**Behind the Prose Transcript**

**Episode 21: Lee Gutkind’s Incredible Creative Nonfiction Law and Order Power of Story Yellow Test**

**Sunday, July 12, 2015**

Length: 59:08

Guests:

Sarah Cox [SC]

Lee Gutkind [LG]

Kristina Marusic [KM]

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Music.

0:33 Well, well, well. Look what the writer's cat dragged in. It's another episode of Behind the Prose. Thanks for bringing me into your electronic device. Welcome back. I'm happy to report that I have finally finished my chunk of 20. It took me like three months; every week I tell you something that has not been done on the chunk of 20, and then some weeks some stuff has been done, and finally, I'm done.

My ratio still holds true. I got about two acceptances so that still works, but I think I might slow down on the chunks of 20. Even though I was kind of trying to keep up and be inspired by Chelsey Clammer, who I call the Submission Queen. She sends out like massive amounts of stuff a month. I was like "Oh, my God. What am I doing? I gotta work harder. But, um, I get depressed easily. When I started to just look at how many I hadn't finished, I would get annoyed, and so that's going in the wrong direction.

1:43 It sounds like something I might need to talk to Dr. Ike about. Remember Writer's Psych with Dr. Ike? I haven't forgotten about it, I just didn't think that I had anything crazy enough to ask him, other than my own life crazy which is not appropriate for this show. Maybe another show. But maybe that's something I can revisit. If you have some writers psych questions, you can email me them to me at info@behindtheprose and I definitely will bring them to Dr. Ike. Again he's not a real doctor, but he could be. So don't take his advice, you can listen to it, but don't take it. If you take it, I'm - nobody's responsible but yourself okay?

2:29 This week's episode of Behind the Prose features an excerpt from the Creative Nonfiction Writers' Conference. I promised I would bring that to you and I am. It's the beginning of a series of gifts for you from that conference that will feature Dinty Moore, other panelists that were there. Other essayists and authors, people who were in attendance, so this week's excerpt I'm sure will inspire you and enlighten you. If you like it, tweet me and let me know. If you like it, also tweet Creative Nonfiction Magazine and let them know that you liked it too. And while you're at it, why don't you go to their website, CreativeNonfiction.org and sign up for their journal.

3:11 My web find for you this week is the podcast "So You Wanna Be a Writer" by Allison Tait and Valerie Khoo. They are two Australian writers and they are working out of the Australian Writers Centre. They have a really good podcasts. I like their personality; they're funny, and they always seem to manage to bring some really great resources to the audience each week. I don't know where they find all this stuff, but it's cool so you should check them out. If you like it, review them on iTunes. And then when you're finished reviewing them, hop on over to the Behind the Prose page on iTunes and you can review us too. Us, by us, I mean the people in my head. So I'll appreciate that.

4:03 Are you doing any writing events this week? This week, I will be - I'll actually be in Connecticut and I'll be in New York. On Tuesday, I invite you to come hang out with me at Blue Stockings book store. It's in the Lower East Side on 172 Allen Street in New York City. And I will be there supporting last week's guest Kate Walter. She's gonna be reading from her memoir, Looking for a Kiss. So why don't you come out and we'll have a good time, and it will be fun, and it will be writerly, and you can meet guests, and you can meet me, uh, if that's important to you. [Laughter] And you know, it'll be cool.

4:43 Before we get to Lee Gutkind, I want to give an opportunity to learn how you, as a potentially struggling writer, if you're making $35,000 dollars or less a year, can get a free house. Yes, free. Thanks to Write A House. It's an organization that's doing just that for writers who are amazing like you. I talked with Sarah Cox who's one of the founders of the organization and she explained exactly how this works.

5:11 KW So tell me a little bit about Write A House. Where did you get the idea for this?

5:21 [SC] I think it's a fairly original idea. We didn't know of anyone else giving away houses when we started it. And we began the conversation talking about more of a traditional writers' residency, but given there's so many vacant houses in Detroit and we wanted more people to relocate, the idea evolved into a situation where we were creating permanent residents instead of temporary visitors.

5:48 Why did you choose Detroit?

5:50 Well everyone involved in the project lives in Detroit so this is our home.

5:56 OK

6:00 Tell me about how long did it take to get the project off the ground since this is such an innovative concept.

 6:07 [SC] It took about a year of prep work from when we first started talking about the idea to then figure out what could we buy houses for, what would it cost to renovate them, and then the legal issues of giving away houses and the 501c3 applications and whatnot. It was about a year before we launched the project while we tried to figure out the logistics.

