**Behind the Prose Transcript**

**Episode 11: Kenny Porproa**

Release date: Sunday, March 29

Length: [00:84:58]

Host: Keysha Whitaker

Guest: Kenny Porpora

Note: [italicized words in brackets were added in for clarification]

[KW] = Host Initials

[CL] = Interviewee Initials

[Opening Music by Redvers West Boyle]

0:02 I'm Kenny Porpora, author of *The Autumn Balloon*, and you're listening to Behind the Prose with Keysha Whitaker.

0:12 Welcome to episode 11 of Behind the Prose. You're riding shotgun this week, and we're going across country with author Kenny Porpora. Plus, an exclusive interview with his editor Emily Griffin at Grand Central Publishing and another edition of Writer's Psych with Dr. Ike. We'll find out why the hell I can't finish what I started writing the day before. But first let's check in.

0:49 I'm still at 16 in my chunks of 20. I didn't submit anything last week because I was getting up early - some days earlier than others - to work on my memoir. I put the term "work" in quotes as you'll see from my session with Dr. Ike. But you know there's a trade off if you're working on something long and you want to make progress on that, you can't necessarily spend as much time working on something shorter that may not be related, especially if you got to go to work during the day. You know the deal. So I'm trying to figure out how I can continue to do both, because . . . Chelsey Clammer. Chelsey Clammer is newt week's guest on Behind the Prose and she has got 100 publications in a span of two years. She's my new motivation man. She's like the holy grail of submission. She's a submission machine and if you download the podcast next week, you'll see how she does it. In the meantime, I'm becoming the writing podcast queen. There are so many good shows on writing and my recommendation for you this week is Writers on Writing. It's a weekly radio program hosted by journalist and author Barbara DeMarco Barrett. She's got two co-hosts, Marrie Stone and Nicole Nelson. It's on the art and the business of writing. Finding this show proved to me that the publishing industry and writing industry is as small as they say it is. Their episode on Feb. 17 featured Erin Harris, a literary agent in New York. Erin Harris was my workshop mate at The New School. It was my first year there and it was her second, which means she was a senior and I was a freshman. In true freshman senior fashion, I was enamored with Erin and another workshop mate, Brittany Canty, she's now Canty, married name.  I was just impressed the comments they gave each week. It was always thoughtful and focused on the work, and it always seemed to edify rather than tear down. I'm so happy to see that she was featured on this show and you can learn more about her work at her literary agency Folio. So I encourage you to go check out that show. Writersonwriting.blogspot.com

You know maybe I should be asking Dr. Ike if listening to podcasts is a proxy for interaction with real people. But instead I'm trying to figure out if getting up everyday to write is useless if I just keep starting over anyway.

3:54 Well, procrastination I think, if I had a pill for it or a behavioral model that would immediately resolve it, I would be a multi-millionaire.

4:06 Is it procrastination because I sit there, I do the work, but I'm not continuing the same scene??

4:23 What I pinpoint is that you started at one place, you go back with the intent to start at that same place, but for some reason you don't want to, that's where for me it's procrastination. You start somewhere else just in a focus to start. Because otherwise I would wonder why the jumping around; do you still want to tell the story but literally the place you were at the last time, you don't want to start there, is there a problem with starting somewhere else? Because ultimately starting in a bunch of different places, no coherent contingency amongst things probably means that this will never be able to be a finished manuscript at some point. So that's where I look at procrastination in small poisonous doses. It's kind of like you're psyching yourself out. "It's not like I’m not doing it. I'm doing it." But pieces that can't be pulled together.

[KW] 5:14 Laughter.

[DR. IKE] 5:15 So I'm not procrastinating, but boy, how in the world will you get this out?

[KW] 5:21 I guess I just feel like, um, and I've read a lot of writers books, enough to know that I shouldn't feel this way but I still somehow feel that if it really was a story I was supposed to tell or if I really had it, the next day I would just pick up from where I left off, and I would just go go go. And the next day pick up and go go go. For some reason I'm still looking for that to happen.

[DR. IKE] 5:47 Well - what I find interesting is, it's memoir right? And a memoir is - just from a layperson who isn't big into writing at all, what's the vantage point of a memoir? Just so I make sure everybody understands I understand.

[KW] 6:02 It's first person.

6:07 First person telling your own story. That in and of itself is problematic because life happens in these blurbs and moments and capsules. They're all valid for all those reasons within themselves, so to tell it and try to make it a nice coherent story? That's not happened. These things happened which caused colliding things to happen and they all have relevance back to the central, and they at the end of the day tell a story together but they didn't come together that way. So when you're trying to recreate this thing that came together as pieces, it's kind of a collage. When you look back at the collage, you think it's a great story or piece but ultimately coming together it was a mess. So if you think about it and use that analogy of a collage and you're going back now and you're trying to recreate and piece back this collage it's a messy process. I would ask you to think about this. Maybe change your vantage point on this. Instead of saying oh, when I get up, I can't get back and start where I left off, part of what I say is if I know that to be true, then I can't get up until I leave off where I was.

[KW] 7:23  Huh?

[DR. IKE] 7:24 So if I'm telling a story or writing this piece about what happened in my bedroom, I'm not allowing myself to leave from writing until I finish that encapsulated piece about what happened in my bedroom. Because I know when I come back, I won't be able to start back off here in the bedroom. But if I get that encapsulated piece done, it's okay if I move to another room or another thing, because I'll be able to make it all fit later on.

[KW] 7:48 Oh I see.

[DR. IKE.] 7:50 So since the problem is I can't start where I finish, then I don't finish anywhere that it won't flow if I don't start somewhere else.

