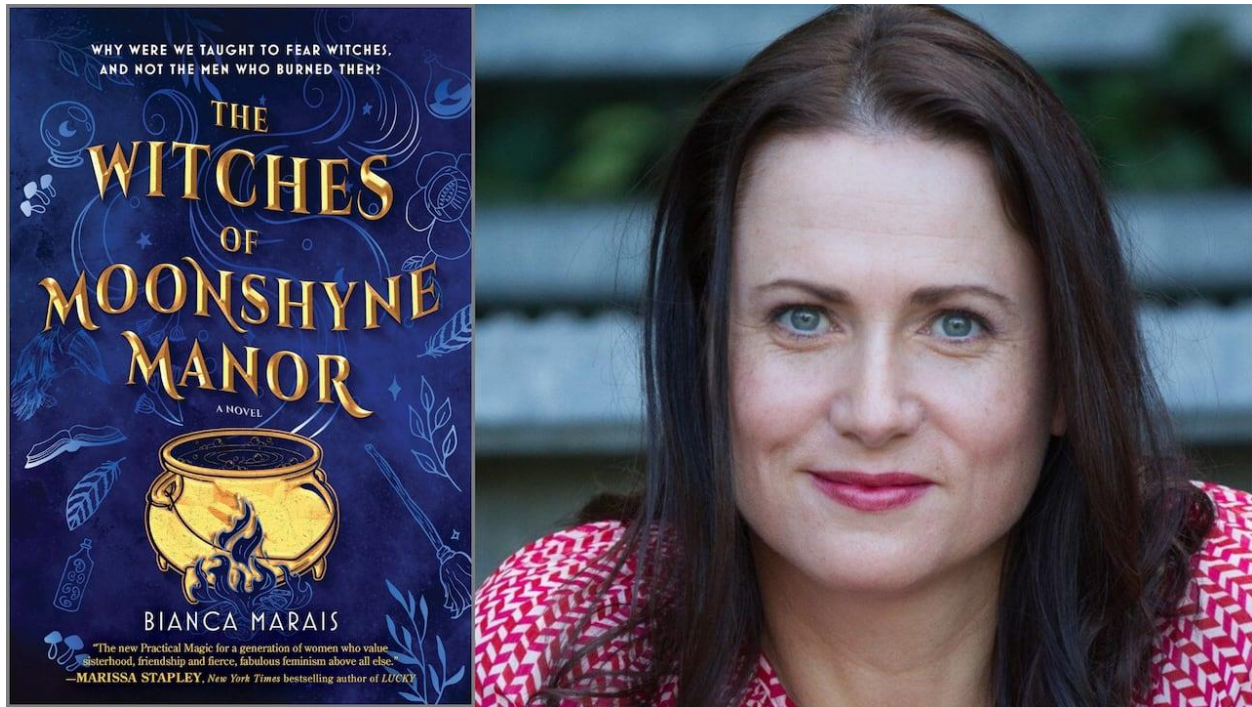




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The Witches of Moonshyne Manor

About Bianca Marais

from www.biancamarais.com

Bianca Marais is the author of the bestselling *The Witches of Moonshyne Manor*, as well as the beloved *Hum If You Don't Know the Words* and *If You Want to Make God Laugh*, and the Audible Original, *The Prynne Viper*.

She taught at the University of Toronto's School of Continuing Studies where she was awarded an Excellence in Teaching Award for Creative Writing in 2021.

She runs the Eunice Ngogodo Own Voices Initiative to empower young Black women in Africa to write and publish their own stories, and fundraises to assist grandmothers in Soweto with caring for children who have been orphaned by HIV/AIDS.

She is the co-host of the popular podcast, *The Shit No One Tells You About Writing*, which is aimed at helping emerging writers become published. She's an experienced public speaker who is in great demand for various events

About the book

from www.harpercollins.ca

A coven of modern-day witches. A magical heist-gone-wrong. A looming threat.

Five octogenarian witches gather as an angry mob threatens to demolish Moonshyne Manor. All eyes turn to the witch in charge, Queenie, who confesses they've fallen far behind on their mortgage payments. Still, there's hope, since the imminent return of Ruby—one of the sisterhood who's been gone for thirty-three years—will surely be their salvation.

But the mob is only the start of their troubles. One man is hellbent on avenging his family for the theft of a legacy he claims was rightfully his. In an act of desperation, Queenie makes a bargain with an evil far more powerful than anything they've ever faced. Then things take a turn for the worse when Ruby's homecoming reveals a seemingly insurmountable obstacle instead of the solution to all their problems.

