"We get to the places we get to the way we do:" An Interview with Suzette Mayr

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Suzette Mayr is the author of five novels. Her fourth novel, *Monoceros*, won the ReLit Award and the City of Calgary W.O. Mitchell Book Prize, was longlisted for the 2011 Giller Prize, and nominated for a Ferro-Grumley Award for LGBT Fiction and the Georges Bugnet Award for Fiction. *Monoceros* was also included on *The Globe and Mail*'s 100 Best Books of 2011. Her novels have also been nominated for the regional Commonwealth Writers' Prize and the Henry Kreisel Award for Best First Book. She has done interdisciplinary work with Calgary's Theatre Junction and visual artists Lisa Brawn and Geoff Hunter. A former president of the Writers' Guild of Alberta, Mayr was also a writer-in-residence at the University of Calgary and at Widener University, Pennsylvania. She teaches Creative Writing at the University of Calgary.

Her fifth and most recent novel, *Dr. Edith Vane and the Hares of Crawley Hall,* is set on a fictional university campus on the Canadian prairies. In Mayr's darkly funny satire, a sentient Crawley Hall preys upon English professor Dr. Edith Vane and her Liberal Arts colleagues. As Crawley Hall and its pack of haunted hares picks off professors one by one, Edith must also navigate her increasingly chaotic life—cutthroat colleagues, a creepy therapist, a missing best friend, and a capricious new girlfriend—all while trying to avoid being "refreshed" by the Dean. *Dr. Edith Vane* is an eerie campus novel that conjures the malevolent forces haunting hallowed academic halls.

I spoke with Suzette Mayr in April of 2021 via videoconference, both of us in our homes in Calgary. As a writer who sets much of my own work on the prairies, I was eager to chat with Mayr. Her vibrant representations of prairie life—its people, its landscape, its possibilities—are a fierce source of inspiration. In particular, Mayr's novels defy my occasional worry that our shared geography might seem parochial, or dull, to readers from elsewhere. Among other things, this interview touches on Mayr's interest in the supernatural, what it means to be a prairie writer, her most recent novel, *Dr. Edith Vane and the Hares of Crawley Hall*, the tensions between criticism and art, and writing during a global pandemic. In places, the interview has been edited for clarity.

MJ: What do you like about being a fiction writer?

SM: What do I like about being a fiction writer? I like that, in a sense, I can do anything. I can be anything. I can be anywhere I want. I love the possibility that fiction gives me. I love the power and control.

MJ: One thing that I love about your novels is their supernatural elements. The haunted university hall in *Dr. Edith Vane and the Hares of Crawley Hall* and the unicorns in *Monoceros* [a novel about the profound effects of a heartbroken queer teenager's suicide], for example. Why are you drawn to the supernatural? What does it add to otherwise realist fiction?

SM: Partly, it's that when I look at life around us, I think this can't be it. This cannot be it. We know so little about the human brain. And with the human brain, we're not necessarily processing everything that is actually going on around us. I have eternal hope that there's something more to it than this because sometimes things are just so depressing and terrible. My mother is from the Caribbean, and part of the way she is, which is rooted in her culture, is that there are certain elements of life that are supernatural. Like, ghosts exist. Dreams can tell the future, or can tell you a truth that you might not otherwise have access to. I remember when I was a kid, we moved into this new house. My mother said, "Oh, yes, there are spirits here. But don't worry about it. They're friendly." And she had a dream that I was gay. I hadn't told her anything, and yet she dreamed it and knew it.

The other thing, too, is that I came of age as a writer when magic realism was the trend. Gabriel García Márquez was the pinnacle of all writing. *One Hundred Years of Solitude,* I remember, was huge. Michael Ondaatje. Isabel Allende. Robert Kroetsch. Tomson Highway and Thomas King. All these writers were writing these magical worlds that I just really, really loved because the writing was so good. It was also an opportunity to take metaphor and make it real. As somebody who grew up as a biracial person in predominantly white Calgary, for a lot of my childhood and teenage years there was no language for who I was and how I fit in the world, so I was often resorting to metaphor or simile to try to explain this to other people, explain it to myself. Also, starting out as a poet, metaphor is incredibly powerful. I love how the supernatural and magic realism allow room to expand metaphor.