6:34 How long have you been doing it?

6:39 We became official in December 2013 and gave away a house in 2014 and now we're giving away another house in 2015 so it's been about two years.

6:54 What does it feel like to give away a house. You don't get to talk to too many people who can say that they've done that.

[SC] 6:59 Yeah, I don't think that we really anticipated what it would feel like. When you've been working on something for that long, you don't know what it's going to feel like to actually finish it. I think we were just so focused on like getting new windows in the house, getting new flooring in the house, getting the house painted. There were so many little tasks that eventually added up to a house being done, there wasn't that much time to think about it. But there was definitely a pretty emotional reaction when someone actually became a resident to come live in this house.

[KW] 7:35 How do you chose the winners?

[SC] 7:40 We have a pretty competitive application process. You have to send a writing sample. We're judged in categories of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. And we have professional very esteemed judges reading each one of those categories. They create a list of finalists, and we go over that. And then we announce a list of ten finalists, and from there pick out the winner.

8:03 [KW] What is the unveiling process like?

8:10 [SC] Um, you know last year, we called Casey and told her she won. Then a few days later we had a big party and she came out for the celebration, and then she needed to go back and pack and get ready to move so she moved out about a month later.

8:34 [KW] Was there a time during the organization of this when you were facing some big hurdles and thought maybe this was not going to work or this is not going to happen. How did you get through that?

8:48 [SC] I don't - I mean definitely in the early meetings we sat down with some lawyers and said we want to give away a house and they said, you can't. But we worked around - there was nothing actually that was going to break the project. It had to take different forms. We had to modify things that maybe we were attached to in the beginning and had to become unattached to and do differently. I don't think it really changed the core of what the project is.

9:15 [KW] Why did you decide writers?

9:18 [SC] Well the two founders, me and Toby, we are writers. We were interested in seeing better writing about Detroit; it also just feels like such a creative place to be. We wanted to get more talent out here to sort of experience the environment. We also felt like it could have a great impact on someone's writing just to participate in this community.

9:45 So Casey's living out there now. I looked at your website and it says the person has to come out; they have to find like their own job and stuff. How does that work?

9:57 [SC] I mean it could work out any number of ways. We're providing a place to live, but we're not a career placement agency. We provide people with connections and introduce them to people they need to know but someone needs to really pick their own job. It's not something I can pick for them. That said, we introduced Casey to a few people, and she found a teaching job. Then on the side, writers, a lot of them freelance. I think the people who would be interested in coming out here are the sort of people that can work from anywhere and do work from anywhere already and bring a list of organizations they work with here, that don't depend on them living in sort of any one place.

10:40 [KW] Do you envision like, when you get enough writers out there? Do you have other projects you might do with them, once you have a group of people?

10:49 [SC] Sure. I mean, it's possible. We're definitely interested in letting the writers propose things that they want to do. So I think it's really up to them to say, hey, here's an interesting thing I could get excited about, rather than me proposing it for them. I'd love to see what they come up with. In the meantime, we're just focused on -- houses so more people can get there and see what inspires them.

11:15 [KW] Outside of being a good writer, what are the general requirements for someone to be qualified to apply for the house?

11:24 [SC] You have to a U.S. Citizen or permanent resident. The other criteria is outlined on the website. If you are one of the ten finalists, we do an interview and I think the conversation we end up having about where they are in life and their interest in Detroit is pretty important.

11:46 [KW] Is there an income guideline?

11:50 [SC] Yeah, this is for what is defined as a low-income writer. If you're already able to afford a house on your own, this isn't for you. We're really trying to make homeowners out of people who would otherwise struggle a bit more with that process.

12:07 So this is the second time, your submissions just closed the beginning of June for this round of the house. What's that process? Did you get more submissions than last year?

12:21 [SC] Well the first year we didn't charge an application fee and so it was a bit unfiltered and this year we did. So this year we got 228 applications this year which is super-strong so we're excited about that. For one house, that's a really great amount. I'm sure we'll have ten amazing finalists. Right now we need to send the applications to our judges, and they need to take their time and sit with them and figure out what they think the emerging talent is. So right now, applications are getting ready to go to judges, then it's in their hands after that.

12:56 [KW] When do you guys expect to make a decision?

12:58 [SC] I would say late September. An announcement should be made in early October.

13:06 [KW] you said that you are a writer as well as at least two of the other founders? Did you say two?

13:13 [SC] There are two founders - me and one other person.

13:17 [KW] What type of writing do you do? What's your background?

