

WHY WERE WE TAUGHT TO FEAR WITCHES,
AND NOT THE MEN WHO BURNED THEM?

THE WITCHES OF MOONSHYNE MANOR

A NOVEL

READERS'
GUIDE



BIANCA MARAIS

"The new Practical Magic for a generation of women who value
sisterhood, friendship and fierce, fabulous feminism above all else."

—MARISSA STAPLEY, *New York Times* bestselling author of *LUCKY*



THE WITCHES OF MOONSHYNE MANOR

BEHIND THE BOOK WITH BIANCA MARIAS

I started writing *The Witches of Moonshyne Manor* back in January when the city was cold and dark, and we were in the midst of yet another lockdown. But despite how bleak the world felt, spending time with the Moonshyne Manor sisterhood was like holding my hands up to a roaring fire (the lovely, crackling kind that warms every inch of you—your soul included—as opposed to the dumpster kind that sometimes mirrors the state of the world). The fever dream six months it took me to write the novel felt like a vacation (that’s if you have a penchant for taking vacations at retirement villages, surrounded by cranky, horny, irreverent old women who heckle you constantly to Get back to work, Missy! This book’s not gonna write itself!).

Most people I know, women especially, are horrified at the thought of getting older. But I’m a Capricorn (and we’re apparently born ancient, getting closer to our true age every year), so I can’t wait for my seventies and eighties. It’s the only reason I eat kale and do my 10 000 steps a day: because I want to be around then, not just for the senior discounts, but that epic moment when the bras come off and the muumuus come out.

I speak to a ton of book clubs, many of which are made up of retired women, and what I delight in is how few f*cks they have left to give. If they don’t like a plot twist in one of my books, they’ll yell, “What the hell did you do that for?”. And then, because they think they’re muted, they’ll yell it again, only louder. All while instructing their husbands to get off their lazy asses, and pour them a damn drink. My favourite part of any Zoom session with them is the first fifteen minutes where they don’t give a sh*t that a famous author (hey, this is my letter, and I can elevate my status however I want) is sitting there waiting for the discussion to begin. That’s when they chat about how CBD oil is likely to clear up Iris’s boob rash, or when Stella can cha-cha again after her hip replacement, or where Louise should hide her husband’s Viagra this time round.)



What occurs to me is that we've all grown up identifying with some awesome character or another at various stages of our lives. I was first a Kristy (*The Baby-Sitters Club*) and then a Miranda (*Sex and the City*) and then a Dorothy (*The Golden Girls*). But then media and literature mostly stopped showing me what else I could be after my mid-fifties... like women stop existing after a certain age, like we don't have so much to look forward to. Which, as Jezebel will tell you, is utter bullshit, especially if you (like me!) have big plans to age as disgracefully as you possibly can.

The great news is that you won't be on that journey alone. As women, we've been looking out for each other since we were little girls. In our 20s and 30s, our friends became our family, getting us through our worst breakups and biggest career disappointments. They also kindly held our hair back for us when a few too many of those tequila shots did U-turns, making mad dashes for freedom. Sisterhood is one of the greatest gifts we can give one another, at any stage of life, and this book is a celebration of that. (#AgingGoals #AgingDisgracefully #SisterhoodGoals #BadBitches). And if we can all support and encourage each other, while simultaneously bringing down the patriarchy, then why not? It's all in a day's work; just another item to tick off that never-ending to-do list.

I hope that you love the sisterhood as much as I do, and that they give you something to look forward to as you keep on kicking ass and taking names, growing into your power as you break that glass ceiling. I'm not saying the witches are likely to hex you if you don't love them, but I'm also not making any promises that they'll behave. More importantly, I really hope you have a Sybil, Ursula, Jezebel, Ruby, Tabitha and Zelda in your life. And that you see yourself in at least one of these amazing women. May you also know a Persephone who gives you hope for the next generation of women who will be raised to be just as badass as you are.

Warm, witchy regards,

Bianca



Q&A WITH BIANCA MARAIS

The Witches of Moonshyne Manor is quite the departure from your first two novels, *Hum* *if You Don't Know the Words* and *If You Want to Make God Laugh*, which were set in South Africa and dealt with issues and experiences you'd witnessed growing up there.

Why the dramatic shift in topic?

I was born and raised in South Africa, living there until I was 36, and as a result, I had so many conflicted feelings about my upbringing during apartheid. That's what I explored in those first two novels while, at the same time, confronting my white privilege. After writing them, I felt I'd said everything I needed to say about that.

Although those books were heavy in theme, they were also humorous, and so I wanted to challenge myself to write something that fully leaned into the humor while also stepping out of my comfort zone genre-wise. I also wanted to try and reach a wider audience.

Although on the surface the stories are very different, there is definitely thematic overlap between *The Witches of Moonshyne Manor* and your previous novels. Can you tell us a bit about that?

Absolutely! I write to make sense of the world, which is why, regardless of the genre, I try to tackle issues that we grapple with on a larger scale like feminism, misogyny, racism, identity, etc. While I was writing the book, the US Capitol was being stormed. We were seeing women's rights being challenged, as well as gay and trans rights being taken away. It was infuriating to see. A lot of the anger and dismay that I was feeling about that got channeled into the book. I may have felt helpless, but the witches were able to fight back!

Although readers got glimpses of it in your previous two novels, what was it like to finally be able to fully unleash your sense of humour and let it run wild in this one?

