

Karen Michalson
Q & A
The Maenad's God



1. **What is your newest book, *The Maenad's God*, about?** It's a blend of psychological thriller and magical realism that concerns a spiritual war that's been fought for thousands of years; the war between the ancient arts of music, poetry, and love; and the equally ancient forces of artistic envy, oppressive law, and authoritarian religion.

Boston 1992. Alienated FBI agent Pete Morrow discovers a murder and becomes obsessed with Jade McClellan, a mysterious mafia-backed rock musician. Tough-guy Morrow has never been in love before—but Jade is almost magical, creating a private imaginary world from his songs and stories that rapidly become the only thing Morrow values in his otherwise empty life. But there's a problem. Morrow's investigating a mafia family that's investing in Jade's musical career. Being open about their relationship could get both of them killed.

It was selected by *Independent Book Review* as one of the best novels of 2022.

2. **Where did the inspiration to write it come from?** A mental image of a man in his mid- to late-twenties who was a) sitting on my living room floor and playing a four-stringed guitar and b) Canadian. I didn't play music at the time—or even know much about Canada. My spouse (who had played guitar when he was younger) told me that sounded like a bass, brought me to a club to see a bass (that's how musically naïve I was), and that resulted in my learning bass guitar as a kind of research into the character, who turned out to be Jade in the book. When I began writing, however, the story's perspective emerged from a different character, Pete Morrow the FBI agent, which meant I needed to do a lot of research about the FBI. The story just happened as I wrote it.
3. **Were you surprised – delighted – to see *BlueInk Review* give you a starred review and call your book “strange and beautiful... addictive”?** Yes. Who wouldn't be? I've been blown away by many of the responses from critics and readers. My goal was and is to share this story—to see it live out in the world—and to connect with readers through it. That's the point of creating anything—making a sacred space for an alternate reality that those who are inclined can share. From that perspective I don't see art as a business so much as a gateway to alternate ways of being. Others will disagree.
4. **Your book is a story about a spiritual war that has been fought for thousands of years. Why is the same battle confronted by every generation?** Not to go all macrocosm/microcosm—because nothing is ever that neat—but the universe is wired that way, and humans reflect that, and so we get these generational battles. The war between entropy and creativity, the tension between the two, is one manifestation of the elemental tension between all particles of matter—negative/positive charges. That's why the true sources of evil in this book aren't the “monsters” like Hugh McCrae who embody entropy—they are as necessary for everything to exist as creativity is. We know ourselves in a large part through knowing what we aren't. Pete, like a lot of us, is caught between the two ways of being in his mundane life and in his imaginative life. He's in the middle of this war. We all are. Every day.
5. **Prior to *The Maenad's God*, you penned *The Enemy Glory Trilogy*. What is that about?** The three novels (*Enemy Glory*, *Hecate's Glory*, and *The King's Glory*) form an epic fantasy trilogy told from the point of view of Llewelyn, a brilliant magician who made a rash decision to become an evil cleric when his friends and newfound allies betrayed him. Most of it is told in the form of a “trial” in which Llewelyn, who is dying, tells his life story to his former friend (now enemy) who is keeping him alive at sword point.

It's the story of legal transgressions, the use and misuse of law, the philosophy of good and evil, individual choice and its consequences, the nature of punishment, trials, justice, ethics, magic, wizardry, witchcraft, betrayal, politics, and death.

It's also a fun read.

