**Behind the Prose Transcript**

**Episode 26:**

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Hosts:

Keysha Whitaker [KW]

Guests:

Scott Hess [SH]

Today we are talking to Scott Alexander Hess. Scott has an MFA in Creative Writing from The New School. And as you know, I also went to The New School and actually another New School connection how I learned of Scott was through a former classmate at The New School who is his publicist, Brittney Inman Canty, which I think Canty is her married name now. And so it's all New School up in here today. Welcome Scott.

Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

We're gonna talk about your new novel which is called the Butcher's Sons.

[SH] Yeah

And this is your first book?

[SH] NO it's my third novel. My first - I moved a little more into literary fiction and historical fiction, so it's a new movement for me as a writer.

And what were you two previous ones.

[SH] The first, speaking of The New School, my thesis at The New School. My second book was The Diary of a Sex Addict, and that was the first book published. IT was a bit more of a subversive book, you know. I was right out of school, my MFA at The New School, I was really into Mary Gaitskill and kind of being subversive and just pushing the envelope so that was the project that became The Diary of a Sex Addict. It was a very different kind of a book, trying to use language to numb the reader and it was a different type of a modern story. Bergdorf Boys was my thesis also set in New York City. After that is when I started moving into, I became inspired by Cormac McCarthy, William Faulkner, people like that and became a little more literary, poetic, language focused, and writing in historical time periods.

So let's unpack that - you said that this book would be considered with literary historical fiction. So for people who might not necessarily be familiar with those terms and I'm coming from the nonfiction side, so for myself as well, I would say from reading this I think that when people say the word literary, we mean that the prose or the writing is very like description heavy not slow in a way but deliberate in how it is using metaphors and language and kind of making just - weaving in details with the narrative that mean something more . . . can you explain?

[SH] I would just say language becomes primary. Language drives the writing, the story, symbolism, and all five senses. It becomes a very, a richer and fuller type of language and not that story is secondary, but to me language is primary: visuals, descriptions, rhythms of writing, language choice, just the whole - I tend to be a bit stream of consciousness; I kind of let it flow. And that type - a little more poetic in the language. And sometimes I suppose larger concepts might come through in what I consider - I mean I have my favorites and my idols that would to me term it literary fiction. I guess as opposed to popular fiction, something that's a little more focused on story, you know, getting the story out, which is a talent too. I see literary as mostly language focused, driven by that.

So, I've started taking notes more deliberately when I'm reading through some of the books, usually I'll just write in the margins and when I go back to interview someone, I'm like where did I write that note?  So now I'm trying something different and a lot of the notes that I've written down are language-based elements. One of them that you've mentioned there, in terms of the nature, I said 'You use elements like light and nature I found come throughout the book.' For example on page 59, which is, so the book is about three brothers who are in New York, they're butcher's sons, their father is a butcher. You can probably explain it better than me but I'm going to explain it in the way I read it or understood it. They end up becoming sort of - they try to form a gang; they get into all kinds of mess; they each are trying to figure out who they are and they have their own story lines in terms of relationships. There's this one story line that is coming to terms with their dad and how he is different since their mom died.  So overall before we think that - I love the book; I read it in a day. I did find myself, going to really nothing about language. For this example on page 59 - they are in the kitchen with the dad, and I think this is when the dad is cooking for them.

[SH] Right

At the end you say "They all chewed, ate, while the wren sang. Then another bird joined. Some cawing thing. A violent more reckless call. an angry shrillness that filled the room with something mean but bright." And so my question was - are details like that - are they organic or do you focus on those in revision and how?

[SH] They're organic. I tend to write; I'm a bit of a method writer. I get into the feeling and the scene of it. I tend to spit all my language all my - the story, the writing - in my first draft. When I go back and revise, it's usually about toning down or clarifying or things like that but I'm always into the weather, the tactile senses within a story: the animals, the whole world - like nature as you said - the natural world. And to me, the elements of the world become like a character, whether it's the heat of the apartment or the birds outside the window, because the world they live in - they happen to be in Hell's Kitchen, 1930s, very gritty and I always see the entire landscape. They're in a tenement walk up but there are these beautiful little birds outside the window, so the juxtaposition. Earlier in the scene they mentioned how they can feel the coolness from the meat cooler below and just below them is all these carcasses of meat, of animals, and they're in their kitchen and outside there is a beautiful bird and then there's violence on the street, and so when I write especially in that book, it felt like a very sensual book in terms of all the elements of life. In every chapter and every segment I wrote, I would always try to be aware of all the segments, all the sense, almost like an actor - like all the senses, not just the character and what they look like and how they're feeling and so forth, but what the world around them is doing and how it's influencing their choices, their action. There's also a heat wave throughout the whole summer, so I use the heat a lot throughout the book to kind of aggravate and propel things that are already happening.