[KW] 7:58  So don't leave something like, open, because you know you're -

[DR. IKE] 8:07 Yes, you have said that will not work for you. And I always say this; sometimes the problem is the solution.  You have your own answer. It told you what it needed.

[KW] 8:19 Well thank you. I'ma try it.

[DR. IKE] 8:20 Well thank you. I appreciate the opportunity to give a little bit of what I got. My bill will be in the mail.

[Laughter]

[KW] 8:28 I'm sure.

[DR. IKE] 8:29 It'll probably sit there on the table.

[Laughter]

[KW] 8:32 Along with the rest of them.

[Laughter]

[Music]

[KW] 8:40 Emily Griffin is a senior editor at Grand Central Publishing, a division of Hachette Book Group. Her list includes fiction and nonfiction with a specific interest in narrative nonfiction, memoir and popular science. She is the editor of The Autumn Balloon by Kenny Porpora. Welcome to Behind the Prose, Emily.

[EG] 9:03 Thank you. Thanks for having me.

[KW] 9:05 Let's start to make sure, I and for you listening have a clear understanding of what happens in the publishing industry. I think most people know the nuts and bolts - such as an agent acquires a work, agent sends work to editor, editor buys book. Can you fill in any blanks there in that process?

9:29 I think one of the things that people are curious about is the editorial acquisition process. They have questions about how it all happens. I think one of the most frustrating answers that I can give, but also very honest is that there's no one-size-fits-all way of acquiring a book. There are times when you read something that comes in from an agent and you read it that evening and you get really excited about it and you can see exactly how to publish it and where it fits in the market and you know you can get your entire house on board behind it, that's when you maybe try to make a preemptive offer which often involves putting down a fair amount of money for it. There are other times that you read something maybe right away, maybe in a week or two, and you know there's something there but you're not exactly sure how you want to publish it. You don't see the total market yet, but there's something about it that's staying with you. So you might bring it up with some other people; you might get some colleagues reads on it. You might try to get all your ducks in a row before bringing it to your editorial director, editor-in-chief, publisher, or whoever is making those ultimate acquisition decisions. Sometimes you bring things to a meeting to try to acquire them, sometimes you don't. So it's never a one-size fits all. And of course it depends very much on the book and the author. I have situations where I get to meet the author prior to acquiring the book and then there are other times that I have worked on a book for two years and I still haven't meant the author. So there's never a sort of one-size-fits all way of working. But it's of course always depends on a subjective response from an editor. We try to be as dispassionate as possible about the numbers and all of that, but we really do, as much as we're trying to be hardheaded, it does come from that emotional response from an editor.

12:02 How did you arrive at your current position at Grand Central Publishing?

12:09 I have been here, I started here as an editorial assistant in 2003. So, publishing is a real apprenticeship business. To start in editorial for most everyone, you start out assisting people who are already in the role that you'll eventually, hopefully, grow in to. I had a little bit of a different path because I had worked in travel publishing in college and written and researched and edited for a company called Let's Go Publications which is budget travel. Then I lived in France for two years after college, and I taught English in an international school there, and I really wanted to move to New York and had always been really intrigued by book publishing so I moved back here and looked for a job, so I wasn't sort of coming in with the most traditional path. So I started here working for two editors who worked on all sorts of different kinds of books. We were actually a different company then. We were part of Time Warner and we were sold a few years later, but I stayed there and our team has retained many of its original members including our publisher, Jamie Rabb, who's great, so it's been really wonderful to work here.

[KW] 13:26 So now you're a senior editor. Describe an average day, if there's one. What's your average day like?

13:33 Uh, there's no real average day but in general, I come in a little tire from having stayed up too late reading for work the night before, excited to follow up with agents about the books that I read, and let my colleagues know, ask them to take a look at things; I'll tell them what I thought if I read something from one of them the night before. There's a lot of coffee involved with that usually. Then oftentimes getting on the phone with authors and agents, giving them updates on agents on everything to do from marketing to jacket copy to really preliminary editorial direction depending on where we are in the process. Most days I'm corresponding with people in production; I'm corresponding with people in the art department who work on the covers so we're the project managers. We're a liaison between the author and every other department in our company basically. So we really have to communicate the author's wishes on a cover and then try to come up with something great that we show them. We are responsible for telling our sales reps several meetings a year that we have about books, about why we're so passionate about them. So it often ends up that my day involves a lot of meetings and a lot of much more informal conversations about business matters, you know, everything from can we get this author to do Q&A for a website to I think the cover's looking a little orange rather than red. Is there anything we can do to make that look like the way we wanted it to? So it's very different.

15:31 You mentioned that a lot the response from an editor still does hinge on that initial gut reaction that one receives when he or she reads the work.  And on the site, Grand Central Publishing page, it says you specifically focus on narrative nonfiction and memoir, and also on the site you have an interest in upmarket women's fiction. So I'm going to ask you to educate me a little bit, when I hear narrative nonfiction I would have assumed memoir. But what's the difference?

[EG] 16:13 Um, there are other nonfiction books that tell a story, you know Eric Larsen is a great example whose book is out right now about the sinking of the Lusitania, he's obviously the author of Devil in the White City, that's an example of really terrific, top notch narrative nonfiction, where it's not a memoir, it's not his story, but it is telling a story. Part of why we say narrative to distinguish it from books that are primarily there to educate, inform, prescriptive books, that have that as their primary purpose.

16:57 For example like a textbook?

17:00 Well or a prescriptive health or diet book or a book about the educational system that is more focused on sort of diagnosing a problem and offering solutions, but that might not be primarily focused on telling a story.

17:19 What's upmarket women's fiction?

