**Behind the Prose Transcript**

**Episode 9: Cameron Conaway**

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Host: Keysha Whitaker

Guest: Cameron Conaway

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

[KW] = Host Initials

[CC] = Interviewee Initials

[KW] Welcome to episode 10 of Behind the Prose, the show that explores and illuminates the craft of writing and its process through interviews with writers and editors. I’m your host, Keysha Whitaker.

This week, an interview with Cameron Conaway who was featured on NPR’s Best Book 2014 list for Malaria Poems, a new segment I'm calling – Writers’ Psych with Dr. Ike, but first let’s check in.

Check In Music

Did you write this week? You haven't sent me your updates on your publications, so what's going on with you?  Last week, I told you about “chunks of twenty” submission process so I got about 16 to go.  One of my obsessions has been McSweeney’s Internet Tendency.

I’ve been submitting to McSweeney’s since 2011. I started with Open Letters. After much un-success, I decided to try Lists.  I’m proud to say this week I got my umpteenth rejection back from McSweeney's but in a timely fashion. Because when they say they respond to you in two hours or two weeks, they mean two hours or two weeks. That's good because people got things to do; nobody wants to be waiting around waiting around for a rejection. But when I got it, though I expected it, it sent me into some sort of disbelief where I had to find out who was this man, who was this person who keeps telling me, oh good, but no thanks.

So I go to his Twitter page, and I’m scrolling through his tweets like a crazy ex girlfriend. I'm wondering what he thinks if funny and maybe I should write something to that, and I'm worried about myself. Maybe this trying to get into McSweeney's has become an unhealthy obsession. So I asked Dr. Ike, a behavioral therapist and life coach. Has my McSweeney's goal gone too far?

Dr. Ike: I think that it’s all on a personal basis. So, this if for me I would put on my life coaching hat and say from a personal basis what matters to you. If being verified by this particular source is gonna bring you some sense of fulfillment or acknowledgement, then that’s what it is. And until you can shift your mentality to something else being of value, that you know what, me being funny and someone laughing and enjoying it – even the editor writing back and say this is a good list, but we’re gonna pass, I think sometimes you may be putting your mark on the wrong place because you've already gotten several verifications that you're funny. So if what you're was going for is you want them to think you're funny enough - they think you're funny enough but are you going to be posted or are they going to put you in the print or whatever it is. That piece is very different. See what I'm saying. He’s giving you verification, but it isn’t something we’re going to use, maybe we’ve already reached their criteria, but that doesn’t mean yours wasn’t validated, but for you having this justification is important.  So then you say is this a healthy obsession or not? Does it prevent you from functioning in other parts of your life? Does not having this prevent you from writing other pieces you should be writing? Does it take valuable time from things you need to be doing? When it starts to veer into other lanes and prevent you from doing other things in life, that's when we say it's unhealthy. So I have a big thing with paying the cheapest price for gas. I have a gas buddy app. Some people might think that's extra, but now when I will travel way out of my way to go get gas and save two scents, then we've gotten unhealthy. When I show up to work late, because I traveled out of my way to get gas, then we've gotten unhealthy. When I will not go places and do things that are important to me because I'll have to pay extra for gas, that's unhealthy. It's preventing my normal daily function.

4:38 [KW] But stalking his twitter page is not unhealthy?

4:40 [Dr. Ike] There is a component that is productive because part of you is a writer you're trying to get an understanding of his tone. Literally when you said it, that was going to be one of my suggestions - well get a feel for who he is as a person, what he might like, what his flavor is, but also acknowledge that once you get that, that this may not be what he's going to choose for the articles or the page. You know both me and you, what we personally like may not be what we would professionally go with because people will start to infer a lot about us personally if all of them had a certain tone or had to meet our criteria of funny or what we like, just because I'm the editor in chief, doesn't mean my personal tone of funny could be what makes it into the article, magazine, or whatever the product I'm putting out is. Once you get your article printed or your piece published in this, then I think you will have accomplished this and you will be ready to move on. So in the moment it seems like a major hurdle and something that's preventing you from getting where you want to go, but ultimately think of once you accomplish it - it's kind of like climbing a mountain. Once you get to the top, you're here, and now you got to go down. But you've done it. While you're doing it, it's such a process; it's so tedious; there's so much going on. But once you get up there, you're like nice view from up here, good feels good, and time to go back down and move on to the next thing.

