

# Interview with Myriam J.A. Chancy

The author of *Village Weavers* (2024) discusses the themes of migration, Haitian identity, family & the 'madan sara' bird interwoven through her life and novel.

*Interview by  
Callie, Isobel  
& Michael*

**CALLIE:** You were born in Haiti but moved to Canada as a child and now live in the United States. How have these three regions and cultures shaped you differently as a writer?

**MYRIAM J.A. CHANCY:** This is a great question and one that I'm not often asked as people assume that migration occurs simply, from one place to another. I would say that for me, the effect of having migrated twice has had multiple impacts. On the one hand, return to Haiti is hampered by this double migration as my parents remained in Canada while I moved on to the US. They became a second mooring post after Haiti, while I had to develop new adaptation skills in the US as a person of African descent. In Canada, as a child, I could readily identify as being Haitian as

everyone I knew came from an immigrant group and identified as such. This was less possible in the US, where I emigrated from Canada at age 20. As a person of African descent, I faced different challenges given the still unresolved history of slavery in the US and the lack of acknowledgement in Canada of complicity with that history. Since Black identity in Canada is primarily derived from the Caribbean and Africa, while, in the US, Caribbean and African immigrants are less visible as a category, the capacity with which I was able to identify (and be identified as) with a particular community in one country or the other has been somewhat complicated. In the last decades, however, I've seen a kind of reversal of this reality with Blackness in the US complicated by migration of people of African descent from all over the world—from the Caribbean, Latin America, and various parts of the African continent— and Haitian migrant groups having a more formal identification within the US.

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In Canada, in my experience of late, it seems that Haitians have lost recognition despite being highly represented in French Canada. Anglophone Canada has been very slow to recognize Haitian artists, despite having had a bilingual and Haitian

Governor General, Michaëlle Jean. I'm not sure why this is and I would be curious to find out more about this phenomenon.

**CALLIE: The Lyre is primarily made up of student literature, many of our authors have never been published before. What advice do you have for our readers about getting into the literary scene and becoming a writer?**

**CHANCY:** My best advice is first: read, read, read. Then: Revise, revise, revise. Read literary journals that publish works that resemble your genre of writing, whether that is literary fiction or something else. Find out about their submission guidelines and submit work to them, always asking for feedback in case your work doesn't get accepted but an editor likes what they see and would welcome new work from you in the future. Pay attention to that feedback. You don't have to take all of it on board but feedback helps you to figure out how to better achieve what you seek to in your work. If editors are turning back your work, you need to figure out why and you need to figure out how to do what you intend better. Reading others helps to close the gap, sometimes. Once you do receive feedback, be willing and prepared to revise your work. Much of writing is revision, as you write, and after you've submitted your work. Finally, don't give up. If one editor says, 'no,' another might say 'yes' to the very same work. Circulate your work and build relationships with editors.

**ISOBEL:** Continuing from earlier, what connection do you maintain with Haiti?

**CHANCY:** My connection with Haiti is ongoing given that I was not only born in the capital, Port-au-Prince, but both my parents are Haitian. This means that my home life was steeped, continuously, in Haitian culture—its food, its music, its literature. Conversation with both my parents, my father’s parents, and numerous uncles, aunts and cousins who remained in Haiti, and then Haitian colleagues working in the fields of literature, culture, and history, have nourished that primary connection through the years. Even though I’ve been unable to return physically in recent times due to both personal and political issues, I stay on top of developments on the ground and try to remain current with organizations that I continue to support working in the health sectors and women’s cooperatives. My connection with Haiti, regardless of return, will never be severed (*desounen*); Haiti defines who I am.

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**ISOBEL:** What was the inspiration for your newest book *Village Weavers*?

**CHANCY:** My mother passed away in 2019 at age 84 after a prolonged illness. All of her sibling group as well as a number of half-siblings also passed away within two to three years of her own death. I realized as this unfolded that a generation of my family had disappeared, people born in the 1920s and 1930s who had lived through Haiti’s golden years post-US Occupation, and also seen all manner of governments come to pass from dictatorships to elected officials to coups. It occurred to me that I had not seen something of this generation reflected in literature, especially not in English, and I wanted to write a novel that spoke about the decades they lived through, the changes they witnessed, and what this generation’s migration may have looked like, all the while remaining anchored to the country of their birth. Besides being witness to Haiti’s more glorious decades, then its descent into violence through dictatorship and beyond, they also held on to Haitian culture and never entirely assimilated to those of the countries in which they found themselves. Home was always elsewhere, not entirely nostalgic, but simply not in the new country, somewhere between it and the connections with other family members and other peoples who also struggled for their inde-

pendence (like Algerians, whose struggle figures in *Village Weavers*).