MJ: You set several novels on the Albertan prairies. Is there something unique or compelling about prairie fiction or prairie life? Do you identify as a "prairie writer"?

SM: I totally identify as a prairie writer. I remember an ex of mine, who was from Brooks, Alberta, once said that I don't know anything

about the prairie because I was born and raised in Calgary, born in a city, which, even at its smallest, was maybe 500,000 people. She was like, “Well, what do you know about living on the prairie?” I don't know what she was talking about. Do I have to grow up in a sod house in order to understand what that means? Or be a farmer? I do absolutely feel like a prairie person because I was born here. This is what I know. This is my place. I'm so much attuned to basic things, like weather and landscape. This is one of the sunniest places in Canada. I don't think I could live anywhere else because I could not handle being in a place that doesn't have this amount of sun. The way the weather is so unpredictable. The chinooks. I just love, love, love that landscape of brown expanses of grass and, then, mountains in the distance. That's totally my home place. Totally, totally, totally my home place.

Now, is there anything unique to the prairies? I think it's hard for me to answer because I haven't really lived anywhere else. I don't know what the alternatives are. I can know what they are intellectually, but, in terms of your own connection to place, I don't really have an answer. What I love about the prairies are the layers of history and the diversity that operates in this place. It drives me bonkers when people say, “Oh, Alberta has no history.” Or they say the history is recent. And it's like, oh my God, there’s archaeological evidence of people living here from 11,000 years ago. This has clearly been a populated place for an extremely long time, wave after wave of people who have lived here and who continue to live here and who leave their traces. I know that people in central Canada and Ontario, for example, see Alberta as a conservative backwater. But there's so much more going on here. There's so much more room to move. And I love how, because we're in a more conservative place, the art is more raw and more immediate and more relevant. We can't take anything for granted, because any minute we'll have a government who will come down and slash arts budgets to zero. You've got to be scrappy. You make your art from whatever resources you've got.

MJ: When you are working on a book, who do you imagine as your ideal reader? What do you hope readers will take away from your novels?

SM: I remember years ago worrying about writing to as wide an audience as possible. Because that's what commercial success is—how many people buy your books. And I had to give that up pretty quickly, because that was not going to be in the cards for me. I also remember talking to Fred Wah, who is a poet, and he said, basically, that if he has an audience of five people he's perfectly fine with that. And that's where I'm at right now. I think Madonna also said it, too, which is that

all you can do is make your art and hope that somebody on your wavelength hears it or sees it and responds to it. So that's the ideal reader. Somebody who gets it, whatever that means. That might actually just be me, but it could be other people who are a bit more unicorn, who are interested in seeing the alternative to the conventional.

What do I hope people take away? The minute you publish a book, it goes into the world and it no longer belongs to you. Whoever's hands it falls into, they have their own version of what your book is. They'll take away from it what they want to take away from it. I hope that if somebody picks up one of my books they can connect to it somehow fundamentally. And I hope that it moves them. I hope that I can change the world, or convert somebody, even in a tiny, tiny way.

MJ: It seems, more and more, that all our words and actions have political implications and consequences. Do you consider yourself a political writer, in any sense of the word? Do you think your novels are political? Why or why not?

SM: I think that my words are political just because of who I am as a BIPOC person, as a biracial person. That's just a fact of life. I don't know how people can say that they're not political. I think that anything you do is political. I remember teaching at the Alberta College of Art and Design, which is now the Alberta University of the Arts. There were a couple of students arguing about why would you choose to paint butterflies in the middle of all this world chaos. And it's like, that's a political stance, deciding to paint flowers and butterflies in the middle of war, or something like that. You would hope that, as an artist, you're in control of what that message is. I would hope that you're thinking about those things. For me, it's inescapable, but I don't ever want to be the kind of writer who is complacent. I don't want to put out bad art. There is no way I'll ever think, this is the message my book must have. I don't want to write paint-by-numbers stuff, either. I've met people who have all kinds of grand ideas about what literature should say, or they have a particular theory they want to illustrate. And, then, they write a corresponding book of fiction or book of poetry, and it's usually kind of crappy because the ideas have completely taken over the organic. I think a book is an organic entity. It has its own ideas and its own impulses and sometimes goes in directions that you don't necessarily plan and that you might not understand. You've got to respect that. You've got to respect the way that the text wants to go.

