**Behind the Prose Transcript**

**Episode 10: Carlos Lozada**

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Host: Keysha Whitaker

Guest: Carlos Lozada

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

[KW] = Host Initials

[CL] = Interviewee Initials

 [Opening Music by Redvers West Boyle]

0:02 Hi. This is Carlos Lozada, and I'm the nonfiction book editor of The Washington Post, and you're listening to Behind the Prose.

0:16 Hey you, o' writer o' buddy, o' friend, o'pal o' mine. Welcome to another installment of the show that explores and illuminates the craft of writing and its process through interviews with authors, journalists, essayists, and editors.

Today’s episode features the new nonfiction book critic of The Washington Post, Carlos Lozada and my Writer’s Recommendations.  But first let’s check in.

0:49 I still have 16 to go in my chunk of 20. I didn't submit anything this week, that's because I've been getting up writing, but I get up and I go write to the computer and work on the second draft that I blogged about a few weeks ago. Honestly, I'm doing this because first and foremost, I need to prove to myself I can do it. My first draft though 80,000 words was just a matter of trying to bang out 80K in someone else’s voice. Not that I know what mine is, I know what it’s not.

I'm starting to understand all the things writers say in their books in books I've read through the years, that when you go to work, some days you get 200 words and some days you get 1000 that might be good. I find that the most challenging thing is continuity. When I return the next day, I don't really feel motivated about where I left off and I start something different and so I'm struggling with that. Then I feel like I spend too much time shaping the first free chapters. I don't like the idea of not knowing where I'm going, so I'm trying to strike that balance there where you make progress, but at the same time, do what I can so I don't feel like I'm floundering. I'm not good with uncertainty. So my goal is to finish a draft, a second draft that has cohesion by June 1. There, I've declared it to you, and you should hold me it, because I'm going to hold you to yours, as soon as you send them to me on Twitter or email them to me. You should be on our email list - text PROSE to 22828.  I do plan to get back on the submission train next week, especially after my interview with writer Chelsey Clammer. You'll get to hear what she had to do get 100 publications in a span of two years. That show airs in a couple of weeks. You'll know because you'll be on the email list. Text PROSE to 22828 and remember to tweet me your publication shout outs to @behindtheprose.

3:51 Today's feature guest not only writes for a living, but he reads for one too. Carlos Lozada is an associate editor and nonfiction book critic at The Washington Post where he has worked since 2005 in various capacities, including economics editor, national security editor, and Outlook editor. He was the managing editor of Foreign Policy Magazine and a Knight-Bagehot Fellow in economics and business journalism at Columbia University. A native of Lima, Peru, he is a graduate of the University of Notre Dame and Princeton University.

One might think someone with those credentials would be a little bit, say, hoighty-toighty? Not Lozada. He is down-to-earth; he is super cool, funny, and I came across his work in January when I read his post, "The Five Worst Sentences I read in January" and I knew that someone was that astute to syntax needed to be on Behind the Prose. I'm glad that he accepted and without further adieu, I bring to you Carlos Lozada.

[APPLAUSE] 5:08

5:11 Thank you for being here Carlos.

5:12 Thanks for having me.

5:14 I'm super excited to talk to you today, and I always start out with, how did you know you wanted to become a writer.

5:27 You know, the funny thing is I didn't really. I was an avid reader as a kid, sort of a bookworm, but I sort of fell into this accidentally. I went into banking and studied economics and in my mid-20s, I realized I was sort of bored by that. I'd done a little bit of freelance writing as a hobby on the side, but then I thought maybe I could make that into a career. So I started looking around and eventually, I was able to get a job as an editor, and I've been an editor for about 15 years, but only recently have I moved to writing full-time at The Washington Post.

6:08 You did study in writing at Columbia. Is that correct?

6:13 At Columbia I did a program in business journalism at the Business School and the Journalism Graduate school there, but my undergraduate at Notre Dame where I did economics and political science. So I had to do writing in the course of my studies but I didn't edit the college paper; I didn't do most of the things that the people working at the Post have done as a path to get here. I feel very fortunate that I have the opportunity.

6:50 Congratulations first of all on your new position at The Post.

