

## **Box Art, Food Science, and Portuguese Protestants: An Interview with Katherine Vaz**

*Katherine Vaz is the author of two novels and three collections of stories who has drawn on her experiences as an Azorean-American in her writing and become perhaps the most recognizable name in Portuguese-American fiction. Her work has won several awards, including the Drue Heinz Literary Prize and Prairie Schooner Book Award, and has been translated into six languages. She has been leading the Writing the Luso Experience workshop at Disquiet International Literary Program in Lisbon, Portugal, since 2013. Vaz lives in New York with her husband, Christopher Cerf, and agreed to speak with me from her home over the phone. This telephone interview was recorded on October 18, 2017 in New Bedford, Massachusetts, and has been shortened slightly for length.*

**Hi, Katherine, how are you?**

Hi, Maggie. Good to talk to you.

**How's your life?**

Good. I've just finished a novel I've been working on for twelve years, and I just turned it into my agent, so I'm in that period of trying to distract myself by writing and doing other things. It's a book that started out with research in Madeira, and it's about a group of people who were converted to Presbyterianism on the island of Madeira and were violently driven off the island for religious reasons and were given refuge in Illinois, of all places. The Protestant societies there heard about their hardships as they fled the island and took up residence in Trinidad. So, that was a lot of research, and it's—I would hope it's turning into a sort of *Love in the Time of Cholera*. It's based on the true story of someone who was put in prison and raised in prison in Madeira with his mother, who was condemned to die for heresy. The sentence was commuted, but she did spend two and a half years in prison. He met and courted someone he met in the Lincoln household, which...it's a love story. He went off to the Union army and was injured and basically wandered a long time before he found her again.

This is based on a magazine article I came across, or was actually given to me many, many years ago at the Library of Congress. The woman in charge—and this

was in the Hispanic division—the woman in charge was Brazilian, and said “Oh, here’s something I think you should see.” And it was a map display simply called The Portuguese Protestants of Illinois. So, that was long ago enough that I remember doing my research with a yellow legal pad and going to libraries and writing things down. It was really before googling things was one way to operate, but I am a believer in doing the research with your physical being and going to the places and seeing what it feels like. You put yourself in the position of finding things out you wouldn’t otherwise. When I went to Illinois and I was in residence there—in Jacksonville, Illinois, which was one of the sites of the Portuguese settlement—there were all sorts of things I found that I might otherwise not have come across.

There are orchids on the prairie, which I didn’t know about. I went on a hike in the prairie and discovered that there are these bowl-shaped indentations all over the prairie that get full of grasses and can act as kindling. I don’t think I would have known that if I hadn’t gone. One day, I was there and suddenly all these cicadas were hatching all over the place. I was told, oh, it’s the thirteen-year cycle of them, and they happen to be here when you’re here, raining out of the trees and covering the sidewalks. And I thought, gosh, I don’t think I would know to research if I hadn’t put myself in the place. So that’s kind of a long answer to saying it’s been a long project with a lot of research and writing and rewriting. I put it away two years ago, thinking ‘I just don’t know what to do with it anymore; I’ve written it as well as I can.’ My father was dying at the time, and it just felt like I didn’t want to return to it. And then I got it out about a year ago, and I rewrote it from first page to last completely, and that took a year. It’s a long book with very short chapters, so that’s finished.

**Well, congratulations on it being done!**

Thank you. It was sort of a long project, and it feels like I just want to write short things now. I did a labor of love creative project, collaborating with a Portuguese painter named Isabel Pavão, who has exhibited her work all over the place. She lives in New York; she’s originally, I think, from Coimbra, but she’s lived in New York for maybe two decades now, and we got together through this wonderful organization in New York City called the Arte Institute. What the Arte Institute does, with Ana Ventura Miranda, is put artists together who are in the Portuguese community or Portuguese-American/Luso-American communities. I’d admired Isabel Pavão’s work, and she wanted to get together. We had no preconceived idea of what we wanted to do when we had lunch and started

talking, and we found out that we both had older husbands who had serious health issues. We just...kind of collaborated in this magical way after that. She pulled all these paintings together, and I wrote these prose poems, and that's something we've just put together.

