

K N O P F Q & A



A conversation with

FRANCESCA MOMPLAISIR

author of

MY MOTHER'S HOUSE

Q: What inspired you to write *My Mother's House*?

A: I don't know that I was so much "inspired" as this was the novel that chose to come when it did.

I did know that I wanted to create a place that was more than a setting but a full character. I grew up in South Ozone Park, and the neighborhood was very much a life and each house had a character of its own, not just because of the people who lived there. The houses had faces and feelings and were characters in an intricately evolving immigrant neighborhood.

I did know that I wanted to write a story about women and survival.

But, again, for me it was always about the House, La Kay. I wanted it to have agency, to love, to be deliberately dangerous, to know and hold an entire history and to be able to recount that history. The history of families, communities, New York City. As I created this place and life, La Kay, I did take advantage of it to tell the story of abuses against black men and invisible women. I hope that I validated both the experiences of the men while foregrounding the women whose stories get far less exposure. I didn't want to have to choose between the two. I hope it's clear that what happens to both are products of the same evil.

It was not by accident that I chose to write about Haitian culture, my culture. That was the easiest part. How I write about immigrants – Haitian, Latino, and Caribbeans, in particular – might be seen as exposing the secrets of the many ways immigrants navigate life in America – the hustling of hardworking often desperate immigrants, the intricacies of trying and sometimes failing at obtaining legal status in this country. And then there is this awesome sense of community and how places they create, the niches they carve out for themselves inform this nation and the world.

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Q: One of the central figures in this story is Lucien, a man who has fled Haiti with his wife and children for the promise of a new life in America. Tell us about Lucien—what inspired this character? What themes do you explore through him?

A: One of the most challenging and interesting parts of writing this novel is the creation of Lucien, an unlikely protagonist. Through him I wanted to explore the nature of psychopathy as “The Mask of Sanity”. I wanted to understand how the aberrant can seem normal or be normalized by a self-deceptive community, culture, and society. I hope that no one sees this novel as providing Lucien the “abuse excuse.” Evil and psychopathy are real. I don’t portend to know their origins. I just know that things happen and people become who they are – somehow. I found Lucien just as interesting as Sol. They show how similar experiences produce very different people.

Lucien is a controversial character. I never intended the reader to sympathize with or even pity him. I wanted to lead them through the mind of broken, evil man who seemed so normal on the outside. I wanted to expose (his) secrets.

I was in another realm when I was writing this book, a simultaneously dark world that was also full of light. Maybe it was the time of year, January, after the winter solstice, when we start to gain more minutes of daylight while crying and craving for winter to turn into spring. That’s why Lucien and Sol are as they are, in stark contrast.

Q: What does *My Mother’s House* tell readers about the immigrant experience in America?

A: That it is complex. That it is a part, in fact, the foundation of America’s history and life here. That it is warped and exquisite. That it is hard!

Some might say that I should not have written about one of “rapists, drug dealers, and criminals” who come to this country to “wreak havoc” in the “great” and pristine land of the free. The villainous character(s) are so much more and so much more complex. They are also balanced and outnumbered by the “legal” immigrants this country claims to appreciate – the cab drivers, housekeepers, homeowners, consumers, taxpayers et.al. But, no one wants to talk about one of America’s dirty little secrets – the undocumented who live in the shadows and who are easy prey.

I grew up, like many black immigrants, being told (but never believing) that we were different from and, therefore, better than American blacks. This is quite absurd. It is buying into the classic divide-and-conquer trickery of racism. I wanted to articulate that societal construct through the way Marie Ange is treated at the law firm and the way she views Asante even before the affair. It is also apparent in the recounting of Abner Louima’s violent rape and Amadou Diallo’s murder, both at by cops who saw black before they heard accents.

Q: *My Mother’s House* has a thread of magical realism woven throughout. How does magical realism appear in your novel, and what does it contribute to the story?

A: Magical Realism? It’s just life – more magical reality. That’s the environment I was raised in, where vodou

K N O P F Q & A

spirits were beings in our lives and in us. Just consider the reality of possession whether is God, the Creator, or the Universe that resides within us. We are magical or just ordinary beings in an extraordinary realm.

The House alive is an obvious thread of magical reality. Marie Ange's worship of the goddess Ezili and Lucien's fear of Her wrath are also references. But it's really La Kay. It's all about La Kay.

I love magical realism. I grew up with it both academically as well as in ordinary life. I love going into these spaces and living with, not just in them.

Q: *My Mother's House* is set in New York City's South Ozone Park. What kind of research went into writing this location with authenticity?

A: I grew up in South Ozone Park. However, I did have to research the history. My sixth-grade teacher taught a lesson about the area in which she explained the history of mass production in America. Writing this novel, I looked further into the history of South Ozone Park. I found pictures online mostly and leveraged how I'd experienced and observed it. I guess I dug deep into the archives of my memory to (re)create South Ozone Park.

I also went to Haiti in the midst of writing the book. I wanted to see the storefronts, the now dilapidated houses with window splintered shutters hanging by rusty hinges. I imagined these as fully alive as they were when Lucien would have been standing in the doorway of Bar Caimite. I've been to Haiti many times, but I needed to remind myself of the dust and the colors.

Q: If you had to identify two or three authors whose work has most influenced your own, whom would you choose? And why?

A: Toni Morrison is the only novelist who has influenced my work. Her writing is complex and flawless. The seams do not show. *Beloved* is perfect. I love more of Morrison's novels than any other novelists'. Other novelists whose work I admire include Walter Mosley, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Ngugi wa Thiongo.

I've been writing and reading poetry since I was a child, so my favorite writers are poets: Amiri Baraka, Ntozake Shange, Pablo Neruda, Phillip Levine, the poets of the Black Renaissance and the Black Power movement, Jean Toomer, (some would say that *Cane* is a collection of short stories, but I consider them poems.)

FOR BOOKING INFORMATION:

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