6:56 Thank you. Yes, before this I was editing our Sunday opinion section which is called Outlook, but our longtime book critic Jonathan Yardley retired late last year, so I've been able to take on a modified version of his role, both reviewing a nonfiction book every week, but also writing different posts on a forum that we've started here called Book Party, just about nonfiction that's in the news.

7:38 Can you describe an average day for you?

7:46 An average day in this new job, I'm still figuring it out because it's only been a few weeks. I have a list of books that I've been developing, the list I mean, for roughly two to three months out. I know what I'm going to be reading in March, in April, in May, and I'm starting to add books for June, so I'm constantly looking through publisher catalogs, through the avalanche of books that arrive every day at the Post, trying to pick things that I'm going to find interesting. Sometimes I want to review books where I feel like I really have some deep understanding of the subject matter - it's something I've thought about or written about before - but other times I just want to take a book that will be completely new to me and take me in an entirely new direction. And so, it's fun because there's people who have spent years, sometimes careers, working on these books, and I get to sort of dip into their minds for a few days, sort of reading and reviewing them. Aside from that, I try to look at things that might be relevant to readers, to Washington Post readers, that are happening in the world of nonfiction. And I sort of try to crank out some shorter posts on that. So I spend my day wading in a lot of books and scouring the internet for more news on what's happening book wise.

[KW] 9:37 And you said that you have your schedule slated through June, so and this kind of goes back to your process - so does that mean you've slated books for every week from now until June.

[CL] 10:07 That's right. And I'm in constant communication with my editor here, and we, the list evolves, right? There are some books I wanted to review in March but then I heard about something else that was coming out that seemed like it would be more urgent or more exciting, so I postponed one or added another; it's constantly evolving, but it's a way to give me discipline so I know what I'm going to be working on going forward. And I end up reading multiple books at once, which is not easy to do, but it's a way to keep me on track.

[KW] 10:48 How do you tackle the reading?

[CL] 10:52 I'm constantly reading. I commute on the DC Metro and so I'm reading there. I try to sneak in a chapter at lunch. One day a week, generally Tuesdays, I stay home and devote it entirely to reading. I lock myself up in our guest room and spend the day reading. I'm reading for different purposes as well. There's some books that I'm reading because I'm going to do a review. There's some that I'm reading that I'm trying to mine for information, for instance, I've been reading a lot of the Bush family memoirs recently to try to gleam insights into Jeb Bush. So I'm almost done with his father's campaign memoir from 1987 when he was vice president and he was launching his campaign for the presidency after Reagan. That I'm not reading with an eye toward writing a review. You read it in a different way; you read it with an eye for interesting tidbits and things that could be appealing for readers in maybe a shorter post. For instance, I recently was looking at Barbara Bush's memoir, and she's talking about how Jeb was very disappointed when he thought that Reagan had passed on his dad as his Vice Presidential pick, but then it turned out that either Reagan changed his mind or something else happened and of course he did pick George H.W. Bush. So, I'm reading multiple books, but reading them in different ways.

12:55 When you're reading for tidbits or a review, are you annotating in the book? Do you have a notepad with you?

[CL] 13:06 I don't really have a notepad. I write all over the book. [Laughter] The copies that I get are generally the ones, especially the ones that are for review, are what they call the advanced reading copies, so I get it early. It's not the final book in its bound beautiful form. It's still rough. It may not include the index or the acknowledgments, and so those are versions that I have no problem kind of writing all over. So I make a lot of margin notes; I underline things; I have multiple colors for different kinds of things, multiple shorthand for there's things I know I am going to want to quote, when themes occur to me as I'm reading I'll jot those down in the back of the book or send myself an email, if I don't have the book at that moment. I send myself lots of emails saying "This if for the review!" I don't keep notes. Once I start writing the review, then I'll probably spill a lot of that into a file electronically, then slowly start culling, eliminating, synthesizing. So that becomes my notepad, but the initial notepad is really the marginalia in the book.

[KW] 14:38 How far in advance do you try to finish the book before the review week?