6:12 [KW] Thanks for chiming in. I'll be back at some point during the month with another Writer's Psych question with Dr. Ike.

6:19 [DR. IKE] Alright.  I need like a disclaimer: I'm really not a doctor.

[Laughter]

6:24 KW - No one can listen to Dr. Ike's advice but me. If you do I'm not responsible for any consequences or repercussions.

6:35 [Dr. IKE] There will be all of the above: consequences and repercussions.

 6:50 You know success is a funny thing. When we see it realized in the physical world, it appears that someone all of a sudden is just everywhere. They're on best books lists; they're in revered magazines; they're traveling; they're winning Pulitzer grants, but we don't see the work that went in to that what appears to be sudden success. We call that phenomenon in hip-hop - the person is "blowing up" right? So Cameron Conaway is blowing up right now. He just returned from India on that Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting grant that he won, was awarded. His book Malaria, Poems is on NPRs Best Books of 2014 list; he's got an article in Newsweek magazine, and I think he's working on some more. He’s a former United Nations Social Good Fellow and Creative Writing Instructor at Penn State Brandywine.

I had the opportunity to sit down with Cameron in February at Penn State Berks. I talked to him about his Newsweek article and we discussed one of his poems, which is in Malaria, Poems. But before we got to how he writes, I had to know why.

 8:18 [CC] I wanted to become a writer when really I saw that Bruce Lee was a writer. When I saw that he would write things like "You put water into a teacup / It becomes the teacup / Now water can flow or it can crash / Be like water my friend." As a martial artist, I would view his words, I think in a deeper way than I would say, William Faulkner for example because I had that connection to him. That was when I knew I wanted to be one. I didn't know that I could be one though until my time at Penn State Altoona.

[KW] 8:51 When was the moment at Penn State Altoona that you realized "I can be one."

[CC] 9:00 So, Intro to Poetry, Lee Peterson took the students outside and asked them to focus on an object that was pretty far away. She didn't give any directions. So I chose a tree that was maybe half a block away. She asked us to just get out our notebooks and write about the details of that tree for 30 seconds. After that, she said take four or five steps closer to the tree and do the same thing. We kept doing this to the point where I am now seeing the ants crawling through the bark of the tree. Something clicked in my mind where I realized I wasn't viewing any part of my life - the media, the symbols from the media that were coming into my mind, my past with my father abusing me, I wasn't viewing anything in my life with that kind of perspective. And if poetry is about the pursuit and the practice of perspective then this what I want to do for the rest of my life. It was probably a few weeks later when I realized that poetry is really about that. How do I tack on an English major? Immediately, right then and there, I knew I was going to be a poet for the rest of my life. Maybe a failed one or terrible one, but pursuing perspective was a key to what I wanted to do, what I needed really for my own healing.

[KW] 10:26 What's your writing process like?

[CC] 10:31 Wish I had something more stable. Sometimes it's at a coffee shop. Sometimes it's typing notes into my iPhone at 2 in the morning when I can't sleep. But it's always anaerobic. It comes in spurts. It's like Usain Bolt. I will got weeks without anything, and then boom, something strikes me, and I just Usain Bolt it and like within two hours, something pretty decent comes. Of course, then there's the revision process, but the bulk of the material comes in a very fast period of time. And I mix it up between writing on the computer and physically writing in a notebook. There's something different about that process. There's a way of slowing down when your hand is in contact with the notebook that's different than just banging away on keys so I try to mix that up.

[KW] 11:31 In reference to - you said you wish it was a little bit more stable, it comes in spurts - do you feel that's because you are a poet and we tend to think of poets as waiting for the muse or do you attribute that to something else?

[CC] 11:57 I think as a poet, I've never been able to buy into the waiting for the muse. I think you have to take a lasso and pull the muse down to where you want it. It's about putting myself in a place and seeing what I can rip down from the clouds - the bones of the clouds, I tell my students. The clouds have bones; pull them down; find what's in there. I am always trying to come back to this equilibrium of stability because I do feel like I am so curious about so many different topics - modern slavery, malaria - so many different facets that I want to cover and ways that I want to cover them, but often it's just about finding that period of time where I can do it and that space where I can do it. I think I've been freelancing and teaching for so many different places, and just living that life of a writer where you're kind of in the scrap all the time, just trying to pay the bills. So yeah, it's been tough. So I think that out of stability, I will be able to be a better writer, create more work.

