

# HOUSE RULES

t h e p o d c a s t

## **Episode 8: Contrast is Queen if You Want to be Seen**

I'm Myquillyn Smith and this is House Rules.  
Welcome to Episode 8.

It was 2016 and long leather earrings shaped like feathers were all the rage. I've always been a big earring fan, and anything made of something lightweight gets my attention. A friend had gifted me a pair of dark brown leather earrings that she made and I couldn't wait to wear them. I had the perfect outfit picked out and put on the finishing touch, the dark brown earrings into my ears. But to my surprise they magically became instantly invisible.

By the end of this episode you'll understand exactly how to make anything more visible or invisible depending on what you want to see.

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There was a restaurant in our town that was built in the front area of the parking lot of our local Lowe's Home Improvement. This restaurant was surrounded by a concrete parking lot on all sides, so you had to drive behind it to get to all of the other stores in the shopping center. That meant everything about the restaurant was exposed everywhere, to everyone, when you drove past it just to buy your light bulbs and flowers from the Lowes store.

It ended up changing hands and changing names and the new owner began remodeling it. They painted it from white to black. No problem. Except at the back of the building. Because everything about this restaurant was on display as you drove by, the first owners had designed an elaborate lattice fence to hide the trash, boxes and equipment at the back of the building. When the lattice was white, even though it was full of holes—that's what lattice is—you never really noticed what was behind it.

The first time that I drove past the place after the new owners had made some changes, I could clearly see every unsightly thing that was behind the lattice. At first I wondered what in the world they had done? Why would they take down their privacy fence and put up a fence that let you see right through to their mess?

But then I realized it was the same fence. It was just painted black. The same thing happens if you've ever accidentally got white paint on a window screen. Suddenly that white is all you see because white seems to move forward. It's easier to see things through a black screen—or a black lattice, because the black can seem to move back or kind of recede.

I pretty much got a year of design school out of that one powerful visual lesson from 20 years ago. I think about that invisible black fence probably still once a week, and I know it was 20 years ago because it was when we lived in Macon, Georgia. And we haven't lived for 20 years.

Color has power and we can learn to harness it. We aren't even talking about colors beyond black and white here, just the difference between light and dark makes a big difference in our lives.

When we moved into our current home, for the first time in my life, I had a house with built-ins! Every room had some type of open storage with pretty display shelves built right into the walls. The dining room has a corner niche that's extra fancy, it's borderline too fancy for me. And I had no idea what to put there. I truly I don't love the placement of the built in itself.

Everything I tried seemed forced and unnatural or it just didn't make sense in a dining room. Plus because the walls were white AND the shelves were white, anything I put on the shelves practically screamed in the room and hogged all of the attention and I didn't want the shelves to be the first thing you looked at when you walked into the room.

I needed to style the white shelves in a way that didn't make them look like I forgot to put something there, but also didn't call major attention to them.

I grabbed every white vase I owned and played around with their placement until it felt right. It worked. The white on white trick made the shelves look like I remembered them, but didn't draw your eye as the first thing you saw in the room like it did when I put other things on the shelves. The white vases in all different shapes and sizes had a kind of quiet drama, you noticed the shadows and shapes more than anything else, but the vignette wasn't bossy and overpowering.

**This worked because Contrast is Queen if You Want to be Seen.**

Because I wanted my shelf to get less attention and to be seen a little less, I knew I had to turn down the contrast with what I styled it with. White on white on white hushed up the entire situation and toned the corner down until I figured out what I really wanted there.

The situation was the opposite in our family room. We have dark wood built-ins and I wanted to style them in a way that you could see the pieces I was decorating with. What's a girl to choose? Well, if contrast is queen if you want to be seen—and it is, that means in order to actually see what I'm decorating with, in this case I want to be sure to create contrast. So, for my dark shelves, I was going to make sure that I incorporated lots of art, vases, books, boxes and frames that had lots of white and light colors so they could be seen.

