**Behind the Prose Transcript**

**Episode 22: How to write a novel when you don’t know how to write a novel with Neil Smith, author of *Boo* and *Bang Crunch***

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Hosts:

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Guests:

Neil Smith [NS]

Joel Miller [JM]

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Music.

[CHECK IN]

[INTERVIEW WITH JOEL MILLER OF THE REJECT PILE]

[JM] It's going pretty well. I must say. The reaction and the response has been overwhelmingly - well maybe not overwhelmingly positive - but positive in general. Everyone has been very supportive and excited about it who sent things in, and just readers who are saying on Twitter that they're enjoying what we're putting out. So it's been great so far.

[KW] At the beginning you were talking about setting up an editorial calendar, did you get more submissions than expected?

[JM] I guess I wasn't really sure what to expect in the beginning. We definitely at launch had a healthy amount scheduled out. Right now we're just posting three stories a week but soon, just because I wasn't entirely sure how things would stop coming in once it was live, but soon we should be able to bump that up to five stories a week. So every weekday in the near future, there should be a new story.

[KW] Have you added people to your team?

Not yet. It's still just me. This one man show. I'm trying to keep everything wrangled and that's working fine for now but at some point if there's a huge spike in the submissions that I can't handle on my own, and I'll definitely have to look into recruiting someone to help with that side of it.

[KW] Talk to you us about the wrangling. How are you managing the site with whatever else you're doing during the day?

[JM] Yea, Just trying to balance it the best I can. Right now, it is just, it's sort of a side passion project for me personally but it's very enjoyable for me so it doesn't feel like very much of a chore. I guess the biggest sort of chore part of it would just be the maintenance of the technical side of it moreso than responding to writers. That part of it has just been a pleasure. For the most part it's keeping a way steadily at it. There's a bit of a backlog right now as far as getting responses to from submissions. We're at about a two to maybe three week window, but I'm really trying hard to keep it under two weeks.

[KW] When we talked last time, we spoke about how you would respond to writers and you wanted it to be a learning opportunity for people who got rejected from The Reject Pile. How has that played out for you?

[JM] It's been - I think I've held true to that sort of ideal. As far as when things are rejected, like I said, everyone will get a personal response for me of some sort. Like I said sometimes it takes a little longer than others based on everything else going on. Just be patient and you'll hear from me. Even if it is with a rejection, if the piece, I do see something there, I'll try to provide some honest feedback and maybe a couple notes. Most of the time, when I do that, I do get some sort of a grateful response just quickly back from the writer saying "Thank you very much for reading and the feedback. I appreciate it." So that's worked about the way I imagined it would.

[KW] Initially you said the response has been overwhelmingly positive, more or less. Have people given you any criticism that you are remembering when you say that?

 [Laughter] [JM] Um, I think there's been a couple people just with sort of more constructive criticism than anything else so I appreciate the place where that's coming from, so when someone does that generally gets  - it hasn't been mean or mean-spirited or anything - so usually I'll just respond to that person and say "Thank you for your thoughts. Here's what we're trying to do and thanks for the concern." But really, that's been very minimal. So really people like it in general, or the people that don't are just keeping quiet which I'm fine with as well.

 [KW] Yeah, people that don't like it, keep quiet all the time. We don't want to hear from you.

What do they say? I don't think this is funny? Why did you pick this?

[JM] Honestly there hasn't been any criticism of specific pieces that I've received, at least. Only positive things in that regard, and the main sort of criticism just from a couple people that I reached out - and this may have even been before the launch or just shortly after - was actually more about the name than anything and just the idea that might turn off writers or readers from submitting or reading - the assumption being the quality would be sub-par or something. But my goal is to disprove that notion and it's my feeling that if anyone can sort of understand the irony in the name it will be humor writers and readers.

[KW] I'm still on board with the name. I think that writer who's a real writer understands that they are a reject. You have never *not* been a reject if you're a writer, so. I disagree with you people whoever you are out there.

What have you learned - what would you go back and tell Joel in April when we talked?

