

SOAPBOX

# THE COLUMNISTS

WSJ. asks five luminaries to weigh in on a single topic. This month: Imagination.



NICK  
HORNBY

“Every time you look at someone and think, What’s going on in there? you’re using your imagination. Every time you watch an interaction in the street, you piece together a story using your imagination. There’s a much more prosaic version of imagination, every bit as powerful and perhaps more meaningful, than the notion that it’s something all children have that disappears gradually as you get older. I’m not very interested in something if there’s no truth to it, and that seems to be my job, to write the truth about unreal people. What I want is for people to recognize it and think, That feels true. That’s where the imagination comes in to play. Being human, being empathetic—that is actually the ability to imagine.”

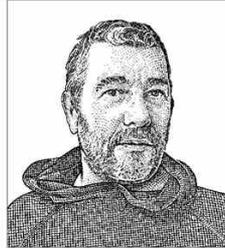
*Hornby is an author; his new book, Dickens and Prince: A Particular Kind of Genius, is out in November.*



CHRISTINA  
QUARLES

“You can’t really invent something from nothing. You have to use what exists, like memory and experience, as stepping stones towards a more imaginative potential. I’m always interrupting my artistic process, because the biggest thing standing in the way of creativity is your own rigid thought patterns. There are a finite amount of things to work with when you’re trying to be imaginative, and it’s easy to repeat yourself. For me, innovation comes from a negotiation with materials, with formalism, with the way we see. You have to improvise, because it’s that unexpected reality that forces you to zigzag so that actual imagination can happen. It can’t happen in isolation.”

*Quarles is a painter whose exhibition In 24 Days the Sun’ll Set at 7pm is on view at Hauser & Wirth’s downtown New York gallery until October 29.*



PHILIPPE  
STARCK

“Creativity and imagination are in our DNA. It’s how we become human. We cannot be what we are, or what we want to become, without imagination and creativity. It’s the center of the self, the reason we exist. It’s our legitimacy. We create every day, which creates creation. It’s like a snowball, and the efficiency and speed of the rotation of that snowball is incredible. When you’re born, you’re signing a contract with your community that says whatever you have, at any level of intelligence, creativity or imagination, you must use it to invent in order to help the evolution of our species. We exist only to contribute to the beautiful movie, the beautiful story, the beautiful poetry of our evolution. That, for me, is what imagination really means.”

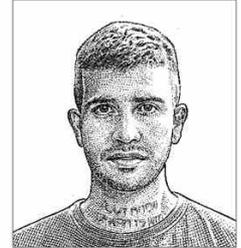
*Starck is an industrial architect, a product and furniture creator and an interior designer.*



MISSY  
ROBBINS

“A lot of my food honors things that I’ve seen, read about or tasted in Italy and puts my own stamp on it, without being overly imaginative. You can really mess up the mission that way. Sometimes I nail it, sometimes I drastically fail, but the beauty of imagination is that you can reimagine again and again. My greatest mentor told me that the most important ingredient in Italian cooking is the one you leave out. You can’t necessarily combine something that you tasted in Sardinia with something you tasted in Friuli. It’s about going back to the roots of what you’ve learned, whether that’s a cooking technique, a flavor combination or an ingredient, and making the most out of that one thing without overmanipulation.”

*Robbins is a chef. Her latest cookbook is Pasta: The Spirit and Craft of Italy’s Greatest Food, With Recipes.*



CHRISTOPHER  
SOTO

“Imagination doesn’t seem possible without its proximity to failure—the failure of migration systems, the justice system. It’s because of the failure of anguish to convey particular emotions or desires or ideas that we create poetry and literature. As an artist who’s interested in the justice system and poetry, my goal is to not be afraid of failure but to experiment with it. I use my skill set to reimagine what police interactions could look like, because the role of the poet is to imagine a world beyond our wildest abilities. So failure should be embraced because that’s where imagination is spurred. And through imagination we come as close as possible to our idealized selves and to our idealized world, knowing that that is not an exact location or a permanent location where we will be fixed.”

*Soto is a poet whose debut collection, Diaries of a Terrorist, was published earlier this year.*

These interviews have been edited and condensed for clarity.