**Behind the Prose Transcript**

**Episode 2: Go Behind the Prose with Jennifer Genest, MFA**

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Guest: Jennifer Genest

Transcriber: Keysha Whitaker

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

[KW] = Host Initials

[JG] = Guest Initials

0:15 [KW]

Good evening. It's Sunday, January 25, and you're listening to Behind the Prose, the only radio show that explores and illuminates the craft of writing and its process. I'm Keysha Whitaker. My guest today is an award-winning writer. Jennifer Genest won the 2014 Ryan R. Gibbs Award for Short Fiction for her flash story, "Ways to Prepare White Perch" published in New Delta Review in December. I will talk to Jennifer today about that story and her creative nonfiction essay, "Her Fighting Weight - A Postpartum Experience." Published in The Doctor T.J. Eckleburg Review. So let's get ready to go Behind the Prose with Jennifer Genest. We'll be right back.

1:05 [Public Service Announcement]

1:35 [KW]

Welcome back to Behind the Prose. This show highlights the work of emerging and established writers. It's all about helping you approach your work in a new way and reminding you that you're not alone - we're all going through the same thing - and learning how other writers are approaching the drafting and revision process. Jennifer Genest our guest today and grew up riding horse and playing in the woods of Sanford, a mill town in southern Maine. She's got a MFA from Antioch University in Los Angeles in Creative Writing and was a Peter Taylor Fellow for the Kenyon Review Writer's Workshop. Her Writing has appeared in Paris Play, Cactus Heart, The Doctor T.J. Eckleburg Review, and New Delta Review. Her short story, "Ways to Prepare White Perch," won the 2014 Ryan R. Gibbs Award and I'm so honored to have her with us today. She currently lives in Long Beach, CA with her husband and young daughter. So please, let's welcome Jennifer Genest to the show.

[Applause.]

2:42 [KW]

Thanks for being here Jennifer.

2:46 [JG]

Thank you for having me.

2:49 [KW] We're going to start the discussion with your creative non-fiction essay, "Her Fighting Weight - A Postpartum Experience." If you're listening, you can go to the website, behindtheprose.com, click on Jennifer's post and you'll be able to go to the essay published in The Doctor T.J. Eckleburg Review. So before we get into it more specifically, I want to ask you some general questions about your writing process. What is your process like?

3:27 [JG] Usually I just have an idea and I start to keep my eyes peeled and mind open for the structure that I'm going to use to tell the story. I think that was one of the things that was so freeing was trying to write a personal essay for the first time. I took an Eckleburg workshop with Chelsey Clammar, and she introduced me to all kinds of new forms to use when you're doing creative nonfiction. It really allowed me to lean on these formats. It was something I could just look at and follow and the story just came naturally.

4:23 [KW]

Can you give us an example of one of the formats you're referring to?

4:28 [JG]

One of the formats is the one I used for "Her Fighting Weight" where I'm using a workout video and kind of going through what my day would be like when I was working out and sort of using that as the format to follow, sort of the top story. It was an easy way for me to talk about something that was difficult and personal by adding humor with it, laughing at myself a little bit, and it was easier to tell the story that way by having that story to hang on to.

5:11 [KW]

Do you - How do you draft once you have that idea?

5:19 [JG]

I just try to get it all out. Not necessarily in one sitting, but like most writers, I get down as much as I can, and I come back to it often. It could be as often as I can. It could be once a day; it could be three or four times a day. It could be, I wake up in the middle of the night and think about it. It's usually a pretty lengthy process. I think if I'm really working on something, like a workshop, that would be compressed, probably a couple days. But if I'm at home and I'm working on it and I have a deadline with a writing group, I would say if I wanted to get a draft out, it would probably take me a week.

6:05 [JG] I was going to say, I'm talking about something short - a shorter story.

6:17 [KW]

Do you remember how long "Her Fighting Weight" is?

6:30 I don't off hand.

6:35 [KW]

How long did the draft process take you?

6:34 [JG]

I think a couple weeks from beginning to end. I got feedback from the instructor and that helped as well. I think I did a couple of drafts with her edits and her input. After that, I probably polished it for another week or so before I started sending it out.