[JM] Wow. That's a good question. [Laughter] That's a tough question; I'm trying to think of something specific. The main thing being just the amount of time that it takes to just to deal with every facet of it, from the A - just responding and providing meaningful feedback to people whether they are accepted or rejected. And for the accepted ones, the editing process that always just takes time too. For me at least, as an editor, I kind of need to be in the right mindset to dive deep enough into a piece to really have thoughts on it and to communicate those in an email to the writer. These are the changes I made and this is sort of why I'm thinking - if you totally disagree with anything, let me know.  So that part of it - it's not something you can really, for me at least, say this is going to take me this long to do. It tends to be different with each piece just based on the length of the piece. I think in general I have a pretty light hand as an editor, but it's just the nature of the variety of submissions that come in. Each takes a sort of totally different approach to reading and understanding and help just make that a little bit better than it can be.

[KW] I think that's reflected in the pieces that you published so far. Each one has a distinct voice. They don't seem like clones of the others in terms of the style of humor.

[JM] And right, yea, that's definitely that variety is what I'm kind of looking for. I think there's definitely you can kind of see some through lines even already just based on sometimes, the kind of humor, but as far as the voice of the individual writer, I want them to be able to showcase themselves and hopefully it becomes enough of a unified whole as it all comes together.

[KW] The site itself looks nice. Very clean.

[JM] Thank you. The idea was for me at least to really keep it simple so that the writing is showcased. If you noticed, there's no images on top of the post or anything. I find the more - if you give someone an image, that sort of implants an initial thought in their mind of how they should take the piece, as opposed to just reading it and enjoying the prose for itself and let your imagination do the painting.

[KW] How will you - have you thought about how you will judge success in this endeavor?

[JM] Um, you know it's pretty  - it's in the early days as far as that. Honestly, at this point, I'll be just happy if people keep sending me stuff. So please send your things my way. Also the things that are published, as long as they keep getting a good response and that the writers feel good about being published on the site and people are nice to them on social media when things are post, and the rest of it, I guess we'll worry about down the line.

[KW] We'll be here down the line, hopefully

Thanks so much for talking to me. I'll say this what you have on the website here. Rejects Unite!

[Laughter]

[JM] Rejects Unite!

**[INTERVIEW WITH NEIL SMITH]**

What's your submission process like?

NS I started off writing short stories and I began submitting them to literary magazines across Canada. And um, I wrote I would say a good dozen of them, and most of them were placed, and some of them started getting nominated for prizes and that's when a publisher and an agent got in touch with me. That's how I started working with Random House.

**Do you do contests that charge entry fees or no?**

I've never done a contest that charges an entry fee although I just judged one that charged an entry fee. I had 100 stories to read and I had to choose the best. I think the entry fee was $25 and the prize was $1000 and so I read through those 100 entries and chose my favorite. It was exciting and the piece that I found to be best was just tremendous - the type that could be published in the New Yorker, I thought.

**So when you started out with those 12? Did you happen to write 12 or did you pick that number?**

I wrote them gradually, I would say. Once I had a couple finished I started sending them out to literary magazines and the first one that I wrote was placed and it was nominated for the Journey Prize, which was the prize for best short story in Canada. That really prodded me along. I hadn't taken writing seriously until I was nominated for that prize. And I thought, well, if they like this story, I should continue. And I kept at it. I ended up being nominated three times for the Journey Prize. And with those stories, I was really able to go after signing with an agent. Once I'd accumulated enough stories, we submitted the book to four publishers and we got several offers. This was back in 2007. I think it was easier back then to place books of short stories. The book was Bang Crunch and we ended up selling it to several other countries: the U.S., the U.K., France, and Germany and India. So that really set me up to become a writer, and really before that I wasn't taking it seriously. Before that, I worked as a translator and I was writing really short stories for fun on the weekends. So It all started that way.

**There is another podcast I listen to - Kevin Kaiser – he says an artist is someone who does the work just for the fun of it.**

That's true I've been thinking about that question a lot myself because for the longest time I hesitated to call myself an artist or writer. I didn't think I merited that label because I hadn't studied literature; I hadn't taken workshops really. I didn't know if I really could call myself a writer. I've finally become comfortable with that label and even using the word artist. When I was growing up, I always wanted to be an artist, but I was always worried about making money. Putting food on the table. So I ended up becoming a translator thinking that I could at least have some income. Then I started working on stories and eventually it became more of a passion for me.Once you sell a book to a publishing house too, sometimes you can forget the art part.

Because you're worried about the editing and the sales of the book and it becomes a business too, but I think you have to remember why you started writing and the initial love that you have for the writing and the awe and wonder that writing can inspire in you when you're working on a piece that you love.