Have you ever wanted some pillows for your light colored sofa and realized that the lighter pillows have a totally different effect than dark pillows? That's because Contrast is Queen if You Want to be Seen.

Contrast isn't good or bad in and of itself—you just have to decide if you want to be able to see something or not—sometimes you do, sometimes you don't. In decorating I would say most of the time, we are trying to make choices that are actually visible, that's the entire point. So if you are decorating your mantel which is a long skinny shelf, most likely you're going to want to choose items that contrast the mantel shelf and the wall behind it so you can visibly actually see the items. If you are like me and have a TV over your mantel and you don't really want to call attention to that fact, this is a time where you don't want something to be seen or noticed as much, you can do what I did and paint the wall above your mantle, behind your TV, a dark color and now, like magic, you notice the TV a lot less.

When our oldest was born we lived in a rental house, it was built in the late 1800's. There was dark wood molding, dark tile surrounding every fireplace, lots of elaborate dark wallpaper, dark wood on the floors and, guess what, I had a lot of dark furniture—like dressers and even a dark leather sofa. After a year we moved into a new little apartment. It had light beige carpet, freshly painted warm white walls and windows with a little white trim. I was shocked at how much I could actually SEE my furniture again now that it was in a little white box. Every piece had presence and got attention and oh my gosh my furniture is showing up! Contrast is Queen if You Want to be Seen.

If you've ever taken one of my decorating classes or if you're in the Cozy Community, you've heard me say Contrast is Queen if You Want to be Seen a thousand times, and now you say it to your family as they roll their eyes. This statement is weird, it's memorable and it's true. Repeating it to myself has helped me make many a decorating decision in the heat of the moment and it's helped community members and my students, too. And now it's gonna help you. Contrast is Queen if You Want to be Seen. It's more than just a memorable little diddy, it's actually rule number 64 in my next book full of 100 House Rules to help you decorate any home with any style and any budget.

The truth is, no one is born naturally knowing how to decorate. Some people are just more attuned to paying attention to decorating truths. Just like with spelling. Some people naturally remember how to spell the word receive, and then some of us have to repeat to ourselves “I

before E except after C” every single time we write the word receive. Either way, we end up with a word spelled correctly.

It's the same with decorating. There are universal decorating truths that apply to every home, that transcend style and just work. I've got 100 of them and you can use them to instantly troubleshoot just about any decorating decision you run into in your home. I can teach you how to make better decorating decisions and my next book, *House Rules*, will be your textbook. These are the rules to decorate by. First you learn the rules, then, once you gain confidence, you break them beautifully. And I'll help you with that too.

So, the *House Rules* releases April 23, 2024. Yep, it's a long way away and after today, I probably won't be talking about it really until next year. I've been quietly working on it for a few years now, and it takes a long time for a big beautiful decorating book full of photos and lovely designed pages to get out into the world. If you have any of my previous books, I'm so proud of them and you know how helpful they are. But this book. Y'all, she got a glow up. My new publisher, Revel, a division of Baker Books, has already made multiple trips to my house to make book decisions together. They understand the importance of every visual detail. This book is a big gorgeous coffee table book. It's got a beautiful neutral big girl cover that I promise will look good sitting out in your home. This book will be your go to gift for weddings, house warmings, teachers and mother's day.

If you already know that you are going to order this book, I'm going to ask you today if you would consider preordering it? I cannot overemphasize or exaggerate how important early pre orders are for the livelihood of a book. If you are new here and have no idea who I am, hello, and welcome! I hope you decide you need this book as well, but right now I'm talking to people who maybe have one of my previous books and they already know they're gonna want this one. I know that most people have never preordered a book in their life, I hadn't either until a few years ago, so, real quick, let me tell you how it works.

