



## Author Carmen Maria Machado on the Myth of a Queer Love Utopia

Her genre-bending new memoir, "In the Dream House," recounts an abusive lesbian relationship and implodes safe notions of intimacy. Carmen talks with Alicia about revisiting trauma, mourning for her former self, and the risks of complicating queer narratives.

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Alicia Menendez:

Carmen Maria Machado's new memoir, *In the Dream House*, is as beautiful as it is haunting. By telling the story of an abusive relationship between Machado and another woman, it offers a compelling meditation on desire, power, wanting to be wanted, and the complexity of who gets cast as a villain.

Carmen, thank you so much for being here.

Carmen Maria Machado:

Thank you for having me.

Menendez: I could not put *In the Dream House* down. It is incredible. Congratulations.

Machado: Thank you.

Menendez: I loved it. You are obviously a very gifted storyteller. You and I, both Cuban, more specifically, both have Cuban fathers. Cubans are storytellers.

Machado: They are.

Menendez: Tell me about an early memory you have of learning or experiencing the power of storytelling. Who in your life was a good storyteller?

Machado: Oh, my grandfather, my dad's father, he actually passed away this year, so I've been thinking about him. You know, he had dementia, and at the end there was something really hard about that person who is so alive and would tell stories--and to see that person, sort of, diminished in that way towards the end of his life was very difficult. But when I was a kid, my grandfather was the most exciting person in the whole world.

I mean, he would tell really great stories about Cuba and about coming to the United States. So there was this giant ceramic Saint Bernard statue in their house who they called

Bruno and what he said to me one time was, he explained that he was walking past a store and he saw it for sale and he bought it and then he got a little cart to put it on and put a leash around its neck and then he called my grandmother to come pick him up. So as she was driving up, she's standing with this what looked like a giant dog sitting down next to him and she really did not like dogs and was very upset, and then when she got closer realized that it was just this bit. He was just doing a bit, and it's funny 'cause now my sister has that very, very battered Bruno the Ceramic Saint Bernard in her home.

So again, my grandfather was always telling stories about his childhood, doing bits; he had this just narrative energy to hand that I sort of took for granted in a way. I didn't really realize that that wasn't how everybody was for a long time. I miss him a lot.

Menendez: So, my Cuban grandmother had dementia at the end of her life, and dementia is hard period, but I think it's also extra hard when that person is your last bridge back to a place that you don't otherwise have a connection to.

Machado: Yeah. My brother and I went to Cuba a couple of years ago, and I remember coming back and trying to talk to my grandfather about it, and he was better--he wasn't as bad as he was before he died--but he was sort of in the beginning of dementia. And I would sort of try to talk to him about, like, "We saw your house granddaddy," "we saw the square in Santa Clara," "we saw your school," "we saw this and that." I don't think he quite registered exactly what was sort of happening, and it's strange, because for some reason it's such a strong part of my identity, I think because I had such a strong relationship with my grandfather. And he embodied this part of himself, and this history, and this country where--until a few years ago, I had never been--so powerfully and so strongly that I don't know, I just always felt a connection that I had.

Menendez: When was your first inkling that you were a storyteller?

Machado: Oh, God. I mean, I just think I was one of those kids that had a narrative instinct. I mean, kids play, kids create stories, kind of instinctively. You know, I had very elaborate narratives with my Barbies and my dinosaurs and my stuffed animals, and I remember one time my babysitter catching me making my dolls talk and then I got very embarrassed. But yeah, I mean I read voraciously, I wrote constantly. I told stories to myself.

Menendez: No, I love the image of you writing to the head of Scholastic, 'cause you found their address in the Babysitters Club book, and submitting your first chapter.

Machado: Yeah, some teacher taught me writing a letter and that was like giving me the keys to the kingdom...

Menendez: I wrote letters to everybody. Yes.

Machado: ... I know.

Menendez: Nobody ever wrote back.

Machado: I was like, you can write a letter to literally anyone if you have their address.

Menendez: I'm still waiting for Ann M. Martin to respond to my letter.

Machado: They've explained to me, they were like, "You know, all publishers, their address is in the front of the book," and I was like, "What?" The only author who ever responded was--I don't know if you remember--Livia Bitton-Jackson.

Menendez: Uh-uh (negative).

Machado: She's written a lot of books for young people about the Holocaust and she'd written this book called *I Have Lived a Thousand Years*. She talks about how she had this book of poems that she had written, and when the book was over, I was extremely concerned that she never mentioned in the book that she recovered her poems that were lost, and I was very upset about this. So I wrote her a letter, care of her publisher, like my teacher had showed me. And then maybe a month later, my mother came in and she said, "There's a letter for you from Israel in the mailbox."

