



***SANTUÁRIO: SEEING BRAZIL THROUGH A SMALL TOWN***  
**AN INTERVIEW WITH MAYA FALKS**  
***SANTUÁRIO: O BRASIL EM UMA CIDADEZINHA DO INTERIOR***  
**UMA ENTREVISTA COM MAYA FALKS**

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**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Literatura brasileira; Romance; Processo de escrita

“Back in the old days, in a small house in the deep, deep, deep interior town of Santuário...” Thus begins the recent novel by Brazilian writer Maya Falks, published by Macabéa Edições in July 2020. The book is accompanied by a map of the fictional town and a travel brochure. By way of twenty stories, the reader becomes acquainted with the muddy streets, religious festivals, and convoluted relationships that depict Santuário in all its poetry and brutality. The peaceful town, according to the cover blurb by Regina Dalcastagné, “reveals itself, little by little, as the ground of tragedies and acts of violence that begin inside the characters’ homes and extend themselves to the town’s political, social, and religious life.”

Maya Falks is the author of the poetry collections *Poemas para ler no front* (Poems to Read in the Front, 2019) and *Versos e outras insanidades* (Verses and Other Insanities, 2017), as well as the novels *Histórias de minha morte* (Stories of My Death, 2017) and *Depois de tudo* (After All, 2015). Falks is also the creator of the Bibliofilia Cotidiana project, a blog that publishes book reviews as well as cultural critique (<https://bibliofiliacotidiana.blogspot.com>). In the following interview, the author discusses the inspiration of *Santuário* and describes the book’s evolution from a set of independent short stories to its final form as a novel. Falks also reflects on her writing career and examines this work in the broader context of her other publications. “What I want to avoid, at any cost, is that the reader feels indifferent towards my work,” declares the author.

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**Luciana Namorato: Tell us about your experience composing *Santuário*. What inspired you to begin writing this novel? How did your initial idea for the novel unfold?**

**Maya Falks:** Years ago, I submitted a collection of short stories for a SESC (Serviço Social do Comércio, a non-profit organization in Brazil) Award, which I did not win. Later on, talking with a bookseller friend about this collection, I mentioned that I had written it in a way that each story was quite independent from the other. This friend then implied that it was perhaps a mistake to do so; that the stories should instead follow a thematic line. I thought a lot about it. Then, in 2019, after a long period of depression, I decided to resume my literary journey through short stories. A book of short stories. So I started to imagine a thread, a thematic line. At the time, I was at my family's house in a small resort town in the northern coast of Rio Grande do Sul, a place with basically no infrastructure. I started to imagine that a small town could offer me the thread that I needed. Immediately, there came to my mind the soap operas that I watched as a child. My favorite soap operas were precisely the ones that took place in very small towns, where one could find all sorts of human characters in a reduced space. These towns are interesting because they function as a type of microcosm for human existence. One can understand a lot about our country just by observing life in these places.

Human relationships—including the ones that fit into clichés—simply fascinate me, so I decided to follow the human relationships in this small town as my guiding thread. I started to write each story with this idea in mind, with the goal of exposing different facets of human behavior. I deliberately chose to compose a number of characters in a caricatural way. The writing process was very pleasant, perhaps because I wrote the stories without any pretense. To this day, I am still amazed by the creative potential embedded in *Santuário*. I honestly could spend the rest of my life telling stories about this town, without ever getting tired. It is simply that fun to me.

**Luciana Namorato: *Santuário* does not follow the traditional structure of the novel genre. Each chapter of the novel could easily be read as an independent short story. How did you decide that you were writing a novel, instead of a collection of short stories?**

**Maya Falks:** I confess that, at first, I was not aware of how much the stories complemented each other. In fact, I had not realized that I was writing a novel until my publisher read the book and immediately classified it as a novel. At that point, I decided to add two new chapters, in order to further develop one of the main characters. The publisher also proposed to change the sequence of the stories in order to make the narrative more chronological. The tour guide that accompanies the novel was an idea that occurred to me only during the book's pre-sale. I must say I am very happy with the final result.