[CL] 14:49 It really varies. Sometimes I get on a roll and I'm able to read a couple of books fairly quickly, so I may have read a couple books ahead of the one that I'm actually about to review. So right now, I'm going to write a review tomorrow that I'm going to send to my editor on Monday, and I've already read that book, and I'm almost done with the one that will come after that. That subsequent one is the one that I was reading this morning when I came in on the train. When I started I tried to build up a bit of a backlog of books, so I'd read three or four that were going to be the first four that I reviewed, and I read the four of them before I'd reviewed a single one. That probably wasn't a great idea because the further back, the longer ago, the initial book was, things aren't as fresh, so it took me a little longer to finish writing those reviews. Critics do it differently. I know some nonfiction critics who read a book, write the review, read the next one, write the review. Other work in bunches; they binge-read and then the write a lot, so I think I'm still trying to find my way.

[KW] 16:22 What is your drafting process like?

[CL] 16:34 Yes, I go back to it obsessively. I'm never satisfied with my writing; I'm just sort of done - I meet a deadline and it has to go in. There's always - even when I look back on it after it has been printed, I think, "Oh, I could have tweaked that sentence." There's a turn of phrase that occurs to me later that really captures an idea in the book. What I'll probably do tomorrow is I'll write a draft of the review and then - the book in question is Stuart Scott's memoir, the ESPN anchor that recently passed away - he was writing a memoir in his final months of life about his experiences in television and his battle with cancer. I've read that, and that's the one I will be writing on tomorrow. I hope to have a fairly close to finished draft by the end of the day on Friday, and I'll probably look at it again on Sunday night, make some tweaks, and then Monday morning, I'll email the editor and say the draft is ready for him to look at.

[KW] 18:10 So essentially, is it safe to say you have like a Monday deadline every week for the nonfiction book?

[CL] 18:18 Yes, I send it in every Monday. That's the latest I want to ever do it. I'd like to get to the point where sending it in, maybe Monday of the prior week, so I'm sort of working a week or so ahead. Right now I file the review on Monday and it's the one that's going to run in the print Washington Post the following Sunday. So it gets edited; it gets laid out. We'll post it online earlier, maybe Wednesday or Thursday, but it runs in the print Post that following Sunday.

[KW]

19:00 What is the editing process like with your editor?

[CL] 19:06 It varies. Sometimes they, the editor feels it's a very clean review, straightforward, and they'll have a few suggestions. Sometimes it's far more substantive. Sometimes I write too long. [Laughter] They help me scale it back. But I think the best editing, and this is the way I've thought about it, not just now that I'm writing all the time, but when I was an editor myself, the best editing happens before anyone has written a word. The best editing is the initial conversation about the approach that one might take to a piece, a review, or a news story. It's harder to redirect a ship once it's moved in a direction for a while; it's easier to make those adjustments early on. I find that having that initial conversation with an editor, or if I'm the editor, having that initial conversation with a writer saves a lot of time and can really help the piece. Sometimes if I'm writing something that is not a straightforward review that is more an ideas piece, I may have a lot of thoughts on where to take it but just taking for 15 minutes with a good editor will help me really crystalize where it needs to go.

20:43 Are there points in the editorial process that you get feedback from your editor when you disagree with the feedback? Do you pushback on it?

20:56 Yeah, I think that's inevitable. I just finished a piece yesterday that's gonna run in Outlook this Sunday. In that case, we weren't discussing the substantive aspects and organization of the piece, but just a few lines. Writers think they're clever and fall in love with their cleverness. It takes a good editor to say, you know, that's actually not that funny or not that clever. Or I see what you're trying to do but I don't think people will understand it. So you go back and forth and I think my editors may disagree, I'm generally receptive to suggestions like that. Inevitably I'll push back on one or two things and say, "I'm really attached to this idea, or this is the way I want to express this," and there are tradeoffs; we find a happy medium. Those happen all the time. I think it's actually great because you have two people or sometimes more if there's more than one editor weighing in who really care about writing, care about readers, and are all working toward the best final product. We have to remember we don't edit for writers, we edit for readers.

22:41 In Book Party, I find that you're doing a few interesting things as far as, you mix a bit of genre. For example, you wrote about the J-Lo movie and how that spurred this new interest in The Iliad and you're also doing something that - in Hip-Hop we would call it digging in the crates.

[CL] Laughter

You wrote this post about the Bush memoirs from 1999, and you also went back to Bill Cosby's memoirs, and that's sort of digging in the crates there. Can you explain how you came up with those ideas?