For many retailers, when you preorder, you don't actually even pay until the book releases. So it's kind of like reserving your copy on free layaway until the book comes out. And, many retailers, like Amazon, will guarantee you get the book at the lowest price it drops to anytime before it releases. So this applies to any book you preorder and let me tell you, if there is a writer you love and they have a book coming out, consider preordering their book. It will give their book a better chance in the world, but even better than that, one day in the future, when you've forgotten what day the book releases, you're going to open your mailbox to find a gift from your past self. A book you wanted! It really is the best gift to your future self. I preorder all the time now and as I'm writing this, I'm looking forward to getting the next Amber Lewis book delivered today—as it releases, even though I preordered it a long time ago.

So a month or two before the *House Rules* book releases, I will of course have some amazing thank you gifts available for anyone who preorders, whether you preorder it today, or you order it the day before it comes out, you'll be able to claim your gifts when they're ready, and I will tell you about that. These gifts will be available to anyone who preorders any version, from any

retailer, in any country, because that's how we do things here. Special shout out to pre ordering from your favorite local bookstore, yes they can preorder for you as well!

If you're curious, see the show notes for a look of the cover of the book. Did I use contrast when creating the cover shot? You better believe it.

If you listened to episode 4, you already know of my love of the ever practical pedestal table. I love them so much, there's one style I bought two of: I bought a white table and a black table of the same exact table. On the cover of the House Rules book, there's another house rule represented, we'll get to that later, but you'll see the backdrop is one of the 9 original fireplaces in our home. The fireplace has a beautiful dark green surround and of course a big black hole—which is the firebox itself. So which color table do you think I chose to go in front of all that dark of the lower part of the fireplace? I'll give you a hint, I wanted it to be seen. So of course, I chose the white table and you can see it beautifully in front of the fireplace.

On the table sits a container and green. If you listened to last week's episode, episode 7, you know that every home needs greens and in the cover photo we have two. So on the white table, there sits a planter holding my beloved pencil cactus. I'll put a link to a recent Instagram post I did about him in the show notes, he's currently my favorite house plant. Anyway, the top of the table is still in front of the dark fireplace surround. So, once again, in order to make sure we could see the planter, and not decorate with something that turned invisible, I styled it with a light color planter. That way you can see its organic shape, fully outlined, thanks to contrast.

On the mantel in the cover shot, like most mantels, it's a long skinny shelf. It's an opportunity to add something with scale, with visual presence and beauty, but because the mantle is so thin, you know that, in reality, you have to really think through what is even possible to use. My mantel is painted a taupe color—it's Sherwin Williams Shiitake if anyone needs to know— and the fireplace is built with a kind of overmantel that 's also painted in that same light taupe color. That goes all the way to the top ceiling.

Of course, this is the cover of my book, so I wanted/needed visual impact. I knew I wanted to incorporate wall art that I made from a random old canvas that we had laying around. When we moved in I just used leftover wall paint and poured and painted weird abstract drips and strokes on the canvas layering paint on it over a few days until it felt right. So the art had some movement but it was still on the light color side on a light background. So my mantel recipe is to always start with art that is really large, then add a container and green and go from there. So I had the art, now I needed a container. Of course, I shopped the house for the largest, darkest vase I could find that fit on the mantel. Then, I went into the backyard and cut off a branch of the Japanese maple twice as long as I thought I needed. I filled a mason jar with water, put that way down in the vase and then put the foraged tree branch into the water inside the vase and put it on the mantel. And there you have it. Contrast is Queen if You Want to be Seen.

If you look at the back of the book, you'll see a photo of me wearing angular off white earrings. To me, it's the first thing you notice about my outfit. Why? Because I have dark hair. This is why those dark leather earrings I talked about at the beginning seemed to disappear. If you have dark hair, you already know, you are drawn to light color earrings if you want to actually be able to see the earrings that you are wearing, because Contrast is Queen if You Want to be Seen.

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This is your personal invitation to join the 100,000 people already on my weekly Cozy Minimal email list.

You can expect pretty encouragement in your inbox just about weekly, September through May.