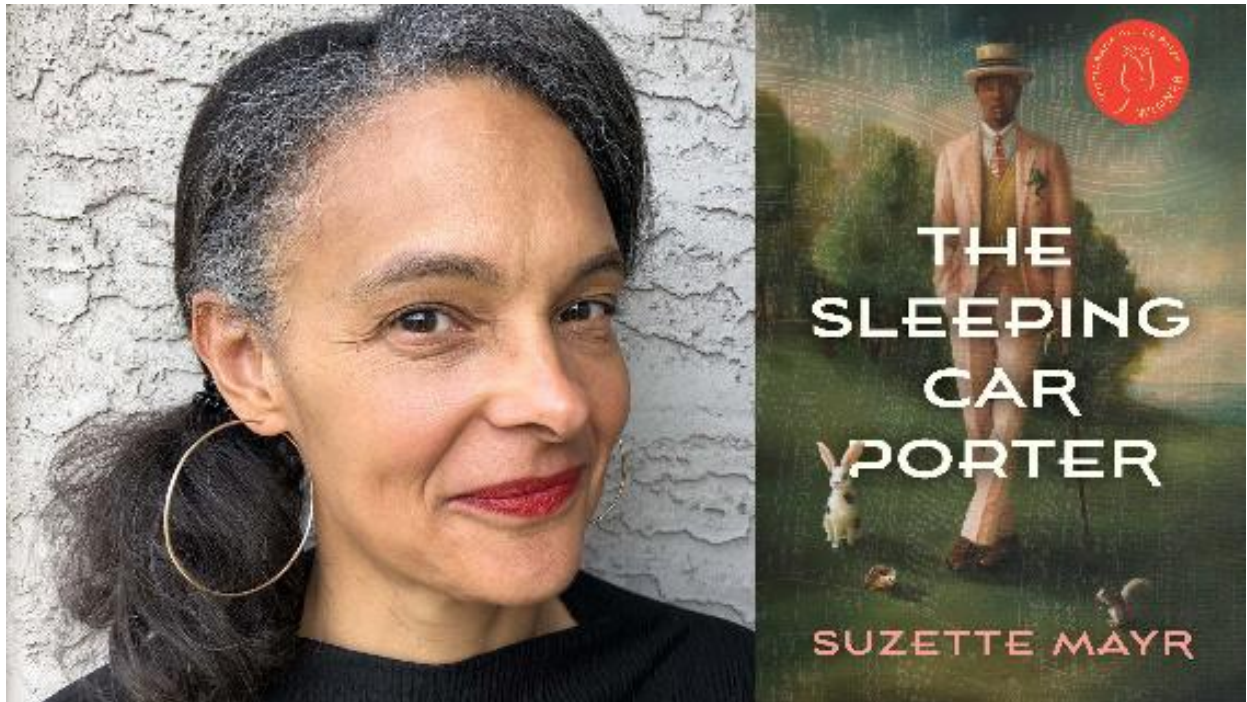


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The Sleeping Car Porter

About Suzette Mayr

from Coach House Books

SUZETTE MAYR is the author of the novels Dr. Edith Vane and the Hares of Crawley Hall, Monoceros, Moon Honey, The Widows, and Venous Hum. The Widows was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best Book in the Canada- Caribbean region, and has been translated into German. Moon Honey was shortlisted for the Writers' Guild of Alberta's Best First Book and Best Novel Awards. Monoceros won the ReLit Award, the City of Calgary W. O. Mitchell Book Prize, was longlisted for the 2011 Giller Prize, and shortlisted for a Ferro-Grumley Award for LGBT Fiction, and the Georges Bugnet Award for Fiction. The Sleeping Car Porter won the 2022 Scotiabank Giller Prize. She and her partner live in a house in Calgary close to a park teeming with coyotes.

About the book

from Coach House Books

The Sleeping Car Porter brings to life an important part of Black history in North America, from the perspective of a queer man living in a culture that renders him invisible in two ways. Affecting, imaginative, and visceral enough that you'll feel the rocking of the train, *The Sleeping Car Porter* is a stunning accomplishment.

Baxter's name isn't George. But it's 1929, and Baxter is lucky enough, as a Black man, to have a job as a sleeping car porter on a train that crisscrosses the country. When the passengers call him George, he has to just smile and nod and act invisible. What he really wants is to go to dentistry school, but he'll have to save up a lot of nickel and dime tips to get there, so he puts up with 'George.'

On this particular trip out West, the passengers are more unruly than usual, especially when the train is stalled for two extra days; their secrets start to leak out and blur with the sleep-deprivation hallucinations Baxter is having. When he finds a naughty postcard of two men, Baxter's memories and longings are reawakened; keeping the postcard puts his job in peril, but he can't part with it or his thoughts of Edwin Drew, Porter Instructor.