**Luciana Namorato: The Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk argues that every novel has a “center,” or an insight about life. In your opinion, what is the “center” of *Santuário*?**

**Maya Falks:** I believe the novel’s center is the hypocrisy embedded in human relationships. All stories end up bringing a little bit of that, either through a character’s behavior or through some reference to a real-life event. For example, one of the chapters mentions the “Casa da Dinda,” or the godmother’s house, in direct reference to the mansion that belonged to Brazil’s former president Fernando Collor de Mello, impeached in 1992 for corruption. Other examples include a mother lying to her daughter in order to guilt trip her into getting married early, or an influential man who trafficked women. *Santuário* itself embodies this hypocrisy. It presents itself as a conservative town, oriented toward religious and family values, but while it does have a brothel, it lacks a hospital. In fact, hypocrisy already begins with the town’s name. A sanctuary is a peaceful and sacred place, and *Santuário* is definitely neither peaceful nor sacred. Human relationships are complex and nuanced, and I used my characters to expose this.

**Luciana Namorato: In addition to *Santuário*, you are the author of two books of poems and two other novels. Do you see a common theme running through your work?**

**Maya Falks:** I would say that my publications share a common impulse towards breaking society’s taboos. Death, mental health, and sexual violence are recurring themes in my work, because people still resist talking about these topics. I like to explore the ugly side of society, to make “dirty” literature, to tread in mud, but without abandoning the lightness of poetry. I am not opposed to entertainment literature, but I do believe in art as a tool for social transformation, and no transformation can take place in silence, while pretending that problems do not exist. And since these are painful subjects, I like to use irony and sarcasm in order to allow for some comic relief, because I also like to make people laugh. As an author, I am not afraid to expose my own weaknesses. The novel *Histórias de minha morte*, for instance, was censored in schools in my hometown of Caxias do Sul for openly dealing with “uncomfortable” themes, such as racism and sexual violence. But this is precisely what moves me as an author. In that regard, I feel satisfied. What I want to avoid, at any cost, is that the reader feels indifferent towards my work.

**Luciana Namorato: How do you compare you as a writer today and the Maya Falks that you project for the future?**

**Maya Falks:** Right now, Maya is rediscovering herself as an artist. For a long time, I believed that I should follow a straight line, without deviation from style and themes that I previously explored. *Santuário*, however, showed me that I can play with words freely. In this novel, for instance, I exercised a variety of narrative styles. I also experimented with drawing, even though I am not an illustrator. *Santuário* sort of freed me, and this is precisely what I will be looking for from now on: freedom. The future Maya will hopefully be the product of this

liberation. She will be more experienced in the art of letting go with a pen in her hand, she will keep looking for new ways of telling old stories. I cannot say for sure if my future books will be better than the past ones, but I feel confident in the choices I have made so far. One thing I can say for sure: The Maya of the future will be as passionate about literature as the Maya of today.

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FALKS, M. Mares para navegar. In: \_\_\_\_\_. *Santuário*. Rio de Janeiro: Macabéa, 2020, p. 70-74.

## MARES PARA NAVEGAR

Não havia mar em Santuário. Nunca houve. Ao contrário das lendas que morriam com os velhos da cidade, Santuário nunca tinha sido deslocada do litoral para o interior pela força de um feiticeiro que resolvera punir a cidade toda porque sua amada o trocara por um surfista. A lenda ia mudando de versão a cada geração, e todo mundo sabia que era mentira, mas dona Mocinha insistia que conhecia os envolvidos.

Noutra época, as crianças gostavam de sair da escola e correr para a casa de dona Mocinha para comer um pedaço de bolo ouvindo as histórias dos antigos. Alguns reconheciam bisavós ou tataravós nas histórias, mas os pais sempre negavam sua veracidade. “Dona Mocinha já é velha, está senil”, diziam eles.

Para as crianças, aquilo pouco importava, nem o melhor doceiro da cidade fazia bolos como os de dona Mocinha, nem os melhores contadores de histórias, convidados pela escola, sabiam como atrair tanto a atenção da criançada como fazia aquela velhinha de cabelos presos em coque desde sempre.

Dona Mocinha nunca se casou. Diziam que seu grande amor morrera na guerra, mas ninguém sabia que guerra fora essa. A história dela era um grande enigma para todos—nem idade nem sobrenome, tudo o que sabiam é que parecia ter nascido velha, com seu avental bordado em sua pequena casinha ao lado da pracinha, e única detentora da receita do melhor bolo do mundo.

