

# On finding the space to create



Author Amina Cain discusses not taking notes, the connection between meditation and creativity, and finding excess in experience.

November 22, 2022 -

As told to Maddie Crum, 2069 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#).

**You introduce your latest book, *A Horse at Night*, as “a diary of fiction.” What does that phrase mean to you?**

In a way it's an ironic phrase because I'm not typically a diary-keeper in a formal sense. But it started to feel, when I was writing about what I was reading, like I was going into a diary-like space.

**Do you usually take notes as you read? Or do you prefer to let it wash over you?**

I prefer to let it wash over me. I don't take notes. I feel like that probably would—and I don't think this is true for everyone, and it probably depends on the kind of writing a person is doing or the kind of reading they're doing—but I feel like I would be less immersed in what I was reading if I was regularly taking notes on it. I'm a big believer in absorption, what we absorb when we read, what stays with us, and in a way, I think when I write about fiction, I get to see what has stayed with me. It's this way to see what's in my mind and what has struck me the most. I can read a novel and not know necessarily from the outset that it's a book that's going to stick with me for years or maybe for my whole life. That parts of it will keep reappearing to me. I like that process. I like that space of seeing what's in my mind.

**I enjoyed the form of this book, how scenes from your memory were blended pretty fluidly with scenes from fiction you've loved. Do you ever feel, when remembering fiction you've loved, that the scenes are like your own memories?**

On one level they don't feel like mine. But there's also the space in which you as a reader are meeting what you're reading, and that is its own space. I think often I get excited when I'm reading something that describes an experience or a feeling or moment that I connect to or that I've experienced but that I haven't really put into words myself. There's this recognition. I recognize it.

And I think in terms of memories, if I'm remembering reading something or remembering some part of my life, they can get blended. There is this blending that happens or this blurring that happens, but that's the space that feels more like mine, the blending, not the original scene.

**Are there other diaries of reading or memoirs about a person's reading life that you've enjoyed?**

I haven't read a lot of them, but a book that I talk about in *A Horse at Night* that's a book on reading and writing is *The Naive and the Sentimental Novelist* by Orhan Pamuk, and I love that book. I mean, it's a book that has stuck with me throughout the years that I just can't quite shake. And really, it's this double, it's very much about reading and about writing together.

**You write early on in this book that you often begin your work with a setting. Are these settings places you've experienced firsthand or are they fictional? Are they composites of places that you've experienced?**

They're often drawn from a real place, sometimes two real places. In the case of *Indelicacy*, I was drawing from Chicago, where I lived for many years, and an imagined London. Because when I started writing *Indelicacy*, I'd never been to London, although I did go there after working on the book for a couple of years, but it still stayed the imagined London. So I definitely combine places. And the novel that I'm working on right now takes place in this empty coastal town that's part tropical, part, I don't know, the south of France, even though I've never been to the south of France. I'm someone who desires places a lot. Places that I haven't been, so they tend to come into my writing. If I want to go somewhere and I can't go there, it comes into the writing.

**I like that you wrote about character and landscape as intimates.**

I mean, obviously they are separate, but I think maybe it's similar to how when I'm writing, things sometimes blur. I do often start with setting. That usually happens before character, it's setting and objects, but then the narrative voice will start to come in for me, and that's how I find character. I find the character from the narrative voice, but the narrative voice is generally pretty close to the setting. The setting is what's informing what the narrative voice is going to be like.

**You write also about landscape painting as it compares with fiction, so I wanted to ask a little bit about your relation to visual art.**

I did my MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and I'd always liked art, and I had worked at the Wexner Center for the Arts at the coat check and information desk for three years, and that felt like a kind of art education for me. But I don't think I realized at the time that there would be any intersection for me with writing and art. I don't think I ever really intentionally thought that I would write about art in my fiction or in this case, in this book, nonfiction. I see what is most important to me in what I've written and then it becomes clear.

**It's interesting that you don't keep a journal or a diary based on how you're talking. I don't know why.**

That's why I've started to wonder, when I do work on fiction and also non-fiction, if it is a diary-like space. Because I write to see what's inside my mind. I'm a thinking person, but I see it through what I write down. It becomes my writing. Maybe because I think journals are these spaces that people return to. They return to them every day, or almost every day, or weekly, and writing in general is that space for me. There's this return to it always.