13:21 [SC] I was a real estate reporter when I first came to Detroit so I covered neighborhoods and developments and the housing market. So I'm on the nonfiction side of things and then my co-founder is a fiction writer who has published two novels.

13:37 [KW] So, I think that's it a really amazing concept. Have you guys thought about a reality show?

13:45 [SC] I don't know how to produce a reality show. I've never done that. But if someone is interested in working with us, I would like to hear from them.

13:56 [KW] I could see this on TLC or something like that. I think it's an awesome idea. Thank you for stopping by, Sarah. The door is open to come back in September when you guys have made your decision and invite the winner - do you call them winners? What do you call them?

14:15 [SC] We call them a resident, a Writer in Residence.

14:23 [KW] So this would be the 2015 Writer in Residence.

14:26 Correct. Yes.

14:28 So I invite you to come back and invite that lucky person to come back to the show and tell us how they feel about this. I think it's really awesome.

14:41 [SC] Yeah, honestly, I can't wait to see who the person is because I have no idea who it will.

14:47 [KW] And they can have a family too? It doesn't just have to be a lonely writer?

14:52 [SC] The house is awarded to an individual but you're allowed to live with whoever you want. If you decide you want your best friend to live with you, if you want your husband to live with you, if your kids live with you, that's fine. You're the renter for the first two years. But whoever you want to live with is welcome to live with you.

15:09 [KW] Now, I'm going to ask a technical question. Writers have side hustles. Can they rent out the rooms in the house?

15:13 [SC] Um, I believe in the terms of the lease, that subleasing is not allowed until we give you the deed to the house, because technically, we are the landlord for the first two years. It's typical for a lease not to allow subleasing but anything can happen after you own the home two years later.

15:36 [KW] Do you have to write or get a deal or publish to keep the house?

15:42 [SC] No, you don't. The reason we're working with these writers, they're already really dedicated to their field. Everyone on the short list last year. I'm sure everyone will be this year. What the judges are seeing are people that really want to do this no matter what. I guess it's possible that someone could move in and quit writing, but what they're demonstrating to us through the application and their talent is that they're very serious about continuing to write as a profession. We don't have specific requirements, but we feel that we're finding people who will stick with it no matter what.

16:21 [KW] Being awarded a house, takes away 80% of the pressure of a struggling writer.

16:29 [SC] Right, yeah. I think the idea is to say, here's a safe place for you to say, go at it. I think the concept is they would now feel inspired to create now that they have a home to do it in.

16:45 Thank you Sarah.

16:46 Sure, no problem.

16:54 CHATTER.

16:57 That's the sound of almost 200 writers talking about writing. They're networking. They're excited about what's going to come of out of the 2015 Creative Nonfiction Writers' Conference. And when writers get 'ta talking, it's kinda hard to get 'em to stop.

17:18 Chatter. Barely audible: Hi.

[KM] Hi.

Chatter

[KM] Hello??

Chatter.

[KM] Hi.

[Crowd] Good morning.

[KM] Oh, beautiful. Thank you so much. My name is Kristina Marusic. I'm the director of the conference. I've emailed with a whole lot of you so it's really lovely to finally put faces with some of your names. On behalf of everyone at Creative Nonfiction, I want to welcome you to the 2015 Creative Nonfiction Writers' Conference.  Thank you so much for being here this morning  . . . [Fade out]

17:55 [KW] The conference featured panels of editors, authors and essayists along with feature presentations by Lee Gutkind, the founder of Creative Nonfiction Magazine and Dinty W. Moore who is an author and founder of Brevity Magazine. Everyone there seemed to be in good spirits. They were encouraged. They were encouraging to others, and it made you really feel like you were in a room of likeminded people. Lee Gutkind opened his talk with verve, with personality, with tenacity and of course with how he became known as the Godfather of Creative Nonfiction.

18:32 [Laughter]

[LG] So, so, people Vanity Fair. It's 1997. I'm just a writer. I'm an assistant professor at the University of Pittsburgh, and I'm trying to write what people call this creative nonfiction. And I start this journal. And it's got like four subscribers. I'm exaggerating, but it's not too popular okay? And Vanity Fair - and I get this phone call. It's the middle of the night and I get this phone call, and I've gotta not tell you, at this particular moment, what was happening to me, what I was doing in the middle of the night. I've got to tell you right away now, I am a - look how innocent I look - but I am a man of many, many vices.

