the only way the story would come out properly. When I tried to write it in a more straightforward way, it was always really bad. [laughs] And I didn't want it to really bad because the thing about art, art isn't just saying this happened to me. It's also, this happened to me and I'm going to make it interesting, interesting and beautiful in some way for you, the reader. But I also had to get it out, and it wasn't coming out in any other way. It was really quite difficult to just write about it in a straightforward manner, and it really took me smashing it apart to see all the pieces and be like, aha, now I know how this all fits together.

WOC: Another one of the big structural elements in this book that makes it feel very special is the point of view: the combination between I and you, and moving back and forth between the two. At what stage in putting this book together did that emerge as part of the structure?

CMM: Well, when I sold the book to Graywolf, like I said, it was a lot of the memoir pieces. There wasn't a lot of other stuff. And it was actually entirely in second person, which was sort of an accident. I just wrote it. That was how it came out. And when my editor bought it, I was like, this is a very, very, very rough draft. This is way rougher than my last. Because my last book I gave to them basically finished, you know? And this was like, yeah, this is going to have a lot more, I have this vision for research material, I sort of kind of gave them my vision for the whole book. And they also had bought it right before *Her Body* came out, so basically they bought it, and then I just put it aside for a year and a half, and didn't even think about it.

So they were looking at it, and my editor was like, "When we come back to this once we're in the editing stage, we really should talk about the second person because it's not that I don't think you could write in the second person. I think you totally can, but I also worry that if you're not exactly sure why you did it, I'm worried it's a distancing technique that you've adapted. And I don't know if that's the best solution, but we'll figure it out." He was very generous and was just like, we'll talk about it when we're ready to work on this book.

And so, when we went back to it, I was kind of like, well let me play around and see if I can just kind of move it all to first, and maybe that'll solve that problem. So, I was working on it, and I was trying to do that, and it was really resisting me. [laughs] I was trying to make it work, and the you felt more natural for those sections in this way that I didn't quite understand. But then, I was like, but it makes no sense to write these sorts of essayistic pieces in any kind of you, and also it feels weird writing about the older version of the self with the you.

So then, I was thinking a lot about this book that I really love, *We the Animals* by Justin Torres. I don't know if you've read that novel.

WOC: Yeah.

CMM: OK. So, you know how in that book, there's the plural first, and then he breaks it in this moment of trauma, the perspective becomes sort of split or shattered. And I was really moved by that when I read the novel the first time, and I was like, oh my goodness, it's a really gorgeous and really tragic. It was a gesture where the pain and the trauma is sort of down into the very marrow of the prose itself, you know? And so, I was like, well, what if I did both? And then, I sort of indicate a place toward the very beginning where the voice breaks, and then you can see the you that's in present tense or that the narrator is sort of eternally trapped in the cycle.

And then, you also have the first person path, which is the more traditional way of doing it. And then, the challenging thing was like, oh, does this work? Will the reader be able to follow what's going on? But I think they can, so I feel like it worked out really well, and my editor was like, oh yeah, this is a really good solution to that problem, I'm glad you thought about it more purposely. And that was the end of that.

WOC: Nice. Well, I mean, I think it works.

CMM: Yeah, I think so too.

WOC: You were speaking earlier about using specificity as a way to reach a lot of people, which I think is something that this book does really masterfully, but it also has moments where it shifts into these other sort of cultural fixing points where we're learning about the second person narrator or speaker, and then we are learning about Carmen the opera, and we're learning about *Flatliners*, and we're talking about *Alice in Wonderland*, and it works incredibly well, but I wonder if there were any moments where you were having to decide between specificity and cultural reference, and how to move between those two while keeping the right balance between them.

CMM: Oh, I feel like the combination of stuff in there is very specific, you know what I mean? It's like, I can't tell what anyone else about their own tastes or what they've seen, but here's a weirdly specific list of media that spoke to me in some interesting way about this topic, and that to me feels like specificity. I think what's interesting is when you return to an episode of TV, or a movie, or whatever more than once over the course of your life, it will always be different in some way, not because the text itself has changed, but because you have changed, right? And the way that you read something has changed.