Mas o tempo passou até para ela, que era velha desde o começo das eras. A voz cansou, as mãos entortaram, e as novas crianças já não paravam em sua casinha para comer bolo e ouvir histórias. A única coisa que restou da dona Mocinha que toda a cidade conhecia era o saudosismo de um mar que nunca esteve lá.

Falava das águas em ondas como se tivesse nascido dentro delas. “Ah, as águas azuis com sua espuma branca e as conchas que se escondiam na areia molhada”, criava ela em sua imaginação, alimentada por filmes ainda do cinema mudo.

Certa feita, dona Mocinha começou a falar da sereia que fora sua amiga de infância, lá quando o mar ficava a poucas milhas da igreja, onde hoje ficam as plantações. Dizia que o belo canto dessas criaturas inspirava as madrugadas dos apaixonados de Santuário. Nessa altura da vida, a velha tinha vincos ao redor dos lábios capazes de guardar os mais antigos segredos, e ela tomava por testemunha o padre Estácio, que emparelhava com ela em idade e demência.

Padre Estácio não dizia nem desdizia a pobre velha—e nunca revelou se era por respeito a Mocinha ou por ter alguma ponta de verdade nas lendas que encantaram tantas gerações. Mas em Santuário não havia nem lago nem açude. O mais próximo de mar era a piscina no quintal de Nona Quitéria, madrinha do ex-prefeito que há muito não era visto em lugar algum da cidadezinha.

Dona Mocinha, a figura mais amada e talvez testemunha ocular do dilúvio bíblico, não era eterna como acreditavam as crianças do passado, que hoje já eram pais e até avós, e um dia o doutor da cidade vizinha desenganou a pobre velha, dizendo que, do corpo dela, só funcionava mesmo a lembrança do mar que nunca existira naquelas bandas.

Foi uma tristeza de dar dó. Dona Mocinha, apesar de tudo, era uma velha sozinha, não deixaria nem filhos, nem netos, nem sequer suas histórias, que iriam com ela para debaixo da terra. Foi então que um daqueles que a tinham com carinho teve uma ideia e foi correndo falar com Nona Quitéria, buscando aprovação. Ela, outra velha já meio mais lá do que cá, adorou e ligou para dois ou três que agilizaram o plano.

A movimentação agitou Santuário—motores e caminhões de areia entrando pela garagem de Nona Quitéria deixaram todo mundo curioso. No dia marcado, antes de dona Mocinha bater as botas, foi levada em comitiva para o quintal da madrinha e acomodada em uma colorida cadeira de praia posicionada sobre uma areia fofinha, onde seus pés se sentiam em casa. Aos poucos, as rugas dos lábios foram se abrindo como um leque, revelando um sorriso semidesdentado e uma emoção genuína que fez escorrerem, no rosto vincado, lágrimas de felicidade. Com ajuda do motor, a piscina da madrinha ganhou ondas, e as crianças montavam castelinhos ao redor de dona Mocinha.

A velha senhora suspirou, respirando a “maresia” e ouvindo na memória o canto das sereias. Antes que o dia terminasse, Mocinha já navegava em mares profundos para nunca mais voltar, estampando na face serena o sorriso mais sincero que alguém já viu.

## SEAS TO SAIL

*Translated by Luciana Namorato*

There was no sea in Santuário. There never has been one. Contrary to the legends passed down by the town's elders, Santuário had not been moved from the coast to the interior by the force of a wizard who had decided to punish the whole town because his lover had left him for a surfer. A different version of the legend appeared with each new generation, and everyone knew it was a lie, but dona Mocinha insisted she knew the individuals involved in the story.

In the past, the children would run to Mocinha's house as soon as school ended to eat a slice of cake while they listened to stories of the past. Some people recognized their great-grandparents or their great-great-grandparents in her stories, but their parents always denied the veracity of the tales. "Dona Mocinha is already old and she is senile," they would say.

But the children could not care less, because the best baker in town did not make better cakes than dona Mocinha, and the best storytellers, invited by the schools, did not know how to keep the kids' attention like that old lady with her hair always kept in a bun.

Dona Mocinha never got married. People say her true love died in the war, but no one knew in which war. Her story is a mystery to everyone—no age, no last name, all they knew was that it seemed like she had been born old, wearing her embroidered apron in her small house next to the town's square, and that she was the owner of the recipe for the best cake in the world.