I guess I always need something to be doing. I wouldn't say that this is a Portuguese or Luso-American project, except that I did collaborate with a Portuguese painter, but my heart—and I guess my artistic identity and source seems to always go back to the well of my Azorean background. The Arte Institute gets a lot of the credit for trying to put all sorts of artists together, and so we did this project recently. You know, it's hard for me. I'm not good at taking days off, I guess. I like to have something going, to have projects to do. I think getting them into the world is a new thing to learn how to do. I'm trying to explore the different ways there are in storytelling now, not just ebooks, but hybrid books, and I like graphic novels, and telling stories on iPhones, and I think there are just really interesting ways of storytelling now. Maybe because my dad was a painter, I like to think visually as well. I'm trying to learn those sorts of things, too.

**I do notice that in your newest book, most of the short stories in *The Love Life of an Assistant Animator* seem to begin with an image, mostly collages.**

The collages are mine. I did those. I love doing box art, and one thing I love about it, because it's a gear that's just abstract. In other words, in writing you have to think of the character, what's the story here, what's the measure of things, how much weight do I give to description, tangents and so forth. With box art, it's a very confined space, and I just do it instinctively. I tend to do it really quickly, but I don't do it often, for some reason. I sometimes sit down and nope, it's not there. After I lost my dad, I sat down maybe a year later and I did about six or seven box art pieces about him and losing him. I did it in about two weeks, and it was exhilarating and helped me then write about him. It was a tapping the source sort of feeling. I really recommend for writers—there's something good about getting up from the computer and doing something else that feels creative. I'm a good cook, for instance, and I do cooking in between things as a way to be creative. That part of the creative process where you have to stop pushing and let it come to you is a good thing to do. So, box art is something I love to do. I'm a big fan of Joseph Cornell.

And meanwhile, I'm also trying to learn...I just had lunch with this wonderful writer named Claire Cooney who does fantasy and science fiction, and is

someone who does reading Audible books and audio books. And I thought, I want to learn more about that, and she wanted to get together with me. I feel like there's a way we keep pushing as writers at trying to do something, and it's good sometimes to step back and to refill, or to let the work come to us in a way that requires a certain amount of patience.

**What was the first story or poem that you remember writing?**

You know, it's funny. When I was about twelve years old—this is going to sound very funny, but I went to a school called Our Lady of Grace in Castro Valley, California, which is near Oakland. I went to high school in Oakland. And we had an exercise every day where we were supposed to write a paragraph using the vocabulary words of the day, and I remember writing something that seemed to come from another place and made me well up with tears. I still remember that feeling, and I don't remember what I wrote. But I remember that feeling, and I remember deciding that's the feeling I want all the time. And I've told this story a lot, so forgive me if you've already heard it, but also when I was twelve, almost at the same time my godmother's housekeeper—and you know, that whole branch of the family is from the Azores—she got locked out of her house, and my father sent me to let her in. I wondered why she didn't just call us. It was the neighbor who saw her and called my dad. She was not literate in terms of English or Portuguese, but she also couldn't dial a telephone because she didn't recognize what numerals were. My father painted her phone dial; he said, "I think she thinks in color." So, he color-coded her phone and then made blots of color to correspond to, say, the fire department or our house or so on. To me, I instantly thought at the age of twelve that that was like another language, and that I wanted to be able to write or work in a way that I found a language of color. That color as a language, or a metaphor for love, was something that made sense to me. I think that's when I really started out as a writer, but it took a real commitment.

I remember in college, I decided I would write every morning from nine to twelve, because that's what Flannery O'Connor said she did, and I would go to the library and sit in one of those carrels. I don't even know if they even have those in libraries anymore. I think I wrote one essay that was okay, and the rest was stuff I just threw out. I was just teaching myself how to write. I also made a study of how stories were put together. I remember spending two years—I was sending stories out to magazines when I was in my early twenties, and I was getting encouraging letters back, but they were stopping just short of taking them.