The witches are determined to save their home and themselves, but their aging powers are no match for increasingly malicious threats. Thankfully, they get a bit of help from Persephone, a feisty TikTokker eager to smash the patriarchy. As the deadline to save the manor approaches, fractures among the sisterhood are revealed, and long-held secrets are exposed, culminating in a fiery confrontation with their enemies.

Funny, tender and uplifting, the novel explores the formidable power that can be discovered in aging, found family and unlikely friendships. Marais' clever prose offers as much laughter as insight, delving deeply into feminism, identity and power dynamics while stirring up intrigue and drama through secrets, lies and sex. Heartbreaking

Reviews

Publishers Weekly
publishersweekly.com

Reviewer: Cecilia Lyra

Marais (*Hum If You Don't Know the Words*) entwines feminism and magic in this occasionally goofy contemporary fantasy about a coven of octogenarian witches who are targeted by men who want to turn their manor house into a recreation center called "Men's World." Everything changed for the coven 33 years earlier, when a magical heist gone wrong left one of their number unable to leave the manor and landed another in prison. Now all are past their prime and barely scraping by. Due to missed payments, they're on the brink of losing Moonshyne Manor, where they live and make magical booze that keeps the men of Critchley Hackle docile (and therefore less prone to witch hunts). When the townsmen arrive in an angry mob, it's only the intervention of the mayor's teenage daughter, Persephone, that prevents the early demolition of the manor. With the deadline for making up missed payments fast approaching—and another, darker consequence on the horizon—the witches must relocate the loot from that long-ago heist or lose everything. Nothing here is subtle, but Marais reins in the jokey exaggeration at just the right moments, punctuating the plot with genuine tenderness. With an abundance of sisterhood, witchcraft, and hijinks, this is sure to draw readers in.

"*The Witches of Moonshyne Manor* is an engaging, hilarious, and utterly charming take on the modern witch story. I loved every page." – Lana Harper, *NYT* bestselling author of *Payback's a Witch*.

"The new *Practical Magic* for a generation of women who value sisterhood, friendship and fierce, fabulous feminism above all else. It was an absolute delight from start to finish, and the kind of book I've been craving for years. Escapist and hilarious but also bold and incisive, this novel has shot to the top of my list of favourites."
— Marissa Stapley, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Lucky*

"In this enchanting novel we meet a coven of misfit witches—a sisterhood as diverse as it is powerful, though struggling with many of the same issues that face non-magical women: in particular, what it means to be an aging woman in a society enamored with youth. Brimming with magic, mystery and meaning, prepare to be bewitched."
—Karma Brown, #1 bestselling author of *Recipe for a Perfect Wife*

"Picture it. Critchley Hackle, 2021. A group of older women living together to share expenses and lean on each other. Sound familiar? But with these delightful witchy equivalent of *The Golden Girls*, it's not just the cheesecake that has healing powers."
- Steven Rowley, bestselling author of *Lily and the Octopus* and *The Guncle*, a Goodreads Choice Awards finalist for Novel of the Year.

"Richly imagined, gorgeously written, and completely addictive, this exuberant novel is a celebration of womanhood at its brightest, funniest, most honest, and most kind.

Bianca has written the kind of insightful, empowering story you can't wait to share with a friend." —#1 *New York Times* bestselling author Susan Wiggs

"A quirky *Golden Girls* with wands that explores women's empowerment, friendship, and loyalty and addresses racial equality, identity, and gender fluidity. A timely, fun modern-day fable about women who refuse to conform." —*Library Journal*, starred review

"Resonant and relevant in its exploration of gender expression, race and racial justice, and age and aging, all with central characters full of wit, heart, and magical secrets."—*Booklist*

Interview

Writers & Artists

www.writersandartists.co.uk

July 25, 2022

Interview with Bianca Marais

Interviewer: Jill Witty

Writer Jill Witty interviews author Bianca Marais about her approach to writing in different genres, the lessons she's learned through years of rejections, and her most valuable tips for emerging writers.

To the thousands of faithful fans of her podcast, "The Shit No One Tells You About Writing," which recently notched over 850,000 downloads, Bianca Marais might come across as a superstar. Between her teaching awards, her interviews with literary luminaries such as Ann Patchett, Ken Follett and Lily King, and her three novels published with "Big Five" publishing houses, her writing career path appears to have been paved in gold. But when she closes each episode by telling listeners in her chipper, South African accent, "Remember, it just takes one yes," that encouragement derives from lived experience.

