**Behind the Prose Transcript**

**Episode 39: Write This Way: How to Find and Develop a Niche in Your Writing**

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Guest: Jason Bittel [JB], Kristina Marusic [KM], Shannon Reed [SR]

[KW]

Welcome to the final installment of Behind the Prose. We have a special series this week. We’ve been at the Creative Non-Fiction Writers Conference in Pittsburgh and we are recording now. Today is Friday and we’re sitting here with three great writers for a special panel called *Write This Way: How to Find and Develop a Niche in your Writing.* And so we’re going to talk to them about how they carved a space for themselves in the writing world, how a writer can clarify and narrow their own interest to develop their personal brand. This round table features Jason Bittel, Kristina Marusic, and Shannon Reed. So I’m going to let them introduce themselves to you, so you can get to know their voice and I’m going to ask them to tell us a little bit about what they write about.

1:35

[SR]

Ok, I’m Shannon Reed and I am principally known for writing humor. I contributed to the New Yorker and I write for McSweeny’s Internet Tendency and BuzzFeed and a couple of other places. I also write some fiction and non-fiction as well.

1:54

[KM]

Hey, I’m Kristina Marusic and I am a freelance journalist focusing on stories related to social justice, LGBT and gender equality, and the environment. I have written for a variety of outlets. I was a staff writer for MTV news for a while and since then I have been a regular contributor at Women’s Health Slate the Advocate and others.

2:20

[JB]

Hi, I’m Jason Bittel and I am a writer on the internet of things weird, fascinating, gruesome and sometimes scary about animals. I contribute to National Geographic News, Smithsonian Magazine.com, Slate and a bunch of other places. But, my interest is usually solving some of the question people have about animals, clearing up misunderstanding about animal’s environment. Really anything related to claws, teeth, venom all the cool stuff and happy to be here, thanks.

2:59

[KW]

Thank you, so first question is why or is it, do you think, is important for a writer to have a niche? Why or why not?

3:10

[JB]

For me, I can say that having a niche was huge because whenever you are going into a MFA program like I was, actually here at the University of Pittsburgh. You can write about anything. A lot of people wanted to write about memoirs, a lot of people wanted to do investigative stuff and for me I didn’t specifically know what I wanted to write about animals or the environment. But, the first day of graduate school Leegukin said you have to have a book idea. I didn’t have a book idea, but I just spent four months in the Great Smokey Mountain National Park trapping and shooting invasive wild pigs. I thought maybe that’s interesting and Lee thought “that’s really interesting. So, I sort of went off on that whole tangent and through that realize that it’s not just about pigs. It’s about salamanders and bears and poison ivy and all this amazing things. And I sort have just fell in love with the whole natural world writing beat and I just took off from there. And it turns out there’s actually a market on the internet for this type of writing. Even people who aren’t interested in getting scientific degrees are really really interested in the world around them. Maybe more so, because they don’t interact with it anymore, because they don’t have jobs where they’re out in the wild. But, everyone loves a cute animal or a scary animal and they like reading about them. So for me, having that niche. It centered me, it focused me and it sent me to the type of publications that pay for my writing and luckily there’s no shortage of that. It was partly my own interest, but also just I’ve found a market and I went with it.

4:45

[KM]

Yeah I similarly was sort of figuring it out in grad school while I was getting my MFA and I’m working on a memoir now that covers *I Spent a weird Childhood in a Cult* from there became an FBI monitor, animal rights, and anti-war activist as an undergrad. So I was one of those obnoxious undergrad activist who was a Debbie downer at parties and wanted to tell you what was wrong with what you were drinking or eating and so I chilled out a lot as an adult but, those issues are really important to me really dear to my heart. So it was kind of natural for me to want to write about those things. I was excited about it, especially liked covering about young people involved social justice movements because I relate to that and because I admire the work their doing. So it’s also been helpful. I think once you start down a certain path and I’m sure both of you can attest to this you then kind of become an expert and then you have contacts in that realm that you can follow up with for additional interviews and people come to know you as someone who has expertise in a certain area. Which then helps you get more and more of that work.

6:06

[JB]

Yeah, there’s diffidently a momentum to it. Once you get going not only are you seeing stories everywhere but, people are coming to you with stories and I’ve gotten a lot of interesting pieces because someone came to me with either their research or something happening in their hometown or even “hey have you g=heard about this weird animal”. You’re right, it sorts of becomes this self-fulling prophecy kind of thing.