And you - that's one of the notes that I have under that, actually I have is 'cinematic writing' the kind of vibe that I got from reading the book.

[SH] Yeah, I do see things very visually, and I had written screenplays in the past, so I do have a visual sense of things. I also did some acting; I think all those elements and also as I mentioned, I'm in love with Cormac McCarthy and William Faulkner, both who I learned some of those - I don't know if I'd call them techniques, but they include that in a lot of their passages where I would read it and just really feel the landscape, the country, the weather, all the elements of life around the characters and that influenced me a lot when I was initially starting.

So let's talk about the three brothers. Again you can please school me on the stab I'm about to make. I think that the narrator is - I feel like - so the book switches from what the three brothers are doing, but I don't feel like it's third-person close. I feel like the narrator's omniscient, but I might be wrong. So what did you think?

[SH] Yeah no it's omniscient. It's an overview. It does have the overview narrative/narrator, the God's eye view. Then you get inside each of their heads and their emotions. I think ultimately the youngest brother, Adlai who is the gay brother who ends up having the elicit affair with the oldest brother Dickey's thug friend big Ed. He I think grows and changes the most, and so carries the thread of the book, to me the most. He's the weakest, the youngest and weakest and the one no one notices so it's definitely that overview. Now, the book I'm writing right now is called The River Runs Red and I've very specifically chosen to write in first person from multiple points of view so it's set in 1890 in St. Louis and I'm writing from three very different characters in first-person from their point of view. So that's a very different book. Someone asked me, wouldn't it be better if you did it third person and so forth? But this new book, it very much lends itself to that. It was originally called three brothers. The Butcher's Sons, I felt leant itself to that arching overview that God big voice above looking at what happening to these three young men and then we get glimpses inside of them but it felt like a book that needed that kind of narrative as opposed to the one I'm writing now, it feels like it needs to be closer, if that makes sense.

[KW] When you said about you feel like that Adlai is the - I forget the exact word - but not the central character? Do you remember exactly what you said a minute ago? [Laughter]

[SH] {laugher} He kind of drives the story through. He's kind of the thread. It begins that Dickey is the violent, the oldest the strongest, and prepares the action initially. And Adlai is very much in the background, but he changes the most. He slowly emerges out of the shadows and then has this gay love affair which in 1930 was very risky, and then by the end has changed the most and kind of come to term with himself, while the other two were a little more formed. They go through change but not as much as Adlai.

[KW] One of the things that I think I noticed about Adlai being the driving force, I said narrator drops clues that Adlai is different. There is this moment when Adlai is writing in the sand or the sawdust - he's writing the word savage and he's thinking 'I want to write beautiful savage.' We know that's what he's thinking, and there's also - we see that he's different and we begin to think, what's that of this? The man in the alley gives him the note, and there's a phrase that 'someplace where boys like him went' so we get that there is going to be some type of journey with Adlai. How did these characters come to you? I say that because I've been talking to people who write novels and they say sometimes that they'll sit down to write and they'll start to hear a voice and they'll follow that voice. Did this come out of free writing? Did you sit down with the idea to write a novel about three brothers?