Marais' writing career almost didn't happen. Unable to find an agent to represent either of her first two books, she undertook a creative writing certificate program at the University of Toronto's School of Continuing Studies, where she wrote a third novel. That one secured her an agent but garnered fifty rejections from publishers. Determined to succeed, Marais rewrote the novel, cutting 60,000 words in the process. Back on submission, the book received another forty-nine rejections before, at last, the one "yes" that she needed. She published two literary novels set in her native South Africa. Then, unable to find a publisher for her next book, a psychological thriller, but committed to a shift toward more commercial fiction, she amicably parted ways with her agent in 2019.

A lot can happen in three years. During COVID, Marais noticed people reaching out to her with similar writing questions. She decided to start a podcast in order to answer their questions in a way that others could benefit. She also signed with a new agent (CeCe Lyra, who became a co-host of the podcast), published a novella on Audible, and is set to release her third novel, *The Witches of Moonshyne Manor*, in August.

Marais recently spoke with me about writing in different genres, the lessons she's learned through her years of rejections, and her most valuable tips for emerging writers.

Jill Witty: Your latest book, *The Witches of Moonshyne Manor*, a contemporary fantasy, represents a departure of sorts from your previous two novels, works of literary fiction. Can you tell me about the decision to change genres?

Bianca Marais: My first two books had moments of levity, certainly, but they were considered much more serious. Readers would tell me, "*I didn't want to read this book because I thought it was going to be so heavy. But once I started, I loved it.*" After that, I decided to write a book where people say, "*Oh, this is going to be fun, and I want to read it now.*" I was trying to be strategic in my writing. But even though the novel is about witches, you could take the magic out of it and the story would still centre on sisterhood.

JW: The witches are in their eighties. Was it a conscious decision to centre a demographic that gets less representation in literature and popular media?

BM: One hundred percent. This book is about what it means to be a woman in the world, the misogyny we face, and what it means to age as a woman. Women pass their forties and we become invisible. People think women no longer have value when we get older, whereas men can be president in their seventies. I see so many friends who turn forty or fifty and they freak out. But I'm like, "*Every year is such a gift! Why are we sitting here acting like we're at someone's funeral when they turn fifty instead of celebrating it?*" And so I wanted to show these women aging disgracefully. As women we should view aging as being liberating, rather than this thing we should avoid at all costs.

JW: In terms of audience for this book, are you worried that your previous readers might not follow your pivot into contemporary fantasy?

BM: Some of my previous readers who have read TWOMM said, "*Look, all the things that we loved about your previous work—the feminist angle, the sisterhood, coming into your own, being damaged, and overcoming adversity—those themes are here, too.*" That said, it's sex-positive. Just because you're getting older doesn't mean you stop being sexual, and Jezebel certainly isn't giving up sex. Maybe some readers of literary fiction will be shocked by my representation of her.

Really, our job as writers is to be read, and there's only so much we have control over. We can write the best we can, but we can't control who's going to pick it up or who's not going to like it. You only have to read your Goodreads reviews to realize how subjective this stuff is. One person will say, "*this is the thing I love the most*" and the very next person will say "*I hated that one thing.*"

JW: These witches are a diverse group, including one trans woman and one black woman. After your previous novels, you'd said that you didn't want to write from the perspective of a black character again. Has your opinion shifted? How do you approach writing characters whose lived experiences differ from your own?

BM: With my last two books, I became very aware of how in South Africa, many black authors were not getting their work published, whereas white authors were, and I didn't want to be a part of that problem. After that, I decided not to write from the perspective of 'a black woman in South Africa experiencing racism.' I'm a firm believer in being an ally, though, whether it's to the Black community or the LGBTQ community. Every book I write is going to have some sense of tackling homophobia and tackling racism, but in this book, I approached it more in terms of allyship than lived experience.

If I only write my own perspective, then everything I'd write would be about a middle-aged, middle-class, white woman. How does anybody learn from that? How does that make the world more diverse, inclusive, et cetera?

JW: You have five or six POVs (points of view) in this novel. On the podcast, you have cautioned that using dual POV means each POV character receives roughly 40,000 words to tell her tale, half the real estate of a single POV novel. With that in mind, walk me through your decision to use so many POVs in TWOMM.