And I thought, ‘I just want to study how stories are made. I can do images, I can do the description; I want to learn how stories are built.’ I taught myself. I watched movies and broke them down to study the bones of a story. I think I was in my mid to late twenties when I sold my first story to a magazine called *Black Ice*, which no longer exists. It was based on a teacher telling me, “You know, Katherine, you’re just trying to write like everybody else. Why don’t you tell me a story that’s yours? Every time you come in and talk to me about your Portuguese background and your family and what’s happened, I just think, why don’t you just write that?” So, I went home and I thought, why don’t I just write that?

So, I wrote a story called “Original Sin,” and I wrote it in one day. Instead of laboring over it, it felt like, alright, let me just say some things I know and that are from my family, from me and what I know. It’s very Californian, because that’s where I grew up, too. And it ended up in a magazine called *Black Ice*, which as I’ve said, they don’t exist anymore, but it made me so happy that it was there. And then my second story got picked up by a magazine called *The Sun*, which is still going strong. And then a friend read “Original Sin” and said, “Why don’t you write another one like that?” I wrote something called “Fado,” and I put “Original Sin” and “Fado” together, and I submitted it for an NEA and I got it. So I thought, alright, I think I found who I am as a writer, so I’m just going to write some more stories in this vein. I put them together, and that was the Drue Heinz collection—*Fado and Other Stories*. It’s almost like who I was was waiting for me to find myself and write about it.

When I was growing up, my father was an historian for the Portuguese community. He wrote a book called *The Portuguese in California*. My mother was a voracious reader; my mother was born in New York, actually, and met my father in California. She’s mostly of Irish background, a voracious reader. I came from an environment where books and painting were encouraged and respected. I think my dad said to me one day, “We have a lot of poets in our community and a lot of historians, but nobody’s writing short stories the way you can do.” In a way, my parents gave me a lot of encouragement by example, because my father painted a lot and my mother read a lot, novels and short stories. So that’s really my beginning, and since this is for a Portuguese journal, it really was when somebody said to me, “You come in and tell me these amazing stories about your family; why don’t you write those?” it was somebody saying that to me.

And now, when I teach at Disquiet, I think it’s people who I see are in the same kind of position. The stories might be different; I think a lot of us had

parents and grandparents who were immigrants, and so there was a bicultural adjusting to it. I'm curious about people who are third generation Portuguese, what do you write about, what do you do? And I've met through *Disquiet* a lot of wonderful writers of all ages and locations who are exploring that. I feel really gratified by *Disquiet*, because they've set up something that's unique. People who are of a Portuguese background, or Azorean and Brazilian and Mozambican, and the whole panoply of backgrounds get to say our stories need to be heard, too. I see that I had a similar pathway, it was just forty years ago now.

**I don't think I felt like I was allowed to write about Portuguese themes, or things that would directly relate to my family until *Disquiet* existed.**

Well, then that's wonderful news, and I'm happy to have had a role in that because I feel like *Disquiet* gives me a chance to give back to people who might be in the position that I was in.

***Disquiet* has changed your relationship with Portuguese-American writers and literature. How has it changed your relationship with Portugal?**

Portugal has always been really, really good to me and has treated me like I'm their visiting cousin. Maria Teresa Horta, it's worth mentioning, did a review of the first book I had published there, which was *Mariana*, the novel about the nun who wrote the love letters—although whether she wrote them or whether they were a French invention is under dispute, so it's important to note that I do know that, but I thought, why don't I write a book, a novel, that she is alive—but Maria Teresa Horta was a champion about writing about it and welcoming me to such a degree that I was so touched by that, and she's still my friend. She always asks about what I'm doing and what I'm up to. You know, we writers work supposedly in isolation, but I have always found that the writers who you might say are 'the real thing' are extremely generous and are welcoming and build a community. When she wrote this long piece about an American writing about this nun, she made it okay for me and she welcomed me.