[KW] 13:05 How did you move from primarily poetry, if there was a point where you were primarily a poet, into this sort of advocacy journalism?

[CC] 13:25 I was sitting having breakfast at a little cafe in Bangkok and saw a CNN story about boys that had been trafficked. All of these boys had HIV as a result of being passed around as sex slaves. It was on CNN; it was like a 60 -second video clip, and I realized I only live a few hours from this refugee shelter where these boys were. I want to go learn about that and see what that's all about. When I did, I walked through the gates of this place with the owner, and I'm seeing all these boys playing hopscotch and acting as children should do. I wanted to tell that story and I wanted to tell it now. That meant that prose and creative nonfiction had to be my vehicle to do that. I'd taken a bunch of creative nonfiction classes at University of Arizona but this was my first time where - here's a piece that needs to be told; it needs to be told quickly; I'm here and I'm bearing witness, so its time. Poetry just doesn't allow me to do it in that kind of speed.

[KW] 14:42 So what did you do with that piece?

[CC] 14:45 So that was the first piece I sent to CNN, they didn't want it. Huffington Post wanted me to cut it in half. I felt like the truth of it would have been lost if I did that. I sent it to GoodMenProject.com. They responded in two hours, "Wow, we have to have this story." So that started my journalist activism.

[KW] 15:07 You mentioned that you did the MFA at University of Arizona, and you were in their creating writing program where you were a poet-in-residence. Can you describe or tell us how completing the MFA in poetry has benefited you.

[CC] 15:33 For me, my first year there was the unveiling of the University of Arizona Poetry Center which was probably the greatest poetry center in the States now. A lot of time and money and resources were put into creating that. That's where I had my classes; that's where I was doing my writing so I was constantly walking into a space where the art form I wanted to do was taken seriously and was respected. I struggled a lot with that, just growing up in Blair County. It's working class. I never felt like my poetry was respected as work in that sense, but in Tucson I did feel that. It's like, the plumber goes to work; the poet goes to work. They both respect each other's work. It's admirable to do both. So the MFA allowed me to have a space where I felt appreciated. I think from that came creativity and less guilt and work.

[KW] 16:37 In the MFA program, a large component is the writing workshop. Was that your first experience in a writing workshop?

[CC] 16:50 I had a writing workshop at Penn State Altoona with Todd Davis - Advanced Poetry - that was my first time.

[PAUSE]

[KW] 17:04 See folks, we have this - I almost talked over him again. You know, you listen week to week, I have this problem and I blamed it on the fact that I couldn't see the person, yet I'm sitting right next to Cameron and I just almost talked over him and I'm starting to realize, I might have a personal problem. I think I have a personal problem that I need to work on. What I was going to say over Cameron, I was going to ask him - how did you discern between feedback that is beneficial for your work and feedback that is not.

[CC] 17:45 I struggle to take very many lessons from workshop. I took a lot of lessons from meeting with professors after workshop. Workshop to me felt like it had this false sense of identity where students were walking in, not with authenticity, but with this idea of trying to please the professor. The professor is not our ultimate reader so cliques started to form, and I didn't like that. But what I loved was "Hey Richard Shelton, Richard Siken, will you sit with me for an hour after workshop? Yeah let's do it." And amazing things happened post-workshop, but it needed the energy of workshop to make it happen.

[KW] 18:41 Can you tell us a little about the books that you had done prior to Malaria, Poems.

[CC] 18:54 So first book was actually part of the Poet-in-Residency at University of Arizona. I was teaching poetry in the Pima County Juvenile Detention Center in an all-female pod. So Until You Make the Shore that came out early 2014 that came out from S\_\_\_ Poetry in Ireland was basically a composite of all of the characters that I met there, but I created four characters and wanted to tell the story of the juvenile justice system but also use their stories to kind of illuminate the problem of the criminal justice system in general, the school to prison pipeline, and advocate our need to really reform what we're doing in terms of putting people, including kids, in prison and behind bars. That was my first piece of, I guess, activist poetry.

[KW] 19:54 In terms of the revision process, do you have an editorial board. Who do you go to?