6:58 [KW]

So let's start with the essay. The title of it is "Her Fighting Weight - A Postpartum Experience." I read the title a few times and I notice there is a double entendre in the title. Was that intentional?

7:14 [JG]

It wasn't at first but pretty soon after I realized what was going on.

7:21 [KW]

Because you have her fighting weight as in the fighting weight of a fighter - [audio drop] and that sort of parallels what the narrator in this essay is going through.

7:33 [JG]

Right.

7:35 [KW]

So the first sentence: "My husband has a theory." For me that presented, within this essay there is like a conundrum or problem or unexplained thing - just the idea that the husband has a theory about something. And then you go into his theory about people living in the era when they were most cool. How did you decide to start the essay there?

8:07 [JG]

I just always thought that was a funny and clever thing that he said, and I more and more see that is true with a lot of people. I just thought it was a light way to start it because the fact that I chose Billy Blanks in 2008 when he was sort of over and done with his time on DVD and him being like the hot thing to follow, I just thought it blended in well and it tied into needing Billy Blanks in my world.

8:50 [KW]

In the first paragraph, we are introduced to the characters in this - your husband, yourself, Billy Blanks is a significant character, and the baby of course. We are also introduced to a technique that you use throughout the essay and that's the use of footnotes. Can you tell us a little bit about your decision to use footnotes in this essay?

9:17 [JG]

I felt like the information that's provided in the footnotes would have really made it clunky. It would have slowed me down, just getting it all out. But I also felt like there was some information if you wanted to pause and turn to the footnotes, it would fill the reader in on what's going on behind that statement, what's going on behind that word. What's another meaning for what was just written? Partly it was to get me through the essay and partly it was just to keep it clean and clear.

10:03 [KW]

When a reader approaches footnotes, for yourself and how did you think readers would approach the footnotes. Are you one to stop at that sentence and then go read the footnote or can you wait until the end? What do you do and what did you hope the reader would do?

10:22 [JG]

Usually I finish a paragraph and then I go back to the footnotes and read it. Junot Diaz has a novel Oscar Wao where he does that through out. I kind of got the hang of it - at first it annoyed me - and then I kind of got the hang of it and I really enjoyed it and I felt like it strengthened the storytelling.

10:45 [KW]

Speaking of the paragraphs, let's take a moment and have Jennifer read a section from "Her Fighting Weight - A Postpartum Experience." Would you mind reading for us your favorite part?

10:59 [JG]

Sure, I'll start at the beginning, the first paragraph.

My husband has a theory. Each and every one of us is stuck in the era during which we were most cool; this is what leaves some men with mullet haircuts and why, in 2008, after the birth of my daughter, I believed Billy Blanks’ Ultimate Tae Bo Workout was the best way to make it back to my fighting weight. I promptly ordered the DVD from Amazon, the best way to shop when your newborn has you under house arrest.

Although I never did the workout back in the ‘90s, I remembered Billy Blanks on Oprah back then as he guided her and her audience through punching an imaginary speed-bag, kicking, and generally killing calories. He was positively grinning, inspiring us all with his sleek, chiseled body and endless energy.

12:14 [KW]

If you're listening, we are going to be working on a way for you to follow along with us, and so I'll be able to show you what we're reading and annotating so you can call in and ask the guest questions. So let's continue with a few more questions. What do you think gave you the most challenge in writing this essay?

12:44 [JG]

I think it was the personal part of it, just writing something that's nonfiction, having it be out there so plainly. That was a brand new experience to me. I'd only really written fiction before this so that was difficult. Trimming and getting it to be very clean and move along, that was also a challenge. I found myself at first when I was writing it, really getting kind of slowed down and into the details of my day and how I was feeling more than hanging onto that top story that I was talking about earlier, where relying on this rhythm that tugs me along to tell the bottom story.  So I think once I edited all that out, it was a lot more easy to write and a lot more easy to read.

13:57 [KW]

I think one of the things in your description that really drew me in is when you're talking about your daughter and the struggle that you are having - in addition to your weight - feeding her and just being a new mom and the breastfeeding. There's a section where you talk about bleeding nipples and I just cringed. Can you tell us how you weaved in those details?

