



Interview

CARLA MADEIRA

Writer

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Revista do CAAP



INTERVIEW WITH CARLA MADEIRA

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Translated from the Portuguese by Gabriela Alkmin

Introduction

A native of Belo Horizonte (MG), Carla Madeira was born on October 18, 1964. She began her studies in Mathematics at UFMG but chose to graduate in Journalism and Advertising at the same institution, where she later worked as a professor of advertising copywriting. She was a partner and creative director at the communications agency *Lápis Raro*, based in the capital of Minas Gerais. She published her first novel, *Tudo é Rio*, in 2014 – a work conceived from a text written 14 years earlier that left her emotionally paralyzed until it was revisited with intensity. The book achieved significant editorial success, was reissued in 2021 by Editora Record, ranked among the bestsellers in the country, and made Carla the second most widely read writer in Brazil that year. In 2024, *Tudo é Rio* was awarded the Best Book of the Year Award for Lusophone Authors, granted by the Bertrand bookstore in Portugal. Her subsequent novels, *A Natureza da Mordida* (2018) and *Véspera* (2021), cemented her place as one of the most expressive voices in contemporary Brazilian literature. In this exclusive conversation with *Revista do CAAP*, Carla reflects on her trajectory, her creative process, and the deep dialogue she establishes with her readers.

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1. As we delve into your books, we notice an intense immersion in the construction of characters and a clear sense of commitment in your writing. In interviews, you have mentioned that writing is a way of dealing with reality. Where did your desire to write come from, and how, in practice, is the first seed of a story born – from an image, a sentence, a lived experience, or pure fiction?

A. It is always difficult to pinpoint where the desire to write comes from. For me, it has a lot to do with a way of being in the world. From a very young age, I was involved with artistic languages: I was given a guitar early on, started composing, painting, and writing. Any free time was devoted to some form of creation, because that brought me joy and propelled me forward.

There was a moment when I believed I would become a singer, until I went to study mathematics. And it was precisely there that I realized how much I missed art. I began to lose interest in something I loved, because it took me away from that creative place that had always sustained me. Writing, like music or painting, has always been a way of living and of relating to reality.

My first texts were born largely from the impact of reading, especially the works of Monteiro Lobato, which I read as a child. As for literature in the strict sense, it all happened later. I published my first book at the age of 50, with no initial intention of producing a book. I just wanted to have fun with a text. But I was hooked by what I wrote, and also frightened. The story paralyzed me for 14 years, because something very powerful and difficult to understand at that moment emerged from it.

Today, looking back, I recognize that that first narrative touched on themes that ran through my life. My mother went through

postpartum depression, and I grew up hearing stories of domestic violence in the family. I do not write autofiction, but I believe that everything that affects us – whether through what we had or what we lacked – ends up finding some path in writing. Sometimes we write about a little dog because we had one; or because we wished we had a dog and that never happened.

The first seed of a story is born from this place of affection. It is something that touches, unsettles, or haunts us in some way. Writing ends up being a way of investigating, even unconsciously, this reality that impacts us.

2. Literature, especially yours, often addresses complex and difficult emotions. How do you personally deal with the process of revisiting these emotions when you write?

A. I do not write from a predefined theme. I never begin thinking that I am going to deal with violence, rejection, or abuse. Stories are not born from an agenda, but from the very act of writing. Very often, everything starts with an event that puts me in a state of listening. I ask myself what came before, what will happen afterward, how one arrives at or leaves that situation. And it is this event that gradually transforms until it reveals what truly matters in the narrative.

In *Tudo é Rio*, for example, I wrote many things before arriving at the beginning of the book that exists today. Lucy's story emerged almost as an attempt to distance myself from another narrative I was writing. I knew nothing about her, only that she was an untamable woman. Only later did I realize that the true event was not Lucy, but Venâncio. Why would a man who seeks pleasure refuse it? What happened to him to carry so much sadness? When I understood that the core was

the violent act that destroyed him, I found the backbone of the story.

Reaching that event was so powerful that it paralyzed me for 14 years. The story stayed with me, resurfacing from time to time, until I had the emotional maturity to deal with it. Years later, already a mother and already a different woman, I was able to return to the book and write it in eight months. When I took it up again, I eliminated everything that came before and began exactly at the point of greatest tension. That is why the book opens in such an intense place.

Each book has a different process. At times, the event is central; at others, it is language that moves me. I have also changed as an author. But there is always that moment when I feel completely involved, present, and powerful. It is this encounter with writing that I pursue.

3. Can you tell us a bit more about your writing process? How do you balance creative writing with other work?

A. I have always managed to balance writing with work because, for me, writing is not exactly work. It is the moment when I have fun, restore myself, and feel alive. For many years, while I was running the agency *Lápis Raro*, writing was a space to breathe. And now that I have just sold the company, I will have even more time to devote to it, although I am still in a transition period.