[Laughter] 19:27 Something was happening, which I'm going to tell you, in the middle of the night.  I'm gonna confess to you because already I feel really close to you guys. [Laughter] So, I get this phone call. And I get this phone call, and it's from my ex-wife who calls me constantly. And she is saying that one of my students is at a grocery store, waiting in line, and sees a copy of Vanity Fair, and guess who's in Vanity Fair? It's me. Four-page spread in Vanity Fair Magazine calling me the "godfather" behind this "stupid genre" called creative nonfiction by James Wolcott, okay? And I have to tell you, my colleagues at University of Pittsburgh, fine people. Wear a lot of Birkenstocks. Got their ponytails. [Laughter] They were fine people in 1997, but they did not approve of creative nonfiction. Hardly anybody, including James Wolcott.  He called me a human octopus, [laughter], I'm telling you, because I was talking about creative nonfiction all over the place, nobody was listening, he said. Nobody was listening until he started started talking about it and me in Vanity Fair Magazine.

20:46 And then they started to listen. But I was pretty embarrassed. And my career - I -- writer - but I was so embarrassed, I really had a hard time leaving the house and going to the Cathedral of Learning where I was teaching because I knew my colleagues would laugh at me, and I knew they would make fun of me. So, it took me a day to get out of the house. I was really embarrassed. The godfather behind the creative nonfiction? Octopus? Okay, so I go to the Cathedral of Learning; I go up to the fifth floor - English Department. I'm really uncomfortable. I'm not kidding around. This was not the way my colleagues, you know, literature coiffes, really wanted - they didn't want me around anyway.

21:40 So I get to the fifth floor, the elevators doors fly open. And there's one of my colleagues, a guy named Bruce \_\_\_\_\_\_ and he looks at me and I look at him, and our eyes meet, and suddenly he drops to his knees. He grabs my hand, and he says, "I kiss your hand godfather." [Laughter]

22:01 Everything changed. So I thought maybe there's something in that, even though I was doing something I shouldn't have been doing in 1997 in the middle of the night. So now . . . [Fade Out]

22:14 [KW] Gutkind opens his presentation kind of like he would open an essay I think, with a scene, with description, with a hook. Don't you want to know what he was doing in the middle of the night in 1997? He pays it off but not before he shares how he ended up traveling the country, defending the genre over the next day. There's a bit of creative nonfiction history lesson in his talk that day too. He gives nods to writers who had been early pioneers in the field, Truman Capote, George Orwell, Tom Wolfe, after taking us through his own work and showing us how narrative is becoming more instrumental in a variety of fields like science, he discusses various approaches to writing creative nonfiction and the one thing that really matters.

23:11 [LG] . . . First-person vs. third-person. I'm supposed to do a lot of things here today, you know? But I don't have that much time. But, I don't care. First person, third person, who cares? It doesn't matter. What matters is this: Don't think. Don't think. I'm telling you now, this is my message to you as the godfather of creative nonfiction, as a writer, do not think the point I want to make. Don't think what's the point I want to make? Always remember there is a point you want to make. There is what we call the focus; there is a reason to write. Like I said to you, the reason to write is not to make money. The reason to write is not for glory. The reason to write is to make a difference. The reason we're all here is because we want to figure out how what we have in our heart, what we have up here, how what we know can impact other people. That's why we're here. That's why I'm here with you. I want to make my own difference by telling the story. By getting other people to tell a story. So we absolutely have to figure out, while we're writing, what it is you want to say to a reader. What it is we want to give them, how we want to move them?

24:56 So we got to have the point, at some point, in the end, but don't think about that point when you're writing. Think about what's the story that will lead to the point. It doesn't matter if it's first person, second person, third person. What is the story that is going to get you there? What is the story that I want to tell that nobody else can tell or tell as good as I can tell? Figure out the story. 25:31  The story is everything. It's the story that matters. The story. It's also - holy cow!

25:51 it's like those dog have those electric fences? Okay, here we go. It's the story that's going to lead to the point, so what you got to figure out is what my story is. Here is one more thing I want to say to you before we move on. You got to figure out, what my story is okay? And then it's the story that will lead you to the point.

26:23 This is what - all these wonks I'm talking to - I talk to policy people, science people, robotic people, I talk to all these folks okay, and they want to tell me what they want to tell a reader. Okay, that's fine, that's good. But I say, start with the best story that you know will lead you in that direction. So maybe the point you think you wanna make will end up not being the point. It'll be some other point. Okay? But it's your story that will get you there. That's what creative nonfiction is all about - sort of. Story and something else which I'm going to get to. What's the story that will lead you to that point?

27:05 Think cinema. Think about how you can grab your reader and keep your reader involved. I really do think about how my essay could be a movie. How my essay can capture my reader, and keep them there, just like the most compelling movie ever without bending the truth. Without not being accurate. Creative Nonfiction. Creative is story. Nonfiction is substance. Accurate substance. Evidence. Think cinema.