[SH] 16:02 This was different in the way that I read a book called The Wettest County in the World by Matthew Bondurant. It was about three brothers in Virginia during prohibition. They made it into a film called Lawless with Tom Hardy. I am one of three brothers. I'm the youngest; there's a middle and there's an older. We had a restaurant equipment company. So this book, unlike some of my other books which are just sort of hatched out of my mind, people often say 'Where do you get the inspiration?' I'm like I don't know. It's just little bits and pieces of life stick to me and then I'm like oh, lemme go in this direction, but this one specifically I was fascinated by that movie and these three brothers close in age but very different. I started thinking about my own journey and my brothers and they are back in St. Louis. It was a restaurant equipment company, so it wasn't a butcher shop in 1930 so the stories I created were different, but it was initially inspired by this concept of myself and my two brothers, and also a very masculine world. It was my first book where I really wanted to focus on masculinity and heterosexual masculinity. You know, I came from a family in a restaurant business that was very masculine: a big warehouse, old saws, and tough guys which I did not engage with. I moved in the arts. That's what's initially engaged me. I want to write a really masculine book. I want to get into the world. That's why the mother is dead. Initially, I was going to have no female voices, but then I decided to let each of them have a relationship. It was more inspired by the older brother Dickey because he was a type of man that I never related to, never saw myself as, so as a writer and a man, I wanted to explore - ok, what's going on with? Let me write as this type of character, and Dickey is a fighter and violent. Then he has that affair with a black woman which again in the 30s was a very risky behavior.

And then that led to the creation of all three brothers and so forth.

[KW] So talk a little bit about that Dickey character. So on page 30, I'm like Dickey is an asshole. Oh my god, this guy's an asshole. How do you get there as a writer?

[SH] Making him an asshole?

[KW] Yeah, how did you?

[SH] I think that's where my time as an actor, when I call myself a method writer, and also I read some articles about, actually when I read American Psycho and thought in some ways it was brilliant. I had read that if you're going to write a despicable character, either the language needs to be so beautiful that you draw people in or his point of view has to be so authentic that the reader will follow. But beyond that when I started with Dickey as I was saying about the actor thing - when I worked as a method actor, you kind of become a person. So if I'm supposed to be playing a mean, asshole, bigot or anything, you have to embody that. And just think as that person thinks. Also, I think that people who have a certain point of view that on the outside we might find it despicable, but in their own minds they justify it. They see the truth in what they're doing in some way. It makes sense of their world.

So when I arrive at a character like Dickey, he is more animalistic, he was kind of led by his gut and there was that veil wasn't so much there. He would be led emotionally by his gut and just go for it. But I had to let him be who he is and let him embrace himself and just go forward, but it all made sense to him. Then my goal was that he's truthful and organic and ultimately, I  - there's always that fine line when I worked with my writers group - like well, you don't want him to be so despicable the audience turns away. So when I introduced his relationship with Eva, I felt that in some ways offered a softer view, a humanistic view of him, so we could see some of his vulnerability because he is a killer, you know, in essence.

[KW] The funny thing - so many different directions I want to go with you - in terms of the three brothers, you have three obviously very different characters, did you in terms crafting the characters, I don't want to say how did you make them different, but how did you decide how different they were going to be?

[SH]  I don't tend to outline. I tend to write and discover as I go. I use a lot of external inspiration. So and also, I had my own brothers to draw from - pieces of their lives. Like my middle brother wanted to be a doctor, so I gave that to the middle brother. The oldest I knew I had some sense of wanting the oldest brother to be involved in organized crime - which my oldest brother is not - and I knew I wanted him to be like this thrust - like this masculine violent thrust of the character. I kind of knew I wanted the youngest one to be fragile and to have a coming out, and I think I kind of balanced the one in the middle, as one of the brothers to be kind of normal or a nice guy. He's the brother that's most middle of the road and just kind of wanted to have a nice life: be a doctor and marry this nice woman from Argentina, but it was not possible because he was part of a bigger picture.

[KW] And what - on my show, I've given up trying not to do spoilers because there's no way to dissect plot and how a writer came to something without. I think earlier I said that Dickey was the middle, but you're talking about Walt which is the middle one.

[SH] Right.

[KW] So when you said that Adlai might make the most profound change, I kind of feel like Walt makes the most profound change because in the end he becomes the killer.

[SH] That is true. I agree. I felt Walt - his change was slow,

[KW] but then it was hard

[SH] That's right it's a sudden snap. He was trying to remain a good person as long as he could. But to me, he was the character that really wanted to be a good person but life just kept pressing on him and pressing on him but then it went too far. Finally having lost the love of his life, it kind of pushed him over the edge. Then he kind of gave up and went unexpectedly into crime, which was not his through line. It wasn't in his life plan.

