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## How I Write

## Meena Alexander

Meena Alexander keeps busy. In the past 12 months, she's spent time in India, her birthplace; Sudan, a country she was raised in; France, where she was finishing her latest manuscript; and New York City, where she teaches at the Hunter College MFA program. But then, Alexander has always pushed herself. At 13, she began studying English at the University of Khartoum. And while still a teenager, she scored her first publication credits with poems in a Sudanese newspaper. Since then she's published two novels, four volumes of poetry, a book of criticism, a one-act play, a memoir, and more. She has an uncanny skill for evoking a place's atmosphere, whether writing about Manhattan or Kerala, India, and for exposing the memories held by locations, as well as by people.

**Credits:** Include the novels *Manhattan Music* and *Nampally Road*; a memoir, *Fault Lines*; four poetry collections, *River and Bridge*, *Illiterate Heart*, *Raw Silk* and *Quickly Changing River*; a book of poetry and essays, *The Shock of Arrival*; a collection of criticism, *Women in Romanticism*; and a play, *In the Middle Earth*.



Marion Ellinger

**Why:** I would have been delighted, surely, to be something other than a writer, but I write because that's the only thing I really know how to do. I write to make sense of my life, of being in the world. It's essential to the rhythm of my life.

**Routine:** It comes over me in waves, writing. I have a special notebook, in fact several notebooks, in which I write with a fountain pen. I also cut and paste pages from my computer and stick them into a large spiral notebook, and cut and cross and write over those pages. Or sometimes I put the pages in a loose-leaf binder and write over the lines with pen and ink.

I do have a desk and a room in which I can write, but I often write in the subway, or in buses or at café tables. I love the sense of life going on around me as I write, a cup of coffee, a croissant if I'm lucky.

**Process:** If something nibbles at me, I try to follow through. I immerse myself in feelings, thoughts, ideas. But for me it's always important not to let the research swamp the feeling. It's not an academic

treatise one is trying to make, rather a form of feeling, emotion and thought commingled, what the passionate mind marks out.

**Evoking atmosphere:** I immerse myself in the feeling of what I'm writing about, so I can search out a form, attach that feeling to the concrete edges of something—a table, a chair, a shelf, a stone, a rock, a tree. There is a musicality to the senses, and I try to reach for that.

**Plot:** I try to rest in what is not known, as much as possible, so that what emerges becomes in some sense inevitable. Perhaps this, under another guise, is what we think of as structure in the text: the making of a piece so that time works for us as writers, both the time in the story and the time we spend writing it.

**Revising:** I revise all the time, over and over. There are some lines that come out ready to fly. But yes, I revise. What is it that Yeats said in "Adam's Curse"? "If it does not seem a moment's thought/ Our stitching and unstitching has been naught."

**Struggles:** Sometimes writing is very hard for me, because I know that when I am in the writing, "I" will be eaten up. And then only when it's ready will it spit me out.

So I hold myself back, I resist, because once I'm in the great wave, there's no turning back; I have to lose myself, till finally I am washed on shore.

**Influences:** The Bible; the Indian medieval mystic poets Mirabai and Kabir; Wordsworth; Proust; Rabindranath Tagore, both as a poet and a prose writer; Virginia Woolf; the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty; Toni Morrison; Ryszard Kapuscinski.

**Advice:** Follow your gut. Don't be afraid to push a thought or a feeling as far as it needs to go. At the same time, be in awe at the power of words, give them their due—give each word its due and be sure to have the discipline you need to hone your craft. It is possible to keep getting better and better as a writer.

*Interview by Gabriel Packard, coordinator of the Hunter College MFA Program.*