Menendez: Amazing.

Machado: Yeah, she had written back, and she's like, "My publisher forwarded your wonderful letter to me. Thank you so much for writing, and to answer your question, no, I didn't. I never did get the poems back." It was like someone reached back.

Menendez: You write: "I didn't date when most people dated. When other teenagers were figuring out what good and bad relationships look like, I was busy being extremely weird, praying a lot, getting obsessed with sexual purity."

So, you walk us through that experience and an emotional affair you have with a member of the church, but have you figured out the origin story for how you ended up there?

Machado: Yeah. It's so funny, because I feel like I've talked through so much of this in therapy, being like, "What is this? Where did this come from?"

I think I really wanted to be loved. I think I wanted to be admired, and I wanted to be the center of someone's world, and I wanted to feel good, and I wanted to have sex. I wanted to feel desired, and wanted, and had all those sort of normal "You're a teen and you're figuring out your body and you're figuring out what you want."

Menendez: But why the obsession with sexual purity? What had brought you there?

Machado: I experienced sexual violence as a young person, and I think the way that my brain processed that was: The thing you did wrong was you wanted this thing, you wanted something sexual. And I had this really good friend, and we were both in church together, and we just got really, really fixated on this book that we read called *And The Bride Wore White*. It was just all about purity for young people and that idea just became very central to this way of discipline, this way of disciplining the self, and it very neatly fit in with... I had fallen in with this gang of Evangelicals in my school, and everything sort of came together in this way, and I was like, "Ah, this is the thing that I need to keep myself safe and protect myself."

Menendez: The woman you write about in *The Dream House*, first relationship you have with a woman...

Machado: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Menendez: Did you identify as queer before that?

Machado: I did. It's funny, 'cause when I was in high school there was one girl in particular that I really wanted to kiss all the time. She was a really good friend, and I didn't understand what that meant. I guess I thought, "Oh, it's just normal to want to kiss your friend. 'Cause I knew I liked boys, but I also would think about kissing this person but couldn't connect the dots exactly. And so I got to college, and I had this really dear, dear friend, Anne, who rolled into college identifying as bisexual, being her total self--and I was like, "Oh, that's what I am." I remember just having this sense of clarity where I was like, "Oh, it all makes sense to me now," and then I was like, "Ah, now everything will be fine 'cause I figured it out," but not having yet processed "You have a lot of insecurities about your body."

Menendez: Let's talk about that...

Machado: Yeah.

Menendez: ...because this deeply resonated with me. I just want you to read this entire section for me.

Machado: Oh yeah.

"Dream House as Luck of the Draw:

Part of the problem was, as a weird fat girl, you felt lucky. She did what you'd wished a million others had done--looked past arbitrary markers of social currency and seen your brain and ferocious talent and quick wit and pugnacious approach to assholes.

When you started writing about fatness--a long time ago, in your LiveJournal--a commenter said to you that you were pretty and smart and charming, but as long as you were zaftig you'd never have your choice of lovers. You remember feeling outrage, and then processing the reality, the practicality, of what he'd said. You were so angry at the world.

You wondered, when she came along, if this was what most people got to experience in their lives: a straight line from want, dissatisfaction; desire manifested and satisfied in reasonable succession. This had never been the case before; it had always been fraught. How many times had you said, "If I just looked a little different, I'd be drowning in love"? Now you got to drive without needing to change a single cell. Lucky you."

Menendez: A straight line from want to satisfaction.

Machado: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Menendez: What did her attraction do for your self esteem?

Machado: I felt really good. I think I feel the way you always feel when somebody is like, "I want you," where you're like, "Oh me? Wow, okay." Because she was so hot. I'm so confused. I don't understand.

Menendez: I just look back at my twenties...

Machado: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Menendez: ...and I think about the amount of time I spent trying to sell myself with almost no regard for whether I wanted to buy...

Machado: Yeah.

Menendez: ...that I was like, "Oh, you like hiking? I could learn to like hiking," as opposed to being like, "I don't like hiking. I'm never going to like hiking. Let me just stand in this truth and be who I am and then you can decide whether you want that." But that wanting to be wanted became its own exercise.

Machado: Of course. When I think about being in my twenties, and didn't have sex and start dating until I was like 20, 21, I had the same way, where I was just like, "Oh, if that's what you want, that's what I can do." I remember thinking, "This is what I've been waiting for the whole time, has been this person, and this experience, and somebody who wants me in this way, and isn't saying to me: 'You need to be different somehow.'" Because in the beginning she was just like, "You're perfect, you're smart, you're gorgeous, you're hot, you're sexy. This is all I want," and I was like, "Okay, here I am, here I am."