I find, too, that the older I get the more things are shades of grey. That's why I don't participate that much in social media. Because what

you're supposed to do on social media—at least, this is my impression of what's going on—is you're supposed to weigh in immediately with only some of the information. And I can't do that. I have to sleep on stuff. I have to do research. By the time I've figured out what position I hold, that conversation was ages ago. And who cares what I have to say anyway?

MJ: What kind of writing inspires you? Which writers have most influenced your own work?

SM: It's changed over the years. I try to stay as open as possible to different kinds of books, but I'm big into work, fiction in particular, that pays attention to language. That doesn't mean it has to be poetic but that it doesn't take language for granted. And work that is more character-study oriented. I'm really interested in people's psychology. Even if they're completely evil and terrible, I want to know how they think. That could be as varied as *Beloved*, which is a story about a woman who decides that the only way to save her child is to murder that child. Or *Fight Club*, which is a whole study of toxic masculinity. Or Carol Shields' work, which is all about looking at people with ostensibly boring lives but with these very deep interiors. I remember reading Virginia Woolf's *The Years*. Nothing really happens in that book, but the character study is just so, so rich.

As far as what kind of writing inspires me, when I try to think of a through line in my life, it's usually character-based writing. Usually, but not always, a female protagonist. Or a male character who has some kind of really rich interiority. When I think of some of the books I loved as a kid, like *Harriet the Spy*, now it's just me trying to find *Harriet the Spy* over and over again. There was a course I took in grad school. It was called "The Gender of Modernism," which was looking at women writers from the 1920s and 1930s, and I just loved that stuff. It was so weird. Like, Mina Loy. And the writers in the Harlem Renaissance. They were trying it all. And it was—it is—so interesting. And they also had really interesting lives. Very dramatic and gossipy. I love a good gossipy story. Those writers, there's a lot of gossipy stuff happening there, a lot of sexual experimentation. I was reading it romantically, of course. People experimenting with people from other races, genders, and all kinds of things. I love that experimentation. I love the gossip. I love the language play that came out of that period. Gertrude Stein revamping how you understand a word, or Virginia Woolf and the sentence. And it's not that these writers don't have big problems. They sure do. Virginia Woolf was a total racist. Gertrude Stein had her own biases. But these writers were really radical in terms of what they did with language.

MJ: In your last novel, *Dr. Edith Vane and the Hares of Crawley Hall,* the protagonist, Dr. Edith Vane, is an English professor. At times, it seems like Edith Vane believes that most academics—literary critics in particular—don't actually like art. In fact, the novel's epigraph is a rather cutting quote from Stephen King's *Danse Macabre*, "…college and university professors, those lepidopterists of literature…." As both an English professor and a novelist, do you feel there is a tension between criticism and literature? Between academia and art?

SM: I definitely do. I cut my teeth as an instructor at the Alberta University of the Arts. You never had to apologize for art there. One day, you'd be walking down the main hallway and there would be someone walking around naked because that's their boring performance art for that day. I remember once there was a rocket that was studded with dildos. It was like, anything goes. I remember a student handed in an essay on sheets of paper that were graduated colours in the spectrum of the colour red. The top page was deep red and the very last page was pink. Or a student handed me a paper and it was in a tube. I didn't ask for that. They just did it, and it was awesome.