6:30

[SR]

Yeah I think do, I’m really interested that both of you were much more, I think deliberate about finding you niche or maybe in the retelling of it more than at the time. But, I diffidently fell into it. But, I feel like with a niche it sometimes not so much that you are looking for one as you just develop one and that’s what you become known for and suddenly you look back a couple of years later and you’re like. “Oh I’m humor writer, ok that’s what I do, interesting”. Because that’s diffidently how it happened to me. I was in a MFA program I also went to the University of Pittsburgh and I was majoring in fiction and I’ve found myself greatly helped by the workshop model of the program. But, also incredibly frustrated by the workshop model program. I got so tired of picking over everything and not being the global literary superstar that I expected to be at there after a couple of months and I started submitting humor pieces to McSweeny’s Internet Tendency. Because, it was something that we weren’t talking about in the program and nobody was workshopping it. It was just something I can do for myself. I was like “I can be funny; I’ll just do that”. I racked up a lot of rejection letters then I started getting published, then that was my niche, that what’s I was doing. I have a funny view point on things and I don’t mean to imply that it was all happen stance like “uh look at that, I ended up being funny”. But, I think you do if you are producing your own work and you are faithful about getting your voice out there you end up finding what you are supposed to be writing. Because, the publishing world wants that from you and the people are excited to get that work from you. Perhaps it’s not just about. I think if I have been told “go find something interested in and write about I would have been incredibly limiting because theirs like. “There’s so many things I want to write about but, for me it’s about what kind of affect you want on your readers, what ripples do you want to be causing in the pond.

8:48

[JB]

It’s funny that you say that about workshop too because I feel like you probably became the funny one. I felt like I became the animal guy and I was into animals before that but, a year before that I wasn’t the animal guy. But, once you’re in that workshop everybody has these amazing ideas and stories and histories your just like wow I can never write anything like that. But, someone keys in to something and your, all of a sudden, your kind of set down that path.

9:14

[KM]

It’s nice to have that foot hold right? Like it’s nice to have that well I could look at it my point of view on this would be blank and could feel somewhat secure in that. Instead of “oh my god there’s so many different options and I don’t know what to do. Because the MFA programs can sometimes be wonderful but, they are also really unsettling and it’s good to feel like something’s settled.

9:36

[KW]

What advice would you give to writers who might be in that place right now where their feeling unsettled and their feeling they don’t have a niche or a place?

9:45

[SR]

I think the most important thing is too continue to pursue your non-writing interest and I think that often times leads you unexpected ways to what you want to be writing about to what your most excited about to what your most interested in learning more about. sometimes I’ve taken on assignments about things I know very little about going in but, I’m really excited to learn about them. So then I know that the process of conducting interviews and researching is going to be enjoyable for me and I think that comes across. I spent a lot of years writing copy, writing stuff that was less exciting to me for money just for the sake of writing. Particularly for writing and getting paid for it and all of that absolutely helps to hone my craft and make me a better writer and also make me more marketable as a writer. But, I think the reason why I was able to eventually carve out a niche is because while I was doing that I didn’t stop being interested in the other stuff I was interested in and learning about it and knowing what was going on in those worlds.

10:58

[JB]

Yeah, that’s one thing I would recommend is go do a job, doesn’t matter what it is. But, if you hate it enough, it will tell you what you want to be doing. I worked in advertising for three years after graduate school. Sort of fell into it. Never really taking it seriously and then after three years I was like “this is my career, this is what I’m doing”. At night I was in my cuffs, I would think “why can’t someone just pay me to learn cool things about animals. Then write them in a fun and exciting way”. Then it was sort of the light bulb goes off and I was like “well I could start doing that on my own” and I started a blog. One thing led to another and here I am today. Someone pays me to learn about and write about cool animals. So I think definitely doing what you don’t want to do is huge and will sort of push you.

11:54

[KM]

Yeah, those are both really great pieces of advice. I would just kind of concur. It was interesting to me. My mom is in the process of packing up her house and moving and I was going through old stuff that I have in the house like notes and yearbooks and I realize that being funny has been an important value for me for much of my life. Making people laugh is a big joy of mine and I suspect that if you are lost and you’re not sure what to write about if you look back to your original interest were perhaps it’s not going to be an exact match. But, there’s probably something there that’s going to push you. I think the ultimate goal is to write about what you really care about and who you really are. That person is most likely been in place for a very long time. So especially in the hub hub of the literary world, there’s so many different places to publish and there’s so many different venues and so many different people doing so many different things. Look at who you really are and what’s actually important to that might be a place to start.

13:12

[KW]

That actually leads into one of the questions that I was going to ask you and Jason to follow up on. I know Kristina mentioned the family cult and if we were doing another show we would definitely go down that road. But we got a few minutes left so we need to know this. So you’re coming back to Behind the Prose. As are you Shannon and as are you Jason. However, so you just said, Shannon, that you realized really young that you know being funny came natural to you in what’s your thing. So Jason tell us how did you become fascinated with these weird kind of animals? Where did that come from?