Ad: *Is there something that's getting in the way of your happiness or that's preventing you from achieving your goals? I have found the talking with someone can make a big difference, but sometimes the logistics, like finding the right person or the time to connect, make things complicated. BetterHelp online counseling connects you with a professional counselor in a safe and private online environment. You can get help on your own time and at your own pace. You can schedule secure video or phone sessions plus chat and text with your therapist. BetterHelp's licensed professional counselors specialize in everything from depression, to relationships, to complicated family dynamics, self esteem, grief, you got it. And if you're not happy with your counselor for any reason, you can request a new one at any time. They even have financial aid for those who qualify. Best of all: it's an affordable option. Latina to Latina listeners get 10% off your first month with the discount code: Latina. So, why not get started today? Go to [betterhelp.com/latina](https://www.betterhelp.com/latina), fill out a questionnaire to help them assess your needs, and get matched with a counselor. That's [betterhelp.com/latina](https://www.betterhelp.com/latina).*

Menendez: What were the first few months of that relationship like?

Machado: They were great. In retrospect, there were a lot of red flags, but at the time I was on cloud nine. I was so happy.

Menendez: Because there's an early sort of plot twist, which is when you meet this woman, she has a girlfriend.

Machado: Yes.

Menendez: She then tells you that she's in an open relationship with the girlfriend.

Machado: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Menendez: You go through the whole rigmarole of imagining a future where it is the three of you...

Machado: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Menendez: ...but then she comes to you and says, "Okay, I'm ready to be monogamous with you."

Machado: Yes.

Menendez: Which must feel like being chosen?

Machado: That's exactly what it felt like.

Menendez: Then there's bliss, and then, when do things turn?

Machado: Looking back on it, things were turning the whole time.

Menendez: Right.

Machado: Even before that happened, even before we went monogamous, I think there was this... she became a little less judicious about her anger and she became a little less patient and a little more quick to snap and quick to bite. And there was this really early incident--very early on, in retrospect--where she didn't know where I was and she was really upset, and when she saw me again, she got furious. And I remember her screaming at me so much and I remember saying, being so scared, like, "Don't do that, don't talk to me like that. It's not okay that you're talking to me. This is really bad." And I remember her leaning over and being like, "You can never write about this, ever. Do you understand me?" And I was like, "Yeah." And that was early, it was a few months into the relationship, and I remember thinking, "That's a weird fluke, but it's just a fluke."

Menendez: You spent years coming up with excuses for what were flukes and how you could explain things.

Machado: Yeah. Every time something happened and every time it got worse, I would think to myself, "There's got to be a really logical explanation." So I remember, I talk in the book about probably one of the worst and scariest part things, which was two incidents that happened where she got very violent, physically violent, and really scary, and I ran and hid myself, locked myself in the bathroom, and both times she claimed to have no memory. After it happened, she would be like "Why are you crying? I don't remember anything. What's wrong?"

I remember like Googling "memory"--there must be some explanation--and I was looking up, Could she be having a kind of mental illness? Could something be really wrong? Could she have hurt her head? I was desperately scabbling to help with some kind of explanation, which would take the burden of responsibility off of her, that it wasn't her bad behavior.

Menendez: When did you finally identify and then verbalize those experiences as abuse?

Machado: It was after we broke up. I was on my way to this workshop in San Diego. I was living in Iowa at the time, and there's this thing called Clarion, it's a science fiction and fantasy

writer's workshop in San Diego every summer, and it was the year that I was going to go. And so, I drove from Iowa to San Diego, and on the way I stopped at various friends' houses along the way as I drove. A friend of mine, though I hadn't seen her in a while, I sort of told her the whole story, and she started talking to me. People, just whoever, were kind of giving me a little bits of kind of language or ways to think about it, and she gave me a book to look at, and then I talked to a couple of people about it, and then I remember one of them sent me this really beautiful essay by Conner Habib.

He's this really beautiful writer, he's also an adult performer and he had written this devastating essay about a boyfriend who put him in the hospital, and I remember being like, "I have just never read anything like this." I don't know, at some point in there, I think the word... And then when I started describing it, it was like, "Oh, I'm just describing an abusive relationship. I've walked other people through this. I've had other people say to me, this is what happened to me," and me being like, "Oh, that's a very classic presentation." So, at some point I just got enough distance where I was like... it was in that summer where I just sort of really started thinking about it.

Menendez: You write: "I enter into the archive that domestic abuse between partners who share a gender identity is both possible and not uncommon and that it can look something like this." Why do we assume safety in lesbian relationships?