Then I got to the University of Calgary. In a way, it felt like I was walking into a morgue. It seemed that writers and artists belonged on shelves and in drawers that you could pull out to look at them and, then, put them back when you were done. There didn't seem to be much interest in living artists or in artists as people. And that struck me, especially when I would see these kinds of vampire academics who would make their reputations off of other people's art, and, then, at the same time those artists – if they were alive – couldn't pay their rent. I saw that over and over again. And it was really disconcerting. And a little bit disgusting, too, because these professors were making money off of publications that were about other people's art. In the meantime, those artists, some of them were living in poverty. It was so vampiric to me. It was really revolting. I think, at least in the unit where I work, the department has come a long way, where there's more respect for creative writers and for artists in general. As creative writers, we're now more readily accepted as actual scholars, too. That partly has to do with bodies like the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council [of Canada] recognizing creative practice as a research area. Times have changed. They're a bit better, but those vampires are still running around. And I have a big problem with them.

MJ: What made you want to write a "campus novel"?

SM: Because I'm an academic! I've been brainwashed. I've been one hundred percent brainwashed. It's so sad! Basically, what happened

was that I was teaching at the University of Calgary. I was burning out. I'd been there for ten years. I'd never been at a job longer than ten years in my life, and I could see the next ten years unravelling. I was very happy to have a job, but I could feel myself hollowing out because there was no time for me to write anymore. I was giving all my time to these things that, when I'm on my deathbed, I'm not going to be proud that that's where I spent my time. I remember not going to a David Bowie concert because I had too much grading to do. How stupid was that? Oh my gosh. Free ticket to David Bowie and I'm like, "No, I have to grade papers." I hit a midlife or midcareer crisis, and I thought, I either have to quit this job, or I have to do *something*. I ended up doing a two-year assisted study leave, where I got paid about a third of my salary, and I could go off and do a PhD. I found this creative practice PhD program in Australia. I had to write a novel, and I thought, that's going to work just fine because I'd be writing a novel anyway. I'll get this nice degree out of it and get a little time to myself to be creative. Of course, what do I end up writing about? I end up writing about being an academic. But I'm not surprised at all. And it was valuable for me because I always thought of myself as being outside of the academy. I thought, I'm not really an academic. I'm an imposter. Or, I'm just a spy. Writing this novel made me realize that I am a part of the fabric of this institution, and I'm totally perpetuating all of those terrible things about it. It was a cathartic action for me to turn the lens onto myself and onto this institution and just let her rip. Every moment of it in my entire life, I wrote about.

MJ: Do you get joy out of academic writing? What can fiction accomplish that criticism cannot, and vice versa?

SM: I do get joy from writing criticism. The problem is there's just not enough time in this lifetime to do both. I had a moment recently where I read this book, and I just loved it. And I thought, I want to find out more about this book. I started doing more and more research. I talked to my partner and I said, "Is this what it is? Is this what you enjoy about writing articles?" And she said, "Yes! That's exactly what it is." It hadn't occurred to me that writing scholarly articles could be about falling in love with a book and trying to delve deeper into a book and see how it was put together and the context it was written in. What are some things that readers, when they read this book, what are they potentially missing that I can show them? It's beautiful when you find a book that really resonates with you. And you get to just do a deep dive, like, just dive and dive past the bottom. I love, love, love it. But there's just not enough time. Life is short. If I had a couple lifetimes, it would be different. I would do more criticism, and I'd be a musician and a playwright. And I'd be a scientist. I'd be a zoologist. There are so many things! I have so many plans for my other lives.

As far as what fiction does that criticism can't or doesn't do is that fiction—and I find this especially when I think about historical fiction, for example—with fiction, you're allowed to say something probably happened. Whereas with criticism, it either did happen or it didn't happen, and there's no idea of possibility, or probably, or could have. Whereas fiction can do all kinds of things. What I like about criticism is that it's a nice dialogue to have with a writer. It's really interesting for me when I read articles about my own work and what people might have seen there. It's cool because, often, I didn't know it was doing that. It's a beautiful and interesting moment of being psychologized, and I find it really exciting. Criticism and creative writing inform each other in interesting ways. I don't know if, as a fiction writer, you have to read critical articles. I think you absolutely don't. But you can sure learn a lot from a well-crafted article.