13:49

[JB]

I was always the little kid that was poking at dead things and catching snakes and that kind of stuff. Where I grew that wasn’t an unusual thing where I grew up in the South East of Pittsburgh. We called it the mountains but, it’s sort of like the Alleghany front and that was just what we did back then. Sounds like old times but, it was only 1989. So then I went to college and I majored in writing and I didn’t apply to any graduate schools and I had to do something after I graduated. Someone told me about this thing called the SCA. Which is the Student Conservation Association. Basically it’s like Americorp but, for the environment. So I went to Washington State and I worked on a trail crew and we would go backpacking for nine days and build trails and it was amazing. Then when that was done I had nothing else to do so I applied for another one and that took me to Tennessee where I was trapping and shooting the pigs and Tennessee was insane to me because I never been to the Smokey’s and all of sudden I had all of these wildlife people pretty much at my beck and call and I could do anything I wanted. So I did pigs stuff, I did bear stuff, flying squirrels, salamanders and fish and it was a bonanza. There are no national parks near me in Pittsburgh I was like “well, that was a dead end career”. Then I sort of realize that I could write about this stuff and it basically taken me to different places. I got to go to Africa last year on a safari which was just like a life goal. It was just the coolest like I might cry just thinking about it. I think just realizing that even though I never got those science degrees and I sort of just gave up on that whole science history side of my life. I was able to bring it back in through writing because you can write about whatever you want to write about. It honestly didn’t occur to until later in life that I could do that. So I would think maybe not every niche is going to have a market out there for it quite like science writing. But, it’s worth looking into because there’s might be something out there that would pay you to do something that you love and that’s worth looking for.

16:15

[KW]

How do you stay on top of your respected fields or the topics that you’re interested in? Are their certain publications that you follow or associations that you might be members of? How do you keep up?

16:29

[SR]

So I have a very elaborated Tweet Deck which has a lot to do with this. That’s really helpful if you want to report on breaking stories or things as their happening. I also get every newsletter and I am on everyone’s press list. So if there’s an organization I’ve written about in the past or if there’s an activist group and they have something big coming up. They will email me something to let me know. Which is really helpful. That’s actually a great way to take a lot of that work off your shoulders is to let people know I’m interested in covering this world and if you know something going on let me know. Those folks are really excited to do that generally because they are trying to get the word out and those contacts are often really excited to know someone who is interested in covering what they are up to. So I rely pretty heavily on people letting me know what’s going on and then kind of looking out into the world. I also read the news voraciously and have my regular websites and my Feedly. But, the importance of a well-organized Tweet Deck cannot be overstated.

17:42

[JB]

Yeah, I’ll second Twitter. That was going to be what I was going to say. It just allows you to tap into the pulse of your little world. My little world is all scientist and science writers and not a whole lot else on Twitter really and I love it. It’s like an online community I work from home so I don’t have co-workers but, I have people who I interact with daily through Twitter. The other thing if you’re interested in science writing you can sign up for is an embargo press lists and press releases. You can find out about the stories that are happening before they actually come out. There was an ancient marsupial in Australia that ate a lot of snails. It’s all over a lot of science newsletters today but, I knew it was coming out a week ago because of those press list. So if you are interested in science writing look up a site called Eureka alert. As long as you don’t have any competing interest you can sign up for free and it’s great. But, I would highly recommend having a Twitter account even if you are not interested in tweeting just follow everybody it’s great.

18:51

[KM]

Yeah, I agree the nice thing about being a humor writer is that theoretically anything can be funny so I have the scope to pay attention to whatever I want to pay attention to. I also have a Twitter feed, I’m a vigilant Facebook user and a very obsessive emailer as well. I go back and forth. Sometimes I feel like it’s very important for me to read all of the humor pieces that are coming out so I really need to read Daily Shouts and I really need to read whatever in the New Yorker that week and I need to be up on what the McSweeny is publishing and so on and so forth. I find that inevitably saddening and depressing because I didn’t write everything that’s on the site and just get like gloomy about how I’m not that smart and funny and I don’t want to write. So I sort of pass a cursory “I” over everything and see what’s happening sometimes I think “oh they stole my idea ok” and sometimes I think “oh that was really brilliant. I should have done that”. But, I try not to actually, as strange as it sounds, I try not to actually engage in reading humor writing that much. I’m afraid of having my voice affected or I’m afraid of inadvertently stealing a joke. Having to go into my subconscious and then having it come back out three months later as something else. Which is really hard to do but, most of my reading is about politics. I’m a huge politic junky and politics is always ripe for a lot of humor writing and I keep a running list of, this is my best advice for a humor writer. I keep a running list of ideas that pop in to my head or anything that I have an extreme emotion about I sort of take note of because probably other people are as well. That would be a good source for humor. The thing about humor is that only I get the joke that it’s not going to sell. So right now I live in Pittsburgh and I was driving in the city the other day and I was thinking about the concept about the Pittsburgh left. Which any listeners don’t know is that when you are crossing at an intersection at a light if there’s a car on the other side that’s want to cross left you let them go first even if you’re going straight just as a curtesy. When I was growing up that’s what the Pittsburgh left was and everybody practice the Pittsburgh left. Of course it kind of faded away. I don’t know anybody who does it anymore. So I started thinking about other rules we should have in Pittsburgh and generated a whole humor post that’s going to be on the glass block sometime soon about Pittsburgh driving rules. That’s just from taking a kernel of an idea and remembering it and then sitting down to work on it a little bit. Which I think most humor writing is in all honesty.

