

Does inspiration strike like lightning? Are artists fuelled by insanity? Novelist **Audrey Niffenegger** examines 10 stubborn myths about the workings of creativity. Illustrations by **Helen Musselwhite**.

TEN MYTHS ABOUT CREAT- IVITY



Myth 1**Inspiration strikes like lightning**

I tend to experience inspiration more as though I'm asking a question and some form of answer has been given to me. I often have this feeling of holding out my hand, and that something is put in it. It does seem that a prerequisite is an open mind – by which I don't mean liberal or tolerant, but a blank space in your head where you don't already have all the answers. That receptive pose lets you experience the lightning moments. The great scientists who have apples falling on their heads or eureka moments in the bath have almost invariably been querying very diligently and then have this moment of relaxation when the answer comes. Both are necessary: the discipline and preparation that enables you to ask the question – and the goofing off when your brain is disengaged that enables you to receive the answer.

Myth 2**The artist as untutored genius**

There still exist very romantic notions about creativity – that it comes to you purely because you are a genius. No! There's an unimaginable number of people who are capable of moments of inspiration but if they live in a terrible slum and have poor education, their potential may never be available to them: without that preparation, they can't ask the questions they might like to. One reason I still teach is that I'm a great advocate for people being educated and developed.

Myth 3**Artists are a breed apart**

People have a notion that creativity is somehow set apart from normal life – that only artists have creativity and no one else. I think that's completely stupid. If people were to be an 'artist' for a day, they would see it involves the same qualities they have themselves being trained and used in a different way. In daily life, people are constantly doing creative things and having amazing insights, they just don't go home and make an oil painting about them. I once tried to convince an audience in upstate New York that knitting or making chocolate chip cookies were also a form of creativity, but I could tell they weren't buying it. They wanted me to tell them what it felt like to be special. But people don't want to hear that it takes years and years – that they too could write a novel if they spent five years working on it.

Myth 4**The artist as lone genius**

My background is in the visual arts where the painter-genius is the prototype. But the history of art suggests it's often a group activity. In the vast acreage of Rubens' canvases, there's probably not that much that was actually touched by the master himself – he'd perhaps do the face and hands and leave the rest to his assistants. One reason I really like hanging out at the Royal Ballet is watching the ever-shuffling kaleidoscope of talent. You see choreographers sizing up the dancers: even if they cook up some insanely difficult move, they will find a dancer who can do it.

Myth 5**Creativity comes quickly**

So many things I do have really long gestation periods. I'm currently working on a ballet with Wayne McGregor called *Raven Girl*. I first had the germ of the idea back in 2002. I thought it was really cool but was finishing *The Time Traveller's Wife* – so I filed it and knew that sooner or later I'd return to it. Originally, I imagined *Raven Girl* as a novella. There are 22 images and the story is very short. It's perfect for a ballet scenario – you don't want too much information. Wayne knows what he wants and is very firm about pursuing it. He has carte blanche, because I know I'll learn something about my story that I didn't know when I made it.

Myth 6**Creativity is close to madness**

People want artists to be either heroic, or damned, or both – but most artists get up each morning, buy groceries and send their kids to school. I don't think being off the deep end or drinking a lot is a requirement. There's no Faustian bargain. We have a fascination with people who flame out, like poor Amy Winehouse, but to me the point is: if you're dead you can't make any more stuff. Take Jackson Pollock: I don't think he would have painted any better or worse without drink, but he would have lived longer and we would have had more paintings. These myths are destructive: students buy into them in ways that are not healthy. Yet this is what many young artists imagine for themselves – especially musicians drawn to rock's bacchanalian reputation. I've dated a lot of musicians, and the straight-edge ones were in many ways better artists because they were in control. Personally, I try to live as quietly as possible. I try not to be fascinating.

Myth 7**Art is a mystery**

I think practitioners sometimes fail to convey how it's done. That's why I love ballet rehearsals. When David Drew first introduced me to the Royal Ballet, I watched Liam Scarlett teaching something he had choreographed to Edward Watson. They were dancing in parallel, so it looked as though the dance was moving from Liam to Ed. And as it moved, it sharpened – I don't know how else to put it. In the process of being transmitted from one to the other, the idea was becoming more like the idea that Liam had in mind. The collaboration was amazing.

An open, receptive mind lets you experience the lightning moments

Myth 8**You can't develop your creativity**

Artistic practice is about working in an ongoing way rather than just occasionally throwing yourself at something. When you're young you're acquiring skills and figuring out what you want to talk about. You have massive energy, so you're frenetically taking in ideas and being imitative (which will later be embarrassing). As you solidify, you become more intelligent about how you pose problems and what answers interest you. Later still, the challenge is to avoid repeating yourself over and over; there's a fight to keep your brain alive and address current things. Artists who continue into old age are amazing because they have nothing to prove. Lucian Freud's early paintings were so stiff and cold – then suddenly, boom!, everything gets brushy and lush. The great mature artists are still open, they're still receiving.

Myth 9**You deserve a career**

I had great teachers and was encouraged from an early age. My attitude at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago was, 'The rest of you will have to find other jobs, but I am going to be an artist!' Which I'm sure didn't endear me to them. Recently, the School sent a survey to former students which revealingly seemed to presume people hadn't made a career of art. There was a section about whether you made art in your spare time and what you did for an actual job. There's a reality check. The world doesn't need for that many artists, at least in terms of giving them money. The person who put it best was Dan Clowes in his comic *Art School Confidential*. In one panel a professor explains that 'only one student out of a hundred' will have an artistic career, but the thought balloon above the entire class is, 'I'll be that one!'

Myth 10**Inspiration is the hard part**

There's a perception that if you can just get an idea in your hot little hand, everything else will follow. But we all have plenty of ideas all the time: the problem is how to recognise which is the idea for you. See if it resonates, take it for a drive, keep adjusting – until eventually you have a 600-page manuscript.

Raven Girl opens at the Royal Opera House, London on 24 May.