17:21 You know, in fact the bio on the site is a little out of date, really fiction that has commercial appeal that is really well-written and that you can see book clubs reading and getting behind so that might have either issues to discuss, characters that are really interesting and compelling.

17:52 I'm gonna preface this next set of questions with the idea that we know that writing a book is not necessarily about doing it for the money and you should write the book you love, rah rah, etc. etc., at the clichéd end of the day, I think it does come down to numbers, right? At least in terms of whether or not a person or author gets picked up again or gets dropped when they come around with their manuscript if a book doesn't do well on one house. So and I see in the bio it also says you published a book that was on the New York Times Bestseller List for 14 weeks, so I wondered first what number of books sold would your, or would a publishing group look at and say, oh this book did well?

18:53 Um, it totally depends. It depends on the advance. It depends on the number of copies that we sent to the stores. It depends on the number of copies that we printed and so there's no magic number. I mean I can tell you that if you pay a million dollar advance for a book and it sells 5000 copies, that's disappointing. But it's all part of a larger financial picture. It depends sometimes the book did really well in foreign markets and so we're happy with that, and there's just not a general number that I can give because its so dependent on the book itself and the entire financial picture. And sometimes a book maybe didn't perform amazingly well sales wise but it got amazing reviews and brought some good attention and we think, "Wow, this author is a great person worth starting their career here and we think this book could go on to sell for a long time because the author will write many more books.

[KW] 20:14 Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today.

[EG] 20:17 Thank your for all the great questions. It's interesting to hear about what you guys are thinking and I really hope you have a great talk with Kenny too.

[Music]

[KW]

20:33

Kenny Porpora’s work can be found in The New York Times, New York Daily News, Newsday, and The Huffington Post, and is an associate editor and part owner of Man About World magazine. He graduated magna cum laude from Hofstra University, where he studied philosophy and holds an M.S. from Columbia in investigative journalism. He wrote his master’s thesis on professional wrestling. He’s reported on some of the biggest national news stories of the last decade, including the New York Yankees’ World Series win, the 2008 presidential primaries, the John Gotti, Jr. trial, and the ‘Miracle on the Hudson’ plane crash.

In this interview, I talk with Kenny about his debut memoir, The Autumn Balloon.

20:56 I always start the interview with this question but since I read the book, I feel like I know the answer, but for someone who's listening, they might not know the answer. How did you know you wanted to become a writer?

[KP]   21:10 [Sigh] Writing for me was just the only thing that I was ever any good at. From a young age, I would write stories for the English class or even earlier fourth grade just a little essay, and it always happened to be the one thing I didn't struggle with. The writing stuff was just fun and effortless in a way. When teachers would give me positive feedback, I just thought maybe this was my thing. And then later in my life, it became an escape for me and a reason to keep going. If things went wrong in my life, I could escape into a story, sort of write myself into a new life. I think it started with just being something that I was decent at and became a sort of salvation.

[KW] 22:09 Can you give me a little bit of a plot line as far moving from realizing it was something you were good at, to doing it professionally?

[KP] 22:21 I think it took me a really long time to believe that I was good at it; people would kind of tell me I was good at it, but my self-esteem wasn't really quite there and didn't really start to be there until very, very, recently, and still it kind of wobbles. So I think that's probably true of a lot of writers though. I think it was just a combination of it being the only thing I wanted to do, so I thought - you know, I went to school; I studied philosophy because I didn't know what else to study. Then I studied journalism because I thought if I could be a writer of some sort while I wrote whatever it might be while I wrote whatever it is - be it books or movies or screenplays - at least I'd always be able to say I was a writer and that is what my life would consist of. I think just knowing that I had some sort of a knack for it and the positive reinforcement of the people around me took it from being a thing that I was good at, to maybe I could turn this into an actual career. It took a little while for that to happen, and there were a lot of things that happened in between there. I played the guitar; I wanted to be in a rock band. I think at one point I wanted to be in a boy band. If I had my way, I wouldn't air that part, but you certainly can. A film director and all those things. Writing just seemed to be the one thing that it came back to. I had a teacher once talk about how when John Lennon would hear the faucet going, he would hear the music in the faucet. When I talk to people and I hear them talk, my immediate reaction is, that's a great story. One way to know is to see how you interpret the world. A musician will interpret it in song. I interpret it in stories. I think that was also a way for me to see this might be the thing for me.

24:28 Your work has appeared in The New York Times, The New York Daily News, Newsday, Huffington Post, and you're and associate editor and part owner of Man About World Magazine. With all that you're doing, what is your regular writing practice like?

[KP] 24:52 [Laughter] Well that is a very good question. I have a list; I separate my life into about five different parts: book writing, magazine writing, ghost writing, and I guess you would call it freelance writing. I try to spend a few hours everyday and compartmentalize each section. Man About World is a magazine that I started with two colleagues. They're on New York time, and I'm on LA Time and I usually try to work on that first. I will wake up, will do a morning call, and I will work for a few hours on the magazine. Take a break. Then I will maybe transition into my freelance writing. And usually at night work into book writing, novel writing. I really just try to stay dedicated, try to keep my brainpower up. But - I try not to be too technical about it. If the novel writing urge hits me, I don't deny it because it's not the right time of day. I just go with it and try to make up for it later. I do my best to have a structure, but often I stray from it. It's just the way it is.

26:28 What is the difference for you between the freelance category and the mag category?

26:39 Nothing other than, that's just - subject wise it's pretty much the same. I guess I would separate it more into book writing for me is a totally different thing. It is a very creative process; it is this oasis of my life. "I will sit at a dinner with a cup of coffee, and I will write for hours, and it is the highlight of my day every day." The other stuff, I guess I think of it as enjoyable as it is and as lucky as I feel to do it, I consider it to be more of a job, and so I will try to get it done a little bit earlier. I have deadlines and I have other people to consider, so I just try to get it finished like you would a job so I can spend the rest of my day working on books, novels, memoirs, whatever it might be.