[KW] Not only was it not his through line, in the scene where that is most - or biggest snap is when he kills that he snaps the neck of the father of his girlfriend, the woman he wants to marry. As a writer did you know that - did this just happen to Walt? Did this come on revision? When did you decide that he was going to make that type of change?

[SH] It was kind of in the moment. It was in the moment of writing that scene. I really got up into his head and I felt he was at his wit's end and that - the way I tried to - I did do revisions and stuff, but the way I tried to present his mind state is that he went into that apartment not planning to kill someone. He thought things were going to be somehow fixed. He was holding onto this shred of hope that his older brother could somehow fix things and he'd walk about with his girlfriend.  When he got there and saw the scene and what was happening, and then things went out of control, he kind of caved in. He's also a very large, a bulkier, bigger guy. He didn't really use his physical strength through the book, but I tried to present that he was a bit larger.  So in that moment of despair and cracking, it's just like snap, it was just easy to snap this man's neck and put to rest the obstacle.

The whole book, his girlfriend Adriana - the father is the obstacle who does not want him to marry his daughter. And he's always trying to get rid of that obstacle so I think in the final moment, he was also afraid - in that moment he becomes his brother Dickey. He just gives in and is animalistic. Just well, here's one way to get rid of him: crack his neck and poof it's over. Whereas Dickey can thrive on that behavior, Walt, it ruined him. He couldn't be the man he wanted to be having just killed somebody.

[KW] I'm going to ask you a question. You might not be able to answer it because it might be too close an organic process, but you say that, in order to get to that scene with Walt - he didn't plan to kill someone - you said you "kinda tried to get up in his head."  I'm wondering, so you're writing from the point of view of an omniscient narrator when you are sitting there drafting, and what - are you thinking - what does that mean?

[SH] I guess I always kinda straddle both. The omniscient is the overview - looking and seeing okay this is what is happening. But when I'm in the moment of the character, I'm specifically switching into that, to the moment and exactly how Walt feels emotionally where he's at and how he can reach this point. So yeah, it can go back and forth from the narrator to the character themselves, their specific actions. And that was an important moment in the book and for Walt. I remember working on that and finding that place and trying to take myself there and being really involved in that. And so - I guess it has to make emotional sense to me when I'm writing it. And that's when the language is less when it's the emotion or the sense of it is important.

[KW] I wonder as - I just happened to look down at this note, did you have to do things to soften Walt's character to make it more of a shock when he kills Adriana's dad?

[SH] No. Walt was always kind of to me, the lumbering nice guy. Maybe if he'd been born into another family, he would have had a really nice life. I kind of wanted through the book, to make the statement too that blood is thicker than water or you are impacted by your family and so Walt - if he'd been an only child or another family - his spirit was that he's the nice young man and he wanted to get married and be a doctor, but he was surrounded   by the area he lived in, the circumstances of his life, and the influence of his brothers, particularly Dicky, the violent older brother who brought so much energy, intensity, drive, and violence into their world. They loved each other as brothers so it couldn't help but color his experience.

So no, I didn't have to soften him; he was naturally gentle. It's more like as the book went on, the world kind of beats him up a bit.

[KW] And then at the end, we see Walt take another turn where we know that he ends up going to work for the mobster guys, the Giordianos?

[SH] Corglianos.

[KW] Dickey seems to ride off into the sunset, possibly with EVA we guess. They've gone off and lived the life that Walt would have wanted to have.

[SH] Well, I don't know if Dickey could quite go that far, but he's definitely abandoned his family; he's gone with Eva; he's left and gone off to somewhere else. Several people said to me 'What's the sequel?' I'm like, I don't know. There is no sequel.'  But he's gone on to live his life somewhere else without the boundaries of his family and whatever that meant to him.

[KW] There's an interesting choice that you make in terms of - I'm flipping - so many question - put that question on pause. So when we're - in general - no wait - people who aren't trained in fiction, I think probably from elementary school we learn like the classic structure, you build up to the climax and there's the denouement and everything is sorta resolved right?

[SH] Mmm-hhmm.