[CL] 23:23 One of the things I wanted to do in this job is to not feel hostage to the new. Book critics are supposed to weigh in on the book of the moment, the book that's about to come out, and that's great. That's a lot of my job; that's most of my job, but I think one place where I can hopefully be valuable to Post readers in trying to resurface older books that for some reason are newly relevant. Jeb Bush looks like he's running for president, at least for the Republican nomination, any insights that we can glean about him I think will be of interest to readers so that's why I started looking through the old Bush memoirs. You know, Bill Cosby obviously in the news in recent months with the multiple allegations of assault against him. I actually had a copy of his book on fatherhood at home which I hadn't read yet. It'd been a gift several years ago when my son, my first son who's now seven, was born and I hadn't gotten around to reading it. Then when Cosby became such a controversial figure in the news because I was just curious to see what he said. I realized that there were things in the book that in hindsight would be interesting to readers, so I read that one, and I read a couple of other books of his that he published in the late 80s at the height of The Cosby Show. I ended up doing a piece on Bill Cosby's books about love and marriage and family and getting old that readers found very interesting simply because they were newly relevant. They were old books. They were 30 year-old books. I see that as part of my job. Jill Lepore wrote a terrific piece in the New Yorker about, maybe a year ago, she wrote a piece about a book that had come out in the 90s about innovation that had kind of become the Bible of entrepreneurs and the whole disruption conversation that we hear about so much now. So she went back and looked at it and did a book review 17 years later, looking at this book by Clinton Christiansen called The Innovators Dilemma that came out in '97. She really sort of raked him over the coals a bit, saying that he'd gotten a lot of his thinking about innovation wrong and had kind of exerted this negative influence over generations of entrepreneurs and innovators, and I thought that was just brilliant because she took an old book and showed us why it had had such a lasting impact and why today it became incredibly relevant, so that became sort of my rallying cry, a great example for me of how you can take the old and make it new.

27:20 I think that's great instinct because when I read the Bush piece, the one where you excerpt the letter of the elder George Bush, I was like, wow, I think I might want to read this book.

That's great, that's exactly what I was hoping to elicit.

27:44 You're messing with my mind Carlos. Let me ask you oh - The Cosby piece - also, I think you did an amazing job with the close reading of that, going back and looking at it within the context of what we know now within the allegations. At times the piece is painful to read, I guess because I grew up on Cosby, as did many of us of a certain generation. It's painful to read, and I wonder what was the writing like for you.

28:21 [CC] That was not easy to do because - first of all - we don't truly know exactly what occurred in a lot of these instances. The overwhelming nature and sheer numbers of these allegations are - that's persuasive - but you can't sort of say, oh in these books we see exactly why Bill Cosby ended up being the man that he was, because we don't really know exactly the man that he was. And so what I decided to do was simply let them kind of speak for themselves. So the article - I'm only really guiding readers through the books. I'm trying not to editorialize too much. My service there to readers is that I went through the books and I'm pulling out quotes, passages, and moments that describe how Cosby developed his attitude towards women, how he thought about relationships and marriage and fidelity, how in some moments he says he hopes his daughters don't end up with a guy like him. There are these interesting moments. I felt that was the service I was providing. In a more traditional review I would be far more opinionated about what I think of the book. Do I think this person's being honest? Do I think they're telling a full story or an interesting story? In the case of the Cosby books, I imagined myself as the person sitting next to a reader, and I'm the one reading the book, and I say, "Oh my gosh, look at this thing I just read," and kind of relaying that to people. The trick was trying to decide what to include and what not to. And it's obviously a very sanitized version of Cosby's life. There are a lot of things that come out in biographies about him that he doesn't touch on. These books were kind of a brand extension of the Cosby Show, even then, they're still revealing. That was sort of tricky to write because in the end, people care more about his voice than they do about mine.

31:16 I think you executed it well. And even at the end you pointed out, the name of the show was the Cosby Show and the family was the Huxtables. I was like, you know I never thought about that. I know, everyone

31:32 It wasn't the Huxtables. It was the Cosby Show. And you know what's interesting is a detail that people often forget is that, in the show, Phylicia Rashad's character Claire, her maiden name, her fictional maiden name in this show is Hanks which is Bill Cosby's actual wife's maiden name. You could tell that there was some kind of conflation right? That the Claire character was at some level in part based on Bill Cosby's own wife Camille.