**You won the McLennan Prize . . .?**

It's a prize for the best first book published by a Quebec author. Bang Crunch was also nominated for a couple of other prizes. So after that book came out, I knew that I wanted to work on a novel. And often when you sell a book of stories to a publisher, they do expect you to publish it up with a longer piece, with a novel.  It took me a while to figure out how to write a novel. I had no clue. I had to make a lot of mistakes. I wrote one novel that I ended up tossing out because it really didn't work before I could start writing *Boo* which ended up finally working.

**When you sell a short story book - how did you get that they felt that way?**

It wasn't indicated in a contract. I think it was implied. Not only by the publishers but also by the agent. I know that when we were shopping Bang Crunch around and I met with the different editors, they all asked me about the next book, and they always asked about the novel that was coming. Unless you're a really tremendous short story writer like George Saunders who can et by with only writing short stories, I think it's always almost either implied or stated that a fiction writer has to write a novel. There are a few exceptions of course. Alice Munro, as well. But for the most part, short story writers move on to writing novels.

**So your platform was really getting awards?**

That's right. This was back in 2007. The internet, although it certainly existed back then, it wasn't the - it didn't have the power that it does nowadays. Nowadays when you put out a book, a lot of the interviews, as we're doing now, are done on the internet. The reviews are often posted on blog sites as well as newspaper sites. It's just become a really, really powerful tool for not only writers but other artists to get their work out into the universe. Nowadays, I've been doing a lot of internet stuff that didn't really exist when Bang Crunch came out. So I'm discovering at the same time really, with this new book, how the industry has changed in the last seven years.

**You use the internet mostly for promotion?**

Right, I don't have a website. I don't have a blog. I do have a Faceebook page. It's Facebook.com/neilsmithauthor and that's where I post reviews or obviously, I'll post Behind the Prose link when it comes out and updates on what I'm doing. I'm doing a review this afternoon with The Vancouver Sun. They had a book club that read Boo and I'll be chatting with them through Facebook with the book club members and I'll be talking about the themes of the book. The general public can also write in through Facebook and ask me questions. These are tools that really didn't exist in 2007. It's opened me up to chatting more directly with readers. Readers can email me with their comments. So it's always nice to have a reader write to you and give you a pat on the back and tell you to keep up the good work. Because when you're a writer as you know, you're at home all by yourself. It can be very isolating and you wonder if there's anyone really out there listening to what you're putting down on paper.

**I totally understand.**

KW I had considered a website. I did speak to the people at Vintage Books in New York. They suggested to me not to have a website. They said that a Facebook page would be easier. They also have access to it. I also have a publisher in New York and London and Toronto because the book has come out in the U.K. and the U.S. and Canada and this allows the publicists in each country to also use the page and add things to the page if they need to. So it's like a hub for all of us where we can update readers on what's going on with Boo, **which would be harder with a website. I don't know if the publishers would have access to a website.**

I'm not on Twitter yet. I haven't done any other social media. I think I'm on Goodreads. But so far Facebook is working out fine for me.

**That seems like a good approach.**

Since I was a neophyte, I thought I would just start with Facebook and see how that would go. It's so easy to use that it's fine for me at the moment.

**How did you transition from freewriting?**

I think as it became more serious once an agent or publisher was interested in the first book. So I gradually started writing during the week as well and cutting back on the hours during translation work. So I was spending more time on my fiction writing. Once Bang Crunch came out, I started writing a second book and trying to teach myself how to write a novel. So it gradually grew and once I finished Boo. Boo has sold now to ten countries around the world and it's coming out in seven languages so it's suddenly becomes much more serious. It also financially the advance was quite good, so it enabled me to take time off and really concentrate on my fiction writing which I guess is what every fiction writer wants: the time and money to be able to work on his art.

**Can you say the part about where your novel sold again?**

It sold to ten different publishers around the world and it's coming out in seven languages. It's coming out in Czech, Dutch, English, French, German, Mandarin, and Portuguese.

**I just want to give you applause. That’s so cool.**

It feels great because I also work as a translator and I'm really interested in how language travels from country to country, from culture to culture.  I've just translated a book myself from French into English so I know what it's like.  So I'm always thrilled when my agent lets me know that the book has been bought by another country and will be translated into another language. It is really thrilling for me. Also, I've created this character Boo who was in my head for a long time and now he's out in the world. Travelling around the globe in a way. That is thrilling as well.