27:47 Uh, here we go. We're so close now aren't we? We've made a connection. We like each other. At least, I like you. So now I have to confess what I was talking about before. My vices. My addictions what I was doing in the middle of the night in 1997 when I was 22 years old. [Pause. Silence. Laughter.] You had to think about that one for a while didn't you? [Laughter] 1997. I'm 22 years old. I'm lying, I meant to say I was lying in bed. My vices. Red wine. Ah. Vodka. Potato chips. Cashew nuts. I love that stuff. I can't stay away from. But the thing that really drives me crazy. The thing that I'm really, really, connected to, the thing that I cannot get away from in the middle of the night is what I was doing when I got that phone call learning that I was the godfather of creative nonfiction this is the worst addition that I have.

29:10 [Laughter] [Image on screen is of original Law and Order cast with theme music fading in.]

29:16 I love that tune. It drives me crazy. I saw two last night. sometimes I do four. Some people are lonely; I've got Law and Order in the middle of the night.  So Law and Order. Do you know that the original Law and Order was on prime time TV for 23 years? And I do a lot of traveling. I go all around the world. I'm not alone. Everybody - I saw it in China. Law and Order reruns. All you got to do is wait up until 2 a.m. and no mater where you are there's a law and order rerun. But it's taught me a lot about writing. It really has.

30:03 I mean, it's kind of made me a better writer. Of course it's made me a better writer because I'm up all night and I don't have anything else to do so I write. But let's kind of think about why Law and Order works, on why Law and Order works so well. It begins with a  scene, just like we should begin with a scene, right? There's a policeman eating a donut right? There's a woman walking her dog. So, kind of the story gets started slowly, and the story has a problem. Suddenly, something serious happens. Shots are fired.

[Gunshots]

Right? A body is discovered? That's the first scene. Then what happens after that. There's another scene. You know what happens after that. Logan and Briscoe arrive. The two detectives. They look around the area. They interview the bystanders. They talk amongst themselves, figuring out what happened in this terrible crime. This problem that has occurred, and then, of course, what happens next? One thing - Lenny Briscoe, the veteran detective, looks at the camera and makes some sort of clever and caustic remark. And then what happens after that? You know exactly what happens after that. You know it? Think. Ready?

31:52 [Law and Order Dun Dun sound effect]

[Laughter]

31:55 That's what happens after that. That's what happens after that.

Then what happens? Commercials right? A series of commercials. So we have a couple scenes, we have a commercial, two scenes, then another scene after all these commercials we're back at headquarters and the detectives are caucusing with Anita Van Buren their lieutenant. They make a plan, then another scene they arrest a suspect. Then what happens after that? Commercials right? More commercials. Lots of commercials. You see the pattern here? You see what's happening here? First there is a scene. Then there is a commercial. Scene. Commercial. Scene. Commercial. We creative nonfiction writers do the same thing you know. We do the same exact thing.

32:49 Our terminology is a little different. First there's a story; then there's information; then there's a story; then there's information; it's the creative nonfiction jazz is what we do; it's our formula; it's our pattern, more or less. Story. Commercial. Story. Commercial. So look, so this is what we kinda do. I want you to think about that. Story with a problem, then information. Then more story, then information, then more story. The story keeps our readers going even if our readers aren't interested in the information, it doesn't really matter. We've got 'em with the story. They're learning even if they don't know they're learning.

33:33 And you know, the sponsors of Law and Order, and the sponsors of all these other successful TV programs they have understood the creative nonfiction story with a problem pattern as well as the Law and Order people. So they do it better than us sometimes. How about . . . let me think - how about a bunch of young parents contemplating the responsibilities of their future.

[Commercial audio]

"So has anybody actually started saving for college yet?"

"No not me." I've got time.

"We already started."

"But how did you know where to start?"

"I found out the Gerber Life College plan."

34:17 [LG] This has been on TV for years. It's been incredibly successful. Story with a problem; then comes some information.

[Commercial audio]

Announcer: Call now and get started with free informational brochure. . .

[LG] Sometimes you just have to nudge your reader a little bit and point them in the right direction.

[Commercial audio]

"We got to get started."

[LG] A nice commercial. But there is no commercial more successful than this next commercial which is probably more a part of our culture today than Law and Order. So watch it. It's a little dramatic, so brace yourself. I don't want you to get too upset, but here is a story with a real problem.

[Commercial audio]

Woman: I've fallen and I can't get up.