14:37 [JG]

I guess thinking about what it was like to be in that moment and thinking about someone with an eating disorder, generally when you're exercising it's not necessarily its about being in that moment in your body, you're just in your head. You're just thinking about everything that's either wrong with your body or what's going on in your life. I think it was just thinking about my body, all the responsibilities I had, how I felt very trapped, very isolated and Billy Blanks was the only person I was really seeing or talking to besides the newborn for the bulk of my day. It came organically when I talked about my body and feeding my daughter.

15:38 [KW]

Probably about ten paragraphs in you begin to use the form of repetition: "this is the ultimate test, the ultimate test" appears a few times. Can you explain how that parallels what the narrator is going through and whether you knew at that time you were intentionally putting in that repetition or did it just happen?

16:07 [JG]

That happened through the editorial process. I believe when I was going back and forth with my instructor that was a suggestion from her and I really liked it. I thought it strengthened it. It's like that trance-like repetition of someone in that moment being stuck, doing the same thing over and over and just feeling like this is the ultimate test. This is where I am. This is how I feel and this is horrible. That's how that came along.

16:51 [KW]

A little further down there where you begin to talk about counting calories and using the Excel file to do so, you have two simple sentences next to each other and I feel that the ideas are a nice juxtaposition. They read: "An hour of Tae Bo burns about 500 calories. Producing enough breast milk for a single baby per day also burns about 500 calories." Can you give us insight into what was the choice to put those two sentences together in one paragraph by itself?

17:32 [JG]

At that time in my life, that was a really important fact. Again, I'll generalize here, but I think most anorexics, they know their calories. You can tell them pretty much any food and they can tell you what half of it has, a quarter of it has, a piece of it has, three drops, I mean its calorie. I knew what I could eat that was 500 calories, how to burn 500 calories. You get really good at math unfortunately, so I felt like that was a really important thought at that time. It meant a lot to me. It was very significant in my day and I felt it needed to stand alone.

18:27 [KW]

I was trying to pick out from this piece and I think it does it subtly in the beginning, six paragraphs down - in the middle of it you introduce the idea: "Later, I would recognize this as binging." As a reader, I felt like this was a hint. That this writer - the narrator - is going through something more than just postpartum experience. Then when we get to the end, we see the narrator in the bathroom trying to purge and unsuccessfully doing so, that sort of confirms it, but it's never explicitly said in the text. There are points where you hint at your past - being obsessed with weight - knowing weight here and there. But it's never explicitly said that the narrator has an eating disorder. Do you know what I mean?

19:30 [JG]

Right.

19:32 [KW]

And so, barring HIPPA and everything like that, [laughter] I'd like to know was that move that you made because you didn't feel comfortable or am I reading something different.

19:50 [JG]

I haven't really thought about it up until you asked me that? It wasn't intentional not to actually say it. I guess I felt it was there and not that it was obvious - but being in the state that I was in, I didn't know that that was what was going on. I didn't realize that I had an eating disorder. I just thought this is me. This is what I do and perhaps that's why when I was back in the moment writing about it, I didn't really name it. But that's where I was and that's what I did. I don't know if that answers your question.

20:43 [KW]

So we're going to take a break now and when we come back, we will continue talking to Jennifer about her award-winning piece "Ways to Prepare White Perch" which appeared in New Delta Review in December 2014. Stay with us. It's Behind the Prose.

21:12 [COMMERCIALS]

22:12 [KW]

We're back on Behind the Prose. We're talking today to Jennifer Genest. She's an award-winning writer and we are now going to get into her flash fiction piece "Ways to Prepare White Perch." Jennifer will be taking your questions. You can call in - the number's 347-857-2225. You can go to the website behindtheprose.com and click on the link to read along with us as we get into "Ways to Prepare White Perch."

Jennifer, would you please read a section of this flash fiction?

23:00 [JG] Sure. I'm going to read the third paragraph.

The garden still hasn’t recovered from your letting it dry up, so bring him to the market for fresh ingredients. Poach the fish with half a green leek and pickling spice. Brown the rest of the leek in butter. Add flour, reserved stock, and sour cream. Stir until hot and pour over the fish. At this point the boy will probably think, “Fish again?” but he still hasn’t spoken a word. Maybe the only blessing of his silence is that he won’t ask about where she is and you won’t have to explain.