MJ: One thing I love about Dr. Edith Vane is how much she loves her research. It's a powerful aspect of the novel and, to me, redemptive of the academy. That there are these people—academics—who passionately care about art and ideas.

SM: I think that's a really good point. English departments, if you look at them in the purest sense, are a temple. It's a worship of that particular art form, which is really, really beautiful. And I love coming across real academics who are passionate about the work. They're the kinds of people who hang around after they've retired, and they're still there just because they love it and they think it's interesting and worth it.

MJ: You are a very funny writer, and there is a wonderful satirical tone in much of your work. For example, there is a very humorous scene in *Dr. Edith Vane,* where Edith meets with a graduate student who is writing her dissertation on representations of sugar in Canadian fiction. What is the role of humour in your writing? What draws you to satire?

SM: That's an interesting question. I've never deliberately written something to be funny. Or when I have, it's just come across as far too broad and not funny at all. I think it's a question of perspective—a student writing about sugar. I didn't make that up. That's totally real. I think it's about picking out the details in life that are inherently absurd. I mean, I don't want to make fun of somebody for studying sugar. I can totally see that there would be a book written about sugar in literature. I'm a believer in the idea that—I don't know who said it, I don't know where it came from—but that comedy is tragedy at a distance. Basically, it is me as a writer looking at things the way other people do, but maybe from a particular kind of distance, or from the

perspective of an outsider. I've always felt that I'm an outsider, even when I'm clearly not an outsider, so the humor in *Edith Vane*, it's just not even humor. It's just fact of life. Like, it *can* take twelve months to order an office chair for your university office. And if you order it from the wrong unit, and you sign the wrong form, they'll take your chair away. The book was just reporting what goes on. Asbestos abatement and absurdity like that. I think sometimes, too, the academy can cultivate a little bit of wackiness in the people who are embedded in it. As for the other books, I don't really have an answer. Humour's just something that is a by-product.

MJ: There is never a moment when I feel like your humour is meanspirited or at someone's expense, which can be a hard line to draw, too.

SM: I think it's also about hyperbole. I have found myself in situations where I'll be telling somebody a story about something that happened to me or happened to somebody else, and I'll embroider it because it makes a better story. It doesn't take very much. It's about playing up certain features and making them just a little bit bigger or a little bit smaller than they were in real life, which I guess is what satire is—hyperbole.

MJ: What are you working on now?

SM: I'm still finishing off my historical fiction book. I'm chewing my way through the very final, final, final draft and looking at it now from the level of the sentence. I've been so preoccupied with the historical details and figuring out who the characters are and what the plot is. Now it's time to work on the language. It's taking forever. Then I'll send it off to a publisher. Hopefully they'll take it, and, then, they'll probably have more edits.

MJ: How do you start a new project? Where did the project you're working on now begin?

SM: It often starts from a moment or an image or a sensation. When I think about the very first book I wrote, *Moon Honey,* that came from me having my heart broken by the first guy I ever fell in love with and trying to process that sadness. Then, at the same time, I was reading this article—not an exposé, but a deep dive into the job of being a garbage man, or a sanitation engineer. In this particular article, the person they interviewed was talking about all the strange things you find in the garbage. The stuff you'd expect, but then also finding fetuses and whatever else. And this person talked about finding a wedding dress, and that was a really interesting detail because it

automatically made me think, okay, so whose dress was that? Why did they get rid of it? What happened? Because, from what I could gather, it was a new wedding dress. It was one that hadn't been worn before. That sparked a whole bunch of things, and, then, at the same time, I was going through this terrible heartbreak. It was a terrific coincidence. I totally love trivia and gossip, because I'm always interested in how people think and why they do the things they do. What makes them think that they should make those choices? What was the thought process?