[KW] But I find that at least in really kind of looking at some of the novels that I read over the last eight months or so doing this show, that I can't plot point the stories like that. It doesn't seem to really happen that way. For example, I was writing down what I felt were the climaxes. So the first one I felt is we are like - early in the book - so Dickey shoot the guy - they go to intersect this deal that's going on and Dickey shoots someone. So we're building up and the Corgliano's come and they kidnap Dickey so it sets a new chain in motion - so I don't feel like there's one big - at the same time, we do have the Adlai relationship we know that Adlai and Ed are sneaking around, maybe we could say that is the big buildup, but I don't really know if we could say there is one big buildup. What do you think about that?

[SH] I think the classical structure and the build and the fall and the resolution, I don't know if it's as common. To me, especially with this book, well in a lot of my books. I see it in the rhythm, like the rhythm of life. And life doesn't really operate by certain rules like that, so I tend to often start things in the middle. I start in the thrust of things and then keep moving with the scene. With this, with three different people having three different arcs to intersect and come together, I think that is also what caused multiple conflicts. More like ocean waves or something. You are correct in that he intersects the deal and that began one chain of chains where they are looking for Dickey, but then Adlai begins a relationship with Ed and then halfway through, I mean one central climax is when the father sees Adlai kissing Ed and that makes a shift, but then you have continual small climaxes and openings that keep shifting the story in new directions. My goal is then that all these different mini climaxes and builds and falls come together and then we reach a finale. They ended up on a farm; I wanted them - they begin in a butcher shop and ended up on a farm more in nature - but it was a quiet place after all of these ups and downs and climaxes that they were just kind of stuck in a quiet place together but ultimately led to that final moment which is the climax finale.

[KW] Is that something that you thought about in terms of resolving one of the story lines that is sort of implied?

Like they're estranged sort of from their dad but they're in the same house with him. I feel like at the end, it's resolved - I wrote her something about page 246 a moral. They come together at the end, all these trials and tribulations have brought them together as a family and the dad is kind of taking care of them now as a family. Is that something that you consciously knew you needed to resolve or did that happen organically?

[SH] Both. It happened organically because I just kind of work that way, but it was - I did want the father to step forward and become the father figure at the end. It begins the sons are in charge and the father is kind of lost, but by the end the sons have become lost and the father has stepped up and become a father figure again. The father is able to step up and unify them together almost as if they're boys again. So that was intentional in his journey, and in their journey in that they, because they're points in the book where they just sort of feel he's kind of useless and they can't count on him for anything. And to me, the turning point was when he realized his son was gay and he had no idea that was happening and that snapped him awake to say, 'you know here I am with my sons and I don't even know who they are or what their lives are.' Then he slowly begins to come awake; then when they commit a murder, he comes awake even more and takes them to the house and rises above to be a stronger figure.

[KW] What type of research did you have to do for this novel and how did you incorporate it?

[SH] Yeah, I tend to research as I write; I'll be writing a page and I'll think what kind of light? Do they turn on a light or is it a candle? So as I'm writing a scene, I'm aware of the time period, and I look at pictures; I google. I read other books in that time period. I watch movies. When I'm writing a book, I basically live in a world. So for a year and a half, I'm living in the 30s. Throughout my day, and my life, I'm always looking for things. Like today I'm writing in 1890, and I want her to bake a cake, so I'm okay, what does the stove look like? How big is the kitchen? As I walked down the street, I actually saw an antique store and there was this old stove. And I'm like oh, what year is that from? So I kind of fill myself up with all the elements of what I think might influence when I'm writing - and specific things, I interviewed a butcher because I hand to find out well 1930, what was up with refrigeration? What was the meat-market like? The meatpacking district was very vibrant. I learned that the carcasses actually came from New Jersey, so I had to interview and research and read about just that element. Well they're butchers, how do they operate? How do they keep meat cold? Where does the product come from? How does it get from downtown to uptown, you know. So that all kind of informs my process.

[KW] When you were writing this book, had you already gotten the deal for it?

[SH] No. No. I had my first two books published with JMS Books**,** a small press. But I moved into as I said, what I call literary fiction, language-driven, and also historical. So I'm actually on my sixth book right now. My third book was set in the 20s about a jockey which has not yet been published. This book, The Butcher's Sons set in the 30s, so I knew I was moving in that direction so I started looking for a publisher that was into that type of work. And then I found a match with Lethe Press, not with the jockey, but with The Butcher's Sons. I was just starting to send that around and I read about Lethe Press and I liked some of their books an some of the awards they'd won. I submitted and connected with the publisher and it turned out as it did.