32:16 You executed that piece without inserting opinion. But in your other pieces, as you said, you do insert opinion, and you also insert humor, I think very well. I first was drawn to your writing when I read the post "The Five Worst Sentences I Read in January."

[CC] 32:39 I'm currently compiling the five worst from February; I'm not done yet.

32:43 I thought that this was a really funny but a very accurate of these sentences that you rank in offending order from the least offensive to the most offensive. First, I guess the question is when did you become a sentence aficionado?

[CC] 33:16 Anyone who's a longtime reader as I imagine many of your listeners are, you sort of, you know what you like, you know what you react to. You see something and you think "Wow, that's a terrific sentence" or a terrific piece of writing, a terrific paragraph, a terrific chapter. Or you see something else that just really doesn't sit will with you. I think it's the Tolstoy line that all happy families are the same, all unhappy families are unhappy in their unique way. All bad sentences are sort of uniquely bad in their own way. For a while I have been just as a hobby have been collecting clichés that journalists use, like expressions that only journalists use in their writing. I end up picking up those a lot when I'm reading books, but then I found sentences that are painful to read and they're often in really good books. So it's like when bad sentences happen to really good books. They stick out even more then. I end up marking them sometimes because I wanted to simply mention them in the review. In every review, I try to give a sense of not just the story and the arguments of the book, but to give readers a real sense of what the writing is like. So I'll highlight beautiful turns of phrase but also highlight some kind of more painful passages. I wasn't planning on doing that, but then I realized in late January that I had collected several of these, I thought it would be fun to sort of do as a post, here are the five worst sentences I read and people seem to enjoy it. Especially people who are writers or who are copyeditors or who work in writing got a kick out of them. Someone said I should do it every week but that would be too much. I'm going to see if I can keep doing it every month. That's just sort of an experiment. I'm just trying different things, seeing what kind of reaction I get, if things resonate with readers. So if I do this for six more months and no one seems to care, I might stop.

35:54 What's the reaction - or do you get a reaction from some of the offendees.

[CC] 36:09 None of the writers have gotten in touch with me. Although in a couple of cases, the Five Sentences from January were from books that I'd reviewed, and at least in one of the cases, had given a very favorable review to. So often when you write a favorable review, the author will track down your email and reach out and say thank you or make some kind of comment. In this case, none of the five have reached out to say anything about their offending sentence. One of the publishers from one of the books did say something to me on Twitter, something to the effect of ouch, but you're right. So I think I'm going to keep doing it. It's just kind of fun too.

37:10 I agree. I'm putting my two cents in. I concur.

37:17 Thank you.

37:21 When you approach drafting a piece do you freewrite then rearrange? Does it flow out in the order that it appears?

[CC] 37:34 I think that really varies for me. I often will start when I'm just staring at the blank page, the blank screen when I have to write my review. I will run through the book again and highlight key quotes and key ideas that really leapt out for me, in no particular order, in no particular sequence that makes sense, I’ll just get them out on the page. Then I'll look through the notes that I kept in the back pages of the books in the margins for what I thought were important moments or important messages and I'll get all those out on the page. Then I'll stare at them and see if there's an obvious pattern emerges. I think I'm most comfortable when I'm able to write my lead, when I know what I'm going to say right at the top, then I can use that as an organizing principle, a first marker. Then I might look back at the end and realize that what I have from my conclusion actually makes more sense as the beginning of the piece, but I try to start with the source material, with the quotes, with the ideas, and then organize my own thoughts around those because in the end, I think people are reading the review multiple reasons. I think it's different between fiction and nonfiction. I think people read reviews of fiction to decide if they want to read that particular novel, but I think a lot of people read nonfiction reviews in some cases to decide if they want to get the book and read it, but often as a substitute for the book. There are so many nonfiction books, so many books on politics and economics and history, it's impossible to read them all. It's impossible for me to read them all and reading is my job. I can imagine how much harder it is for people who may read a book a month or just a couple of books a month or less than that. Some people read reviews just to get a sense of - "okay those are the big ideas in the book and I feel smarter because I know those ideas but I won't necessarily go out and purchase the book and read it." So I feel like I have to serve both audiences: the audience that may want to go out and purchase the book and the audience that is using my review as a substitute for that.

