

The Complete Guide to Memoir

Writing: A Carmen Maria

Machado Style Guide

By: Mackenzie Simms

Introduction

Welcome to the ultimate guide for writing as Carmen Maria Machado, a well known author of a memoir, short story collection, and graphic novel. As a member of the LGBTQ community, Machado reveals intimate details of the trials and tribulations of her life, dating back to childhood. Here, she welcomes us to step inside her body and feel what she's felt. She accomplishes this by using distinct stylistic choices that connect her with the reader. These choices evoke emotion from her audience, not specific to one identity.

In this guide, we will explore a few of the unique choices Machado uses in her memoir writing, including parentheses, symbolism, polysyndeton, and metaphor. If you wish to write like Carmen Maria Machado, you will need to tap into your humanistic vulnerability and explore the depth of your past. You will need to reflect back on your life and use meaningful rhetoric to create power through your words.

Parentheses

Definition: The symbols () that are put around a word, phrase, or sentence in a piece of writing to show that what is inside them should be considered separate from the main part (Cambridge).

In her memoir, *In the Dream House*, Carmen Maria Machado uses parentheses to interject her personal feelings while recalling the events of her past. This choice adds a personal, conversational tone to the piece, as the reader gets to see what she is really thinking while looking back on these memories.

On page 221 of *In the Dream House*, we see an example of Machado's use of parentheses. "The footsteps never sped up or slowed down but remained horribly, terribly even, and when I'd try to hide **(because hiding was all I could do; there never seemed to be the possibility of opening the door and going out into the world beyond the house)** there'd be creatures in my way: a skeleton under the bed, a ventriloquist's dummy behind the shower curtain, a zombie in the closet" (Machado 221).

From this example, we can see that Machado uses parentheses to create a more personal, inner thought-like style to connect with her readers. She extends her sentence to reveal this personal snippet that adds depth and value to the sentence.

In another example found on page 105 of *In the Dream House*, Machado writes, “You sing musicals and hymns and old songs from childhood (**from church, from school, from Girl Scouts**)” (105).

In this example, we can see that the parentheses are much shorter and less complex, providing the reader with variety in her use of this device. Although shorter, the parentheses here still accomplishes its goal in providing more depth and context in her writing.

If you are hoping to accomplish memoir writing like Carmen Maria Machado, it is recommended that you use parentheses to add more meaning and context to the stories you share. The use of parentheses will not disrupt the flow of your sentence but will allow you to connect with the reader in more depth.

Definition: A type of art and literature developed in the late 19th century that tries to express ideas or states of mind rather than represent the real world, using the power of words and images. (“symbolism”)

In her writing, Machado uses symbolism to create depth. This is accomplished by illustrating images for the reader which makes the writing more engaging. If Machado were to just come out and say some of her main points, the writing would be much less interesting to read.

On page 119 of *In the Dream House*, machado writes, “When you were out walking her on a leash she would lie on the ground and refuse to move, and more than once you had to carry her home.

One day, you picked her up, put her by the door, and opened it. “Greta,” you said, “Go on! Be free! Run! She just looked at you with the saddest, most mournful expression.

She could have run. The door was open. But it was as if she didn’t even know what she was looking at” (119).

Symbolism

In this example, Machado describes her mother's dog that she watches. Through context in the book as a whole, we can see that Machado is using the dog as symbolism for herself. As she is in an abusive relationship, Machado is explaining here that she was given opportunities to run but she never took them. She never left despite having a support system and all the resources to do so, just like the dog in the story when the door is opened.

Machado uses symbolism throughout her memoir to create depth and evoke emotion from the reader. To accomplish her writing style, you will need to use symbolism to demonstrate your points to create interesting images for your reader to interpret.

Polysyndeton

Definition: The rapid repetition/overuse of conjunctions in a sentence/clause.

Carmen Maria Machado uses polysyndeton to extend her sentences and add rhythm to her phrases. Using polysyndeton makes Machado's sentences more memorable and the repetition

overemphasizes her purpose in writing the specific sentence.

On page 57 of *In the Dream House*, we can see an example of polysyndeton. "Your brain is scrambling for an explanation, **and** it hurts more **and** more, **and** everything is static" (57).

Here, we can see the polysyndeton as Machado takes us through her memory of the first time she experienced abuse. When reading in context, the sentence moves faster in your head than if it were broken down into more sentences. This establishes the panicked tone that Machado is trying to convey as she is experiencing something scary and brand new to her.

Writing using polysyndeton will make you sound like Carmen Maria Machado, as she uses this stylistic choice to create a conversational and emphasized tone with the reader.

Metaphor

Definition: a literary technique where one thing is compared to another by stating they share the same qualities.

In her memoir, *In the Dream House*, Carmen Maria Machado uses extensive metaphors to create a scene that the reader can digest easily. By doing so, Machado relates things in her life to other real things, which helps to demonstrate her point more clearly.

On page 127 of *In the Dream House*, Machado says, “In this way, the **Dream House was a haunted house**. You were the sudden, inadvertent, occupant of a place where bad things had happened. And then it occurs to you one day, standing in the living room, that **you are this house’s ghost**: you are the one wandering from room to room with no purpose, graping at the moving boxes that are never unpacked, never certain what you’re supposed to do. After all, you don’t need to die to leave a mark of psychic pain. If anyone is living in the Dream House now, he or she might be seeing the echo of you” (127).

In this example, Machado explains her internal feelings about her life in a house where she used to experience abuse. She compares herself to a ghost in a haunted house, which creates a vivid image for the reader. In using a metaphor, Machado writes

in a tone that is cryptic, not revealing her full and truthful meaning. This makes the reader read into her writing deeper to reveal her main message.

If you wish to write a memoir as Machado does, using metaphors to explain your message will help you to be successful. In this way, the writing will be more interesting and engaging to readers.

Final Thoughts...

The stylistic choices of Carmen Maria Machado enhance her writing by making it more applicable to readers. She evokes an emotional connection with her audience using descriptions that allow us to step into her shoes and experience her personal thoughts and events of her life. Through her choices, she speaks to the reader, making her writing flow naturally into the reader’s mind. Writing like Carmen Maria Machado requires deep internal reflection and connections to life events. To write like her you must express vulnerability and be willing to display your life to any reader, using stylistic choices to help you achieve that.

Works Cited

Cambridge Dictionary. "Parentheses."

@*CambridgeWords*, Nov. 2023,
dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/parentheses.

Machado, Carmen Maria. *In the Dream*

House: A Memoir. *Serpent's Tale*,
2019.

"Symbolism." @*CambridgeWords*, 6 Dec.

2023,
dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/symbolism?q=symbolism
+. Accessed 8 Dec. 2023.