Machado: I think, because--and I say this as somebody who has dated both men and women--I think dating men is like having a low level cold all the time; there's always this little bit of patriarchy that's kind of dragging, and it's just the way it is. Even if the guy is great, you're still sort of negotiating male bull--wait, I probably can't swear.

Menendez: No, go ahead!

Machado: Oh, can I? Yeah, you're constantly negotiating male bullshit all the time, right? I think that there's something really lovely about when you're in a relationship with a woman, that particular dynamic. It's not like in your home, it's not in your bed, it's not in this. So there's this distance you have from it, and a lot of the language that surrounds discussions of queer women's relationships is of, like, a utopia and a paradise where, "Ah, here we are. We found it. It's great. Sex is great. The lesbian paradise, the lesbian utopia."

Menendez: Did you have reservations about casting another queer woman as a villain in this story?

Machado: I think she cast herself as a villain. But yeah, I did have a lot of anxiety about it. I think if you ask any person who belongs to any sort of...

Menendez: Marginalized group.

Machado: ...Yeah, marginalized group. It's really tricky to quote unquote "air dirty laundry". The idea of saying, "It's not perfect, it's not great. I mean, it's great in a lot of ways, but also it can be bad, and this is how it can look."

Menendez: Right, and you write beautifully about the fact that to complicate the experience is to actually acknowledge the humanity.

Machado: Yeah.

Menendez: Right?

Machado: Yeah.

Menendez: There's not a one-dimensional queer experience.

Machado: Totally, and I think even now it's funny, 'cause people think, "Oh you guys got marriage, right? So you're great." And it's like, "Oh no." Right now the Supreme Court is deciding stuff about queer people and trans people in terms of employment, the ability to be fired, and we are all still not in a place of safety. And it's hard. because yeah, I talk about in the book how you deserve rights because you deserve them, because you're a human being--not because you've proven yourself to be good or virtuous in some way. I think there's a lot of stress and strain around proving a certain kind of goodness, or like you're worthy of the things that you're not being given by dominant culture, or you're not being given by your government, or you're not being given by whatever. So that, to me, was something that was kind of on my mind.

Menendez: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Machado: The events of this book were happening around the marriage equality conversation, and it was weird how that kind of existed all around me while I'm afraid to say, "I am being hurt in many ways by this woman that I'm dating." So, there's a lot of pressure. There's a lot of pressure to perform virtue.

Menendez: I just want to say, because this is such a heavy topic area, such an important topic area, there's a lot of levity in this book. I feel like you sort of throw a lifeline to the reader to be like, "I know that this is... It was hard to live, it was hard to write, and so it must be a little hard to read."

Machado: I imagine it's very hard to read. People keep telling me that they read it in one sitting, and I'm like, "Really?"

Menendez: It was very suspenseful, and the way you play with form keeps it very interesting.

Machado: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Menendez: You said in another interview that writing *In the Dream House* "kind of killed a little part of you."

Machado: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Menendez: How so?

Machado: The process of writing the book was very difficult. I was not in a good place writing it. It was really hard, and I think...

Menendez: Wait, why?

Machado: Well, logistically speaking, I actually went to a residency. so I was away from my spouse, which was really difficult. I don't mind, I actually really love being out in the wilderness



writing, but it was really hard to do it. With fiction, it's not a big deal. It's actually quite useful for me, but every day was just like pulling teeth, and at the end of the day, I would just be exhausted. Sometimes with a residency, you'll have a social thing, you'll have dinner with other residents in the evening, but neither of the residencies I did had that. And so, I would make dinner.

Menendez: Oh my goodness, that's so isolating.

Machado: Yeah. I was really isolated and I would make dinner and just be thinking about the book as I was cooking and then I would do the dishes and then I would be like, "Well, I guess I'll just go back to my computer." So, I would make a drink and then I would go sit by my computer and just stare at it. Then as I was writing it, I was like, "This sucks."

Menendez: Yeah.

Machado: The book is good, it's not even that. It's just like, this hurts writing about this old self. It's really painful and embarrassing; and I mourn for her, I mourn for this person who isn't even around anymore. She's just stuck in this eternal second person present tense, just running on this hamster wheel of the past, and is just confused and is... I'm pounding on the glass and trying to say something to her like, "It's going to be fine. You're going to be okay, you're going to be so happy. You don't even know," and I can't reach her. I think acknowledging that and acknowledging the things in me that have been shaped forever by this experience--which is just the human condition--it's like, things happen to you. You're different. That's just what it is, but there was something about realizing the ways in which these weird little ruts that she had sort of carved in me and these habits that she'd ingrained in me and realizing that that was sort of permanent.