BM: I wanted the sisterhood to become a character unto itself. For that to happen, I needed to have all the witches' voices together. There are scenes with an omniscient, third-person narrator, and then in other scenes, I've zoomed in and offered one third-person close perspective. On the podcast, we always say, we're giving you these rules but rules are meant to be broken. Most of the advice we give is for emerging writers, people writing their first and second novels. I would never have been able to write this book five or ten years ago; I wouldn't have been technically proficient enough. Still, I made lots of mistakes, but thanks to the input from my writing group, beta readers and agent, I was able to fix them. Writing is rewriting.

JW: What kinds of mistakes did you make?

BM: The biggest challenge when you're writing multi-POV is knowing whose perspective to use for each scene. I always write the scene from the perspective of the person who's got the most to lose or the most to gain. But sometimes I wanted to show one character observing the other characters. I'd set it up from the perspective of the person with the least at stake, making some social commentary on everybody else, and that would be a mistake. I would write a scene in Ivy's perspective, and [my writing group or agent] would say it would be more compelling if it was in Queenie's or Ursula's perspective, and they were right.

JW: The timeline in the novel is structured in an unusual way. The first half of the book unfolds in the present day, and then come chapters that took place thirty-three years ago. How did you arrive at that timeline?

BM: I'm always saying on the podcast, backstory has got to be revealed in a way that moves the current story forward. The modern story is a race against time, and it's full of tension. To maintain that tension, I tried to write for as long as I could, giving as little about the past as possible. And then we got to the point where the reader had to know what had happened in the past in order to make sense of the current story.

JW: You found your first agent and publisher with the third book you wrote, *Hum If You Don't Know the Words*. What do you think made the difference for that book?

BM: When I wrote the first two (unpublished) books, I'd never studied writing. I was just like, "*I've always loved writing, and I love reading, so I'm going to write these books.*" I hadn't studied storytelling. I hadn't studied structure. While writing *Hum*, I was studying writing, and I was much more serious about the craft. Then, the first two books were madcap capers, with characters you didn't really care about. For *Hum*, I gave myself permission to write a book that explored some themes

from my upbringing, like my privilege, how my opportunities came at the expense of Black people in South Africa who had that opportunity taken away from them due to apartheid. I decided to hold a mirror up to myself, no matter how uncomfortable it would make me.

And then of course, an enormous amount of luck comes into it. The book was imperfect when I queried it, but the woman who became my agent had just spoken to a South African friend. She saw the book was about South Africa, and she really liked the title, and she read it as soon as it came in, instead of letting it go to the slush pile. And she was prepared to put in the work the book needed. I'm incredibly indebted to her.

JW: Next I want to ask you a series of questions your fans sent in. First, can you give writers a few quick tips to elevate their manuscripts, to help them emerge from the "slush pile"?

BM: Agents often decide whether they're going to represent something if the writing is there at the line level. So look at your work. Read your work aloud; look for redundancies. Mix up your sentence structures. Are you using 'and' too much, or too many adjectives or weak verbs? How long are your sentences? Are you tending toward purple prose while trying to sound literary? If you can write on a line level, as a writing teacher, I can help you with your story. I can help you with your structure, tension and pacing. But if you're not a good writer at the line level, there's not much value I can add.

JW: We've heard you describe yourself as a 'pantser' on the podcast. If you haven't mapped out the plot in advance, how do you ensure that each chapter advances the story?

BM: Every scene needs to do two jobs: move the story forward and reveal character [dimensions] that haven't been revealed before. So when I begin a scene, I list my goals for that scene. How does the character change in that scene? What is the emotional shift? What plot points do I need to address and how will it move the story forward? So long as I'm doing that at the chapter level, the rest will come together.

JW: What do you do when you're overwhelmed with self-doubt about a new project?

BM: To be a writer is to live with self-doubt. You just need to make it your best friend. Give yourself permission to say, 'despite the self-doubt, I am still going to write this.'

JW: When I hear about writers that don't stick with it, I think, on the one hand, not everyone can handle so much rejection, but on the other hand, I wonder if they still love writing, the way you have to if you're going to survive in this industry.

BM: When we're sitting by ourselves, talking with our imaginary friends, we are in a state of bliss. We love it. What is soul destroying is trying to sell this thing that we loved writing. That's why I tell writers all the time, "*Take a break. Stop querying. Stop pitching. Go back to the writing, reestablish the love, and return to the querying later.*"

JW: Can you describe your writing routine for us?