The first three books were written while I was working intensely. *Véspera*, for example, was underway when the pandemic began, and that was one of the most challenging periods of my professional life. Suddenly, everything changed: remote work, uncertainty with clients, general chaos. And on top of that, I lost my rituals. Before, I would leave the agency, get home, take a shower, switch computers, put the children to bed, and

only then sit down to write. It was a passage from one world to another. During the pandemic, everything became one single thing: the same house, the same computer, the same clothes, everything mixed with household tasks and the book pulsing there in the middle, at a point where it was no longer possible to stop.

Even so, I wrote a great deal. Because it was a moment of living, of giving myself over to something that revitalized me, that gave me back energy and potency. It is a different kind of feeling, although there is also suffering. I have never seen work as a place of pain, but it has its challenges, like anything in life. Writing does too. It is a process full of ups and downs, of moments when I feel what I am doing is great and others when I think everything is horrible and I ask myself why I am doing it. I move through these emotions as I write.

4. Your works share a raw and multifaceted approach to motherhood, with complex characters who move through conflicts, tragedies, and pleasures arising from that experience. How do you think your literary work can allow us to rethink motherhood and femininity today? Do you intentionally engage in questioning these themes?

A. That was never a conscious intention. I did not begin writing with the aim of questioning motherhood or femininity. But we are all social and political beings, living in a violent, sexist society that produces forms of pain that cut across each individual experience. There is no way to stand outside of that. We are involved all the time.

For me, literature does not need to serve a utilitarian function. It is not a manual of best practices, not a pamphlet, not a tool for moral correction. It can be whatever it wants to

be, because it is born from a particular gaze upon human possibilities, both the lightest and the most difficult to face. Literature touches our shadows and our light. It exists to feel out what is possible within the human condition. It is not the search for truth; it is the search for existence.

And the mere fact that a book generates discussion is already valuable. I may agree or disagree with what a character does, but if the work becomes an occasion for conversation, it has already accomplished something important. *Tudo é Rio*, for example, became a controversial book, and it is interesting that it did so. It did not begin that way. But suddenly people were debating whether there was a romanticization of violence, whether it is possible to forgive, what it means to forgive, whether forgiving is forgetting, and whether forgiving does or does not prevent punishment. These are extraordinarily rich discussions. And this happens because we are talking, because the work produces meaning.

In concrete life, we need to produce better laws and better civilizational pacts. Literature does not have that commitment. Literature allows us to enter the minds of good and evil, to look at what exists in the world and try to understand it. Sometimes the reader discovers that a horrible character is not only horrible. They may have committed something monstrous, but they are not reduced to that.

I experienced something like this when visiting men's and women's prisons with *Tudo é Rio*, in reading circles for sentence reduction. The women were very young, had committed serious crimes, and yet, when talking about the book, they laughed, talked about Lucy, talked about themselves. There, for an instant, no one remembered the prison. Leaving that place, the feeling was: they are not the crime they have committed. They also have layers, contradictions, tenderness, and hardness, like anyone else.

Literature expands our humanity. And if my books allow us to rethink motherhood and femininity, it is because they open themselves to this complexity, not because I set out to advance an agenda. It is simply because looking at the human condition is already political.

5. Your novels explore human relationships in depth, delving into love, loss, violence, and forgiveness. Is there any theme you have not yet explored but feel a desire to take on?

A. I do not really start from the idea of choosing a theme before writing. Things emerge along the way. But I am already finishing my fourth book, and I realize that some new themes have emerged, including ones related to gender issues. Perhaps this also has to do with my personal experience. I have a 25-year-old daughter who, around the age of 20, discovered she was a lesbian, and that process of hers ended up, in some way, crossing into the book. It is not the central theme, it is not a political statement, but it is there as one of the layers of the narrative.

My books never revolve around a single issue. They work like life, like nature, where everything happens at the same time. In this new book, for example, there is also the story of a mother who reports her own son. These are issues that meet and gain meaning within the movement of the narrative.

Another thing that came in strongly was the idea of vocation and transformation. How a 17-year-old boy who commits a huge mistake can become another person many years later. And how unsettling that is! I am sure it will unsettle people, because the world has this difficulty. The world likes to put a label on someone and be done with it, as if each person had to be only one thing. But I do not accept that. My characters do not accept it. They kick and scream. They are alive.

6. Your books are being adapted into other media – the rights to *Tudo é Rio* and *A Natureza da Mordida* have been sold, and *Véspera* has already been filmed as a series for HBO Max. What has it been like to see your stories move from the page to the screen? Are there elements you believe are essential to preserve so that the emotional essence of the narratives remains alive?