27:37 For your book writing, what are you working on currently?

[KP] 27:48 I do. I am working on a follow-up novel. I don't talk much about it. I tend to kind of live in my own world, my own bubble. I think that's just kind of how I was with the memoir. I don't think I told a single friend of mine that I was writing it while I was writing it, just kind of kept my head down and did it. I work everyday on a new novel, and like I was talking about earlier, it becomes this escape for me, and everyday I just sort of really enjoy spending time with those people and escaping into it.

28:28 When did you start working on the memoir?

[KP] 28:32 Um, okay, lemme see if I can get this right. Okay, so I started writing it about September of 2011. I wrote nine chapters that had to do basically, this will be hard to explain if there are listeners that don't know the story but for your purposes, there's a point in the story where I'm a teenager and a lot of my family has already passed. Well originally, I had started the book there and a lot of the characters in the book played more as ghosts than they did as characters. I wrote about nine or ten chapters over the course of six months. Then I started to send it out. I sent it cold to six or seven agents. I was incredibly lucky; I met Jeff Klineman who's my agent in June 2012 and he was so generous and enthusiastic about the book and really wanted to work with me on it. We put a proposal together then we signed a book deal that August, August 2012. Emily, who you spoke to, she stepped in and she wanted to know more about the ghosts. She wanted for me to realize those characters, to go back and start when I was younger and bring those characters that had already passed away and explore them. So I did that. That took me about another year. So I worked on it for - the book that you know - for about a year. I finished it in August of 2013.

30:24 When you were going through the writing process, I'll take it in two parts. First, before you got the deal, you said you worked on it for about six months. When you returned to it everyday, were you continuing the same story line and then piece it together?

[KP] 30:47 That's a great question. For this book in particular, I wrote it straight through. I would map it out, outline what I wanted to do in each chapter and I would just kind of write a piece of it everyday. If I had ideas for other parts of the book while I was in a different place - if it really kind of came on strong, I would write it because I didn't want to deny the inspiration. But if it was just sort of a shred of an idea, I would make a little note, email it to myself so I could be reminded of it, and then I just kept going forward and let it build it's own momentum.

31:32 In your process, do you prefer drafting or revising?

[KP] 31:42 My process - it used to be that I would write and rewrite and rewrite until it was perfect. Then I realized that I don't really believe in perfect art. The art that I loved and was inspired by was messy and imperfect. So that gave me the freedom to just write and throw whatever I had at the page and I would do some minor revisions but I would just finish it to the best of my ability and move forward. I think a lot of times writers can sabotage themselves by being perfectionists. I didn't believe that I could get it perfect, so I just moved on. I had a friend who I trusted very much read it. When he signed off on it, I moved forward and trusted that - I knew Emily would be there to give me her opinion of it; my agent would give me his opinion on it; I would have the opportunity to go back. But before I had an agent or editor, it was just a matter of trusting my friend and moving forward because having a finished product was my goal. I knew I would get tripped up if I kept going back and fixing every line, and trying to get it perfect. I didn't want that to happen.

33:16 How did you decide what timeframes you were going to focus on?

33:25 It started so organically. It was like something inside of me that I needed to get out. I started to write a scene about my mother and me living in a motel and it started there because that's where I started. Just, I was overwhelmed with this memory and I wanted to get it down, and I just wanted to move forward from there. When people started to speak up and say they wanted to know more those family members, I was a little bit surprised - and pleasantly surprised - to know that there was an interest in them. I think, for a young writer who has lived a certain kind of life, I think there's a little bit of doubt to think if anyone is interested in your life at all. So to hear someone say, not only are they interested, but they want to know more about certain people, that was really inspiring for me. I started it later in late, and then with some consulting with Emily, went back and decided to start much younger. I think that was a really nice decision. I liked going back in little Kenny's shoes and sort of reliving those days and losing those people all over again. It's something that was necessary to get to certain places in the book.

34:51 I think that's a good time for us to get into The Autumn Balloon. Before we do and before I ask you to read an excerpt for us, you went to journalism school, I didn't go to journalism school but I've worked as a reporter, so I know you'll understand my due diligence. I have to ask, you're the first memoirist that I've had on - well the first book length memoirist on the show - I know that in the school of memoir there is varying thoughts about how memoirs are crafted. So I'm going to ask you, is any part of this fabricated, falsified, exaggerated, elaborated?

[KP] 35:45 No, well, so I can tell you a little bit about my process, from the journalist’s - I'll put my journalist hat on. We'll talk about it from that perspective. I think there are old school journalism purists that might take interest with the amount of dialogue that I use. I think they might think there's no way that I could remember dialogue so purely. I definitely understand that, though I disagree with it. I've tried to make the book as readable as I could. To not only think of it as a work of nonfiction but also as a narrative, sometimes I think if you get kind of caught up in the details to the point of minutiae that maybe it would be a little bit too dry. That was decision I made to not only rely on my memory, but to rely on the fact that many of these conversations, take for example, my mother sitting in front of the television set, that was a situation that happened every night of my life for 15 years. So even if her words weren't verbatim, I think the heart and intention - and I do think I got the pretty close - I do think the heart and intention was very accurate. There were situations where I would outline the book, but upon getting court records, housing records, police records, I would find out that my timeline was off and I would have to shift it and that would be inconvenient at times because the narrative flowed better when it was in a different way. Had it been fiction, I might have just kept it as is, but I decided to shift it so it was more accurate and inline with reality. If there were instances where we had to condense time, I would just let my editor know and we would make a decision together as to whether that was something that was ethical and worthwhile, we put a note in the beginning of the book to let the reader know that there was certain changes made. But I'm reminded of, Mary Carr has this - she was talking about this very issue. She says, we can dispute David Foster Wallace's intentions for throwing a chair against the room, but I have a police report that says he threw it. I feel very much like that. We can dispute what was going on in my uncle's head when he robbed that bank, or we can dispute my father's relationship with Katie Beers and the kidnapping but I have reports and records saying that these people were in these places. I think that's what kept me confident in what I was writing was true.