BM: I don't have a writing routine, and right now, the podcast takes up four full days of my week, leaving me very little time to write. Whenever I feel like a pressure valve, like I'm going to explode, even if it's nine o'clock at night or four o'clock in the morning, I sit down and write. I will write a chapter, send it to my writing group and agent, ask them to critique it, and when it comes back, I revise based on their feedback. And then I keep moving forward. I like to constantly be polishing and revising as I'm working. The only other consistency is that I need a collaborative process. One of the things I love about CeCe is she'll say, "*I would like some pages.*" I'll send her five chapters. A week later I get notes back, and I revise based on that.

JW: I think of your brand as 'the emerging writer's best friend,' due to your work on the podcast. But you're also a novelist and a writing teacher. How does the podcast fit into your career goals? Do you think there will be a time when you'll have outgrown it?

BM: I love that role; I take it very seriously. I love helping people tap into something that maybe they didn't know was there. Maybe they didn't have the confidence, or they needed one person to give them permission, to tell them they have talent and to keep going. Nothing is more rewarding to me than when I get an email from a podcast listener or former student who's like, "*I finished this and I've now landed my agent.*" I celebrate on their behalf as if it were my achievement. I will keep doing the podcast as long as we have an audience and as long as we're helping people.

JW: And how about your writing goals?

BM: My only goal is to keep writing. In publishing, you're only as good as your last book. If your last book didn't do well, you're not as likely to get another book deal in the future. So I want each book to do well enough, essentially, that I can write the next book. If I can keep writing, doing the thing I love for the rest of my life, I will be overjoyed. *Bianca Marais is the author of the beloved Hum If You Don't Know the Words and If You Want to Make God Laugh, as well as the Audible Original, The Prynne Viper. She taught at the University of Toronto's School of Continuing Studies where she was awarded an Excellence in Teaching Award for Creative Writing in 2021. She runs the Eunice Ngogodo Own Voices Initiative to empower young Black women in Africa to write and publish their own stories, and fundraises to assist grandmothers in Soweto with caring for children who have been orphaned by HIV/AIDS. Bianca is the co-host of the popular podcast, The Shit No One Tells You About Writing, which is aimed at helping emerging writers become published.*

Discussion Questions

All questions from Bookclubs
www.bookclubs.com

1. In some novels, setting becomes character. Would you consider Moonshyne Manor to be a main character in the novel and, if so, how would you describe its personality?
2. In many ways, Critchley Hackle is a microcosm of the world today. What global issues do you recognize in the town that continue to plague so many societies?
3. Many novels about witches focus on the mother-daughter bond shared by women who have magical powers in terms of how the craft is passed down from one generation to the next. How did the sisterhood compensate, in both healthy and unhealthy ways, for being orphans who didn't have that kind of guidance?
4. Queenie expresses anger and frustration at having to shoulder all the responsibility, but also desperately needs to be needed. How much of her struggle is self-inflicted and how much comes from the fact that we're so often pigeon-holed into certain roles when we're younger, which we then feel obligated to act out throughout our lives? What role were you assigned when young (the sensitive one/the responsible one/the rebellious one, etc.) that you've sometimes felt stifled by in terms of the expectations or associations that come with it?
5. When we meet Ursula, she's plagued by guilt and regret, and we learn that she's guarded secrets about her wrongdoings for decades. But before that, she never spoke of her love for Ruby either, not even to any of the sisterhood. What kind of toll do you think this has taken on her and what does this say about the prisons we create for ourselves?
6. Jezebel is unapologetically sexual despite her age and Ivy bucks conventions by being a senior who is covered with tattoos. That both raise eyebrows says something about what we consider suitable behaviour for older women. How do the sisterhood offer a more liberating view of what it means for women to age?
7. Ruby's form of magical Alzheimer's is especially heartbreaking because she had to fight so hard for a sense of identity when society could not accept who she was. What do you think it was like for her in a men's prison before she lost her memories? Why do you think she refused to see any of the sisterhood in all that time?
8. Persephone is from an entirely different generation to the witches which often leads to consternation on both sides. How does her presence in their insular lives

help them grow and what lesson is there to be learned about intergenerational relationships?

9. Tabitha has been tied to the manor for decades, waiting for an apology from Ruby, and this has made her bitter and angry. What does this say about how much of our unhappiness is a self-administered poison that we could let go of if we were able to gain a fresh perspective on it?

10. Witches were the very first feminists. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why do you think we remain so fascinated by them? Which witch are you?