So, I almost certainly have seen that episode of *Star Trek* that I talked about before the

time that I watched it where I was writing the memoir, and I was literally just at a residency, I was at Yaddo, and I was cleaning up my little cabin, which had gotten really messy, and so I put on the show to distract myself while I cleaned, and then I stopped what I was doing and just sat and watched the entire thing, and was like, holy shit, you know? I had never had that reaction to that episode before, but the timing was just perfect, or I suddenly had this really strong response to it, and that's my response.

It's the combination of me, and where I was, and what I was doing interacted with this particular episode of television, which came out when I was a very small child, and then it created this response in me that was very specific, even though I was responding to an extremely famous episode of a very famous television show. And so, for me, it's always going to be specific to you, even if you're talking about major cultural touchstone because part of the experience is having a certain response to movies, or music, or TV, or books, or whatever.

WOC: Yeah. I like that a lot. That's a much better way of approaching it.

In switching between this you and I perspective, and also explicitly in the text, there are moments where you talk about if you could talk to yourself in the past. The book in its point of view feels like it is moving between these characters, the me and the you. And then, there are moments where you imagine your current self going back and interacting, as a time traveler, and telling your past like, wait, don't do this.

And I imagine that in writing this book, you spent a lot of time thinking about this you character, this former version of yourself. And there's a distance in my reading between the current Carmen and the past Carmen in this book. But it also feels like there's a lot of tenderness. How did you approach this past version of yourself who experienced a lot of harm, but also, how did you approach that version of yourself with this tenderness as you were writing the book?

CMM: I think it wasn't just tenderness. Finishing the book was really difficult, and last year in particular when I was trying to finish it was really, really hard. I think I was having this really strong emotional reaction to this way of writing about my former self and my young self, who at this point is almost a decade in my past, which is not a small amount of time. And I should say, I was hard on her. I am hard on her because I felt like writing it down, it's so stupid. It's like watching a horror movie where someone's going into the basement, and you're like, don't do that. What are you doing? Oh my gosh. You know? Or how are you being so dumb? I don't understand.

There's this idea—I don't know if you're familiar with this—in certain kinds of art called genre blindness, which is like, if you're in a zombie movie, usually, you yourself have never seen zombie movies. No one in zombie movies is ever like, oh, it's like we're in a zombie movie because that would sort of break . . . It's supposed to be kind of like, this is what's happening, you know?

WOC: I've never heard that term before, but I think about that all the time. So, now I'm going to go read into it.

CMM: Totally. That's the whole idea. So, basically, there's almost a kind of genre blindness. You're in this story, and in retrospect, it seems extremely obvious what you're looking at, and everything that's happening is very by the book in this really, really weird way. But you still don't quite understand what's going on. It's obvious to me as an adult, as like, a 33 year old woman looking back on this little version of myself, but it wasn't obvious at the time.

There's something really stressful about that, and I felt very angry. It made me angry at her. Not at my ex even. I mean, eventually at her, but also at this little version of myself, and I was really upset. And at some point, I couldn't sustain that anger because it was so counterproductive. It just made me feel like shit. Eventually, I had to kind of transition into this, like look, if I think about her as someone else, not me, then I feel the tenderness coming back. Because I feel like also there's this tendency where people can be really good at giving advice to other folks, but when it applies to them, they sort of shut down and they can't really take their own advice. And I guess it's easier to help other people, and to see what other people's problems look like than your own. You just have the proper perspective.

So I think the whole book was sort of an exercise in managing my own perspective, and thinking about, OK, imagine that this 20-whatever-year-old version of Carmen wasn't you, but was a friend, or a young friend, or a student, or something, what kind of advice would you give them? And that helped me kind of square everything away in my brain, but it still was a very aggressive back and forth, and a very anger-filled, rage-filled process.

WOC: Yeah. How do you show tenderness to the Carmen that you are now?

CMM: Oh, good question. Come back to me in six months and I'll have an answer.

WOC: Fair enough. You're about to have a book tour, so I'm sure tenderness will be hard earned.

CMM: Yeah.

WOC: Well, is there anything that you wish I had asked you that I haven't asked you?

CMM: No, no. You did a great job. Thank you.

WOC: Thank you so much for talking to me. This was incredible. Just a dream come true.