6. **You pen a blog called Matter Notes. It is about the war on the humanities, creativity as spirituality, and your observations on culture and society. That's a lot to tackle. How do you go about informing and enlightening others on these topics?** When you see universities gutting humanities education and the pure sciences and replacing them with glorified jobs training programs, hiring adjuncts at ridiculously low wages instead of investing in tenure track positions, AI replacing human creativity, people being forced distort their lives and natural ways of thinking and being to placate the demands of bots and computer algorithms – it's easy to see that the humanities, the arts, and their votaries and practitioners are under attack. This is really an attack on critical thinking, on the culture, on human spirit and potential—and in many ways—on our nature as creative beings. I blog about these things when time allows—and I never want for material, although I often want for time.
7. **In a prior life, you were a criminal lawyer. How did that experience influence or inform your writing?** It didn't. Unfortunately, it separated me from my writing for many years. I don't regret practicing, and I learned a lot from my colleagues and from my clients, but I regret doing it as long as I did. I went to law school after having played music professionally for about a decade and after having written and published fiction for longer—because, for many reasons, I found the creative “industries” to be getting increasingly ugly and corporatized, and decided it was time to “grow up and do something real.” However, anyone who thinks reality lurks in law courts needs to spend time there. There came a point where I had to be honest with myself—I'm getting older, and I don't have time to invest in being something I'm not—so I started fiction writing again (*The King's Glory*) and returning to my roots in rock music in a more focused way. For all its' problems, and for all of the issues and ugly competition between artists, the arts are the most honest place I can be.
8. **You also played in a progressive rock band and released four albums, including songs based on your first two novels. How do you blend your musical background with your writing?** Two of those albums: *Enemy Glory* and *Enemy Glory Darkly Blessed*, are prog rock concept albums based on incidents from the first two trilogy books. We (meaning my band, Point of Ares) performed them all over the USA, complete with a stage show that involved sword fighting and other surprises. We were Homeric bards storytelling through music. We also wrote a concept album that was inspired by the myth cycle of Apollo and Dionysus—and Dionysian mythology certainly threads its way through *Maenad*. My musical background informs *The Maenad's God*, but in a sense it also came out of *Maenad*. I needed to understand the character I kept “seeing” in my mind—so I learned bass, played in bands, formed a band, and immersed myself in the indie rock scene. My observations on how musicians live and see themselves, get along (or don't get along) with bandmates, and physical setting stuff – stage setup, 1990s era equipment, what gigs are like etc. inform the book, but the book informed my music – and maybe still does.
9. **How would you describe your writing style? Which writers are your favorites?** It varies. There's a noticeable strain of satire in all my books—because satire comes

naturally from the perspective of outsiders being honest about things and I'm an outsider. In the trilogy it's quasi-Victorian. In *Maenad* it's a blend of hardboiled and what's sometimes called "literary" (because Pete, my narrator, loves literature and often has a poetic edge to his hardboiled assessments.) A lot of readers are surprised by the amount of social satire—in a good way and email me that as dark as my books can get, they're also laugh out loud funny, which brings some comic relief to the darkness. Favorite writers: right now, I'm on a reading binge of old translations of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* – comparing translations is fun. I like Robert Fitzgerald's translations. Favorite writer ever: Roberto Calasso. I tend to read more classics than contemporaries, though, and more nonfiction than fiction.

10. **What challenges did you have in putting your latest book together?** If I was challenged by anything, it was the themes that the characters led me to explore both on and off the page. And once I began to see these issues in the so-called "real world," I couldn't unsee them. Particularly the war society wages against the arts - not just against artists, but the godawful, petty mundane policing that goes on against everybody's creativity and sense of self. We're all born into social structures that divide us from ourselves. Art helps heal that awful divide; imagination is a sacred space in which we can begin to reclaim ourselves. This happens between Pete and Jade when they create a private world as a subversive act against a toxic culture. Jade and his band mates experience what many real-life creatives do – in that their sense of self is always contingent – always being held hostage to a world rooted in a rock-solid materialism that gives no quarter to the numinous, or to anything that can't be measured. Get famous, make money for a corporation, or spend a lifetime carrying a sense of unearned shame like a neon scarlet letter for having ever dared to think of yourself as a real artist. It's ghastly – and it causes a multitude of mental health problems among real-life creatives.
11. **Tell us about how you practice your craft. Specifically, how do you know when you have nailed down the dialogue between characters?** When I write dialogue, I often hear the characters in my mind—the same way I saw the mental image—and try to get all that down. On a good day it's almost like transcribing. I "hear" the line's meter before I hear all the words – the words come as an echo to the meter. When what's on the page reads or sounds like what I heard in my mind I know I've nailed it down.
12. ***The Maenad's God* was chosen by *Independent Book Review* as one of the best books of 2020 and it won a *Literary Titan Gold Book Award*. What is it about your book that the critics are drawn to?** The word "different" comes up a lot. It's not straight genre – in some ways it's a literary version of a progressive rock concept album that draws from different genres: psychological thriller, magical realism, romance, myth. I don't "write to market" – meaning I don't study the top sellers in a particular genre and write the same thing – which is standard "writing advice" today, unfortunately – and so people often say my stuff is "not what they expect" and either love it or hate it for that reason. Rarely are reader responses lukewarm.