21:42

[SR]

It’s really funny having moved here from elsewhere my understanding of the Pittsburgh left was very different from yours. It was that Pittsburgh drivers were jerks and will go left before you get to go straight without consideration that you’re going to run in to them.

21:58

[KM]

You can see that it’s an imperfect silence.

22:01

[KW]

I think this sounds like there’s a lot of crashes in Pittsburgh. Like what does this means?

22:07

We actually have more car accidents like we’re really up there in terms of cities in numbers of car accidents. Yes, yes the statistics are dire. As you would guess if you drive here.

22:19

[KW]

Don’t drive or walk apparently.

22:22

[JB]

I lived in New York for so long and Pittsburgh just seems like a hot bed of niceness in comparison.

22:28

[KW]

So we’re coming to the end of our time here and I’m really excited to be with you guys because this is my first face to face Behind the Prose podcast. I’m usually virtually. Talking to people through the internet so I’m actually looking at their faces. I’m not talking over them like I usually do because I can see when they are going to speak. But, I really do appreciate you guys joining me for this special edition and I’m just curious where do you all see yourself moving in your niche in the next five years? Like what is some personal goals for you?

23:02

[JB]

I defiantly want to write longer pieces. I would like to write a book at some point. I’m holding that one until the kids are older because I’ve been told not to even start thinking about that. I think the more mediums I can get into the better. So a podcast like this are huge and it’s something I really haven’t done much work on. YouTube maybe and I guarantee you that there will be five new things in five years that people will be using to get their news and their entertainment. I think you have to keep moving forward and all of my stuff is on the internet. I don’t do anything print, almost. So you have to keep moving with the times especially with the news beat.

23:50

[SR]

I’ve been working on my memoir for a very long time now and I’m really eager to wrap that up and hopefully find a place for it in the world. In term of my reportage similarly I am interested in doing some longer more in depth stuff investigative stuff. I have some of that a little bit on the horizon. I’m, right now, just trying to get better and better bylines. I just feel that I’m working to scale the ladder of bylines right now. So I hope to keep doing that.

24:27

[KM]

Whenever I hear about goals I always think of a friend of mine in theater who use to say about parts that he really wanted but, didn’t get. “You have to hold on tightly and let go lightly”. That’s kind of where I am with goals like I think they’re so great and I love having them and I am also very eager to let them go. Like I didn’t have the goal of writing for the New Yorker. It was a vague dream in the sense that many writers have that dream. But, it wasn’t a goal and it happened and I think that’s fantastic so I am super interested in seeing what happens to my career where I just let it ride. At the same time, I am working on a novel and it’s a spy parody novel about a woman who was recruited by a spy organization somewhat against her will and I’m excited to see how that turns out.

25:19

[KW]

Thank you guys for being here. I feel like I learned a lot. I am someone who have interest and I still don’t know feel like I have a niche so that’s why I thought of this topic. Like how did you guys kind of get into this and I feel that there’s a lot of people who are struggling. My brother used to say that “your niche is not having a niche” and I was like “that’s not right” so hopefully this has helped someone out there. But, I want to thank you guys for being here. Jason Bittel, Kristina Marusic, Shannon Reed you’re gonna go to the Behind the Prose page if you’re listening and check out their full bios and get links to their works and get links to their sites connect with them on Twitter. I’m sure they would be happy to hear from you and hear what you thought. Also I would like to thank the Creative Non-Fiction Magazine, the Creative Non-Fiction Foundation for allowing Behind the Prose to come in to the Creative Writing Non-Fiction 2016 Writers Conference this year in Pittsburgh and we brought you some live broadcast and we have this for you today. Learn more about the magazine by going to the links at Behind the Prose. They have online classes, they put calls for submissions there all kinds of great things that you can get involved in. So here we are. We are not in a trapezoid shaped closet today we are in a nice room at the Wyndham University in Pittsburgh and I would like to thank everyone for listening, thank the guest and until next time. Listen. Learn. And Write.

26:56