

# On creating mental space to make room for deep work



Poet Diana Arterian discusses making art about real people, finding community outside of the internet, and how history deepens our understanding of the human experience

September 25, 2025 -

As told to Ruth Madievsky, 2175 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Poetry](#), [Process](#), [Success](#), [Focus](#), [Mental health](#), [Education](#).

**This book is such a master class in mining an overwhelming historical archive. How did you navigate centuries of research and all kinds of media from archival texts to films to physical ruins?**

I certainly had the resource of being in a PhD program, knowing how to move through archives, and having access to literature that otherwise might be difficult to have access. Something that made it a little less overwhelming was my ignorance, in that I took Latin in high school for three years, but I had a terrible teacher. I don't remember any of it. My information about Agrippina was limited specifically to what is written in English. It was a relatively contained arena of material.

The first poem in the book has me spinning out on the many myths that surround this real person. When I first encountered Agrippina the Younger as an historical figure, it was one of the many versions of her assassination. It was really powerful for me to realize that the archive is not trustworthy, which is something I'm continuing to reckon with. That's particularly true for women in ancient history and every group that has been maligned explicitly and implicitly. If there is any piece of text that an ancient woman wrote or said and it survives, it's a miracle.

**Is that uncertainty in the archive part of why you chose to explore Agrippina's story mostly in poetry versus nonfiction, which you also write?**

At the time, I was in poetry workshops. I was like, "This is what I do." Also, it [the topic] felt like an epic poem. The thing that's really activating to me about poetry is that, because it's so ancient, anything is allowed. I have a lot more liberty in terms of allowing gaps and uncertainties and opacity.

**The book took 10 years to write! How did you stay sane and connected to the project over a decade?**

I was doing so much at the same time. I was working toward completing my doctoral work and working on [poetry co-translations](#). My mother had severe health issues, and I was doing a lot to support her during that time. In terms of sanity and connection, Agrippina just felt like such a rich, powerful, and compelling figure. Even if I ended up taking some months away, I got drawn back in quickly, especially when I thought about ways to make the book better, to give a greater sense of Agrippina, what she means to me, and what she means in a grander sense.

**Tell me about that grander sense. How did tracing Agrippina the Younger's rise in the Roman Empire help you understand your place as a woman in America?**

Her context is so important—why should I be interested in this woman who died 2000 years ago? The narrative that I was told during walking tours in Rome was that this was a woman who desperately wanted power. She was evil. She murdered and manipulated and fucked people so that she could get power. She even had an incestuous relationship with her own son. She married dudes and poisoned them until she became Empress of Rome. And then her own son had her assassinated. The end.

She's actually far more compelling than that. She was living in a time when women were legally second-class citizens. She also came from a very remarkable family—her parents were almost like the Kennedys. Agrippina grows up wanting power despite the fact that she's told through law and society that she doesn't deserve any. She manages to have a son and marries the emperor Claudius, who happens to be her uncle. She essentially runs the Roman empire using her husband as a puppet. Then he dies (the rumor is that she poisons him), and her son starts to run the empire. But he's very young, and she uses him as a puppet too. Eventually, he starts to resist and exiles her and then has her assassinated.

**That's wild.**

It's also really stunning to read ancient material that feels like it could be spoken on the Senate floor today. I think about how little has changed in many regards, particularly in the United States. It's telling that we are having to contend with a president for a second time who won both times he was competing against a woman for that seat.

**I've heard people speculate that the first woman president will be a Republican, which feels very possible to me**

Or a vice president because the president is a man who dies.

**Speaking of lineages and sequences... sequencing a poetry collection is so challenging. There's usually no obvious or "logical" way to do it. How did you decide whether to go chronologically, to use a more vibes-based approach, or some secret third option?**

The verse poems—the ones that are lineated—operate more or less chronologically. Those didn't feel too difficult to sequence because I could follow this truly unhinged chronology graph that I created as I was writing the book. I would follow it and think, "Okay, I need to write about this person's death or this wedding." The squishier elements were the prose poems about me. I sequenced those so that they vibrated more alongside the chronological pieces.

**I guess when you have 10 years to work on something, you can try it in a lot of different permutations! I like how you use the word *vibrating*, because it does feel like an act of physics or chemistry.**

Yes. I also do the thing where I lay every piece of paper out on the floor and my cat starts to destroy them.

**You've been mostly off social media for many years now. How has that affected your creative process?**

I have more mental space. I'm not necessarily thinking about taking a cool picture or having a pithy tweet. Those are really fun, and I do think they're creative and great. I just, like many people, felt like social media was really not helping my mental health during the height of the pandemic. I certainly miss out on things. I'm sure that more people would know about this book and my work if I were on social media. But for the most part, I've taken it as a summons to instead have more meaningful interactions with people, even if I haven't talked to them in a few years. I try to go to AWP and the American Literary Translators Association conference every year, because those are my people and my communities, and it helps them remember I exist outside of the all-encompassing realm of the internet.