**In the book, you pose a question that I really liked. You wrote, "What is it that happens when a narrative allows us to look at an image longer than we are 'supposed' to, when it is just as interesting as the story being told?" I'm curious about whether you think slowness and this lingering quality is especially meaningful or important today when many of our lives have become fragmented and fast-paced. I just notice a lot of contemporary fiction that's very fast paced, to mirror the pace of modern life-.**

I do think it's important. I think because things are so fast, it's important to have these slower moments and moments where we rest within fiction, but also just a sense of space around things. I'm always really drawn to space, and I feel like we need it, and I feel like I need it. Especially with social media, I feel like I allow a lot of noise to be in my head through it, and so I think that makes me crave space. Space in a reading experience or space in a writing experience, or just space in experience in one's life.

**I want to ask about your meditation practice. You wrote that the austerity and the pointedness of the chants has influenced your writing.**

It definitely has. I started writing seriously a few years before I started meditating, and I think for a long time I saw them as separate activities. But I did, I think, come more into myself as a writer as I was starting to meditate. I think when I first started to become aware how intertwined they were was when I was answering questions during conversations or interviews about *Creature*, and people would ask me questions about my writing

process, and I would always go back to meditation.

I think I meditate partly because of the idea of spaciousness, which I just mentioned a minute ago. I need space in all areas of my life. I need space in my mind. I need space in what I'm writing. When you're meditating, you're trying to let thoughts go and be in a more spacious place, and that's always what I'm doing with writing. Not trying to let my thoughts go, but just making space in the text, clearing things out. Letting objects talk to each other, which they might not be able to do if too many things were there in a particular story, for instance.

**You also write about sentences in the book. I like how you describe sentences that can haunt or conceal secrets or hidden meanings, and I enjoyed the moment when you realized that your own more spare or spacious sentences conceal secrets as well as a more maximal sentence might. Would you say it's accurate to describe your work as minimalist?**

When I'm trying to finish something, finish a story, I've often felt like the way that I know it's done is when there are these clear threads of things that have appeared and are talking, communicating with each other, but they also have enough space around them. And I live in a pretty minimalist house in terms of what's in the house, so I think in general, I'm just naturally drawn to it as a person.

**How else can you tell when a project is finished or nearly finished?**

I'll just say that it looks different for me with short stories and the one novel that I've completed. Because I think with the short stories, that was sort of enough, making these threads appear strongly and then having them talk to each other and then making space around them. I think there's some of that at work, or there was some of that at work when I was writing *Indelicacy*, but at the same time, there was more of a plot going on in that novel than I had originally planned for. Or maybe 'planned' isn't the right word, but since I've never been a very plot-driven writer, I wasn't sure if when I wrote a novel there would be much of a plot. But as my editor said to me, "You created a plot and now you have to deal with it." Because I was having a hard time. I knew what the ending of the book was, but I didn't quite know what the last quarter of the book was that would get me there, and so I kept having to rewrite it. And so in ending the book, I had to find what felt true to it. I wrote a few endings, or ending pages or ending last quarters of the book that felt really false for the book. It became about not destroying the dream of the book at the cost of plot.

**You write in *A Horse at Night* that fiction is a space of plainness and of excess. Could you elaborate a little on what that means to you, a space of plainness and excess?**

The plainness I think relates to, again, spaciousness or emptiness or the minimalist nature of my writing and the desire for that at times in what I read. And of course, I love to read lots of different things. I love to read maximalist sentences and very long, layered novels. So that's the plainness. The excess comes not through the writing itself, but maybe excess in experience. And I feel like it's in contrast with a Zen Buddhist meditation life or practice, but I'm very drawn to heightened experiences and elevated states—as a reader, too. The excess for me is, it's not in the sentences, it's not in the writing itself, but it's about experience. Excess in experience.

**Amina Cain Recommends:**

Anything [Marie NDiaye](#) has written

["Dali Rama"](#) by Josephine Foster

Walking in the morning when it's starting to get light/walking in the evening when it's starting to get dark

[Dōgen's \*Extensive Record\*](#), translated by Taigen Dan Leighton and Shohaku Okumura

Getting rid of things

[Deus ex Machina](#) by Jennifer Pilch

[deader than dead](#) by Ligia Lewis

The musical instruments and boats of Alex Branch

Name

Amina Cain

Vocation

writer

□