38:54 Let's get into these people and these places in The Autumn Balloon. Would you please read an excerpt? Tell us what page you're going to read from so we can follow along.

39:08 [KP I'm going to start on page nine, chapter one.

A small dark house in long Island . . .

She hates MASH.

41:25 Thank you. Let me just say, you need to record your audiobook. You need to narrate that because that was amazing.

41:36 Thank you very much. I have. Earlier this year I recorded it.

[KW] 41:48 So there's so much - I have so many questions written down, I guess since you started with that vignette of your mom and the reader does know - from the prologue - that things turn out somewhat okay. The mom is there, you guys are there; it's the graduation, but when we get into that chapter, for the first few chapters it's just a lot of pain. This brought to mind something that I asked one of my previous guests; it was a novel, and I asked her if she was concerned with making the characters likeable. And she said no that wasn't my concern. For you since obviously they're characters but they're people. Were you concerned - How did you pay attention to presenting redeemable qualities with aspects of their personalities that might be viewed as negative?

43:05 I've always - it's interesting to talk about them as people and as characters. I've always seen my mother first and foremost as this incredibly compassionate and thoughtful mother who struggled with alcoholism and with incredible loss and that manifested itself into such anger over the years but it started to explode out of her, and at times in a sort of funny way. I was really fortunate with her because she has all of these flaws and all of this sadness, but I think because her heart was so good and beneath it all, there was this very thoughtful loving mother who really wanted the best for her kids. I think it made it easier on me to create this sort of character that was monstrous at times and harsh at times, yet still someone that you may have been rooting for and wanting to see turn their life around.

44:31 The memoir is written in present tense. Tell me about that choice.

[KP] 44:39 I wanted there to be an urgency to it. I wanted it to feel like it was happening to Kenny no because for me to go back and get behind his eyes and walk through his little world and walk through his little days and lose all of those people all over again, I wanted it to feel for the reader the way it felt for him, like this is happening now. I didn't want it to be past tense because for Kenny, past tense would have meant that he knew tomorrow was going to be okay and that wasn't what was happening. I wanted that sense of uncertainty to be there. I was hoping that putting it in that tense would allow the reader to sympathize more with this little kid as he's sort of growing up.

45:38 The way you're answering that question, you're doing something that I believe one of my gradschool teachers said. It's about learning to see yourself as a character when you're writing memoir, detaching. You're referring to yourself, which is the younger Kenny, as Kenny, right. How did you arrive at that understanding in relation to the narrative?

46:11 It was important for me to get distance so I could be honest. It was important for me to understand from the beginning that I am not the hero of this book, and this isn't, as much as it is my story, it's also the story of a lot of other people, some of them who have died, some of them who are still alive. That distance is what allowed me to come to terms with some of the things that I did in the book that I wasn't incredibly proud of and look at myself objectively and to accept that I, along with every other character in this book isn't perfect and has made a lot of mistakes, and it allowed me to step away from any sort of shame or guilt that may come along with that and look at it strictly from the perspective of a character, even though the character was me. I think that distance allowed -for anyone that finds honesty in the book - I think that distance is to credit for some of that.

47:23 Did you arrive at that distance at some point during the drafting process? When did that happen for you?

[KP]   47:35 I think it happened long before. I think it was something that I had to live first, and then, I was able to write about it. I think being able to step back, just at my everyday life and look at what I've brought to the table. There's this moment where I was living in a motel with my mother. She was drunk and she was very unhappy and I was about 14 years old. I'll never forget this. I remember her; she was crying and she would say, she says, "You know I haven't even thought about sex in 30 years." It was just incredibly heartbreaking moment for me because for a split second, she stopped being my mother. No one wants to hear their mother talk about sex or their desire for sex. But in that moment, she because just a real woman, you know? I think that was the beginning of me where I stopped seeing her as a mother purely and started seeing her as a full woman who had fears and failings and desires and dreams. I took that and applied it to myself and everyone else in the book and tried to get used to living with that idea. I think that informed my perspective and hoped that it would inform the writing.

48:57 I think that you did a number of things well in The Autumn Balloon, but I want to let you hear what Emily Griffin, your editor at Grand Central Publishing thinks that you did well and you can feel free to respond to her thoughts.

[EG] 49:16 Everything. I think he's a fantastic writer and he did an amazing job. One of the things that have come up so often in the media that he has been doing for this book, and I think really resonated with a lot of the early readers of this book, is how funny he is and how he's able to get down dialogue in a way that sounds so real and snappy and funny but not artificial, and how he's able to find these moments of beauty in absurdity and beauty in pain in a way that I think many people - if I had grown up the way he had - I wouldn't have had that power.

[KP] 50:07 That's really nice. I don't know how to respond to that. I'm incredibly flattered. That was very nice.

50:20 When I talked with Emily, one of the things that I immediately asked her about was the dialogue. Someone might say dialogue heavy, heavy has a negative connotation, but I noticed right away that the book is dialogue intense. It's how you show the characters, especially with your mother and the things she says. She's an equal opportunity hater. She hates on everybody.

[KP] 51:03 Exactly, you know.