40:33 You've mentioned a few times about remembering the audience, remembering the reader. In the Five Worst sentences post, there is a line you write just before the worst sentence of the month, you write, "This sentence shows the authors have long forgotten about their readers.

[CC] 40:56 Yeah, I think that was a book, a sort of complicated and very specialized book that yet was published by a big publishing house and aimed at a popular audience. It was a book about a longtime Pentagon official who ran an internal think tank at the Pentagon. His name is Andrew Marshall and he just recently retired. And the two co-authors of the book were themselves sort of defense analysts and specialists who sort of worked closely with Andy Marshall. I think they're trying to tell their story for a broad audience but sometimes it gets so deep in the weeds that it feels that they're writing for colleagues, for people who are as specialized as they are. That's a really narrow sliver of humanity. That's what I meant that they really had forgotten about a smart general interest reader who might be reading that book because this particular sentence was so specialized and so full of acronyms and jargon that it's hard to know exactly what's going on. I try to do that as well, to always keep readers in mind. Writers can, it's very tempting to write to impress other critics or write in a way that your colleagues will think is cool but to not remember that you're writing for a very diverse and demanding audience that doesn't want you to sit there showing off, it really needs you to distill the writing and the impact and the import of this book for them.

43:15 Do you write outside of your work for the Post?

43:24 No, I don't think I've ever written, since being at the Washington Post, it's been almost ten years, I think I've only written something once or twice that ran elsewhere. Overwhelmingly, the Post is more than enough

43:48 Let me rephrase. Do you have a daily writing practice? If you think of the Post as your job during the day, do you write on your own in the morning, separate from work writing?

[CC] 44:09 Maybe I will get to a point like that. So far, I feel that the writing I have to do for work is more than enough to scratch that itch. There's an interesting thing right? There are writers - who are far more notable writers - while there working on some great novel, they're actually editors by day or doing some other technical writing by day. Then there are writers who feel that anything they do outside of their official writing has to be wordless. [Laughter] They're carpenters or they do things that have nothing to do with writing. That's tricky. I don't know if it would be helpful to do other kinds of writing outside that would help me work those muscles more. What I've found is that it's actually the reading outside of reading for work that has suffered. Since I'm constantly reading for reviews, it's tricky to say, I'm just going to read this fantastic novel that's out. I'm not doing it for review; I'm not going to do a post on it; I just want to read it for my own pleasure. I'm not doing much of that because I feel because I have to voraciously feed this audience of people who are interested in coming to The Washington Post for views on nonfiction. So there's a novel that came out a couple of years ago that I've really wanted to read and it's sitting on my night table. I haven't been able to pick it up yet because I figure I can always read the next book I have to review so why not do that instead.

46:19 When you edit your pieces, what techniques do you use? Are you printing them out and marking them up? Are you primarily on the computer?

[CC] 46:30 I generally work on - the first draft is done almost entirely on the screen. I sit with the book next to me, I have a big binder type clip that I use to keep the book open and spread out to where I want it to be. I try to do the first draft and all the initial rearranging on screen and usually leave my desk and I'll take it to lunch or I'll take it on the train home and read it with a red pen. There I'll see things differently; I shift into editor mode, which is really my natural condition. I've been an editor for a long time. There I start rearranging, identifying things that don't make sense. I do that all on the page and mark it up pretty heavily. Then I'll come back and write through all that onscreen. I may do that a couple of times, maybe three times if it's a more complicated review or if I'm increasingly dissatisfied with what I'd produced. So that's the process. It's on screen but also just a lot of old-school red pen kind of editing.

48:06 Would you mind playing a quick game with me?

[CC] 48:11 [Laughter] Sure.

48:12 I've invented this game. It's called, I'm going to read a list of things and you pick the one that you like the most.

48:19 OK

48:22 First one: eBooks or hard copy

[CC] 48:25 Hard copy.

48:27 Drafting or revising.

[CC] 48:28 Ooh, revising.

48:33 Pitches or articles on spec

48:36 Generally pitches.

48:44 nonfiction or fiction

48:48 As a pure reader, I'd have to say fiction, but as a consumer of information, I'd have to say nonfiction. Sorry for splitting that difference.