**Let's talk more specifically about the novel. If you were going to write a very short how to write a novel book, what would be in it?**

I think the main thing was creating the plot. When I first started trying to write a novel, I had no idea how to structure a plot and it took me a long time to figure that out. I had no trouble describing things and no trouble creating characters. For me it was creating a plot, so I knew the different steps that the character would have to go through in the book from A to B to C all the way to Z. For me, it was such a jumble at first. It was going from A to D back to B then to X then to W. I was all mixed up. I also had this feeling that I could go off on a lot of tangents because I was so used to short stories which are these tiny nuggets, and I thought once I had a novel in front of me, I would be able to expand, but I expanded too much. I got lost. It was like I was lost in the forest, but when I finally understood plot that was the main thing for me. And different writers have different foibles. A writer might be very good at plot but very bad at characters. I think each of us has our own hurdles to clear. But really plot was my main one.

**What helped you to understand plot?**

I think writing a plotless book helped me understand. I wasn't even thinking of plot the first time.  Once I finished and I had my agent read it, we just knew that it didn't proceed the way a novel usually does. It needed a type of arc that was missing so I ended up putting that novel aside and started something else.

The character of Boo had a very very minor role in the novel that I junked. He came in maybe three quarters of the way through and it was just in one or two scenes. But I loved his voice so much, that I thought it would be interesting to try to write a novel in his voice. His voice was so powerful that it almost created a plot for me. So once I had this character in my head, he was almost telling me the story of what was happening to him. It made it so much easier to write this second time. I'm hoping when I start a third book, I will stumble upon a voice too that will help carry me through the novel.

**That’s something similar that I’ve heard from other writers.**

It was a voice that - a character that was probably pieced together by various people that I've known over the years. I should point out that Boo is a 13-year-old fairly science geek in 8th grade. He doesn't represent me per say, but some of his obsessions were my obsessions when I was 13. And I pieced him together with other people I've met over the years. A children writer's for instance. There's a director actor called Mike White whom I really admire and he has white-blond hair like the character does, so I can imagine he would be like that at 13.  But even though I pieced this character together from various sources, he came alive in my head as his own entity. I could picture him really well and I could almost dream about this kid and his trials and tribulations.

It's happened to me before in my writing with Bang Crunch. There was a story that was written from the point of view of a 55-year-old woman who's an alcoholic and that voice came to me very clearly as well. I'm not an alcoholic and I'm not a 55 year old woman, and her voice was just so clear and it's really a gift, so I'm hoping that other gifts like this will fall in my lap for the next book that I've just started to plan.  I don't know exactly where it comes from. But I think we all do. You know how when you have a dream and there's a character in a dream of yours that is not anyone that you actually know that seems like such a real person. It's somewhat like that.

**I can't wait to talk to you more about he plot aspect - you were struggling the most with that but it’s one of the things you executed the best. How did you do it?**

Thank you. I appreciate you saying that. Because I wrote a book that was plotless when I started Boo, I thought I really had to concentrate on plot so I thought about it all the time. And those twists and turns, I didn't initially plan them all out; some of them came when I was writing. And sometimes as authors often do, you take five steps forward and two steps back and you continue on and you make the corrections needed as you go along. I'm happy to hear that you thought the plot works well because I really did concentrate significantly on plot for this book.

**Would you please read an excerpt?**

Here we go.

[Reads Chapter 1]

**The section you read is first chapter in book- chapter 1 aka hydrogen chapter. You use these unique conventions of chemistry from the periodic table to mark the chapters.**

That's exactly right. Not to give away too much; there's a section where it jumps ahead quite a bit and in that section there are several chemical elements on the page to give the notion that quite a bit of time has passed. Sometimes it might be a couple of months that passed. If it's three months, say maybe three chemical elements indicated on the page. So it's a way of pulling you through the book. And the character Boo, Oliver, is obsessed with science and the book is a book of fiction. So I wanted the nonfiction side of Oliver to be present throughout the book, and by using the chemical elements for each chapter, that's a way of rounding this fictional world in the world of science and nonfiction.