23:44 [KW]

When I first read this piece - and let me just before I get into that, I'm going to read a quote by Roxane Gay who selected this for the 2014 Ryan R. Gibbs Award. And her quote says:

This is a story that, in the way of excellent flash fiction, does so much work with aggressive economy. “Ways to Prepare White Perch” is a story about loss and grief but also about a father learning to be more of a father. The challenges are conveyed intimately but without unnecessary sentimentality. There is a domestic sensuality to this story–the bitterness of ale, the sharp indentations of a Lego on the bottom of a tender foot, the heartiness of a bowl of chowder, the way the things that engage the senses are what can make a home.

24:37 [KW]

What struck me first about this piece is the voice and the pace of it. It reminded me of Jamaica Kincaid's short story, Girl, with this sort of driving narration. How did you find the voice for this piece?

24:59 [JG]

This was a story that came from a writing prompt that I did in Nancy Zafris class at the Kenyon Writer's Workshop I guess, two summers ago. The prompt was to read "Solutions to Ben's Problem" by Bonnie Jo Campbell. So that was a story that was told in the same sort of listing style. That was a story told in the same sort of listing style. I really like it. I liked the pace of that and the emotion under it and it was sort of the inspiration. Nancy wanted us to read that and then to start writing using one of our own memories and give the character a secret so that's how this started out. The memory that I used was when I was a kid my brother caught 21 white perch out of the lake and my mom had to find all these different ways to prepare them. That's where it started.

26:19

So the flash fiction is numbered - it's seven numbers - and each one of those paragraphs feels like a story within itself and then decide you wanted to do the list?

26:38 [JG]

I started with the list because the prompt asked us to do a list, so I always kept it from the first draft. There used to be an extra one that I took out that wasn't working and leading me down a different road and not staying with the story. During the process of rewriting I had to cut out quite a bit.

27:17 [KW]

Is it easy for you to see in your own writing what to cut out and how do you acquire that perspective?

27:34 [JG]

Not really. [Laughter] It's not really that was for me to see it. At least not right away. If I have time to let it sit and come back and see it - I think that's probably true for most writers - you just take a break, you come back and then you see all kinds of things you didn't see before and when you read it out loud you hear all kinds of things that you don't need. That was part of process. Bringing it to my writing group that helped immensely. There are some really strong flash fiction writers in my writing group. They were really helpful trimming this and trimming that and "you can say this in three words instead of seven." I would say, I don't know how long it took because I did let it sit for a while after I left Kenyon a couple years ago. I let it sit for quite a while, like nine months at least, and then came back to it.  I'm not really sure how long it took. Sitting down time, probably a couple weeks.

28:39 [KW]

So tell us about the award for this.

28:50 [KW]

It's through New Delta Review. I'm on the creative writing opportunities list. It's a free list that's sent out every week and it tells you all the different contests and calls for submissions through literary magazines and elsewhere. I saw this on that list and I read some pieces in New Delta and I really loved what they published and also love Roxane Gay's writing. Also one of my friends in my writing group suggested that I entered this. It had just gotten an honorable mention from Kenyon Review and I was really pleased with that but I wanted to kind of just keep it going and get it out there. So I entered and heard back from them, and I was really thrilled.

29:49 [KW]

I'm just looking at the narrative here in "Ways to Prepare White Perch" and you use a lot of active voice in this, short sentences. How does that contribute to the story?

30:11 [JG]

I think the intention is to make each one count. And making it short can make it have more of an impact. Reading it aloud and reading it over and over and figuring out what that rhythm is. I'm not really sure how to explain that other than just you read it and you just kind of figure out if it feels strong and if it sounds strong when you read it out loud. So that's kind of the way I do it.

30:51 [I'm going to read one of the sentences that hit me in the gut - so to speak. It's number four, the last sentence. "When you imagine what he’s already been through and what he’s now probably thinking—that he didn’t sign up for a single parent, that maybe she left because he’s ten and has baggage and isn’t a newborn baby—you want to use something much larger than a mallet to smash pretzels."

Can you tell why it was important to bring the reader into the mind of the father with this story?