[KW] So you submitted a proposal with like sample chapters?

[SH] The book as completed by that time. By the time I pitched it to him, that book was completed. I just sent a pitch letter along with sample chapters and he'd written back, send me the book, and I did and then six months later it was like, let's do it. Yeah, it's all part of the process.

[KW] What is you writing process like? Do you make yourself sit down at a certain time? Are you writing full-time?

[SH] I chain myself in a room.

[laughter]

[SH] No. I once saw Mary Gaitskill, who I like, and someone asked her that question and she said, 'to tell you the truth, sometimes I'm writing and I'm on, and other times, I'm not.' Cuz I had often read 'real writers write everyday' and probably some do, which is amazing. I tend to be more, I don't worry about the amount of time I write or that it has to be everyday. As I mention, I'm in a world, so for a year and a half, whatever this world I've created I'm in this novel and I'm always thinking about it. So I'm kind of in the book and researching it and jotting notes all the time. And the literal sitting down of it and doing the work - if a few days go by and I haven't written, then I say to myself, you got to carve out an hour tomorrow, I don't care if it's seven in the morning - cuz I do have a day job and I do have multiple things - and other times, I'm able to write everyday for a period. It's more of a feeling, like, kind of like the gym. If you say to yourself, oh my God, I haven't been to the gym in two weeks! If I realize, hey, I haven't written in three days, then I make sure I sit down and write. But it's the bigger picture that really drives me and that began in like my third novel where I started to find my process. I started to find my voice more, the whole stream of consciousness. I'm not going to say it became less work, but it became more organic; it became more natural. And then that's when I realized as long as I'm in the book and I'm living it, then it will just keep getting written whether I'm doing it everyday or every three days. I'm just simply in it.It's like the train is going so, I just keep moving. I also read a lot. You're New School. They always said to us, you have to read as much as you write. And I balked at that initially, I'm like 'No, I have to keep writing.'  But it's true.

I'm writing in first person now, so I picked up all these first-person books. I just started reading The Girl on the Train.

[KW] I listened to that on audiobook.

[SH] It's good. I like it; I'm really enjoying it. For the challenge I have for the whole point of view, like first-person point of view. It's really been amazing to see what she does with first person point of view. So I make sure I carve out time to read because it always inspires my writing.

[KW] I do want to say - I have many things I'm going to have to leave out that I didn't get to say - but you have some - sex scenes in here that are very well done. That another - I talked to another writer that was doing nonfiction, but I thought that it wasn't like - not like, how do I say - a lot of it is implied with language; it's very sexy; I liked it.

[SH] Thank you. That was very intentional. It was a choice, an emotional choice. I worked with my writers' group. We still meet every week. To me, it was about personal discovery. I wanted it to remain sensual and led by language and led by emotion, and not led by mechanics. Passionate, emotionally passionate and heartfelt, led from the gut, not graphic or - what's the word? - I can't think of the word right now - but much more led by the beauty, the beauty of lovemaking, not the graphicness of sex. And so I very much strived - there's one climactic scene in a creek where they're making love - the gay characters, Adlai and Big Ed - and I had to rewrite it a few times because my writing group kept saying, 'I didn't even know they were having sex.'

[KW] {laughter}

[SH] It was so subtle that they were like 'Oh it's beautiful and the poetry and the water rushing but they're just standing there right?'  I'm like 'Well no!' So I went so far the other way, so sometimes I had to add a little more detail so that it was clear it is a passionate scene.  But that was something that was really intentional because I wanted the sex scenes to have like a poetry in and of themselves. The sex for these men, I think, is beautiful in a way because they're each discovering something so new.

[KW] And we see with Dickey, we see him saying 'I can't believe I want to see her or be with her again.'

[SH] Yeah. He's never really been intimate or vulnerable with a person and that is what he's allowing himself to experience with Eva. So yeah, he's also, I wanted him to discover it in a different way.