[CC] 20:16 I like that. So I just returned from talking to a bunch of students here and they were asking me for different advice. And I said, "Do not let your professors, the ones that really inspired you or planted some seed in you, do not let them go. Keep them close." I'm happy to say that a lot of my E-Board is the professors at Penn State Altoona. I come back to their own work as a reader but we also exchange our work. Also, just part of the poetic journey is that you just meet really awesome people, including people out of the poetry realm. I really like showing my poetry to people who aren't poets. I feel like I get a less academic perspective and it helps me write more of a poetry for the people kind of thing. I probably have 10 to 11 people who, depending on what kind of writing I'm doing, I'll kick it their way and get their feedback.

[KW] 21:17 What is your submission process like? Are you on a set schedule? Do you submit X amount a month?

[CC] 21:38 Yeah, when you first said submission I was thinking of mixed martial arts, you know where someone's in a chokehold, you submit.

[KW] 21:45 No wonder! If you could have seen the look on his face, I was like, "Oh my God, what did I say?"

[CC] 21:47 So I'm thinking I love arm bars; I like to use triangle chokes. My writing submission process. Oh! Yeah, no it just, whenever I have a piece, I start pitching it all over the place. Sometimes that's like six pieces a month; sometimes it’s three over the course of three months. Part of being just freelance is knocking on doors repeatedly and being rejected all the time. The Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting Grant, I was rejected three times over the course of two years. You know the process of writing a grant; it's exhausting. I would put my heart and soul into these proposals and they just kept getting rejected. It was I think the fourth time, they were like, "Yeah, we'll take it. We're going to send you to India." Yeah, so it's just when I have something, I knock. When they say no, I kick. Then I'm in, maybe I can do some kind of choke or mixed martial art move, [Laughter] but at least use that toughness to kind of get in and stay in.

In the second half of my interview with Cameron Conway, we get into his Newsweek piece, Killer Distractors, or if you read the online version, “A working malaria vaccine that can’t get money.” We begin with an excerpt of Killer Distractors.

 [KW] 22:51 You said something during your talk earlier at the gallery about martial arts kind of preparing you for that. What was that metaphor that you gave?

[CC] 23:04 Yeah. People ask me what's your base as a writer: fighting. It wasn't a writing workshop that taught me how to write; it wasn't a poetry workshop that taught me how to write; even reading, I read a ton, but that wasn't what taught me to write. What taught me to write was fighting. Especially the kind of writing that I like to do which is diving deep into human rights issues and trying to tease out some sort of truth that has been hidden or glimmer of inspiration. A lot of the lessons are fighting are sort of counterintuitive to slip a punch; you have to move toward that punch in order to combat it and change it. I feel like as a writer, you have to move toward the issue that scares you. You have to move toward the pain in order to ease the pain. And just also the basic metaphor - getting knocked down eight times standing up nine - that mentality of a fighter is why I've been able to get some of these grants and publish in some of these places.  I don't by any means think it's because I'm a brilliant writer, it's because I work hard and I don't stop, and that was my strength as a fighter. You may have better skills than me but I'm going to keep trying and keep annoying you until the third round and you might get tired then. Part of me is working on the fatigue of my editors until they say yes.

[KW] 24:41 Going back to that keeping on the editors, when you are submitting your pitches, are you submitting a query letter or do you send the article on spec?

[CC] 24:57 I mean it's been different. The editors at Michigan State Press, they had on their website in bold print, "We do not accept unsolicited poetry submissions." So I just put a packet together and mailed it to them. I mean why not? Even though their site said they are not going to take it, and they will in fact throw it away, I just figured, I'm going to mail it to them. I did the same - so Bill Gates now has a copy of Malaria, Poems. It says right on the Gates' website, but yet I sent them, and he opened it, and he got it. Yeah, I don't know if that answers your question, but it's different with everything. What has really worked is first connecting on Twitter and taking it from Twitter to email, where it cuts out that kind of formality. Then you can just kind of send a 250-word pitch via email. It doesn't have to be a formal letter; they don't have to dig up and see who you are; they know. That's been a huge help. I think that's kind of where the pitch is going these days - making that initial connection first and then following up. It seems like it's starting more and more with social media: Google Plus, Twitter, and Facebook.

[KW] 26:15 You mentioned that you had pitched Huffington Post. I know on their website they have a standard form, I think it's a Google doc, do you do any of those standard ways, or do you find alternate ways?