I think it's important to take note of the generosity of writers who open their hearts to other writers, and I think *Disquiet*, as I say, deserves a lot of credit for giving me the chance to do that with usually younger writers; not all of them are, but usually. Who, as you say, "Gee, I didn't even know I could write about this," that the cultural attitude can change to be, "Yeah, you can." I remember a young woman coming up to me; I was doing a reading, maybe in California, and she

said, “You know, I’m from Hayward,” which is adjacent to the town where I’m from. I’d set some of my short stories in Hayward, because I’d thought, why not? It’s a place on the East Bay. And she said, “It’s funny; I never thought I could set a story there,” and I said, “May I ask why?” She said, “It just didn’t seem possible, because nobody would care or be interested in Hayward.” I said, “Well, you need to write an interesting story about Hayward,” and she laughed and said, “Yeah, but in fact, I didn’t even know that that could be true.” Things about that are very nice, because you feel like it not just says what’s okay to do in literature or writing or the publishing world, but what’s okay as a person for you to step up and do and claim and look at and investigate.

Writing is a long path; it’s impossible not to have missteps and disappointments and rejections. It’s just part of it, and I think rather than be discouraged by that...when I would send things out when I was younger, it used to be you would put a story in a manila envelope and send it out. I would actually wait to hear back from them, and if I got a rejection, I would just send it right back out again. After a while, you just get to know certain editors, and sometimes they contact you and say, “Do you have anything for me?” And I think it just requires a lot of patience and doing the work. Not being angry or impatient, like why isn’t the world noticing me? I think that gets into a very dangerous area where you’re mad at the world. You can write when you’re angry, and that’s good fuel to have, and you can write when you’re distressed, that’s good fuel. Whatever works. But being mad that your voice isn’t being heard can lead to trouble. You just have to think, let me look at this, and what can I write that is going to speak to people? And that’s a good thing to do. I’m sure I’m long-winded here and off topic, but I think that it’s good to be patient and always willing to learn more about what you do. I don’t think you ever get to a point where you know how to write, because each new piece is going to teach you something that you need to learn.

**On the line of advice, when you were younger, was there any particular advice, life advice or writing advice, that has stuck with you over time?**

In my case, it was somebody saying, “Why don’t you tell me some of the things that are yours?” I think that looking for what you have inside you is the place to begin. But then, just studying stories for what they can teach you about what you can do with your own material, because you have to be an original. You cannot write like anyone else. By definition, original means that it has to come from you. So, you learn with the part of your brain that’s always trying to learn

more, the way a musician has to be an original, but I've never met a musician who didn't study music, what's being done in the field. Mostly, it's trying to say, "What's my voice, and how do I create it?" If you just want flat-out the best advice I ever got, was one of the nuns in my grammar school saying, "Do not wait for the time that you think you're ready to begin; just begin." And that was the most valuable advice I got.

I do that exercise, just a mini-version at Disquiet, and I used to give it to my workshops when I taught at the various colleges and universities, what I call my *tabula rasa* exercise. To take a day and not do things; not crowd your agenda, don't look at email, don't flip through magazines, don't clutter your brain. Just let the screen down. And very often, you can tap into something that's there for you that you need to say, that you need to express. That's the starting point, going to the internal as a beginning point rather than looking to the external is probably the best advice to give to writers about who they're supposed to be and what they can do with what they have.

And I think, to be generous. I think this is going to be an odd thing to say, but never be jealous of another writer. Never be envious of someone's success, because it implies that there's only a limited amount to go around, and that's not true. And you're looking at someone else, not at yourself. The best writers I know have that generous heart, where they care about—Maggie, you know Denis Johnson, because you got to meet him. He had a generosity that came from who he was, and he extended it to other writers. It illuminated them in a way that was like a gift. I'm an advocate of being like that, and of stepping back to refuel and find out who you are as a writer.

**I have a couple of oddly specific questions. One of them is fun and one is serious. Which would you like first?**

Let's do the fun one.