WINNER OF THE 2022 SCOTIABANK GILLER PRIZE

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY TOP 20 LITERARY FICTION BOOKS OF 2022

OPRAH DAILY: BOOKS TO READ BY THE FIRE

THE GLOBE 100: THE BEST BOOKS OF 2022

CBC BOOKS: THE BEST CANADIAN FICTION OF 2022

Reviews

The Toronto Star

thestar.com

Reviewer: Brett Josef Grubisic

Suzette Mayr's novel 'The Sleeping Car Porter' an artfully constructed story that moves, beguiles, and satisfies

Set in 1929, R.T. Baxter sets out on a Montreal-Vancouver work shift in the hopes of saving enough money to go to dentistry school.

Generally, historiography hasn't been all that attentive to the serving classes. Regents, wars and revolutions, yes; scullery maids and chimney sweeps, not so much.

As for a Black train porter in Canada circa 1929 who was also homosexual and an immigrant from the Caribbean? Inventive to the core and peerless as a storyteller, Calgary's Suzette Mayr enchants with a lovely (as well as touching and ever-so-slightly fevered) account of one such émigré. Nominated for the Giller Prize, Mayr's eighth book is fiction that envelopes an absorbing history lesson within an artfully constructed story that moves, beguiles, and satisfies.

The latest in a line of delightful (and delightfully idiosyncratic) novels that began 27 years ago with "Moon Honey," "The Sleeping Car Porter" traces R.T. Baxter on a Montreal-Vancouver work shift that gets waylaid by a mudslide outside of Banff.

A science fiction fan and "dentist-to-be" on the cusp of thirty (though "his bones, his joints, rattle like he's edging into his 189th birthday"), Baxter regards himself as "a clicking Robot, created to serve ... a whirring automaton, screwed together to entertain."

With future tuition forever in mind, Baxter frets about "the little tyrant" (a weighty instruction manual in his pocket), receiving demerits (which can get him fired and end his dream of returning to Montreal for school), "spotters" (hired by the company to report employee infractions), and exacting supervisors (one of whom suffers from shell-shock).

Undernourished and sleep-deprived as the train crosses plains and Prairie, Baxter, nicknamed "Martian" by colleagues and beckoned — with "Porter," "George" and "Boy" — by passengers, struggles to carry out a mountain of duties.

All the while, the hallucination-prone fellow worries about intrusive problems — a cross-dressed flapper, a clairvoyant, a stowaway, a homoerotic postcard, missing towels he'll have to pay for — and yearns for his deceased aunt Arimenta, who he imagines as telling him the "name for when your insides feel the same as a wide orchard of blighted trees." (Mayr repurposes a tweet from actor Dan Levy's mother Deborah Divine — "he twirled one too many

times in front of his female cousins” — to contextualize the shame and disappointment expressed by Baxter’s conservative mother.)

As Baxter attends to passengers he nicknames “Mango” (who promises cash for sexual favours) and “Pulp and Paper” (businessmen who regard the porter as a their personal circus performer), Mayr’s singular prose highlights the man’s numerous — and seemingly inescapable — bonds.

And as Baxter passes Winnipeg and Regina, he summons a furtive sexual history, all with tremendous ambivalence: “... one time in a lavatory, two times in a laneway, always in the dark. Maybe some other times he didn’t want to talk about.” Men, “ravenous, silent creatures,” entice and confound him. Sexual contact exhilarates Baxter but a meaningful bond outside of quick, shadowy trysts remains wholly elusive.

Mayr remains mum about how 1930 and onward will unfold for Baxter. Her gift to him, though, is a concluding scene rich with possibility, a suggestion that times were tough but not always and not for everybody.

Reviews

The Queen's Journal
queensjournal.ca

Reviewer: Sam Goodale

'The Sleeping Car Porter'

Suzette Mayr's award-winning book arrives right on time

Trains, queerness, and dentistry don't seem like they should go together, but in Suzette Mayr's Giller Prize-awarded novel *The Sleeping Car Porter*, the seemingly divergent converge.

The Sleeping Car Porter recounts the story of a queer Black train porter, Baxter, who works in a sleeping car to fund his dream of attending dentistry school. It's a book centred around the abject and the revelation of what is supposed to remain unseen. Yet, after winning the largest literary award in Canada, the novel and its themes have skyrocketed into visibility.

A journey across 1929 Canada ensues, filled with an eclectic cast of characters, romance, and much talk about pre-first molars. It's wild, weird, and makes the reader feel that they, like Baxter, are suffering from a terrible lack of sleep.