[CC] 26:32 What's interesting is, once you're in, everything changes. Once I submitted to Huffington Post, and I think that was just via a submission form. Once you're in, they give you a password and you just publish pretty much whenever you want, and they don't really edit it. So, a lot of the stuff that you read on Huffington Post, if there's a lot of spelling errors, it's because they selected accept and it immediately went onto the site.  But it's different once you're not eh edges and once you're in, the way things change. Newsweek was the Google doc.  We worked in there. It was an exchange back and forth for about two weeks. It was my first time working with an editor in Google docs which was really cool. It was real time learning where - "Yeah, I should have had a source for that," or "Yeah let me look up that statistic." So it was really helpful for just my own writing process.

[KW] 27:41 Let's talk about the craft of "Working Malaria: A vaccine that can't get money." During the talk, you also mentioned that this piece was five years in the making. Explain.

[CC] 27:53 The editorial process was two weeks. The magazine came out a few days ago. But the process, as a journalist, that I took to write this piece, the seed was planted well before Thailand where I was just trying to write for anybody who would read my stuff. I felt like I had stories to tell and stories worth telling, and they eventually built an audience and over the course of five years, I developed a decent Twitter following where people who were very respected in the journalism industry may only have had 400 followers, they looked at me like maybe we should give this person a second look. That second look, in my opinion, is what helped open the door for the Newsweek piece. Five years ago, I would have had a very similar piece but I don't think they would have taken it because I wouldn't have been able to get that second look. So, it was a lot of the planting of seeds, writing for free, paying for flights to Cambodia to cover stories that I was never paid for, a lot of those kind of in the trenches work that led to the respect and the second look, and now I'm in Newsweek so it didn't just happen, is what I was trying to tell the students.

[KW] 29:21 Do you prefer drafting or revising? In nonfiction?

[CC] 29:24 I would parse that even further. I love drafting when it's a story that I'm not part of. Whereas revision, with memoir, I love it, because it helps me re-think about my truths and what I remember, and that process of seeing again allows me to keep digging back into my past and finding what I think is a more accurate representation. It's me trying to bring my best self to the page. That revision process has been really healing for me to discover, why did my dad make that choice? Why did I feel that way when he made that choice? I think at the surface you see there's anger but below that there's usually fear. To reconstruct that, through the revision process at least in memoir has been beautiful.

[KW] 30:34

In the second half of my interview with Cameron Conway, we get into his Newsweek piece, Killer Distractors, or if you read the online version, “A working malaria vaccine that can’t get money.” We begin with reading of an excerpt by Cameron.

[CC] 30:53 Reads excerpt.

"Tucked away in a few rooms within the . . . we do not let ourselves get interrupted by others who say this cannot be done."

[KW] 32:50 Thank you. You read the intro, and then you read the last two paragraphs. I made some notes about those. You open the article in the facilities of the vaccine company. And then you close with them. How did you arrive at that frame?

[CC] 33:25 That was through the editorial process. I opened with the hook. I wanted to put my readers there, where I was. I mean that's what I teach. I had the show don't tell at the beginning, really pull the reader in. And actually what became the ending was probably the middle part of the essay. That was where my editor was like "if we circle back to a quote from Hoffman - he has the dynamic quotes he's a very dynamic speaker - if we circle back to that, I think it ends the piece on hope rather than bitterness and I think that's more of where you wanted to go with the story." And I'm just like "Yes! Absolutely it is." We had to rearrange paragraphs in order to get that placement. So I'm so glad that you noticed it.

[KW] 34:16 That's one of the notes about the arrangement. I felt like the opening of the piece, it read sort of like a movie opening. When you read the article you'll also see the - Sanaria seems to be the underdog hero that has the vaccine. Then we have this situation: you explain for the first few paragraphs what is the problem with malaria, why it's a danger, and then, it seems to, right around paragraph six, I feel like the piece turns and you introduce sort of the arch-nemesis point. Can you just read this paragraph? First of all before you do that, do you think that's accurate?

[CC] 35:15 Absolutely. What is really tough when you are pursuing truth as a journalist, and I take that with, I put the utmost integrity on that process, is the people that you quoted as being the nemesis are probably my closest friends, so yes, that's absolutely the case. That's how the article came out. I love them and their work, but in the context of this piece, the quote that they provided me with is really antagonistic to my protagonist in this piece, right? I mean if you're thinking about it in fiction terms.