**Are you a scientific person?**

That's a good question. I've wondered that myself. I don't think I have Oliver's science geek brain. I was good in science and math. In high school, math was one of my best classes. Although after graduating, I've been working more in the arts and I think my science brain has probably shriveled by now. My science brain is probably the size of a chickpea so I did some research in the book to find out some of the scientific elements. My father is an engineer and he helped me with the periodic table a bit, but yea, it was fun. When I finished high school, I was wondering whether to go into science or art and I ended up choosing art. So I do certainly have an interest in science as well. Because of my interest in science - I don't have a religious background as I pointed out in other interviews - and for me religion was more a fictional world and science - Richard Dawkins and Jane Goodall - was the nonfiction world. So I wanted to combine both of those in this book.

**In terms of doing the research for the science, when did you incorporate doing the research?**

It was more I would stop and look things up as I went along. I also do work for the planetarium in Montreal and some of the constellations and things like that that appear in the book was knowledge that I acquired working in the planetarium. I translate their shows from French into English. So I have a bit of astronomy background as a result of that work that I do, so that I didn't have to do too much research, but for some of the other things I did do research.

For example, little things like the dollar coin that was in circulation in America in the 70s with Susan B. Anthony that appears in the book, I had to look that up and find out who exactly she was and why she was chosen and how long that coin was in circulation but I love doing research like that for projects so it wasn't a bother for me to stop and do the research necessary.

**The book starts in 1979. Why that year?**

I decided - I was around 13 in that year, so I wanted to set it in the years while I was that age. I also lived in Hoffman Estates Illinois where Boo goes to school. He also goes to a school called Hellen Keller that I also attended when I was 13. He lives in a sort of sprawling housing project that I also lived in. So even though the world is very fictional, it is sort of grounded in my reality when I was 13. So that's why I chose that year and that location.

**The characters also bring in social context.**

There's a mention for example of - President Ford - there was some woman from California that tried to shoot him. Events like that come in and out. So it sort of gives you the impression of the year that it's taking place, but most of the book takes place in this sort of imaginary heaven. And the people there are not necessarily - know what's going on in earth in the 1970s. Some of them have been there for 30 years or 40 years. So they're more grounded in the past. So I didn't want the 70s to become too overwhelming in the book. I wanted the glimpses of it without it becoming a sort of tribute to the 70s.

**I notice - in voice of Thelma she sounded like an old black woman, and then I saw everyone sounded old.**

She's been there for I think she says 19 years in the first chapters. Even though she hasn't aged - she's still 13 years old - but she's matured a bit. She's more mature than some of the 13 years old, and I think some of the older girls, meaning that they've been there for 25 years, they treat the newbies as they call them more as their children. So the older the boys and girls become almost parents to the new arrivals. So for Boo, Thelma almost becomes like his mother. And for Peter Peter who is an older boy, becomes almost like his father and they give him advice and Thelma sings to him, even lullabies before he goes to bed, and Peter Peter gives him advice on his career. So he has sort of this mother/father figure even in heaven, even though they're the same age as he is: 13.

She died. If she's been there for 19 years, that means that she died in about 1959 and she was born in the 40s, I had to keep this in mind as I was writing. I also had to keep in mind how language would change if only 13-year-olds were living  - It means they wouldn't have the same type of language that adults would have, but there language would grow a bit as they became more mature so they have a language that doesn't necessarily reflect how americans might speak. It's as if you isolated a community of 13-year-olds for 50 years. They might come up with their own vernacular. And they do in this book. They have a lot of words that they've invented. Such as GOMER, which means getting over murder. The kids who arrive in heaven and have been murdered, they have their own support group, and they have their own terms for it. So I had to make up a lot of words. And it's fun with the translations of the book because the French translator is talking to me at the moment about how to translate these made up words which can be very difficult to do. But it was really fun doing the vocabulary and the speech of these different characters.

**In the beginning of the book, Boo talks to parents directly. Was that from your original writing or on revision?**

That came from the very first page. I immediately started writing the book as if he was writing to his parents. In a way, it's because the reader starts to feel almost parental feelings for Boo. I mean I certainly felt almost like his father. So I think if the readers read it, if you're a woman you might feel maternal; if you're a man, you might feel paternal to him. The reader in a way becomes his parents too, and I wanted that to be the case.