**You've heard me talk about my literary theory of bleeders and pukers, where bleeders bleed over every word, cleaning up as they go, and pukers barf up a terrible draft, and then they clean up the mess later. What are you?**

I love this question because I think it reveals how much ego is involved in my writing, because I am having such a blast. I feel like I enter a flow state when I'm writing and things are going really well, and so I feel incredible and assume that the thing I'm making is incredible.

**Cannot relate. I love that for you.**

I mean, it's not true though! I know that I have to edit, and then I get notes, but it's my dream that someone will say, "This is perfect. You don't have to touch it. It's solid gold." The way that I write, I feel like I'm both a bleeder and a puker, which is a really gross image, but I think is accurate. I'm putting out a lot, and I'm also futzing with every choice I'm making. I'm trying with the poems that I'm writing now to just kind of write more and see what happens. With this book, I had to cut 15 poems. It was long. I think I'm all about output. I'm not a huge fan of editing my own work. I feel like I've done a real pukey bloody job of giving you an answer here, I'm sorry.

**No, no, it doesn't have to be a binary. Like so many things, it can be a spectrum. On that note, do you feel like you're more of an ass-in-chair kind of writer, or do you wait until you have the urge to write?**

I'm an ass-in-chair writer in large part because I'm so afraid that if I don't do that, I'll stop writing. I produce a lot of stuff that's bad or just kind of whatever on the way to something meaningful and exciting and good.

**What are you working on next?**

I'm working on a multimodal memoir which is about my mother suffering a massive stroke several years ago and my caring for her, alongside my earlier experience of being a very serious classical violinist and suffering a major repetitive motion injury, after which I had surgery and my mother cared for me. It's these two stories of how we were both in moments of physical extremity and vulnerability and how we cared for each other. And in between that narrative, there are snappy chapters that give a greater historical context to what we're contending with. For example, the history of surgery, the history of Medicare, the history of emergency medicine. Some of which are extremely ancient. The history of surgery predates written history! It's been, understandably, a really depleting thing to work on.

**I feel like this is your genre and where you thrive—the intersection of the historical and the personal.**

Yeah, I think you're probably right. When you're contending with a grievous injury or a heartbreak or a death, it's so intense and immediate, that it feels like the most novel feeling that anyone has ever had. That's not to say that it's not powerful or that you shouldn't pay attention to it, but it feels important to me to consider that these are kind of the defining features of human existence. And even before there was much of a language, these were things that people were feeling. So, it feels important to me to consider. Maybe there's a sense of empowerment there too, where writing into this intersection is a way to get my arms around something that feels so enormous.

When asking, "Why is this happening to me?" or, "Why do I feel this way?" I try to go beyond, "Oh, well, it's because I played violin too much," or my technique wasn't right, and I played for too long, and nobody fixed it, and so I hurt myself. The deeper questions are, "Why did I play like that? What is music? What is this instrument that's so old?"

**Classic poet move to ask "What is music?" when confronting their chronic pain. You've now published two full-length books and several chapbooks. What does success mean for you at this point in your career?**

I was reading your interview with [Aria Aber](#), and I agree with her. Success feels like such a loaded American concept. I'm not going to be a national bestseller, which can be liberating. I think this is also something that I've heard [Maggie Nelson](#) talk about, how because this creative output is for the most part outside of the capitalist enterprise, it can give you space to really consider what success means. Just having people read my

books, having my books in libraries so that people can access them without purchasing them is huge. In truth, I would also love some sort of recognition for this book because I think it's very ambitious.

**And it took 10 years!**

It's a quarter of my life it, dammit! But I think what's most meaningful to me is when people whose work I really admire tell me how much they appreciated the book or how they're excited about it. Having strangers email me about my book is so meaningful too. Success for me is never getting tired of learning and to continue to feel curious and driven to explore. To never lose that.

**Diana Arterian recommends:**

Reveling in factoids via [Wikipedia wormholes](#) and/or [obituaries that are undeniably wild rides](#).

Perusing [the indie games on the Nintendo website](#) (how I found my all-time favorite: [The Longing](#)).

Reading literature that connects, especially works in translation. Maybe ancient poetry to remind you your life is fleeting yet part of an eternal daisy chain like [Li Shangyin](#), [Sappho](#), [Attar](#), or [Enheduana](#).

The amazing artist [Jeremiah Barber's ceramic mugs](#), which are like visual ASMR. (He's going to sell them online soon.)

Hitting up a good dive bar with an old friend you can be messy with. Any joy is hard-won these days. Take it where you can. And, if you like bourbon or scotch, try a yummy cocktail called [the Godfather](#)—they'll likely have the two ingredients it requires.

Name

Diana Arterian

Vocation

poet, writer

□