**Okay, if you could pick any novel to live in, what would you choose?**

Now, that's interesting. I fell in love with *All the Light We Cannot See*, but it's set in World War II, so I don't know if I want to be in the novel. *Exit West* is one of my recent favorite novels, that the magical world that he created, I just wanted to be within that world, too, but it's about displacement. That's a funny question, because it implies, am I going to want to be in this world, or do I just want to be in this amazing thing this artist created. If it's that, I would say Tony Doerr's



All the *Light We Cannot See* really feels like I would want to be in, and *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid, I would also want to be in. And Elizabeth Strout did *My Name is Lucy Barton*; I just love that as a novel, and I felt like I was in that consciousness in that world, too. But if you're talking about childhood favorite novel, I'd love to be in one of the Oz books.

**I got that question from my little sister.**

Oh, that's really cool. Tell her that's very cool. I guess the easy answer is one of the Oz books, because it's when I fell in love and got enchanted by the idea that books created other worlds.

**You've mentioned *One Hundred Years of Solitude* before.**

That's probably my all-time favorite novel. The world that he created—of course, there again, that's a very dangerous world that he's writing about. In terms of what he created, the work of art, it's like saying, do I want to live in the painting *Guernica*? Yes, in terms of the work of art; I don't want to be in the landscape of a war, except I do like to feel what other people feel. We're stuck in our own consciousness for our whole lives. One of the things that art does is let us feel like we're somebody else, or in another world, which we don't get to do in real life. So that's one of the chief virtues, I think, not just of books themselves but of writing.

**Going off of that, my slightly more serious, oddly specific question: In your short story, "The Mandarin Question," which is in the book *Our Lady of the Artichokes*, you describe a girl whose after-school job is playing violin at a slaughterhouse in order to calm the cattle before they're killed, in order to prevent the dark-cutting of the meat. For me, that image, probably more than any other image in the book, is something that has stuck with me over time, and it's something that I think back on a lot. And I've always been curious—where did the idea for that story and that image come from?**

Oh, okay. Now, I'll tell you something that's very funny. I put that in my new novel, the Madeiran novel. It's in there, too, because there are slaughterhouses. Slaughterhouses actually started when Chicago was becoming a big hub in this country, and they were trying to figure out, how do you herd cattle from the West and deliver it to the East Coast. Slaughter used to be something that occurred in every town. We get the expression "this room is a shambles," well, that was

the original expression for a slaughterhouse. It's about to me, the metaphor and the reality both, that things occur out of our view that did not used to occur, so we're out of touch with it. The idea itself, I find very compelling. "The Mandarin Question" is an old philosophical problem that, in fact, Eça de Queirós wrote a short novel about called *The Mandarin*. I read that in Portuguese, I think when I was in college, and I thought that would be a wonderful thing, to have the Mandarin question in a contemporary setting. So, there again, oddly enough my Portuguese roots took hold with that. But the slaughterhouse idea, honestly, because I'm interested in cooking.

My parents wrote a Portuguese cookbook when I was young, and I love to cook. I have all those books...I don't remember the title now, but it's a compendium textbook where I discovered what dark-cutting was. It's a real thing, that if an animal is frightened, whatever hormones or I don't even know what it would be, shoot through the blood stream, and the meat toughens or gets darker, and that's a real thing. And so a lot of people come to say, and I think Temple Grandin is one of them, to make slaughterhouses more humane. I'm enough of a vegetarian that I think that's a misnomer, but okay. There is a real thing called dark-cutting. It was just a book about food science, and I discovered it while I was reading through there. So, I just put the Mandarin question together with the slaughter, I guess.

I think sometimes we have ideas. An idea is not a story; an anecdote is not a story. Sometimes these pieces exist in our heads that wait for the right places. They wait to find where they belong in the narrative. It's like, Borges has the idea of the library of the universe, that everything ever known or thought or felt is somewhere in the library there; you just have to pull the right books out and put them together. I think that maybe that's what I did with that one. I'll text you the name of the book where I found this, because it's something that I came across that I thought made a lot of sense. It helped me be a vegetarian, because I thought, well they experience fright and dread.