What did surprise me was that reviewers are unanimously calling it a crime thriller or a psychological thriller—because I never set out to write a thriller and I wasn't thinking of it in that way while I was writing it. I don't even read that genre. I intended and thought of it as literary fiction: character driven, idea driven, layered.

But I can see how a book with a hardboiled FBI agent narrator that involves a bizarre murder investigation, the mafia and the music business, political corruption, etc., could be legitimately called a thriller –and now I'm embracing that.

13. **You have taught nineteenth-century British literature at a university and now you are writing books. Which is harder – to teach about books or to write them? Why?** Teaching and writing are so different I don't know how to answer that. They each have their own difficulties and their own joys.

I prefer writing – in fact, I left teaching because the time commitment and academic politics and pressure to research/publish in academic journals left me no time to write fiction, and early in my academic career I had unexpectedly fallen in love with fiction writing.

I had started writing fiction when I got out of my doctoral program and was completely engrossed in that—so by the time I got a coveted tenure-track position I didn't really covet it so much anymore. And even less when my department pretty much ordered me to stop writing fiction but refused to even read it. I was hired because of my first book—a work of scholarship examining why fantasy literature was excluded from the 19th-century canon and relegated to genre—and that was fine—but God forbid I should actually write a literary fantasy—which *Enemy Glory* is.

So, I was feeling so passionate about the story I was working on that I left a hard-won tenure-track position after a year just to immerse myself in it. That was the beginning of *Enemy Glory*, the first book of the trilogy, which also started (sort of) with a mental image — this time of a young man being held at sword point by an older man.

“Fall in love with art and there's no telling where you end up,” as Llewelyn says in *Hecate's Glory*

14. **You wrote a passage on your blog that I find fascinating. I want to share it here — and then have you elaborate further. You wrote: “If you can't write for yourself, if you can't write for those shadows creeping along a silent wall and measuring out your time on this earth in increments of everything else you could be doing, if you can't write while knowing you are destroying your time on a beautiful madness that nobody will ever validate and many will mock - then please don't call yourself a writer. Real writing isn't for sissies. It's more than putting words on the page. It's denying everything else to be able to put those words on the page while knowing that the mess of language you've created is all you'll ever get out of it.”** It's from a blog post called “Why We Read Strangers” and it's become something of a personal motto. The post concerns valuing fiction writing

for its own sake and the courage that sometimes takes in a culture that devalues, and often mocks, art that doesn't make money for a corporation, or bring fame to the practitioner.

15. ***The Maenad's God* is set in 1992, a time when life was not yet infected by the Internet, smart phones, or streaming content. Why does the story take place then?**

I wrote an early version of the story in the 1990s. I put it in my closet for a long time, due to leaving the arts and practicing law—and I've taken it out and reworked it, so it's now historical fiction. But I also think the early 1990s are a fascinating time. Society was certainly immersed in the promise of technology, but the internet barely existed outside of some academic or government environments. Pete has clunky, limited email at work but certainly not at home. The novel ends around 2 months before the world wide web went public, so it's nearing the end point of relationships being primarily in person as opposed to through a screen. A sea change began in the late 1990s in which we all started to become more solitary and separated and loneliness started to become endemic.

Pete, who's a bit extreme in his personal isolation for the time, would be considered normal today in terms of not having or experiencing much connection with others. I think more people relate to him now than if I had released the book then, and relate to his need for companionship, to be heard and understood by another.

Also – late 20th century rock music is the best, and so much of the best of that music died in the 1990s – or at least its cultural impact did.

Also, the story couldn't happen today. The nonstop irony of the late 1990s sanitized the culture into the hyper-realism we all must put up with now, that wearies the soul, so art as a gateway into an experience of the numinous is something we've been separated from since then.