But time passed even for her, who was old since the beginning of time. Her voice was now tired, her hands were now crooked, and young children no longer stopped by her house to eat cake and listen to her stories anymore. Dona Mocinha's only legacy was the town's yearning for a sea that had never been there.

She would speak of the waves as if she had been born inside them. "Oh, the blue sea with its white foam and the shells hidden in the wet sand," she would create in her imagination, fed by old silent films.

One day, dona Mocinha started talking about a time when a mermaid was her friend, a time when the sea was just a few miles from the church, where nowadays one finds the plantations. She would say that the mermaid's beautiful song inspired the nights of Santuário's lovers. At that point in her life, the old woman had creases around her lips that were able to keep the oldest secrets. Her only witness was priest Estácio, since the two of them were close in age and dementia.

Priest Estácio would neither confirm nor deny the things that the poor old woman said—and he never revealed if his silence was out of respect for Mocinha, or if there was some truth in the legends that enchanted so many generations. But in Santuário there was no lake and no dam. The closest to a sea was the swimming pool in the backyard of Nona Quitéria, the godmother of the former mayor, who recently had not been seen anywhere in the little town.

Dona Mocinha, the most beloved figure in town and perhaps eyewitness to the biblical flood was not eternal as the children once believed. Children that today were parents or even grandparents. And one day the doctor from the neighboring town gave up hope on the old woman, saying that the only thing in her whole body that still worked was the memory of a sea that never existed in that region.

Everyone's heart sank. Dona Mocinha was just a lonely old woman. She would leave no children, no grandchildren, not even her stories, which all would be buried with her. It was then that someone who held her dear had an idea and went quickly to talk with Nona Quitéria in search of approval. Since Quitéria was very much like Mocinha, an old woman at death's door, she loved the idea and called two or three people to put the plan into action.

The commotion roused Santuário from its slumber—the motors and sand trucks that entered Nona Quitéria's garage made everyone curious. At the scheduled date, just before dona Mocinha's passing, she was accompanied by an entourage into the godmother's backyard and accommodated in a colorful beach chair, which was positioned on top of fluffy sand, where her feet felt at home. Little by little, the creases around dona Mocinha's lips opened like a fan, revealing a toothless smile and a feeling of joy so genuine that tears welled up in her creased face. With the help of a motor, the godmother's pool gained waves, and children made sandcastles around dona Mocinha.

The old lady sighed, breathing the ocean smell and listening, from her memory, to the mermaid's song. Before the day ended, Mocinha already was sailing the deep seas, never to return. In her face, the sincerest smile ever seen.

FALKS, Maya. Aos versos. In: \_\_\_\_\_. *Poemas para ler no front*. São Paulo: Patuá, 2019, p. 31.

## AOS VERSOS

Voltemos aos versos  
Às armas que trago comigo  
Entre rimas pobres e almas podres  
Entre a imensidão do deserto e o oceano  
Voltemos às estrofes mal acabadas  
Bombardeadas, banhadas em sangue  
Da alma inocente desprendida do corpo  
Da ferida aberta, da boca gelada  
Nas marcas que ficam, voltemos aos versos  
Às súplicas de um perdão dispensável  
Pelo crime jamais cometido  
As balas do meu canhão são feitas de letras  
Da pólvora, o cheiro queimado da inspiração  
Da ponta da pena a estratégia rimada  
Da mão do oponente, meu corpo ao chão  
Voltemos aos versos, porque há de ter um belo epitáfio em meu túmulo

## TO VERSES

*Translated by Luciana Namorato*

Let us return to verses  
To the weapons I carry on me  
Among simple rhymes and rotten souls  
Between the desert's vastness and the ocean  
Let us return to poorly finished stanzas  
Bombarded stanzas, bathed in the blood  
Of an innocent soul, detached from the body  
Of an open wound, of a cold mouth  
In the marks left, let us return to verses  
To the pleas of a dispensable pardon  
For a crime never committed  
The balls of my cannon are made of letters  
From gunpowder, the burning smell of inspiration  
From the tip of a quill, the rhymed strategy  
From the opponent's hand, my body on the ground  
Let us return to verses, because my grave shall have a beautiful epitaph