**In the early part of the book, you spend a lot of time describing the heaven. Was that organic or on revision?**

Some of those details I came up with really, and some of them I came up with as I went along. Because I grew up, where I was living in Illinois, I lived in a sprawling almost like a housing project, I wanted the heaven to look like that. I imagined this wall - almost like The Great Wall of China - surrounding it like a terrarium and I wanted it to be like a rectangular size. To make it easier for me, I drew a map that had the different districts in it. We were going to publish it in the book and we ended up not doing so. But at least it gave me an idea of where these different places were situated. But I had to come up with the type of food they ate, the type of clothing they would wear, and some of that depended on the 1970s too. My other brother was a hippy and smoked a lot of pot and I imagined this sort of god-like figure like him. Sort of a bumbling - you know it was the 70s - so it was the age of flower power and pot smoking, so I imagined the God-figure almost like this. By imagining what the God-figure would be like, it helped me imagine what he would decide to give to these kids. For example the food they eat is vegetarian because I thought it would be very hippy, and if they were eating meat, they would be eating dead creatures and nothing dead actually could exist in heaven so it would have to be vegetarian. I came up with the details that way, by concentrating on what would be possible in this type of world that I'd created. They get around their town on bicycles. They're thirteen so obviously cars wouldn't be there. There wouldn't be gasoline. So I thought bicycles would be the perfect mode of transportation for these 13-year-olds.

**It’s funny you mention this quote because it comes up again.**

That comes up too in the case of Johnny, without giving up too much of the plot, the idea is whether he's actually dead or not, and if he's not dead, how can he continue living there?

**Why did you include the bullying issues?**

These were issues that maybe people didn't speak about as frequently as they do today. I was doing some visits to school recently and there were a lot of anti-bullying posters that we obviously didn't see back in 1979. I think it was tolerated much more back then. The theme of bullying is certainly current and I think that people will relate to the book as a result, and I wanted to point out that back then I don't even think the word bullying is used in the book, because I don't think that people talked about it back then, though it obviously went on all the timeAnd the mental health issue too, I did want to speak about that because when I was around 13 my sister tried to commit suicide and my brother died of an overdose. These were issues that colored my adolescence and adolescence and childhood, they're times of innocence in a way, but when you go through these events as a kid, they affect how you remember your childhood. So I wanted Boo, the novel, to have this balance between the lightness and the awe and wonder of childhood and some of the darker themes that I experienced as an adolescent.

**Boo gets to heaven as well as another person who was shot same day and they start looking for the killer -**

whom they called Gunboy.

**At one point I felt like the book climaxed when they think they've found Gunboy - but then other things continue to happen.**

I always knew that there would be twists and turns; I didn't know exactly when they would come in through the book. I knew that I would have to reach different stages and at the beginning the reader starts to assume one thing and then suddenly there's a twist then he assumes something else, and then there's another twist and he finally finds out what exactly happened to these kids.  When I was around that age, I used to read a lot of murder mysteries: Ellery Queen and Agatha Christie - so I wanted that type - those types of twists to occur in the book as well because it's a murder mystery too. How exactly did these kids end up in heaven?  Who killed them? And why? And that's what the quest is and Gunboy represents the quest of who did it? It's a whodunit in a way, isn't it?

And planning - how to plan that out, I knew that there would be certain revelations. The hardest part for me in the writing, I would say, was the last 40 pages when the final revelation is made. I probably rewrote those six times. I changed it and went back and forth deciding how this revelation would be made. And that was the toughest part for me. My editor at Vintage Books, we went back and forth trying to decide what should be done. The editor guides these things; you're not quite there, but you're almost there. That was the toughest part of the book.

**Did you know who Boo's killer was when he started writing?**

I knew it would have to be one of two people, and as I started writing it became more and more evident to me who that person would be. By the time I was a 1/5 of the way through the book, I'd already decided who the guilty party would be and then I had to write to that ending. It's hard to talk about without revealing to much, isn't it? [Laughter]

**I don’t like to reveal too much but I don’t think this is working without it.**

I've done other interviews and we've done the same thing and talked around the revelations –

**I think we’re just going to have to reveal.**

Spoiler alert - [NS]

**When I found out at first that Johnny is killer, I wanted to read all the clues that came before.**

I think a lot of people don't see it coming but what people have told me when they think about what has happened in the book, it all makes sense. And that was the thing that we had to discuss with my editor. The ending would have to make sense with the characters, so although it comes as a bit of a surprise when the readers think about what Boo has gone through, it all makes sense.