A. My experience with *Véspera* was very intense. I came in as a consultant, but ended up really getting my hands dirty, taking part in writing the scripts and living a very collective process. It was a great learning experience to understand that, in order to adapt a book, you need to deal with cuts, make difficult choices, and face production limitations. Some things are much easier to imagine than to realize cinematically, and that changes the way you think about the story.

With *Tudo é Rio*, the process is still at an early stage of development, working on the premise and the script. But I have already had important conversations about what I consider essential for the adaptation to work. For me, there are certain things that, if not translated well, simply do not happen on screen.

For example, it is essential to have compassion for the characters, to have the desire to tell that story, to understand Dalva's inner movements. To understand this woman who, even in the face of enormous violence, cannot leave, and stays for a set of complex reasons. If this is not built with care, if the work takes on a Manichean view, the story loses its soul. It is not about the saint and the whore. It is not about turning Cain into the good one and Abel into the bad one. None of that makes sense within that universe.

What matters to me is preserving complexity. Having the courage not to simplify, not to close off answers, not to turn everything into a film that resolves conflicts in

a clean and definitive way. Choices of what to cut are inevitable, because it is impossible to tell everything. But in making those cuts, what is essential must remain: openness, ambiguity, and life pulsing through the characters.

7. You are currently the most widely read Brazilian writer in the country, with more than one million copies of your books sold. How do you deal with the public and the multiple interpretations they produce of your stories? Has this success changed your relationship with writing or your creative process?

A. I think my good fortune lies in how completely I am taken over by the creative process. A lifetime working with creative languages has given me extensive training in pushing external constraints aside. Spinoza speaks of creative freedom as the total absence of pressures, something only nature can truly achieve. A cockroach is not concerned with being more beautiful or uglier. It simply is.

I try to work that way. I know it is never possible to completely eliminate interference – there is always something that pierces my bubble, that invades my sanctuary. But to be honest, I am very good at leaving most of those things outside. When I am creating, I truly manage not to worry.

This does not mean that I handle criticism well. It unsettles me; it used to unsettle me more, but it still affects me. Over time, I learned to distinguish between criticism that is honest, that looks at the book, and criticism that aims to hit me personally. The former, even when it irritates me, always gives me something. We may disagree, think the critic did not understand anything, but later, in the silence of the early morning, we realize there is a sensitive point there, a place where we knew we could improve.

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Detraction is different. When criticism is not about the work but tries to disqualify me or disqualify the reader, it bothers me for another reason. It is not a bad critique of the book; it is someone being small. And that makes me angry. And anger disorganizes; it drains energy instead of producing it.

At the same time, I also need to be careful with excessive praise. It feeds the ego and vanity, and none of that helps when you are writing a new book. The previous book does not help; applause does not help. To create, you need to be in another place, far from this search for approval.

Just today I spoke with a very dear reader, Gustavo Jardim, who read my new book. He commented on a passage that I find beautiful, but said it did not fit the character. I understood exactly what he meant. It hurt. There is an ego there that looks at the beautiful excerpt and thinks: what a shame to take this out. But he was right. And that is how the process works.

To close my answer: I think I have developed a real ability to turn inward and leave almost everything outside when I am creating. And that, fortunately, has not changed with success. I think it has only deepened.

8. As a graduate of UFMG, what memories and lessons from the university still stay with you? Is there anything from that academic experience that you carry into your work as a writer?

A. I carry a great deal of the university with me. University life is one of the most incredible experiences one can have, regardless of whether you encountered great or poor professors, or whether the program was more or less what you expected. When we are living through it, we are extremely rigorous and demanding, and it is true that there are

problems, of course. But despite that, it is a precious time in life.

I hold on to many memories and many people I met there, whom I carry with me forever. Later on, I also taught at the university for three years, which made that bond even stronger. My entire education took place there. I started in mathematics, then dropped everything and moved into communications. I studied advertising, journalism, and public relations – all at UFMG. And I experienced the world of communication from every angle.

Being an advertising professional, a journalist, a communicator – all of that brought me very close to the human. To behavior, to ways of seeing and translating the world. And it also gave me a very solid relationship with language. Not in the sense of mastery, which would be far too presumptuous, but in not being afraid of words. In trusting the creative process.

At the agency, we were often at the limit. We needed to present a campaign the next day and still did not have the final idea. But after forty years of work, I knew it would come. It always did. That confidence stays with me to this day. When I am writing, when I reach a point in the book where I think I have achieved nothing, I stop and think: calm down. It will come. I go to sleep and wake up with answers, with images, with ideas bubbling.

I learned to trust the body, the unconscious, that place that keeps working while we rest. And this applies to everything in life. The popular saying goes that the pillow is the best advisor, and it really is. Sometimes you fall asleep full of doubts and wake up seeing everything with great clarity.

In the end, this teaches me something very beautiful: we have an enormous capacity to reinvent ourselves, to find paths, to deal with what comes, to remain alive. The university, in many ways, helped me discover that.

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