The novel's prose is sparse. Its brevity starkly contrasts Baxter's endless days and nights. There's a ceaseless wandering, a weird stationary motion, as Baxter remains inert on "the fastest train in the country," hurtling across the Canadian landscape.

Mayr's style and writing are effective at communicating *The Sleeping Car Porter's* themes. She leaves lines just as they should, revealing more from what she doesn't say than what she does. The novel paints beautiful portraits that speak for themselves.

The novel meditates on how Baxter is rendered completely marginal as a train car porter, restraining his appetites—sexually and for food—to endlessly fulfill the needs of others. It's a fascinating exploration of who's allowed to be visible and who must be invisible.

And then there are teeth. Teeth are very weird. They're tools of consumption that just exist in our mouths. Mayr's use of them in the story is wonderfully done, showing us how they provide a sanctuary for Baxter, giving him a goal to pursue and a means to reclaim some agency as he examines and makes judgements on people's teeth.

They're both gross and fascinating, revealing details about characters that they may otherwise wish to conceal. However, amongst the musings on teeth and the endlessly chugging train, the novel's plot tends to meander along.

The Sleeping Car Porter is an incredibly sleepy book: you will feel as Baxter feels. Maybe that's the point, but it's hard to focus on the book's substance when it's putting you to sleep.

The novel is experimental, and how well its experiments work will likely depend on the reader. It's engaging to feel how Baxter feels, but it can seem a little tiresome.

The Sleeping Car Porter is technically brilliant. It's wonderfully written, and its characters pop and burst with life. It's experimental and weird, and there are things here that will capture and move readers. It threatens to become directionless like the train Baxter is on, but it's ultimately pulled forward beautifully by its characters and its incredible affective power.

Interview

ByBlacks.com

by Nadia L. Hohn

With the 2022 success of *The Porter*, a CBC/Black Entertainment Television co-production about Black railway workers who gave birth to North America's first Black union, the timing of Suzette Mayr's most recent book, *The Sleeping Car Porter* (Coach House Books, 2022) couldn't be more perfect.

Mayr, a Black biracial lesbian of Afro-Caribbean and German descent, who teaches creative writing at the University of Calgary, won the 2022 Scotiabank Giller Prize, valued at \$100,000, and she deserved it.

The Sleeping Car Porter follows Baxter, an aspiring dentist and gay twenty-something Pullman Porter, on a railway voyage, from Toronto to Vancouver. Following life through the organized tasks of one of the few respectable jobs available to Black men in the 1900s, reading this novel reminded me of my proximity and love of railway travel, my retired father's work as a train machinist, and my 2019 trip on the famed *Canadian* that spanned four days.

Mayr's book aptly covers the monotony, the wonders of nature, the conversations with strangers, the ever-changing nature of arrival times, the luxury, and the Canadian racism—all in simple, concise prose.

What was your inspiration for writing this novel?

My decision to write the novel resulted from a challenge posed by one of my former writing teachers, the poet Fred Wah. One day more than 20 years ago, he told me, "Suzette, you have to write about the porters!" I didn't know what he was talking about, and I didn't know what history he was referring to.

So, I started doing some research into sleeping-car porters in Canada, and I learned that they were almost all Black men; that portering was perhaps the best-paid job a Black man in Canada could get, but they regularly faced terrible prejudice; that porters had a crucial role in labour and civil rights in Canada; and that some porters were either the fathers of famous Canadians like pianist Oscar Peterson or they went on to become prominent people in their own right, like Rufus Rockhead of Rockhead's Paradise and Stanley G. Grizzle.

Writing the book was also about finding an unrecoverable, lost or deliberately hidden history that I desperately wanted or maybe even needed. I'm writing about a gay, Black man in the 1920s who worked on a train during a time when queerness in Canada was punishable by prison or worse and a time of intense anti-Black racism. There are no records beyond sketchy

criminal court records of how someone like my main character might have lived or felt, but to understand myself as a Black, queer person, I needed to “find” those records to understand my place and who I am. My need to find an ancestor – to find Black, queer family – kept me going through the process of writing this book.

The novel is organized by days, in a series of moments, and even lists a sleeping car porter’s tasks. What was your intention in doing this?

What struck me when I was doing the research for this book was how regimented the work of a sleeping car porter was. In the historical period I was most interested in, the porters had to follow the rules outlined in these little instruction handbooks, and the rules seemed to cover everything. For example, how to address a passenger, times of day when certain work obligations had to be carried out, and when not to lock the door to the lavatory.

Of course, the subtext of those handbooks is that a porter could be fired for pretty much anything, even for things beyond his control. The main character Baxter in the novel, desperately needs his job and doesn’t want to lose it under any circumstances, so he tries to live by the rules outlined in the book.

The problem though is that his job is impossible: there’s no time to sleep, the food is terrible, and even fraternizing with work colleagues is frowned upon, so where is there room for even a little bit of joy?