**Ultimately we learn Boo was the killer. I had that "oh shoot" reaction.**

I had the idea that Boo had reached really the end of his rope, and he brought the gun to school to kill himself and Johnny had tried to stop him and was shot in the process and that Boo would then kill himself and end up in heaven. As the Zig figure is mentioned very early in the book for kids who are murdered or who die gruesome deaths, he erases the last memories of their life on earth so he can adjust to life in heaven. So Boo doesn't know that he's done this and Zig's finally allows to find out  - years and years have gone by - he's actually been in heaven for 13 years at this time and he's ready to go back and help Johnny again. Johnny has returned to Illinois at this time and is still struggling with his own suicidal thoughts and they meet up finally in the end of the book, after 13 years and they're able to help each other once again.

**You pay off a lot - everything you bring up, like the roach.**

He becomes very significant; he becomes literally a bug. He enables Johnny to - Johnny is in a coma in Illinois. What happened with Johnny is that he was shot in the head, he was taken to the hospital. He was in a coma for a bout five weeks. He died briefly which made his body end up in this town but then he was reanimated. And he ends up eventually opening his eyes in heaven so he's existing in both places. And he finds out himself that this is occurring and he has to figure out a way of getting back to earth. And with the roach's help and with Boo's help, yet again, he manages to do so.

**You pay off the portal too. For a while I didn’t think they would find it.**

I think it’s as essential that they find a portal eventually. It was brought up in the beginning of the book, the possibility that there was a portal back. They really had to. I knew when I brought it up early in the book, I knew that somewhere they would have to find this portal. It just made perfect sense for me, for Boo to find this portal. And not only does he find the portal, the portal gives him the answer that they've always wanted to know: exactly how they died.

The portal is really, it's a gift in a way that the God-figure Zig gives to Boo when I guess he feels that Boo is ready to find out the truth.

**Within the creativity of the book you mention this play, The Effects of Gamma Rays of Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds. Where did that come from?**

It's an actual play that won the Pulitzer Prize in the 60s. It's a really old play, and I had seen it. The author's name is Paul Zindel. And I read so many of his books when I was growing up that I loved. He was my favorite author so I knew I would have to somehow include him in the book. In town, all of the schools and the parks and infirmaries are named after characters from fiction so there are a lot of references to books that I read as a kid, and references to this play that I absolutely loved. And the main character in the play is a young girl who is a science geek herself. Her character sort of inspired Boo as well, so I wanted to incorporate that play some who into the book.

**Is a quirk necessary for a young adult narrator?**

I think in this case, it makes the character come alive more, to have him be this way. He's not the general type of narrator for some of the other YA novels that you would read. He's not the tough guy, and he's not the James Dean type. He's not the character that you would see in books like *The Outsiders* that were read back then, or a still read. I wanted him to be really socially awkward. That becomes - the voice of the character becomes sort of his defining feature. It's one I think - I've heard from readers - is one of the aspects of the novel that people like best; they really like his voice. Or maybe they hate the voice; I'm sure there's people who hate that voice, but those who really love the novel, love that voice. The agent and the editors as well thought the voice was really really strong. So to have a interesting novel it always helps to have a very unique voice.

And some of the novels I've read of late have really strong voices and I've always wanted to create a character - a book that would be carried by the voice of the narrator.

**Why the present tense?**

In this book I wanted it to be present tense because it makes it a little more, it sets you in the action a little more. And if I set it in the past, it would mean that he knew that he knew the answer. He would know who killed him. He would have the answers already and he would be telling the story. I didn't want him to have the answers already. I wanted him to find out as the reader found out.

**Another one of the references is when Oliver says, “Are you there God? It is I, Oliver.”**

Of course, that's another one of the references to YA literature. I thought it was funny too, that he would say, "It is I" because he's so grammatically correct. He couldn't bring himself to say it was me; he would have to say "It is I." And that's part of his OCD sort of obsessive compulsiveness. So it's sort of a wink to that aspect of him and of course too it's Judy Blume right? She wrote that book. Who just came out with a new book herself. So of course there are tons of allusions. Some of the books were books I had read. I did read that book. Some of them were books my editor suggested that she loved. She wanted to have a reference to a book that she loved when she was that age, so we added a few of hers that she loved as well.