[Reads excerpt]

[KW] 36:20 I love Nick Day. Nick Day was the co-signer to my application to get a grant which allowed me to write Malaria, Poems, so love this guy, but also believe that if we're seriously going to end malaria, we have got to have a vaccine. And the way to get a vaccine is to support the best one that's out there. And the best one that's out there is this tiny little group in Maryland that just seems like they can't get any attention.

[KW] 36:51 In the very next paragraph, I mark where you present the solution, that Sanaria has announced this vaccine in early trials that has proved 100% effective. From there, the narrative continues into exposing more of the conflicts that this protagonist company. How did you arrive at that structure from moving to that point to the end of the piece?

[CC] 37:22 I needed to, I think even personally, flesh out the struggles of Sanaria. I saw them as the underdog; I had visited their offices and knew their story but how do I convey that to a reader who, one, may not be familiar with malaria first of all. Then, second of all, with Sanaria as a company, which they're probably not. So I wanted to pit Sanaria as a company up against something that people might know of which is GlaxoSmithKline who is the maker of erectile dysfunction medicine and Sensodyne toothpaste, and everything under the sun. I needed to find a way to bring my reader into something where they felt comfortable because a lot of this could be discomforting and just off putting because what does it mean to them? So the way I wanted to make it mean something was "Here's this company you’re familiar with, they're getting the funding for need for something that is far less an effective product. What does that mean about the state of the pharmaceutical industry? What does that mean about why we don't have vaccines for diseases that we should have? I was trying to balance global health, science, the nonprofit sector, the for-profit sector; it was a lot. This piece was probably twice as long. I think in the Newsweek print edition it's four pages. It was probably seven or eight. I fleshed out what is malaria, what is the cycle of the parasite, and they were like we can cut all this. The reader doesn't care.

[KW] 39:33 this is obviously a well researched article. How do you approach sifting through what you need and what you don't need and where do you even begin?

[CC] 39:41 For me, I was trying to write a human story, and then as I was writing that human story, that typical underdog story, I needed to layer it with research. So it's like oak, why are they an underdog? Why would someone view them as an underdog when they have this 100% efficacy rate? Well what does that 100% efficacy rate mean? So I have to pour through all the journals to see when that happened, when it was published, where did the study take place, where did it happen? But I just try to keep that stuff short because the reader just wants to back it up a little tiny bit just so you're not BS'ing them, but you have to hold the reader's hand. That was a difficult part for me. I wanted to flesh out the story in terms of the science and the research, but if you overload that you end up boring the reader and probably not getting your work published. So yeah, it was tough.

[KW] 40:47 How do you organize your files for research?

[CC] 40:57 I open up a document that's just called play, and a document that's just called research, and a document that's called essay. And the actual essay is what I’m going to send to the editor. Play, I will just copy and paste a sentence or two that I don't feel is right, and I'll pop it in the play document. That gives me just space to mess things up and not worry about that I didn't save the other essay piece. Research, I usually just drop in links that say this is the Oxford piece. I usually can only write one of these pieces at a time. I've tried to do a couple different ones at one time, and I just can't hold the multitudes in my brain.

41:53 When you pitched this to Newsweek the first time, was it a query or on spec?

[CC] 42:02 This is what's been interesting. The accolades that NPR has given Malaria, Poems came because I was pretty relentless on sending the book to writers who had written for NPR, and I felt like man I have to get this in your hands - this is critics of poetry and also global health people. The person who wrote the piece about the book at NPR, that all came because I connected with him on Twitter and said "Dude, I have to get you my book." He loved it and wrote the piece on NPR. Months later, I saw that he started writing for Newsweek, and I'm like I would love to get a piece in Newsweek, following up on this malaria story that you and I talked about on the phone and stuff. He was like, "Oh my gosh. I think my editor at Newsweek would love that; here's his email." So boom, there it was. I just said, hi, I've connected with a writer that you have on staff. He's interested in this story, and I think you might be too. And I just plopped in the 200-word pitch. I think because I had that layered approach, they responded probably in a few hours.

[KW] 43:22 How long ago was that?

[CC] 43:23 Three weeks ago. Yeah it came together pretty fast.

[KW] 43:33 Going back to the piece here, one of the things that you do - in addition to Sanaria being a character, you also become a character in it. You do balance, I feel, you strike that chord between being impartial but also letting the reader know where you stand on the issue that doesn't seem to be in an editorializing way. How did you arrive at that balance?

