

WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT MARGUERITE SHEFFER



Marguerite (Maggie) Sheffer is a New Orleans-based writer and Professor of Practice at Tulane University, where she teaches design thinking and speculative fiction as tools for social change. She previously taught English at several Oakland high schools. Her debut story collection, *The Man in the Banana Trees*, won the 2024 Iowa Short Fiction Award, judged by Jamil Jan Kochai. It was named a Debutiful Best Debut, an Electric Literature “Most Exciting Debut Collection,” and a finalist for the PEN America/Robert W. Bingham Prize. Maggie is a founding member of Third Lantern Lit and the Nautilus and Wildcat Writing Groups, and she belongs to the Brackish Artist Collective. She earned her MFA from Randolph College. She was a 2023 Veasna So Scholar in Fiction at *The Adroit Journal*, a top-twenty-five finalist for Glimmer Train’s Short Story Award, and a 2024 Chautauqua Janus Prize finalist for her story “Tiger on My Roof.”



QUESTIONS: *THE MAN IN THE BANANA TREES* (2024)

- Sheffer depicts several mentorship and parental relationships. How do these bonds, or lack thereof, inform their respective stories?
- Sheffer covers many different time periods, sometimes within the same story. How does Sheffer use time as a literary tool?
- In “The Observer’s Cage,” what parallels are drawn between the relationships of the three main characters and the cosmos they observe?
- Who is the narrator in “How We Became Forest Creatures”? Who are the “chompers” and “snatchers”? What might the violent event in the story represent?
- Sheffer includes objects in many of the stories that seemingly symbolize grief. What are these objects, and how do they work to represent those emotions?
- What is the role of art, creation, and performance in *The Man in the Banana Trees*, and what does it mean to the different characters? How does that role change throughout time?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

- “*En plein air*” and “The Disgrace of the Commodore” feature ghosts as central characters. Such is also the case in books like Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. How do these characters function in these texts, and what insights do they give readers with their unique perspectives?
- Many of these stories fall into the category of speculative fiction. How do Sheffer’s writing and visions of the future compare to other speculative fiction?
- Sheffer specifically examines burgeoning technologies like AI in stories like “In the Style of Miriam Ackerman.” What are her takeaways regarding such technologies and their effects on culture and art?

LITERATURE AS PRAXIS

- A number of these stories portray and satirize how various systems have failed both specific and broad groups of people. First, consider how we can improve the education system to meet the needs of all students. Then, think about how to confront the larger societal powers Sheffer lambastes in her writing.
- Many entries in the collection allude to environmental degradation and climate change. What can we do to address these pressing issues before we see the irreparable damage depicted in these stories?
- As technologies such as AI become ubiquitous, how can we use them without sacrificing our connection to human artistic expression?
- Who are the people in your community most impacted by grief, and what can you do to reach out and give them support?
- How can we promote artistic expression as a crucial method to help people cope with difficulties in their life?

COMMUNITY RESOURCES

- [Council for Exceptional Children](#)
- [Climate Action Network](#)
- [Coalition for Sustainable AI](#)
- [American Art Therapy Association](#)
- [Bereaved Parents of the USA](#)
- [Sandy Hook Promise](#)

ADDITIONAL READINGS

- Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005)
- Greg Kwedar, *Sing Sing* (2024)
- David Foster Wallace, *Oblivion: Stories* (2004)
- Brenda Peynado, *The Rock Eaters* (2021)
- Bradley Sides, *Those Fantastic Lives* (2021)