51:06 And I got that from the dialogue. Let me find the page where I made this note.

[KP] 51:15 I think, just to kind of quickly respond to the thing Emily said, for any reader that finds it funny, a lot of that credit goes to my mother. That equal opportunity hatred that she can spew at times, it is a product of her sadness coming out as anger, but I didn't want to sensor it because a person in that position doesn't have a filter. She is alone in her living room or with me and she's sort of free to say what she wants and in a way wants people to hurt maybe as bad as she does, and she's giving it her all. Sometimes it's vicious; sometimes it's brutal. I've heard people say you know how incredibly sad this is? And I'll say well, I was under the impression I was writing a comedy. I also think it's funny that depending on how you were brought up. You know, someone will write me and say this is incredibly sad, and someone will write me and say this is incredibly funny; I loved it. I think it gives insight into what you're used to, and how maybe it reminds you of your mom or your dad or maybe you never heard anything like that before. So that's been fun for me: to learn about people by their reactions to it.

52:44 There's a page that I was looking for - it's when - there might be - we try not to do so much of a spoiler, but I have to ask certain questions, so this might be a tiny bit. There's a situation in which the house gets robbed and your uncle shows up with a bandaged hand. And your mom and him have an exchange and he tries to blame some Black guys that were running down, he claims were running down by the canal. At this point I think she realizes - she suspects that it was him. The narrator hints at that a little, the way Kenny, the details that Kenny notices. So at the bottom of page 96 - I just want you to read everything now. I am going to ask you to read the uncle because I'm curious to see what his voice sounds like. At the bottom of page 96 - "Mom come on," my brother says embarrassed. My uncle bangs on the door. His hand is bandaged. He looks sober, clear-eyed, concerned." And I marked that part, leads us to suspect the uncle. I feel like Kenny notices that for some reason. If you can just read the two paragraphs on the bottom, the one that starts with "You know what?" and goes until the end of that section.

[KP] 54:35 [Reads excerpt]

[KW] 55:11 On side I write, LMAO, for me you know, I guess most you know who see my picture, I'm Black, but I feel like that was a funny part for me because your mom is kind of calling him like, "Really, dude?"

[Laughter]

[KP] 55:30 Yeah, right. I think at that point, it's funny because for all the anger that she says, all the angry things that she says, I don't, at least I hope that in a scene like that, at the same time she doesn't really hate anybody. She's not just going to buy into his excuses. She knows whom to blame and she knows why. She's grown up with this man, and she knows what he's capable of. It was just, in that moment, it was about getting our stuff back, but yeah, I appreciate the compliment.

56:12 I feel that just as much as you are accurate with the dialogue, there are times throughout the prose where you drop little one-liners that I feel mean more to the text than what they are at the moment, in the context of the paragraph. I'll give you a couple examples. One of them I think occurs on page 94. The bottom of 94 when your uncle "My uncle found out a few days ago that the newspaper he has been carrying around with him is worthless." My note at that time was - good lord you get the sense that everyone is holding onto something, and if they lose it they are going to fall apart. Later, one of your other one-liners occurred near the end. Spoiler alert: Occurred near the end after your dad dies, that's on page 252: "It takes a long time to settle the life of a dead person."

57:36 Yeah. I think - absolutely. Going back to the newspaper - Sandra Cisneros wrote a book called The House on Mango Street, and she talks about her father holding a lottery ticket in his hand and it was sort of their way out. To me, this newspaper was his lottery ticket. It wasn't just - it was more of a promise - it was a get rich quick scheme, but it was a ticket to an easy life or a way out of a hard one. I think that's what I was hoping to get across with that newspaper. It was the desperation of a man who would do anything to avoid having to face reality and that's kind of what drugs are in a way. Towards the end, the line about my father, I think, I don't think I know what to say about that. I remember feeling that when he passed away. I remember being so overwhelmed by how much his life continued on even when he was did and how long it took me to settle it. You know the mail kept coming with his name on it. His voice was still on the answering machine. The nursing homes that he sang at kept calling to book him. Months would go by and you'd get a phone bill or electric bill and something would happen that would remind you that not everybody knew that he was gone yet. I think I was a little bit overwhelmed with the heaviness of that, with this idea that there was just so many little pieces of him still around that kept bringing him back to life and you'd have to put it down again. They were like daily reminders. It took awhile for me to settle his life and took a while to settle within myself that he had actually passed.

60:03 Do those types of lines come to you on revision process? Do you feel yourself concentrating on them?

[KP] 60:14 Not particularly to be honest. Writing is funny where some of the lines that just come will be lines that people connect with. Some lines that I will suffer over and try to make perfect will be lines that people want edited out. So, kind of going back to earlier when I said I don't believe in perfect art, I think that's just one of the reason I try to write from my gut and put it all out there and hope that somebody connects with some part of it because the things you most love might be something that people want cut. The things you think are throw away lines might be things that people connect with and remember and you just never know which lines those are going to be.

61:03 Well let's take a look at one of those. I'm on page 73, and there's the second section there, there's a paragraph that begins "After school" - so how do you say the dog's name first? Woozels?

[KP] 61:23 Her name is Wozels *[pronounced Wah-zels.]*

61:27 So you have Wozels. Sidebar - you have, besides living next to Katie Beers, which when I read that I remembered, Oh my God. So you get this dog on Regis and Kathie Lee, so you name her Wozels and this is when you're in Arizona. And at the end of the paragraph, you have a detail there that Wozels has found a dead bird covered with ants. I wrote such a detail. It's something about that almost just stops time and I can see here there, and I wrote on the side of that. How did you come to the choice to include that detail?