It was such a gift, at a time when the world felt very bleak, to just have fun with my writing, and let myself be as funny and uninhibited as I wanted to be. These witches cracked me up daily, surprising me with how sassy and kickass they were. Many times, it felt like I was just a scribe they'd hired to jot down their stories. And I'm incredibly grateful that they chose me to tell them to.



How did you come up with the idea?



I'd had an idea for quite a while about two friends, in their eighties, who had always lived together, and where one had been in love with the other for all of their lives. And where the other was then diagnosed with Alzheimer's. And I kept circling that dynamic, trying it out at a seniors' village, etc. But it just wasn't working. And then I thought about having a whole group of witches living together in their golden years. But instead of retirement being idyllic, something happens to make it the most stressful time of their lives. The manor was the first character that came to me after the two original friends. I had to map it out fully before I could begin writing the story.



Which witch are you?

I'm an A-type, control freak Capricorn. So that makes me almost 100% Queenie!

If you could have one of the Moonshyne Manor witches' witchy ability, what would it be and why?

This is a tough one. I know that I wouldn't want to be Ursula, which means a witch who is clairvoyant. I really felt for Ursula – things weren't easy for her carrying that much responsibility. I think, considering the state of the planet and where we now are with climate change, I'd love to have Ivy's powers in terms of being able to control nature and the weather. Mother Nature needs a break! I'd love to be able to give her a night off!

The novel deals sensitively with issues of gender identity and fluidity—how challenging was it to write about that?

It was incredibly challenging. We can come to something with the best intentions, but that doesn't mean we'll always get it right. I've always been what used to be described as a 'tom boy'. I didn't like dresses and I liked to wear my hair short, almost shaved. I've never been very feminine and was often frustrated by how society needed me to behave so that it could feel comfortable about putting me in a box. Having said that, I don't truly understand the experience of those who have a gender identity or gender expression that differs from the sex that they were assigned at birth. I can only witness their struggles and rage against a society who vilifies them or makes their lives so incredibly difficult. So, I went into writing this novel with humility about everything I didn't know. I also had sensitivity readers read my work, and I am enormously indebted to them for correcting me when I got it wrong.



Discussion Questions

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?



Moonshyne Manor Distillery Recipes

IVY'S PINK PEPPER AND ROSEMARY INFUSED GIN

INGREDIENTS:

1 750ml bottle of Moonshyne Manor vodka
3 tablespoons juniper berries
1 tablespoon Indian coriander seeds
5 large sprigs of fresh rosemary
1 teaspoon dried lemon zest
1 teaspoon whole allspice berries
2 teaspoons Red Kampot peppercorns
2 teaspoons pink peppercorns

EQUIPMENT:

- A quart jar
- Fine mesh sieve

INSTRUCTIONS:

Put the juniper in a quart jar and add the Moonshyne Manor vodka.

Cap the jar tightly and let it infuse for twelve hours or overnight.

After a twelve hour pre-soak, add the rest of the herbs and spices to the vodka

Let it sit and infuse for 72 hours.

Strain the infused gin into another jar using a fine mesh sieve.

Store in a bottle or jar in a cool, dark place for up to a year.

Enjoy in a dirty martini.

Jezebel's addition:

The dirtier the martini, the better.

Just like a lover's mind.

JEZEBEL'S PEPPER AND ROSEMARY INFUSED DIRTY MARTINI



INGREDIENTS:

2½ ounces of Ivy's special batch pepper and
rosemary infused gin
½ ounce black olive brine
½ ounce dry vermouth
½ tablespoon ground black pepper
Lemon slice
Garnish: olives of choice

EQUIPMENT:

- Cocktail shaker or mixing glass
- A martini glass

INSTRUCTIONS:

Start by rimming a martini glass (not that kind of rimming,
you dirty minx!)

Place the ground pepper in a dish,
run a lemon wedge along the edge of the glass,
then dip the glass into the pepper and twist to rim. Set aside.

In a mixing glass with ice, add the gin,
olive brine and vermouth.

Stir until chilled.

Strain into the prepped glass and garnish with an olive.



IVY'S ELIXIR OF LIFE: SMOOTHIE FOR SENIORS



EQUIPMENT:

- A smoothie blender
- A glass
- Jezebel's amendment:
shot glasses

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 cup frozen cranberries
- 1 cup fresh or frozen mango
- $\frac{1}{2}$ apple, peeled
- $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. fresh grated ginger
- $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp. ground cardamom
- 1 tsp. organic cinnamon powder
- 1 Tbsp. cacao nibs
- 3 Tbsp. hemp seeds
- 1 cup water

INSTRUCTIONS:

Combine the ingredients in a blender and pulse until smooth.

Pour into a glass and savour nature's bounty.

Jezebel's amendment: shot glasses and knock 'em
back one by one like you're at a nightclub
about to go wild on the dancefloor.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Bianca Marais is the author of the beloved *Hum If You Don't Know the Words* and *If You Want to Make God Laugh* (Putnam, 2017 and 2019). She teaches at the University of Toronto's School of Continuing Studies where she was awarded an Excellence in Teaching Award for Creative Writing in 2021. A believer in the power of storytelling in advancing social justice, Marais runs the *Eunice Ngogodo Own Voices Initiative* to empower young Black women in Africa to write and publish their own stories, and is constantly fundraising to assist grandmothers in Soweto with caring for children who have been orphaned by HIV/AIDS. In 2020, Marais started 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. Marais lives in Toronto, Ontario.