This historical novel that I'm working on—it's a terrible, terrible story. When I interviewed for my job at the University of Calgary and a couple of other universities and colleges, one of the interview questions I always got asked was "what's your next project?" What are you going to be working on next? Before beginning to write this historical novel, I never believed in sharing my writing ideas with strangers. I didn't believe in it. So I had to come up with a fake project, and this book about a sleeping car porter on a train was my fake project. Whenever anybody asked me, "What are you working on?" I'd answer, "I'm working on this train book." Part of the reason I started the book was because Fred Wah, once again, said to me years and years ago, decades ago, "You have to write about the sleeping car porters." I started doing research, and, I'm like, what a great fake project. It looks so nutritious. Politically, it talks about race; it talks about all kinds of things. Then, as an academic, you're supposed to also apply for grants, so I applied for a grant based on this fake project, and, then, I got the grant. Then it was like, oh, okay, so now I have to go do this research. And as I was doing the research, the topic was actually turning out to be really cool and so interesting. And as the years went by, I also naturally got older and matured a bit more. When I first started thinking about this book, I was a lot younger, and I just hadn't done a lot of living. Not that I have now, but I had done even less, in terms of understanding how people work. Now it feels like I'm at the age, I've been through a couple things, where I can do that leap into the fiction. Not only into the body of the man, who's the main character, but into the body of a man in 1929. Into the body of a man who comes from elsewhere and who is working on a train. It took me a long time to get comfortable with all of that leaping. That was the hard part. That's how this book came about. It's the fake book, and now I have to come up with a new fake book so people won't know what I'm actually working on.

MJ: I think I have to ask you a dreaded Covid question. How has the pandemic affected your writing practice?

SM: Not much has changed, really, because I have this day job that is quite absorbing. For the majority of the year, the most writing I can manage per week is about two hours. I meet with my writing buddies —different people over the years. I meet with them for two hours once a week. And now we're doing it on Zoom rather than in person. Actually, what is different now is that it used to be with people who live in Calgary, and, now, I'm doing it with people who live in Ontario. I still do my two hours a week, which is definitely not enough, but it keeps me in touch with my work.

MJ: Early on during the pandemic, I remember these atrocious memes floating around, like, "When he was in quarantine from the plague, William Shakespeare wrote *King Lear*." Essentially, the idea was that you, too, ought to use your quarantine to write a masterpiece. In *Dr. Edith Vane,* the narrative seems to mock capitalist notions of productivity, with a satirical focus on both exercising in order to create the "optimal" body and the "publish or perish" mentality of the academy. Do you think the pandemic has helped us collectively question the compulsion to be "productive" all the time? Have you felt any shift in your own attitudes about productivity or being a "producer" of criticism or of art?

SM: Wow, I don't think I have a good answer for that. I think of the people, mostly women, who've suffered so much because of this pandemic, because of the invisible labor that they were doing that nobody was paying attention to before. Their productivity is in the toilet. I know female academics who've probably lost at least four years, career-wise, just in this one year, because of the amount of time it takes to catch up. Many women have lost their jobs. My hope is that we've learned something. My hope is that we have learned something in the academy. But I think people have amnesia. A year after the very last vaccine is administered, I don't know if people will remember. I don't know. That's a really hard question. All that stuff that was going around before, about, whatever, people baking sourdough bread and bragging about baking sourdough bread. It just did not happen to me. I mean, I started baking, but I was baking because we weren't allowed to go to stores and stores were scary. This is probably why I hate social media, too, where there are people who advertise their lives and what they've accomplished, and it pisses me off because it's not a race. We get to the places we get to the way we do. I can't write faster than I already do. I don't want to. I know some people who actually write too fast. They really should sit on that stuff for a couple years before they publish it because it's not done. I think that's something I've been fighting my whole life, as a writer, is trying to keep up. And what does that even mean? I should publish more. On the other hand, writing is precious. It's a precious thing. And it's your thing. You're the only one

who can do it, so don't rush. Quality takes time. I'm a firm believer in quality over quantity. It should take as long as it needs to take. The whole *King Lear* thing? Yeah, sure, prove it. Whatever, I don't believe it. Or he had a wife doing all the cooking and cleaning and didn't have to worry about that, so every day was a writer's retreat.

MJ: Thank you so much, Suzette. This has been just wonderful.

SM: Thank you.

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