

On finishing what you've started



Author and researcher Christina Oakley Harrington discusses what it took to open her London bookstore, the challenge of being creative in academia, finding what only you can create, and working without a completion instinct.

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As told to Greta Rainbow, 1856 words.

Tags: [Magic](#), [Writing](#), [Research](#), [Publishing](#), [Business](#), [Process](#), [Focus](#), [Inspiration](#), [Independence](#).

You started Treadwell's, a bookstore and "intellectual salon" in London, in 2003. If you look in a newspaper's business section from that year, all the stories are about the digital rise. What prompted you to open your doors in such a climate?

I was a university lecturer in the '90s, and I opened Treadwell's when I decided to leave academia. There were five esoteric bookshops in London and at least one or two of them had recently closed down. But I knew that the city had long supported them and knew that there was a space. I went to the bank for a business loan, and this young banker looked me in the eye across the table and said, "Um, have you not heard of a thing called Amazon? I think you need to look into that." And I was able to say to him, "I have a business plan that takes it into account, thank you very much." And lo and behold, it happened. I knew from day one, mercifully, that I was going to be in an Amazon world. So I knew from day one that I was going to have to offer something that Amazon couldn't.

What does that look like?

We offer the experience of escape from the world. A bookshop is a spa for book people: you go in and you come out an hour later feeling completely different. We offer expertise and conversation. When people go to buy occult or witchy books or books about druids, my experience has been that you really want to talk to somebody who has met them. You want help. That's worth traveling for, rather than just pressing a "buy" button. So it started with me and two volunteers who just kind of turned up, in one tiny space with a desk. When people came in it was like, "How are you? What are you looking for? That author lives in London, do you want to meet them, do you want me to get your copy signed?" And then because of my background in academia, our [lecture series](#) was always a part of the plan.

What is the difference between learning in a university setting versus a bookshop lecture?

Academia wasn't designed for creativity. It's very good at doing what it's supposed to do—give people with very, very trained minds all the time in the world and a lot of quiet, and that's how you get brilliant scholarship. I love and have huge respect for scholarship, but it's not *practice*. Difficulty happens when you try to be creative in academia. That's not a place of happiness.

For *The Treadwell's Book of Plant Magic*, you consulted over 200 sources on the ways plants have been used to find love, achieve success, become invisible, and so on. But you also translate this knowledge via your own, distinct writing voice. How do you blend creativity and scholarship?

I don't. Being creative means actually not being in your head. Being creative is being in the moment; it's very embodied. If I'm making something, or doing a ritual, or doing witchcraft, or communing with a full moon on top of a mountain, then the analytical, critical part of the brain is having a sleep. And when I'm doing scholarship, reading through manuscripts and such, it's exciting. I love this kind of research. But it's a very different high and it's a different part of the brain that's actually activated.

I did Medieval history, a lot of dead languages, manuscripts, all of this stuff—and I didn't go on vacation for 11 years. Yeah, I got published with Oxford University Press, I got fellowships and awards, but I never took a break.

Do you regret anything?

No, I'm super happy. There is a part of me that's quite extreme. When I opened Treadwell's, I worked for six days a week for 10 years. "How do you open a bookshop in the world's second most expensive city?" Well, I lived very, very, very simply for a decade. We were open from 12 p.m. to 7 p.m., and one night a week would run a lecture [on everything from the history of phallus worship, to Carl Jung's spiritual quest, to crystals and mirror scrying workshops]. Then we'd have a party till 11 or 11:30. People would go for the train and I would stand there in the basement at a little sink washing wine glasses with a volunteer until the last train at 12:15. I'd sleep for eight hours and get up again. That's not making me into some kind of hero, but to say that the thing that made me understand that kind of focus was being in high-level academia. Sacrifice was normal to me. I had to unlearn it.

How did you make the connections needed to host a new guest speaker every week?

I spent a lot of time on the internet, finding people who seemed really cool. Before there was scholarship about pagan religions or occult stuff, you really had to go through university departments. I would write cold emails. My emails always started, "Dear Dr. So-and-so, please forgive an email out of the blue."