62:28 I think for me there were certain images that made lasting impressions on me and certain things that I would record away that felt that they had more meaning than they did. And it might be that they didn't. It might be that it was just a bird covered with ants, but I remember thinking back to moments like dropping a pebble into my reflection and seeing it split or seeing a bird being sort of eaten away by these little things and decaying and hoping that they could bring some sort of weight to the story. Maybe the reader would see it as an insight into what I was feeling at the time, but if the moment was powerful enough and resonated with me and I thought that I could use it to set the scene, I would do my best to do that. I also try to choose, maybe not consciously, I try to use images that were indicative of the landscape that I was in. I wanted to go from the urban NYC to the desert to the cold of Chicago to San Francisco. I wanted the images to really evoke a sense of place because place was a really big thing for me growing up, the dreariness of my upbringing and how it's not so much that Long Island is even particularly dreary but through the lens that I was seeing it through, it certainly was. So I tried to focus on images that would bring those things to life.

64:21 One of the questions that I had for you was based on your description within scene of your surrounding. The paragraph that you read in the opening that describes your mom. Throughout the book, I felt like for the most part, the narrator doesn't - you don't describe people, like how they look, but you do a lot of scene work: the smells, what we see. Was that a conscious choice or is that reflective of your style? It might be style from what I hear of your last question.

[KP] 65:05 I think my goal is to allow you to really feel it and to be surrounded by it. I try to close my eyes - it's weird - it's almost like shapeless words you can grab them because you can feel them, and whatever those words end up being they go on the page. They might not be correct. When I'm writing the amount of red underlines on my page is outrageous. Sometimes I think I don't know how to right at all because of that. But what I think it helps me with is getting the description right. I just want to be able to feel it on the page, and those are the type of descriptions that I use. If there is a physical description that I feel is important, I'll put it in, but more than that, I want to be able to smell and taste and feel a room. You know - the heaviness of a police officer in your house is such a distinctive experience, and I want to make sure the reader comes away with that, more so to know if the officer was white or black or had blond hair.

66:31 Let's talk a little bit about the structure. The book has chapters and is divided into parts. What is the significance of part one and part two?

[KP] 66:43 I think part two sort of started where I was originally going to start the book. Part one shows Kenny when he has no control over his life. He's sort of along for the ride, even though he's taken on the role of adult in certain instances, he's still very much a little kid who goes along with mom and dad and gets caught up in the whirlwind. Part two comes when - it's only about five or six years later, but they are a significant five or six years. There is an early scene where - spoiler - where he looses his dog. To me that was always the sort of right of passage of the book where he crosses over from that sorts of like the last remaining symbol of innocence and helplessness and when he loses that he has to make those decisions for himself. From that point of the book onward, part two, I think it's about rebuilding the family he lost with strangers and writers and poets and building up self-esteem and facing this pending reality that he can't change what's happened but can make certain decisions going forward and maybe learning from the mistakes he grew up with and try to create a decent life for himself. I think the major distinctions are Kenny along for the ride and being helpless and becoming his own man.

68:29 How did you craft the voice of a child in part one? I do feel like it sounds young.

[KP] 68:42 I was him, you know? I would write when I was his age. I remember very vividly thinking his thoughts and feeling what he felt. To me, I just reverted back to my younger self and write and envision the world as I did. It was challenging at times. There's a line that I just read where I said, 'She fucking hates MASH.' There was a big internal struggle whether an eight year old would say that? I left it in because I would say that when I was eight. [Laughter] I think I just had experience being him. I could remember it so well; it fortunately came very easily, that voice.

69:44 When you said that about whether or not you should say fucking, there's a scene with you and your brother and the Beers household-ish place where he's telling you to curse and you giggle at first. I can see it. In my mind, I'm seeing you guys sitting on the bed which I guess goes to what you were saying about the description and taking the reader there.  Your brother, there's a place in the text around 113, you have this epic fight with your brother and I'm going to borrow a term a previous guest - Cameron Conaway - he has a poetry book, he calls it "spliced" with prose, with some facts. In this particular section, you have spliced I'll say with flashback of your mom and dad fighting. It feels like for me as a reader that section is very poignant because we see you and your brother fighting and we see the parents fighting. We know it's really like a mirror and it feels to speak to the entire book. Tell us how that section came to be.

[KP] 71:26 I think you're absolutely right. Originally, these chapters were titled, and this one was Porpora vs. Porpora because of the element of court and legal stuff going on and also because of these two fights. To me, it was about learned behavior. It was about how we fight the people the hardest that we hope won't leave. For me and my brother, that was each other. It was about growing up in a situation where even the most chaotic fight would be forgotten in the morning. We had grown up with my mom and dad just destroying each other. You know, windows broken and arrests on front lawns, knives thrown, eardrums broken and then the next morning, my mom would wake up more sober. And she would say, 'Oh you would never believe what Regis just said.' It was almost like it never happened. I wanted to show the effects of growing up in that situation, how my brother and I could throw everything at each other, say the most unforgivable things, hurt each other physically and emotionally. At one point he tells me I'm going to grow up to be like my uncle who is a drug addict, a thief, who will die young. That's sort of a theme for me in the book: struggling with what kind of a life you are afraid that you've inherited. Yet at the end of it, we start to laugh, and we're brothers again. To me it was a way of showing the damage that was being done and also showing the strength of my relationship with my brother and that we became those two people that no matter how hard we hit each other we would still be there.

73:24 How did you decide where to end the book?