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ISOBEL:

The village weaver bird is symbolic in both the book and its title. What is the significance and inspiration behind the choice to centre the ideas of community and belonging through this bird?

CHANCY: Well, I was playing around with the gender metaphor that the bird offers for signifying the main characters of the novel and their pursuit of “family,” or “community,” both in Haiti, and in the geographies to which they migrate.

The weaver bird or village weaver was originally imported from West Africa so,

in itself, represents the forced removal of Africans and their relocation to the Americas. Then, I learned about the nesting habits of the birds and found out that the male birds create as many nests as they can during a nesting season; after they have made a nest, attracted a mate, and have eggs with that mate, they move on to create another nest and then another, and so on, having many broods in any given season. The nests hang in clusters, thereby creating a “village.”

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I was interested in this movement of the male village weaver from one nest to the next but in what they left behind, their mates and broods. In effect, I became more interested in the nests themselves and their villages, and how these might constituted a human reality.



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Of course, in the human village, many nests having in common one progenitor becomes a problem when the society orders itself through primary or “legitimate” nests and deems the others illegitimate, which is the case for Sisi and Gertie’s homes, with Sisi being the “outside” child and Gertie the “legitimate” one. The novel reverses the notion of who benefits from this order in showing the love that Sisi receives within her home as opposed to the isolation Gertie suffers in hers, despite Gertie’s being considered the primary home or nest.

Finally, others have written about this bird in terms of its local name, “madan sara,” which is the name given to the market women because of the noise they supposedly make gossiping. But when I learned more about the qualities of the birds themselves and their skill at weaving fronds in order to make nests, I was led to think about how many market women also weave goods for sale and started thinking about more ways of thinking about the village weavers as emblematic of other aspects of the society and weaved these into the fabric of the book.

**MICHAEL: The main characters in *Village Weavers*, Gertie and Sisi, start as friends but soon realize they are also related. Why did you choose to emphasize familial bonds?**

*CHANCY:* In a way, I was pointing to the opposite - that the two characters are connected beyond this accident of blood. It’s the fact that they are related which leads others, particularly Gertie’s older siblings, to want to keep them apart so they have the difficulty of overcoming this connection that others do not want them to cultivate. What ultimately brings them back towards each other, is something deeper than blood, related to the inner workings of the culture, or the land itself, to the river gods, the Simbi, which the girls learn about through Sisi’s grandmother who tells Sisi that that she is from a place where the land speaks through them, shelters and keeps them. Momo, Sisi’s grandmother, urges Sisi to always look for this deeper resonance when making friends, when marrying, and it is that pull that ultimately brings her back into Gertie’s orbit or she in hers.

**MICHAEL: What emotions and ideas do you want the reader to take away from your books? What about specifically for *Village Weavers*?**

*CHANCY:* I certainly want readers to be moved by my books, to feel a human connection to the characters and, through that process, to have a new sense of Haiti, whether they are Haitian or non-Haitian. If Haitian, I want them to feel affirmed in their culture. If non-Haitian, I want the

reader to recognize all they have not been told or exposed to regarding Haitian history and to realize that Haiti is rich in so many ways, despite the condition it finds itself in presently. In terms of *Village Weavers*, I would hope that not only do readers come away with a better sense of what Haiti was like in the 40s and why so many Haitians from that period think of Haiti as a place of return but also the very difficult decision so many had to make to leave in the wake of dictatorship and how that departure has impacted their lives in new spaces. I would hope that readers would carry from the novel a sense of compassion for immigrants and the struggles they face in holding on to their cultures. Also, I hope that they appreciate the relationships between the girls and women in the novel and find a compelling richness in them.

**MICHAEL:** Expanding on this, what are you excited to explore in your upcoming projects?

**CHANCY:** I will be continuing my explorations of Haitian culture, certainly, though I think my next novel will be more contemporary in nature. Migration will continue to feature largely in new work, but perhaps through new angles.

**CALLIE:** Are there any Haitian writers who have inspired you to continue connecting to Haiti in your novels?

**CHANCY:** I honestly don't read other Haitian writers to connect to Haiti or to conduct research for my own novels. I read them because they are great writers and we should all be reading them. It's fun to see what my contemporaries are doing and thinking about whether in or out of Haiti and I hope they read me in the same spirit. That said, in addition to Edwidge Danticat, I would encourage others to read Haitian authors such as Yanick Lahens, Dany Laferrière, Lyonel and Évelyne Trouillot, and Marie-Célie Agnant. Among newer authors, you might want to read Juliana Lamy, Fabienne Josaphat, and out of Quebec, Chloé Bernard-Savoie and Valérie Bah.