[CC] 44:07 I think it came back to the those creative nonfiction classes in grad school. By putting yourself in the work, a lot of times you find new truths that you wouldn't find if you were an outsider perspective. When I've written for The Guardian, you cannot use the word "I." They're trying to maintain that integrity they call it, but I think that also masks a lot of situations. Well, were you funded by this group? How do you know this information? Where were you when this happened? Those "I" statements put the reader there with you, and they can allow them to feel safer in your hands. Yeah, I pulled in a lot of "I" statements including that I was the "Countdown to Zero: Defeating Disease in the 21st Century" and I was at the Jimmy Carter talk. And a malaria researcher got up and she mentioned the GlaxoSmithKline vaccine, and I thought to myself, "Gosh, I wish she would have mentioned the Sanaria one." I think those little glimpses make it obvious what my perspective on the story is.

[KW] 45:15 Yes, it doesn't come across as judging though either. It's just kind of matter of fact. Something I also did notice is that even though this is a journalism piece, I feel there are points where the poet pokes his head out of the sand, in a sense. A couple of the lines, I feel like I could see maybe in poems. One of them is "perhaps this all has something to do with nothing draws a crowd like a crowd." It just has that ring and that sound. The first line of the next paragraph, "Sanaria's lean team means it's great news often doesn't create waves."

[CC] 46:01 Yeah, I think the editors have a tough time with me. Because I'm always listening to my words. My background with rhythm comes from Mobb Deep and Nas and Dead Prez, and after them, DMX. So I'm always thinking about how does this sound and how does this play on the page. I think the editors that I work with, their toughest job isn't getting me to produce work and dig into the research, it's getting me to pull back on the music a little bit so that it doesn't overwhelm the story. I'm glad you noticed little pieces like that where I play with sound.

[KW] 46:40 I saw that as recently as Jan. 12 in the article you attended an event in regards to malaria. How do you manage ongoing research with everything that you're doing now?

[CC] 46:58 It's been tough. I was sitting in Philly grading student papers and got a call from Ellen Agler of The End Fund. They do just amazing work to fight against neglected tropical diseases. She said, "Hey, we would love to buy you a ticket to come to New York City tonight and listen to Jimmy Carter talk about Malaria and tropical diseases. I had to teach the next morning and that was a situation where I tell my students, you just got to go for sometime and put yourself in places, even if rationally it doesn't make sense, you're going to be on two hours of sleep or whatever. That was a way - I knew something was going to happen from that. I knew that would be a useable experience for me, even if it was just some kind of wisdom that Jimmy dropped. But it ended up working itself into the article. So, put yourself in places writer; it's not about waiting for it; it's about going and getting it.

[KW] 47:54 In the last part of our interview, you'll hear Cameron read from his poetry book, Malaria Poems.

[CC] 48:14 Cameron reads Silence, Anopheles.

 [KW] 49:12 Thank you.

[CC] 49:14 The quote from Juan Vidal that really stands out to me and meant the most to me was scientifically sound. I knew that I could write with intense power; I knew that I had heart; I knew that I could play around with words, and bring the deeply cerebral focus, but I struggled really as an outsider in the scientific field. I had so many scientists read the book to make sure this didn't just sound good; this wasn't just for what I thought was a great purpose: the facts were right; the science was right. So when he said that, I was like "Yes." [Laughter] It worked.

[KW] 49:58 The book does something interesting you call splicing. Explain that and how you arrived at that technique.

[CC] 50:10 I've just been around scientists too long. They're just splicing cells all the time. There's something about that word. Something about that process of splicing made me want to use it. Eventually it felt like I needed to use it because malaria is such a huge topic - I could capture a little part of it in a poem - but I needed prose in some way between those poems, whether it was just an excerpt from an article or even a news headline or quote from someone about malaria. I needed to splice that poem with an excerpt from someone else that helped to shape the poem. So a poem about cerebral malaria, I felt to myself, I got it. I capture the humanity of cerebral malaria but what the hell is cerebral malaria, that's what the reader's going to ask when they flip the page. Boom. Cerebral malaria does this, causes this, affects the economy in countries, etc. It started as a way of playing and trying to incorporate science structurally and eventually what it became is something absolutely essential to the book.