**Some lines speak to more than what they're doing on the page, like "heaven is without birdlife - maybe Zig thinks Americans tortured animals enough on earth.”**

That's part of my vegetarianism probably. Yeah, and of course it's a reference to Boo being tortured back home as well by his classmates.

**Now that I read that - "except for occasional specimen that slips in. We know now the roach slips in. Did you edit that in?**

I might have edited that line after I added the roach later when I went back through. I can't remember now, but that is possible as well. And I wanted these animals that slip in on occasion. There are others that slip in and they all seem to help - my idea was that these animals would be helping people in heaven to find out some truth about themselves. Even the dog that comes in at the end - Pierre - helps Boo find the portal back to earth. So and the roach of course literally is a bug and enables Johnny to hear what's going on in the hospital room back on earth. And I imagine that the others, although I don't go into the details, that have appeared over the years in town probably helped other kids come to terms with their deaths.

**The transitions between chapters - tight - at times you end on a point an start with that idea - short and long chapters. How did you fine-tune that?**

I knew I wanted the chapters to be fairly short because that's often the case in YA literature and although the book is not only aimed at YA, I wanted it to be a tribute to those books that I read as a 13 year old so I knew I wanted the chapters to be very short and often that type of literature - like the Hardy Boys for example - there's a lot of action and the chapters end on a mystery, and the next chapter will explore that mystery a bit further. So I wanted that type of feel from those books that I read when I was 13 to be included in Boo.

**Did that make the writing easier?**

It made the writing easier. I think as we went along, when we edited, there wasn't a lot of movement of the chapters around. I don't think there were any really. I think we might have cut out a few things to makes to make the plot move faster, but there wasn't a lot of movement of sections around that can happen in the editing of a novel. It was more fine-tuning. Sometimes even making the chapters shorter than they originally were. I edited the book with two editors. There was one in New York with Vintage Books, Alexie Bloom, and one at Knopf Canada here; his name is Paul Tonton. They worked together as a pair.

**Did you meet in the Canada office?**

The one in Canada lives in Toronto. I live in Montreal so it's too far away so we did everything by email. I mean it's almost the same distance that as getting to New York. So I'm almost between the two cities - in Montreal - so everything is really done by email. The two editors - Paul did more of a line edit that he sent to me and Lexy in New York did more of a structural edit. And she and Paul discussed the structural edit before she sent it to me. It worked that way. Paul is no longer at Knopf Canada. So I think for my next book, I'll probably just deal with Lexy Bloom in New York.

**Are you working on your next book?**

I finished translating a novel from French to English and now I'm starting to write my next novel - my own novel. I was in New York a couple of weeks ago to do a reading and a Q&A with Lexy at a bookstore and we talked a bit about what the next project would be, so I'm just starting it. It's called *The Orangutan*, that's the working title. I'm hoping that it will be an easy book to write; we'll see.  You never know until you sit down and start working on it.

**Do you have a writing schedule now?**

I'm someone who can work really any time. Like I said, I work as a translator as well. I just finished translating a planetarium show about Pluto because the New Horizon space probe will be arriving there in mid-July, so I just finished that and I'm probably going to start working on the book again. I usually work form 9-5 and then in the evenings I might do some editing at a cafe if I have the time. Or I might one day work on my novel in the morning in the afternoon work on a translation for one of my clients. Usually, I do a 9-5 job.

**I truly enjoyed reading Boo.  Can't keep you here forever.**

Appreciate your enthusiasm.

**Before you go, what is your writing superpower?**

I want a writing superpower. What is the skill that I have - that find is the strongest?

**What is the strongest, your go-to writing thing, what do you do really well?**

I think mine would be my imagination. I know that other writers who have read the book say how did you come up with this and this. A lot of writers write about themselves or about there own world which can work out marvelously too, but I'm more someone who lets his imagination wonder, so I guess my superpower would be my imagination.

**I concur. Or Boo would say “I concur.”**

Yes, Boo would say I concur.

When I was that age, I avoided using contractions. I don't know why I did this. My parents didn't have a high school education, so my brother and sisters, I would correct their grammar all the time. Can you imagine how annoying I was? I had this period where I wouldn't use contractions so I'd use cannot instead of can't. So I used that in the book, and he does that all that time. It helped me create some of those annoying characteristics but that definitely came from me being an annoying 13 year-old myself.

**Thank you for being here.**

Thank you. Good luck with your writing projects.

[OUTRO]