31:40 [JG]

I think for me that's the heart of it. It's him dealing with two different things - the grief of his wife leaving and trying to pick up the pieces and hold it all together as a parent and trying not to be angry, probably, I'm assuming in front of the child. Trying to be a good dad. Trying to hold up.  That was what I was trying to convey there, is just his anger.

32:26 [KW]

When Gay mentions the details you include - there's a part where you talk about him stepping on the Leggo on the way to the bathroom  - I think a lot of people can identify with that sever pain when you step on a Leggo. There's a lot of realness in this, in the details that you chose.

32:54 [JG]

Thank you.

32:56 [KW]

You said you drafted this a couple years ago, as far as your process goes, what do you prefer? Drafting or revising?

33:07 [JG]

Well, I guess kind of both. I usually take a draft and every time I change it significantly, I save another draft so I have like 17 versions of the same thing and sometimes that makes me crazy but I've learned to not throw anything away because Nancy Zafris taught me that there is a freshness in the voice that comes in the first draft that you sometimes lose and it gets sort of diluted as you go on and on so it's really valuable to hang on to that first draft even if you really hate it.  It's helpful to go back and try to recapture because sometimes you get lost in all these drafts  -What was I trying to say in the first place? And I like that first paragraph; why did I change it? You just sort of get lost in it - at least I do. I do both; I do revisions and then I save everything. If I get stuck I go back and I try to re-read and sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't.

34:30 [KW]

I'm going to invite you out there listening, give us a call if you have a question for Jennifer Genest. We'll be with her for a few more moments. This is your chance to talk to an award-winning writer. 347-857-2225. Jennifer, what is your submission process like? Do you keep yourself to a schedule of submitting say - two things a month? Or within a certain few months you want to have a certain number of things out? How do you approach that?

35:03 [JG]

I guess right now it all depends on what times I have on my hands. I have a fairly new baby. She's ten months old. When she's not sleeping, I don't have a whole lot of time. When I do have time and I'm rested and I'm focused I try to have I would say, whatever is ready to be out and submitted - I would say, two stories at once. I keep a spreadsheet and I try to send out maybe 40 places at a time. I wait for those to come back and as soon as they come back, I go down the list and send out to the next batch. I found that that really just kind of keeps me motivated to have something in the que. Just keep sending. Keep sending and try not to lest any of the rejections get to me. If I have a plan and I'm moving forward then it doesn't bother me to get the rejections as much.

36:08 [KW]

Do you get write everyday or are you on a new schedule with the baby?

36:16 [JG]

Definitely on a new schedule. Ideally, I would at least open a file and touch it and maybe just tweak a couple things if that's the only time I have. Maybe 15 minutes in the morning or 15 minutes at night. Before my second daughter was born I was on a pretty good schedule some time in the morning once a week and then on the weekend my husband would watch my daughter and I would go leave the house and write somewhere, probably for two to three hours at a time.

36:57 [KW]

What word of advice would you give to yourself five years ago as a writer? And perhaps our listeners can take that and enrich their craft and process?

37:16 [JG]

A lot of it I think has to do with submitting and just really focusing on not letting rejections get to you because that can really knock you down. I think that really knocked me down a lot; it discouraged me. I felt like, what was the use? When I talked to friends who were really submitting a lot and successful with that, I realized I was kind of approaching it the wrong way. I realized it's not personal; it's totally kind of like a numbers game. You have to just submit and submit and submit and not let it bother you. I think if I had done that and not let it bother me, I don't think it would have stalled my writing so much. But I really, unfortunately let that get me down a lot.

38:10 [KW]

I understand. I know we all understand.

[Laughter]

38:13 [KW]

We are glad that you're submitting now, and I'm submitting, and you out there are submitting. I'm sure that I'm going to be many of you who are writing out there and I'm sure I'll talk to Jennifer when her novel gets picked up. The novel is The Mending Wall, correct?

38:34 [JG]

Yes.

38:37 [KW]

We wish you the best of luck with that. I thank you for being on Behind the Prose with us today. Next week on Behind the Prose. I'm happy to talk to writer Soo Na Pak. She's a writer and artist living in the San Francisco Bay area and her essays and prose have appeared in The Butter, The Rumpus, Alternet.org, and in a book Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption. She'll be joining us next week on Behind the Prose. Log onto our site. Listen. Learn and Write.  See you next time.

[END]