[KW] 51:30 How did this poem begin?

[CC] 51:34 Gimme a second. There's a line here where it actually did start. [Flips pages] So Silence, Anopheles, I was actually sitting in - I was at the border of Thailand and Myanmar at the Shoklo Malaria Research Institute. I just thought, we talk about going on a tropical retreat as though it's a vacation. And so this idea came to me of risk. And I thought, from the mosquito's perspective, "It's risky business killing killers that always only want their kind of tropical retreat," whereas the mosquito has a whole different mindset. We view tropical retreats as this kind of privilege and the reason we have that privilege is because malaria has been wiped out. But why don't we do anything about malaria? What about the tropical environments where malaria is still killing people? Why isn't that part of the conversation when we talk about going on tropical retreats? I was really struggling with my own lack of knowledge, my own privilege. Just the idea of risk because I could not put myself in the position of a villager in Bangladesh who could actually get malaria and die from it because I immediately had the drugs that I needed. So there were points during my research where I thought I can't write this book unless I get or allow to happen, malaria to infest my body, and I want the worst kind of malaria. I brought this idea up to my wife, and she just flipped. Absolutely not, I understand your need to be real, but I think there are other ways around this. You don't need to get malaria in order to write about it. But the poem began there and that became - it's probably in the middle of this poem. It was the idea of risk I kept circling back to personally and from the perspective of the Anopheles mosquito that I think in some way I stole from Lucille Clifton who wrote from various perspectives of Uncle Ben's Rice. Her book Voices is actually terrific. I teach that book, and I thought if Lucille Clifton can inhabit an Uncle Ben's Rice box, I'm going to go inside a mosquito and see what happens.

[KW] 54:22 There are points in the piece where I feel the reader begins to, in a sense feel sorry for the mosquito and identify with the mosquito. Was that intentional?

[CC] 54:36 Absolutely, I'm glad you picked that up. Yeah, the mosquito gets the bad rap. It is the vehicle. The true killer is plasmodium falciparum, the parasite that is in its gut. When the mosquito goes to feed, it forces its way up the gut and comes into the needle and is injected with, as the mosquito is sucking blood, the parasites are forcing their way into the bloodstream. So a lot of the campaigns in global health that are working to end malaria are hating on the mosquito all the time like "Let's kill them all" or big mosquito signs with an X through it and yeah just using this language that's against the mosquito. I thought to myself it's not really the mosquito though. How can I show that aspect and maybe even get people to care about this mosquito? It's an animal that shares the planet with us.

[KW] 55:29 There's this one line - it's not a line. I guess it would be a stanza? A verse?

[CC] 55:34 Yes.

[KW] 55:34 A verse.

[CC] 55:36 Stanza.

[KW] 55:36 Stanza. Ohkay. Um, would you please read this stanza?

[CC] 55:44 It's risky business sharing your body with strangers / Uninvited multiplicities high jacking what you have / because to them you are what you have

[KW] 55:53 I just feel that there were a lot of points where the mosquito and the reader become synonymous. And you're like; I've been there, mosquito.

[CC] 56:06 Absolutely. And how could I make my reader feel like, in some way they could have experienced what the mosquito must have experienced, where to somebody you're just a beautiful body or a beautiful smile, and the mosquito is just this body and I wanted to tap into that.

[KW] 56:27 Finally Cameron, what advice would you give to yourself five years ago?

[CC] 56:35 Just keep at it. Just keep chugging along; good people are out there. Good people will come to help you when most you need it. You are not alone.

[KW] 56:53 I hope you enjoyed learning from Cameron today. I'm so grateful that he took the time to talk to me when he was on his way back to Philly, getting ready for a trip to India, and he still made time, and so that's awesome. Thank you Cameron for that. Thank you for allowing me into your electronic device one more week. I'm also starting a new thing that I'm recommending something I find online. Today's is a carry over from last week: It's Improve Your Writing: Ten Essential Tools for Streamlining Your Success by Joan Dempsey.

Here’s your homework: Head over to the website to read Cameron Conaway’s On Revision submission – you’ll get to see his edits to the Newsweek piece plus learn more about his revising process.

Next episode, features Carlos Lozada, associate editor and nonfiction book critic at The Washington Post.  To get show email, text PROSE to 22828 – that’s text the word PROSE to 22828.

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