Menendez: There's just such universality in specifics. This is not my story, right? I did not live through this, but the experience of wanting to go back to your younger self and warn them or tell them something and knowing... and you say this In the Dream House, the message is undeliverable, right?

Machado: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Menendez: There were other people who were telling you, "Carmen, this is not a good relationship," "Carmen, this is toxic," and they couldn't reach you. You couldn't have reached yourself.

Machado: Yeah, I talk in the book about the Novikov self-consistency principle of time travel. This idea that even if time travel were possible, it would be impossible to go back in time and change events that have already happened, because they've, by definition, they've happened, and so you just can't, you can't do that. And I think that was a metaphor that really stuck with me, because I was like, "Yeah, I can't, I can't undo it. There's nothing I can do about it, and that's really scary and sad, but also that's just the way it is."

Menendez: Novikov, which is a very hard thing to say with a New Jersey accent, thank you, is an excellent segue into the fact that a lot of playing with form here, a lot of first person narrative, but also a lot of intellectual analysis and rigor around questions of love, villains, queerness. What did you want to achieve by doing that?

Machado: I think a kind of violence that people experience, people of all different sort of identities, is when you were told implicitly or explicitly that you are the only one or that your experience

has no precedent, and there's no place for it in the narrative. And so in this book I was really interested in taking pop culture and music and film...

Menendez: I mean you've ruined a ton of Disney movies for me. Now I'm going to look at all the villains and understand the ways in which they are playing on stereotypes and tropes.

Machado: I guess I just wanted to say, let me try to bend all this toward me and show how I give myself the context that nobody else would give me. And that just became, it just became really important.

Menendez: You once in the book, if I read it as carefully as I think I read it, refer to yourself as ethnically ambiguous, but you never really refer to yourself as being Latina.

Machado: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Menendez: Talk to me about that choice.

Machado: My relationship with my racial identity is complicated, because I look white, I present as white, people assume that I'm white. I actually had this very weird experience where somebody recognized me in a store in Philadelphia and then was like, "I wasn't sure it was you, 'cause all white people look alike," and I wanted to correct them, but then I felt weird, because this person was not. I was like, I don't know, you know, and just hemmed and hawed and then whatever. So it's complicated, 'cause I have a lot of privileges that come with being white-presenting, but also I'm not white, and that's actually really important to me. It's important to my identity in the way that I feel about myself and the way that I feel about my family and the way I see myself, and I don't know what to make of it. Or I just haven't gotten to a place where I feel comfortable writing about it more explicitly. But it is something that I'm thinking about very actively, and I've started many essays, none of which I have finished.

Menendez: I personally hope you get to the place where you figure out what you want to say about it, 'cause I want to read it, and I want to see that placed in the canon.

Machado: Yeah.

Menendez: You're now married.

Machado: Yes.

Menendez: And there's a complicated element to this piece of the story, which is that when you meet the woman in the Dream House, she's in an open relationship with a woman named Val.

Machado: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Menendez: You are now married to Val.

Machado: Yes.

Menendez: I had to read that about 10 times before my brain would fully compute that. Where do you place all of that in this story?

Machado: The way that Val and I sort of negotiate, it's complicated and it's not even a thing I really want to talk about a ton. I think a thing that I think a lot is if I could go back, would I change it? If I could, would I undo it? No, I wouldn't, because it brought me this person, it brought me the most important person in my whole life. Even though there's a lot of trauma around this ex, our mutual ex, neither of us would change it for anything. and that's hard. It's hard to say that, and also, it's hard because I think writing this book, it's like writing about this really terrible thing that happened to me.

I've also heard Val talk about it, and it's weird 'cause it's externalized somehow, because it's different to hear somebody say, "Here's a thing that happened to me," as opposed to a thing that has happened to you personally. It almost makes me angrier. It almost gives me even more feelings, and I think probably, she has a similar reaction to reading this book. It's complicated, but I wouldn't change it for anything, and I feel very lucky that this one really beautiful thing came out of this really horrible thing, and that feels very special and like a really rare gift that I don't know if I earned it, but I got it.

Menendez: Carmen, thank you so much.

Machado: Yeah. Thanks for having me.

Menendez: Thanks as always for joining us. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me. Maria Murriel is our producer. Carolina Rodriguez is our sound engineer. Emma Forbes is our assistant producer. We love hearing from you, so email us at [hola@latinatolatina.com](mailto:hola@latinatolatina.com) and remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Pandora, Spotify, or wherever you're listening, and please leave a review. It's one of the quickest ways to help us grow as a community.

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