[Laughter]

[LG] Are you touched? Are you moved? Story, with a problem. Then information. Then look at the scenes presented in this information.

[Commercial audio]

[LG] So story is pretty big, and everybody is starting to get the fact these days that story is becoming really important. Coca-Cola has a website that is totally devoted to telling stories. They have four full-time employees. Researchers, writers, editors, four full-time employees just getting stories favorable to their products. Okay? And it's been very popular, very successful. And this guy [Image of Barack Obama's memoir]  would probably not be president of the United States today if he hadn't written this incredibly wonderful memoir, long before he became an international figure. The fact of the matter is, and we have to always remember this, is that we, down through history, the whole world has been obsessed by story. Story is kind of what we're all trying to do. It really kind of ignites our creativity and even our imagination.

36:56 Some time ago, 1945, a professor at the University of Kansas showed 44 graduate students this black and white film, and asked them to quickly, briefly, write down what it is they saw. About half of the students wrote down they saw the two triangles as men and the circle as a woman, and the two triangles were vying for the affection of the circle. About half of the other students wrote down, that actually the circle was a young thing, so too was the small triangle. They were innocent, naive young things being pursued, intimidated, and enraged by the big triangle bully. One student wrote down what the professor was hoping that student would write down. He wrote down. It's a bunch of geometrical figures going across the screen. Since that time, we have done an amazing amount of research about how effective story and narrative is, and to put it quite simply directly, people remember more facts for a longer period of time when they're communicated with story. And people are more easily persuaded when a story indicates what they ought to do, rather than when they're just told. People don't wan tot be told anymore what to do. People don't want to be told anymore what to think. If you look at the op-ed, they won't be talking about op-ed pages in books and newspaper and magazines, if you look at the op-ed pages of the blogs and magazines that they support, stories lead to action with real people, real characters, real ideas, real conflict, the stories lead to the action, and they also lead to the conclusion that the writers want the readers to make. It's the story. Okay? And that's how we persuade our readers by presenting real people in real situations. And not necessarily just telling them what to do.

39:20

Now, ladies and gentleman, I cannot tell you exactly how to do this work. This creative nonfiction thing, this is hard stuff. It sounds easy but it's really difficult. But I'd now like to introduce you to what I consider to be, just to help you out, to give you a sense of how to figure out whether you're on the right track today, whether you're on the right track when you're writing creative nonfiction, I am now introducing to you what I consider to be the creative nonfiction writers most essential tool and that is the yellow magic marker.

40:08 Now we know the yellow magic marker. We used to use that to yellow in our textbooks when we were undergrad and we were told that we had to memorize something. Okay? All the facts. But now, I think we can use it in a different way. At least I do, and I like to tell my students how to do it. And like I said, I can't tell you exactly how to do this work because writing is kind of a part feeling, it's instinctual, it's spontaneous, but I can tell you using the yellow magic marker how you know you're going to get there, how you know you're going in the right direction. So sit down, stand up, whatever you want to do. Go to Starbucks, wherever you write and write the best thing you can and go through as many drafts as you can. Then, type it up. Print it out. Get your manuscript. And then take that yellow magic marker and just do this. Just yellow in the scenes and see if you got this pattern. This creative nonfiction-story-information pattern. And if your paper is glaring and blaring back at you in yellow, then you know your'e on the right track. You've got the scene-information-scene-information, remember?

41:21 Okay, now if you want to kind of look at this in a larger situation in a larger grid, how your whole essay might look, and for that matter, how your whole book might look, do this. Take a look at this. First we have a scene; the scene brings the reader in. First we have a scene; then we have information; then we have information; remember scene-information-scene-information. Now I'm not saying that you sit down and say, "What's my first scene? What kind of information can I do?" I'm saying that you sit down and you write in a spontaneous way just like you would write anything. Follow your heart. Follow your instincts. Pour it out in any way you want and then when you have finally written what you think is pretty good, take a look at the grid and try this yellow test idea and see if it works. And remember, the scene gets your readers involved whether they want to be involved or not. You're telling your readers stuff they may not want to hear or you're telling your reader stuff that they don't know anything about so you really have to get them involved quickly and keep them involved.