They were lovely; I got so many replies. I would note that our pagan and occult practitioners are known to be respectful to scholars, and we ask our scholars to be respectful to people in the audience who may have a personal connection. Mutual courtesy was not the norm in 2003. A Celtic scholar would be like, "Can you *believe* that people actually do this, that they actually go to Stonehenge? How *funny*." And I would tell attendees that you can use the scholars' information and incorporate it into your practice, but don't criticize them for the fact that they don't practice themselves.

How do you straddle the line between the scholarship of witchcraft and the practice of it?

If you're writing a history of something that you practice, you see it through different eyes. But just because I was initiated in a witches' coven when I was 26 doesn't mean my writing should be about my experience. For the book I'm doing now with Claudio Rocchetti at Black Letter Press, *Dreams of Witches*, I'm examining what witches in the 1920s, '30s, '40s were doing and I see it, because I do it too. I knew people who were doing it in the '40s. I see the dynamics. I understand the way ritual works. I can do my job well because of that.

Do you ever struggle with having a wide breadth of knowledge? I'm personally known to keep 80 tabs open but they often just...sit there. How do you decide what's worth writing a whole book about?

I slowly learned that you can only do a few things really, really well. If you're going to write, you have to put on blinders and just not look at the other stuff. I chose to write about the history of the thing that I love best. It's a really important part of who I am, and it's never been written about with any kind of sensitivity or delicacy. That's the thing to find—what is it that only you can write?

Do you have advice for someone who is looking to learn about a subject and they are daunted by how much is out there?

YouTube videos. They're actually painless—they're free, and if it's terrible you can just skip to the next one.

Then you can move on to documentaries and podcasts. I believe books are for later, stage three or four. And I recommend buying them only when you can leaf through them. Now you can virtually "look inside" books but still... I don't buy a book that I haven't touched.

I'm excited for *Dreams of Witches*' promise of leather spines, hand-numbered pages, and marbled paper. Sometimes you pick up a book and you're like, "I could probably just get this at the library." Other books feel necessary to own right that second.

In the world of the occult, people have started calling them "talismanic books," this idea that a book is something that has power or a kind of an aura around it, and it's beautiful in itself. My focus is always going to be to make sure that what's written is worthy of the beautiful casing.

Is that a big part of your job, curating Treadwell's to weed out the fluff?

We call it "dark fluff." Like, "Hello, I am mysterious and wear all black and here is my book about summoning demons." Well, the phrasing that you used to summon demons in the Middle Ages, in Queen Elizabeth's time, in John Dee's time, basically didn't change. You can get it photocopied off a PDF and tweak it a little bit, draw the demons or the sigil that calls them slightly differently. Anybody can do that. Have you actually practiced this? For how many years? Limited-edition silk pages are not enough.

I imagine it's easier to spot who is legit when you're actually in a room together. What do you think about physical versus virtual spaces?

We're animals. We smell one another. We sweat. We have pheromones. You can never recreate the experience of physically being together, but that's not to say that we can't do other things. We did do workshops and lectures online during the pandemic, and it's like apples and oranges. I think they complement each other. Nothing beats listening to a Zoom that you're slightly bored by, taking a few notes and wandering around your room. But then a really good lecture in a cozy, beautiful atmosphere is transporting. You get to meet the lecturer afterwards, maybe you sit next to people who have similar interests and you go to the pub together and end up making new friends. They're going to give you different things.

What does your creative process look like? Can you work around other people?

I need silence and darkness. I work well in a dark room with a lot of heat. A few pictures on the wall are a bonus, but honestly I just get so in the zone that everything else disappears. Lack of distraction is my friend.

Does it take a particular type of personality to be able to sit down in a dark room and write a book?

You have to have a completion instinct, the inner insistence that something needs to be done. I have no completion instinct and it's a terrible thing. I put a picture of a gravestone on the wall above my computer to remind myself that if you don't do it tomorrow, there is going to be a point where it is too late. My writing process is nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing. Deadline approaches. Twenty-four hours of crying all the time. Submission.

Christina Oakley Harrington Recommends:

Siddhartha by Hermann Hesse

visit Stonehenge at midsummer

Georges Bizet's opera *Carmen*

ohnno kau-swe, a Burmese chicken soup

skinnydipping by moonlight

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Vocation

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