Baxter is trying to make this impossible situation work. He has to think very carefully about every action he takes and every job he does, but the job is boring, demeaning, and sometimes nonsensical. I wanted the reader to understand the grinding monotony and impossibility of the job, so I went into a lot of detail about these elements.

Race is rarely mentioned, but it is implied, especially about the class position of Baxter and the other sleeping car porters. Was this an intentional decision?

Yes, this was intentional. I know that as a Black person in the world, I am constantly aware of race, but at the same time, I’m still living my private life, and there are a lot of aspects of my life that don’t have to do with race or where race rarely comes up.

While I think about race or am reminded about my race a lot, I also have other issues I need to consider, like, what will I cook for dinner tonight? Whose turn is it to walk the dog? It was vital for me to get into the head of the main character and see him as a whole person for whom race is essential and who is definitely racialized by the world, but who – for example – also thinks about things like what he likes to eat and read, what his body needs sexually, and his love for his Aunt Arimenta. Race is important, but it’s never all a person is – it’s not how a person should be exclusively defined.

I got the sense that sleeping car porters were a brotherhood. What important message do you think that brotherhood has to share with us today?

They worked so hard, and weren’t paid enough or respected enough as people to do that kind of work. And the work was impossible. The porters were vital in that they had a vision for how Black people should be treated – as workers, as citizens, and as Canadians.

Writing *The Sleeping Car Porter* took a tremendous amount of research. I enjoyed listening to you describe the years and details of your study— grants, archives, books, interviews, newspaper clippings, and trusted readers. How did you make decisions about what to include in your novel?

In the end it came down to trusted friends of mine who are writers and editors, reading the manuscript and telling me what was important and what was extraneous.

In the penultimate draft, I think I cut out at least 40 pages, and this was the right choice because the majority of those pages were just more repetition of the main character Baxter at work on the train polishing more shoes and dealing with more annoying passengers who took up a lot of space. In the end, those passengers didn't make the cut.

For example, there was a passenger who gave herself an abortion that went very wrong. I liked that scene very much, but in the end, neither the abortion nor the passenger added anything to the book, and they just veered the book into a direction that went nowhere.

Where were you when you received the news about your book winning the Scotiabank Giller Prize? And how did you feel?

I was at the gala dinner, which was being televised on the CBC. When I heard my name, I suddenly wanted to cry – I think mostly from shock. I never thought I would win the prize. But I knew I was on national television, and I couldn't just sit there bawling and processing my feelings about why I was bawling. I couldn't understand what was going on, truly. I was electrified that the book had won, but I was also sad because I really loved the other shortlisted writers, and had come to love them as my friends, and I wished their books could have won too.

Who do you read for inspiration in your writing? Is there one Black Canadian writer who inspires you?

Lately, I've been loving Bertrand Bickersteth's book of poetry, *The Response of Weeds: A Misplacement of Black Poetry on the Prairies*. It deals with the Canadian prairies as a geographical and historical setting, but it touches on the work of so many other important and exciting Black writers such as Langston Hughes. It's a gorgeous book.

Also, Cheryl Foggo is a historian and fiction writer from Calgary, and her non-fiction book *Pourin' Down Rain: A Black Woman Claims Her Place in the Canadian West* was huge for me. I was working at the small, independent press that originally published it about 30 years ago, and I remember reading it at work and being floored by the fact that it was the first time I had read about Black people on the Canadian prairies.

Discussion Questions

from *chbooks.com*

1. *The Sleeping Car Porter* explores an interesting part of Black Canadian history – did you know much about sleeping car porters before reading this book? What is something new you took away from this book?
2. Baxter seems to take a liking to Esme as the novel progresses, why do you think this is?
3. When Baxter finds a postcard of two naked men embracing, he keeps it even though it puts his job and reputation at risk. Why does he keep it and what does the postcard represent for Baxter?
4. Throughout the novel, Baxter hallucinates a man in the linen closet curled up and glowing like coal. What do you think about Baxter's hallucinations and what do they mean?
5. *The Sleeping Car Porter* depicts the gruelling and repetitive work of being a porter. How does Mayr convey this feeling in her writing?
6. The novel takes place in the confined space of a train. In what other ways is Baxter's life confined?
7. If you had the chance to ask the author of this book one question, what would it be?

Questions from the author!

8. What about dentistry is so appealing for Baxter? Can you think of any literal or metaphorical reasons for why he might be attracted to dentistry as a profession?
9. Throughout *The Sleeping Car Porter*, Baxter reads the novel *The Scarab from Jupiter*, and seems to find solace in the book. What is the specific appeal of the book for Baxter?
10. What do you think will happen to Baxter after the end of the book?