42:33 So you have the Law and Order Creative Nonfiction Pattern, scene-information-scene-information-scene-information and you'll see by the way, that the more you work and the more you do this, the more your scenes begin to flow and the las information you will need because we do something else. We try as hard as possible to keep in mind this scene/information balance and so whenever possible we embed information inside the scene. Okay? One more time I'm saying to you: this is not brain surgery or any kind of surgery. This is not something that you sit down and say this is what I'm going to do. What you do is, you do your best. You write like Hemingway. You write like whoever it is, is someone that you admire. You write like you are a poet. You write the best you can and then after the second or third or fourth draft, think about how this works. The story connects with the reader. The reader may be connected with the information, but more often than not, the reader might not be connected with the information. So you have this pattern, with embedded information, when it is possible. Of course the first thing that you're writing about, the most important - so your first scene is your most important. That's going to get your readers to want to know whatever it is you're going to tell them. So here's the first paragraph plus one sentence of a book that  many of us have already read. It's *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed. And it says here scenes plunge the reader into the story but there's always a what's at stake factor when you begin. There should be something at stake for the people you're writing about or the situation you're capturing, or you-yourself, the person who is writing, okay? So this is really important to remember, that that first scene must really draw the reader in. And it should be a scene that could be continued later. And there's always a what's at stake for as many people as possible and there's always a promise for more.

45:13 And so here, Cheryl Strayed, she's in the 38th day of this hike across the Pacific Coast Trail. She's all by herself. This is her first big hike. 38 days. It's going to take her four months. Cheryl stops exhausted, some day. She's up on top of a peak. She sits down and enjoys the Panama of the experience, the incredible view, she doesn't mean to to this, but then suddenly, she knocks her boot off of the cliff. And she watches this boot cascade down thousands of feet below. And she says in the first sentence of her next paragraph which is the whole paragraph, "My boot was gone. Actually gone."

This book's on the bestseller list for three years. As you know, it was made into a pretty successful movie. Here is a book that begins in this way, that's been on the bestseller list since 2005. Another memoir: *The Glass Castle*. Jeanette Walls. IT's a great book, but this sentence drives me crazy. I think it's one of the greatest sentences I ever read.

"I was sitting in a taxi, wondering if I had overdressed for the evening, when I looked out the window and I saw mom rooting through a dumpster."

[LG] 46:36 Wow. What a picture. What a great situation. Why is she sitting in this taxi? Dressed to go to a party obviously. She sees her mom rooting through a dumpster. It's gonna be really hard for the reader to not go forward. Really difficult. That's because there's something at stake; there's action; there's intrigue. It promises more. What a great situation. It's really terrific.  Okay.

47:09 So, two good sentences, opening scenes but look. For those of you who have read these books, you know what I'm going to tell you. You know that we do not know what happened to Cheryl Strayed's boot and how she actually went forward or got her boots back and went forward through the Pacific Coast trail till about halfway through the book. And even more important it seems to me, more significant is, that is the first sentence of Jeanette Walls book, and we do not know why mom is rooting through the dumpster and how Jeanette Walls got into that taxi all dressed up and ignoring her mom until the last chapter. That's because you never tell the reader what they want to know, until you tell the reader what you want to tell them. Okay? You start a story. You build the story. You tease the reader. You keep the reader involved with more stories and more scenes. You want them to know stuff. Once you tell them what they want to know, they're out of there. Pizza. Bathrooms. Beers. Law and Order re-runs. Whatever it is. So it's a constant balancing act. Story to involve your reader. And then information related to the story obviously that will inform the reader. Then more story or a different story to keep your reader there with you and then information. It is a balancing act. Creative means story. Nonfiction means substance. It's a complete and total balancing situation. I'm not telling you how to sit down and write. I'm telling you how to look at your stuff when you've written it. And how not to be satisfied.

49:30 We should never be satisfied with our first and our second and our third draft. We can only be satisfied, one, when it passes the yellow test, and two when it feels good to us. I always like to think about Ernest Hemingway who bragged - and it's worth bragging -that he wrote the last chapter of Farewell to Arms 39 times. Maybe we do that on our computers, but Papa Hemingway, they didn't have computers then. He did it on a typewriter. He kept retyping it. Marking it up. Doing it again. We carve it. Writers are like sculptures. We begin with this block of granite. Something really big and then we begin to put shape. Shape is so important. We think about editors as people who play with our words. Um now, there are two kinds of editors. There's the editor who plays with our words -the copy editor, but then there's the really essential smart editor and that is the editor who deals with the shape of your work. And you guys need to deal with the shape of your work. How am I going to get my reader? How am I going to keep my reader? How am I going to inform my reader? How am I going to impact my reader because that's why I am here.