[KP] 73:31 Ending the book was very difficult for me. I can honestly say that, for in terms of writing, it is the biggest challenge. I don't always  - how can I say this? - I don't believe in happy endings in the traditional sense so it is my instinct to end on very sort of everyday notes and hope all the things leading up to that ending will be enough. Some times that isn't what a book needs. I think a book like this definitely needed a happy ending because it can be very sad and dark at times. I struggled to find a place where that would be the truest so I tried to find the reality, the truth in what seems to be people finding happiness - and I suppose it's okay if I talk about the end? - my mother, finally getting a job. It might not have been the most perfect job or the highest paying job but it was a job. She stopped drinking and still had a little bit of that sharp tongue and still had her opinions, but at the end of the day, she was alive and she wanted to be alive. To me, that was an incredible happy ending, whether or not it soared the way you might want someone to come out of this and win the lottery and be surrounded by unicorns, to me, her desire to be alive for her children and for me to get to get to a good school and have a future and go to therapy and have some friends in a new city, and to not only be alive but to be away from addiction, and be surrounded by positive people, that was such a happy ending for me. I tried to find those bits of truth and craft them into something that seemed like and ending while also showing that it wasn't the end, it was just the end of this particular story. Kenny has to go on. Now you have to actually live your life. And that's a whole other thing. I think understanding the difference between the ending of a story and the end was important for me.

76:32 What do you think your writing superpower is?

[KP] 76:39 Oh my gosh. The truth is when it comes to writing, I don't think I know what I'm doing. There are times when I read my writing out loud to myself and I say 'I don't know how to write.' This happens to me all the time. People have said, what do you think? Do you think this is funny? I don't think anything I write is funny. So to me writing is an oasis in my day. It is such a calming experience for me, almost like running or cooking or knitting might be for somebody but that isn't to say that I think I know what I'm doing. I guess if I had to pay myself a compliment, I would like to say that I think I can come at a character with compassion, and that I can understand them and do my best to present them for all that they are - be it good and bad and funny and flawed and terrible. I hope that people connect with that but I would like to think that if there's anything I do well, it's bringing a sort of understanding to a person and showing them fully.

78:10 I do think that you achieved that in The Autumn Balloon. There were times I was rooting for your mom and then when you guys are with your dad, I'm rooting for the dad, and then you're back with your mom, I'm rooting for your mom.

78:17 [KP] [Laughter]

[KW] 78:24 You get us so engrossed with what's going on with the narrative that I forget that forget that she just took you guys, essentially your mom kidnapped you, but then I completely forgot about him. You did a good job showing the endearing side of each one of them. Even with the uncle and the time that he is with Kenny and the brother. One of the other scenes that stick out is when he's fighting with Kenny. He's doing some judo kick or something and falls into the dishwasher. You do an amazing job with making each one of them. Even the grandmother, she starts off, she's more equal opportunity hater - I don't want to say more than the mom - but she has - when Brian comes to meet her in Florida, she even has some redeeming her.

[KP] 79:44 Thanks. There's so much credit to be given to Emily who I remember reading my original draft that I sent to her and I was so surprised by how many scenes of my mom being angry there were and how many scenes of my grandmother being racist there were. It's to Emily's credit that she was able to make it so that there was the right amount. That you weren't inundated with cursing and anger. I remember reading it and thinking 'Oh my gosh,' I'm almost tired of reading it. From my perspective I wanted to throw it all against the wall. I wanted to beat you over the head with it and Emily really helped me zero in on the really important moments and she's really responsible for the pacing of the book because I would like to think that now when you read it you at least get a sense of who they are and a sense of that anger and you're able to move forward versus scene after scene after scene of it. So I think that a lot of these redeeming qualities of these characters can be attributed to her and her eye in that you're able to spend just enough time with them, get a sense of their anger, their compassion, their love, all of these things in just the right doses. I think it makes the story flow better. A lot of credit definitely goes to her for that.

81:25 You have a box of your books there with you. What do you think when you look at that box of books or hold your book in your hand?

[KP] 81:37  That's a nice question. Um, when I finished writing it I moved on to writing something else. That has sort of been the theme of my life in a way where - I think there's two themes. One is I don't ever really believe anything is going to happen until it happens. I would get into a really good school and I don't tell anyone about it until I graduated. Then I would tell them I got in. So for a situation like this, I kind of just moved forward and started writing more because I wanted to stay in the present and I wanted to keep moving forward. I got so into writing my next book that it wasn't until about a week or two before this book was due to come out that I had to stop myself and think 'This is something that you should be present for.' When I see it, I almost think of him as like - obviously I am giving him a gender, the book - I think of him almost as a child. I see him out in the world and I just want people to meet him and get to know him and share him because I'm proud of it the way you would be proud of sending your little boy off to kindergarten, I think. It's very personal to me and I think a lot of the people in the book lived their lives thinking that their lives didn't matter and so anytime anybody pays me a compliment for the book, I'm happy for them because I think it is sort of evidence to the contrary. I think that it's proof their lives did matter and that they were very funny and relatable and people could love them in a way that I don't think they thought, so I think that's kind of what it means to me.

[MUSIC]

I have to say I really enjoyed Kenny's book. I would read it again. I think it's a good piece that I can study and if you're interested in writing nonfiction, I think it's a good piece you could study as well.

Next week on Behind the Prose, my submission idol, Chelsey Clammer. Somehow she's landed 100 publications in real places like The Rumpus, Essay Daily, the Waterstone-Review, Black Warrior Review, all in a span of just two years. We discuss her first collation of essays, BodyHome, out now from Hopewell Publishing.

Thanks for bringing me into your electronic device one more time. Behind the Prose music is by UK Artist, Redvers West Boyle found on Soundcloud. Dr. Ike is not a real doctor and don't take his advice.  The show is executive produced and hosted by Keysha Whitaker from a trapezoid-shaped closet in Pennsylvania. Until next time, listen, learn, and write.