[KW] And your writers group, are they former New School people that you continued on with?

[SH] Yes, they are. We call ourselves The Ponies. Amy Dupcak who was in my class; in the final semester, one of the things, I think they call ourselves the cluster? You met with your peer group, yeah. Amy and I were in that peer group and we had two other people who continued after graduating but people have come and gone. Amy and I are the two original members. And soon, very soon from when we started, Amanda Miller whose nonfiction from The New School joined our writing cluster. Through the years it's had people come and go, but a lot of New School connections have remained.

[KW] Do you meet once a week?

[SH] Yes, every week for years. There's an occasion we miss but it's really important and it's critical and amazing really, all these years later to still have this group thriving and to have deadlines and to have people reading your work and to be reading theirs and to contributing part of a community so when you're in the midst of writing a book and hoping it works out that you've got your peers doing the same thing and supporting your journey, you know, in a different way.

[KW] So you guys is it like a workshop where one week someone will bring some stuff and the next week you guys talk about it and then go like that?

[SH] Yeah, we have four in our group so one week two people will submit and we all discuss and the next week. We usually submit a day or two prior to the workshop, so we workshop two people each week. And, yeah, it's continue to inspire me.

[KW] What do you think, and this is going to be my final question, what do you think is your writing superpower?

[SH] My writing superpower? Well, I'm not sure if understand the question, but basically to sit down and do it. If you mean like as a writer what is my power? Really my writing superpower is to sit and write. I think people complicate writing. I do feel blessed with a muse that I do just sit and things just do flow. I've never had writer's block. I have a strong stream of consciousness. I'm always filled with images and visuals and it's just constant for me which I feel very grateful for. But the power really is to sit and do it. And I read the book The War of Art which is about that concept. I did The Artist's Way which is on that concept, went to graduate school, 99% of it comes to will you just simply sit down and start. You just start writing. I also I don't judge myself. I don't agonize over sentences. I don't think, 'oh my goodness, am I going in the right direction? I just - if I write five pages and say, 'Well that didn't work.' I throw it out and start a new five pages. I'm halfway through a book now. And I'm like this fourth character still isn't speaking to me and so I'm starting over. I'm like 'well, let's find one that does.' Three of the others are going great and this one's never quite connected so I'm like OK, start over with that character. People say to me, 'I wanna write and how do I write?' and it's like well, mainly stop thinking about it and simply sit down and you just have to do it. It's like carving out the time and taking the pressure of. Just simply do.

I guess that was The Artist's Way where you just write three pages a day and it doesn't matter what they are, you might throw them away if you need to, but it doesn't matter what they are, you just write. That helped me a lot.

[KW] Well, I certainly am going back into your collection and reading some of your other novels. I did truly enjoy this one. I wanted to ask you how many words this is. I was like this has to be like 200,000 words - even the font - it didn't feel like it. I'm like he really wrote this book. It's one of those books that just poured out of me. Once it started moving, it just really ran. I got emotionally entangled in it.

[SH] The chapters are short, some of them are like two, three pages maybe. And I thought that worked for me and I wondered what type of conscious decision - I just need to know what was the choice?

[SH] It was the rhythm of the writing. I wasn't aware of the length and thinking like oh this is this long and that long. I think it was three characters and they are all on their journeys it's just that was kind of the rhythm and the energy of it. In each chapter, something important would happen or some turn would occur. And so it was a very energetic book in that way. It was kind of an emotional power going through each chapter in that way, so it didn't always take long. There was always something that was happening to one of them. I did not plan length; I didn't have any concept of how long is each chapter? Again, that was organic. It was this is what needs to happen now and now I need to jump over here and continue with this. But I do feel rhythms when I write, and each book has its own energy and rhythm and that book - the rhythms I was working in kind of contributed to the lengths.

[KW] I'm encouraging everyone who hears this podcast to go pick up The Butcher's Sons. It is very good. Especially if you have a New School connection, if you ever heard me say New School and I know you have, you have to go get this book. And if you're interested in writing fiction and historical fiction, literary fiction, this is definitely something for you to check out. I did really really enjoy it. Thank you. I'm inspired by hearing you talk about your writing today. I wish you the best of luck.

[SH] Thanks so much, I enjoyed it thoroughly.