50:54 So, never tell your reader what they want to know until you tell them what you want to tell them. Remember that. I like to think that we should try to begin, think about how we begin our work right near the peak of a major action. Okay? Not at the peak of the action. But at the peak, right before the peak of a major action. Then get the reader involved like I said, and then, after you do that, then start telling them what they need to know before you tell them what's going to happen in that action sequence. Start before the peak of the action go back in time before you can go forward. A

51:52 And so my time is nearly up. I really want to say that I think that we are here today, almost at the peak of the action. We're here at the Creative Nonfiction Writers' Conference. We are trying to learn as much as we can so that we can back to our computers; we can go back to  wherever we're gonna go, and start to make connections with all the great editors. We're right before this peak of the action. The action will be like Julie Bettinger; the action will be when she finds a connection that leads to a book that leads to her millions of dollars. [Laughter] But it's kind of the way we begin.

52:39 I guess I want to say one more thing about the peak of the action. So, I've been in this creative nonfiction business for a long time: writing, teaching, editing and talking the talk. I think we're almost at the tipping point. We're not even quite there yet. You guys are still forerunners. You're still - we don't teach creative nonfiction very often in high schools. There are lots of writing programs - including mine at Arizona State one of the best fiction and poetry programs in the country, no creative nonfiction. It ain't happening yet. Many newspapers don't yet do creative nonfiction. Or don't yet do what this - first person idea. But it's all happening. You're here knowing that it is happening. It is gonna happen really soon. We are in the vanguard still. Twenty years ago nobody was listening to me. Now people are listening and people will listen to you as well. You think about your stories, beginning your stories close to the peak of the action, and you think about your own world and your own life and the stories you can tell and the impact you can make and the minds you can change. The things we can do that makes the world better through our work and our own personal experience. We can do this.

54:04 It's amazing the power of story and the power of our work. We can do it. Your'e here. You know you can do it. So, I don't even know what my next slide is. Let me see what that is. Oh, that's not my next slide. Give me 15 or 20 minutes and I'll fix my . . .[laughter] Oh I know what my next slide is: You.

This is you. I see you all here; I recognize you. If not you, it's me. It is who we are. We're writers. Sometimes we get blocked. Sometiems we just don't know what is going to happen to us next. Sometimes we're so obsessed with trying to write a story, with trying to get it right. You know the feeling. Oh it's so hard to get it right; you sit down; you work for three hours; you got one sentence and then you throw the sentence away and you go watch Law and Order or something else. It is so frustrating. So but I've written or edited, Kristina said 25 books, 30 books. So I know what I'm talking about. Okay? I know exactly. I've got experience. I know what I'm talking about. And I'm telling you that if your'e stuck, if you cannot write anymore. If it's all just kind of too much for your head. Everything is confused. You feel crazy. You feel desperate. Get out of bed. Go to your keyboard. Or walk into your living room. Pick up your remote control. Sit down on the sofa. Pour a glass of red wine. Put your computer right in front of you, like that guy, he's got his typewriter and wait for the signal. Wait for the moment that's going to make everything come clear to you. It's the incredible creative nonfiction power of story yellow test writers' prompt. Are you ready?

[AUDIO]

Law and Order Dun Dun Sound Effect

[Laughter]

Yes.

So, and buy my book.

[Laughter]

First buy my book, then if Julie has any copies you can buy her book, but my book is first.

[Behind the Prose Music]

57:04 [KW] Pretty cool right? The whole weekend was like that. And you need to be there next year. Make sure that you have subscribed to the magazine, CreativeNonfiction.org. Make sure that you're on the email list for when the next conference will be and where it will because it was a really good time. I'm glad that I have more episodes and surprise snippets to share with you over the next few weeks.

57:33 I want to give a big, big Behind the Prose thank you to Lee Gutkind and the team at Creative Nonfiction Magazine: Hattie, Stephen, Chad, Matt, Kristina. Everyone was really awesome. They had a lot of other people there, others who were on staff, people who were volunteers and it was a really good time. I'm glad that I was a part of it so thank you Creative Nonfiction team.

58:00 Next week on Behind the Prose, I will have an interview with Neil Smith. He is an award winning Canadian author. And I'm going to talk to him about his latest work, Boo. It's a Young Adult novel about a 13-year-old who dies and goes to heaven. It has a quirky and very specific voice and I'll talk to him about how he crafted that, as well as what he did to set the scene for a novel that takes place in 1979 in America.

 58:32 Thanks for joining me on another episode of Behind the Prose. Behind the Prose music is by UK artist Redvers-West Boyle. You can find him on Soundcloud. He's pretty cool. Check him out. The show is hosted and produced by me, Keysha Whitaker, from now the den because the closet is hot. It's still in Pennsylvania. Until next time, listen, learn, and write.