49:03 Morning or night

49:12 For reading or in general?

49:11 IN general

49:14 Oh night owl. Absolutely

49:17 Brian Williams or Bill O'Reilly

49:18 [Laughter.] I don't watch television news.

49:25 J-School or School of Hard Knocks

49:27 Hard knocks

49:30 Pen and paper or screen and keyboard

49:34 screen and keyboard

[KW] 49:37 Ding ding. You got them all right.

49:37 [Laughter} What I should have said to Brian Williams vs. Bill O'Reilly is Gwen Ifill and Judy Woodruff on the NewsHour. That's the one television news that I really enjoy.

49:57 What do you think that your writing superpower is?

[CC] 50:05 I wish I had one, or I wish I had more. The one thing that I try to do, and this is much less a superpower than a discipline I've created for myself is that I try very hard to do two things to avoid clichés and stock phrases that seep into journalistic writing and definitely seep into book criticism and I try to write simple sentences, short simple sentences.  I teach a journalism class and I'm always telling my students to simplify, to shorten, to tighten, that the best writing is one that seems simple and effortless even though it's not. That's what I try to do; those are the two things I try to do most in my writing.

51:13 Many people might say that you're at the top of your game now. You're an associate editor, nonfiction book critic at The Washington Post, one of the most esteemed papers in the country if not among the list in the world. What advice would you give yourself five years ago?

[CC] 51:35 Five years ago, I never could have imagined what I'm doing right now. I feel really fortunate and I think actually the advice I would give is to not have five year plans because things never work out the way you expect them to, the way you imagine they will. I think big plans come together in hindsight. You see how A lead to B lead to C. I think if I'd sat down five years ago and tried to map out what I wanted to do and where I wanted to do and what kind of role I wanted to be in, I wouldn't have guessed that this was going to be it, and I'm really glad that it is. As far as being at the top of my game, I might push back a little on that. There are so many incredibly gifted and talented writers in this newsroom. I learn from them everyday just reading their work. It's very difficult here to feel like you're at the top of your game when there are so many people around you who are so good at what they're doing. Coming into The Washington Post everyday is a privilege and it's humbling. You know so many terrific journalists came before you and so many terrific ones are here right now, so I think it's an honor and I'm having a lot of fun in this particular role.

53:24 We'll we're having a lot of fun reading your writing in that role.

53:30 Thank you so much.

53:33 Thank you for being with me today Carlos Lozada.

53:35 A pleasure thank you for having me.

53:37 You're welcome and I have to admit because of you, I subscribed to The Washington Post. I did.

53:47 Terrific. One more. [Clapping. Laughter.]

53:49 I ran out of my free readings a month. You know you get so many before they shut you out.

53:57 That is fantastic. Spread the word.

54:00 You're got one more follower and I'm sure many, many more.

54:03 Thank you so much.

[MUSIC]

54:16 You know as I listen to that back, I feel like I sound surprised that I subscribed to The Washington Post and I don't know if it even came across as maybe a little shame, but it's not because the left or the right or is this a conservative or liberal newspaper rah rah. I was surprised because I couldn't afford to subscribe to my own podcast if it wasn't free. I have no business on anybody's subscription list, but I really wanted to read Book Party.

The other great thing is since he just started in January, it’s great for us, because we can follow a book critic from the beginning! You know? Some critics – you know they get in that job and stay there for years – and if I want to be a true fan, I’m not gonna go back and read 500 columns. But I can say, I’ve read everything Carlos has written for Book Party.

Check out his episode page for transcripts links to the articles we mentioned.

Next episode of Behind the Prose features Kenny Porpora, the author of the memoir The Autumn Balloon with a special appearance by his editor, Emily Griffin at Grand Central Publishing. Also, head over to the site and check out my posts on why you should listen to A Tiny Sense of Accomplishment, a podcast by Sherman Alexie and Jess Walter and find out what I have in common with John Updike and Garrison Keillor.

Thanks for bringing me into your electronic device one more time. Behind the Prose music is by UK Artist, Redvers West Boyle found on Soundcloud.  The show is executive produced and hosted by Keysha Whitaker from a closet in Pennsylvania. Until next time, listen, learn, and write.