**Behind the Prose Transcript**

**Episode 13: Soraya Nadia McDonald, Joel Miller, editor of *The Reject Pile***

Length: [00:54:42]

Host: Keysha Whitaker

Guest: Soraya Nadia McDonald

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

[KW] = Keysha Whitaker

[SM] = Soraya McDonald

[JM] = Joel Miller

0:01 Today's episode of Behind the Prose is sponsored by Scrivener. A word processor and project management tool that helps you get to the end of that awkward first draft. And believe you me, it's awkward. For more information visit literatureandlatte.com.

[REDVERS WEST-BOYLE MUSIC]

0:22 Hi I'm Joel Miller, the founder and editor of The Reject Pile and you're listening to Behind the Prose.

0:30 Hey writer friend. Welcome to today's episode, episode 13 of Behind the Prose. This episode features a shiny, new and improved Writer's Check-In, an interview with Joel Miller, the editor of a new daily humor site, and a candid conversation with Washington Post Reporter Soraya McDonald, but first, you know what we have to do: let's check in, which is still more like me telling you what I'm doing because you're being very stubborn about sending me your accomplishments but I still love you.

1:08 So I knew there was no way that I could come to you today and still say that I had 16 in my chunks of 20. It just felt wrong inside and it felt dirty so I pushed myself to send out four submissions. I'm down to 12. 12 to go. The methodology behind this is actually in line with my last guest Chelsey Clammer who I'm calling The Submission Queen. She got 100 publications in a span of two years and she says her acceptance rate is about 10%. She sent over 1000 so I'm going with chunks of 20. Twenty gets me two. Twenty gets me two. What about you?

1:53 I've subscribed to Publisher's Weekly, and it's my hope that during the week I will be able to compile some things and share them with you. Things that I find interesting. For example, this week's reflection is that the seven-figure book deal is so alive. It is not dead in case you thought it was. Two authors, at least, got seven figure deals. One of them is a 25-year old novelist for her debut work called *Homegoing* and that was just purchased before the London Book Fair begins in a couple of days on Tuesday. That was purchased by Knopf. The other book deal goes to Meredith Wild who sold her previously self-published Hacker series for a five-book seven-figure deal to Grand Central Publishing's Forever Imprint. Now, she had done pretty well on her own. She sold 1.2 million digital copies and 200,000 print copies without a publisher, but I guess this kind of solidifies - if that's a thing - her place in the literary world. I think that all authors still wouldn't mind being associated with a mainstream publisher even if you've done really well. I'd love to hear what her reasoning was besides money. I guess money is reason enough, right?

3:23 MUSIC

3:26 You know rejection is a right of passage for writers. A few episodes ago, I talked about being rejected from the humor site, McSweeney's. Turns out, I'm in good company. The editor I spoke about during that show, tweeted that he'd been rejected 12 times before landing his first clip on McSweeney's. But what's a writer to do with all that dead work?

Enter The Reject Pile, a new daily humor site set to launch in a few weeks. Writer Joel Miller founded the site and acknowledges the "on the nose" name reflects its mission.

4:05 [JM] So much stuff that goes to any sort of publisher gets thrown into the reject pile. The majority of what gets received. I guess my feeling is that there's probably a lot of stuff in all those reject piles that's worth reading and never gets to see the light of day and that seems like a shame.

4:28 Miller who's worked in journalism and advertising got the idea for the site after reading an interview of another McSweeney's editor, John Warner. According to Miller, Warner mentioned he'd seen writers submit up to 30 or 40 pieces before having them published on the site.

[JM] 4:45 Myself, I've submitted things to humor websites like McSweeney's in such, and they've in course, been rejected. I think it's a common experience for any writer starting out. I feel like there's probably lots more people like me that would be happy to have a place to showcase their work.

[KW] 5:06 That work can be conceptual humor and satire or cartoons a la The New Yorker style, either single or a few frames, said Miller.

[JM] 5:16 Definitely open to literally the kinds of things that might be rejected from different humor sites, whether it's Open Letters and Lists like they do on McSweeney's, so anything like that. Probably not, unless they're really, really funny, probably not personal essays and things like that. I'm more of the conceptual nature or parody type nature or that sort of thing. And again I say, sub-1000 words but if something makes me laugh and is a bit more than that, then it's definitely not a reason to exclude it.

[KW] 6:01 And here's the irony: A writer gets rejected from a site for rejects. How will Miller console those potentially disgruntled scribes?

[JM] 6:14 That's definitely something that has crossed my mind and an excellent point. [laughter] I guess sadly no one site out there can publish absolutely everything it receives, whether it's a site or print publication or whatever, that's part of a harsh reality. That said, especially in the beginning, I will probably be looking just to fill up the calendar enough that a lot of things will be accepted. I feel like because of the idea that - and the name - I do feel it's going to be a place where, if it's something that's written well and makes me laugh, that's going to be the main criteria so I feel like really am going to make an effort to try to publish the majority of what I receive because I have a feeling that the things that I will be receiving will be things that have been submitted elsewhere and you know, these writers it makes them laugh, and so it probably will make other people laugh too. And being a small, start-up quote-un-quote website, I have the license to do that, I guess, where bigger sites have audiences to worry about whereas right now its just about building an audience, so that audience can turn out to be whatever it needs to be.

8:11 For submission information visit TheRejectpile.com or on Twitter @rejectpile.

[MUSIC]

8:22 Today's guest is Soraya Nadia McDonald. She's a reporter for The Washington Post; she's a graduate of Howard University, and she is my new BFF in my head forever. I actually had to cut a lot of our interview because much of it was us talking and laughing. Some of that talking and laughing will be aired during a bonus episode of Behind the Prose and features her journey to her current position at the Washington Post. We pick up the interview at that point, where she has now found herself in the trenches as a writer at one of the most esteemed papers in the country.

9:09 So you feel down the rabbit hole, landed in staff reporter position, and now you are covering arts, entertainment and culture. You're focusing on issues surrounding race, gender, and sexuality as well. How - do you have to write a certain number of stories a week? What are your job responsibilities like?

[SM] 9:34 I don't have a quota per say. For most of - well for the last year I've been working on new initiatives that we came up with called Morning Mix, basically it's four or five reporters, a photo editor, and then two editors who are working overnight. And so it depended because there were some nights where you're looking for things that are interesting to talk about, and the internet is just sort of flush with topics, and I would maybe do like three or four shorter pieces or sometimes there would be things that you want to look at with a little more depth that would be maybe more sort of traditional features pieces that might take a couple of nights to complete, or maybe if it was particularly important or timely, I could just dedicate the whole night to writing this one story. I would say my average was probably around two stories a night. That would vary but it's probably an average of two.

[KW] 11:06 What's your drafting and revising process like when you're under deadline?

[SM] 11:16 What do I like to do? Usually, if I find something that's really interesting, I know kind of right away in my head how I want to structure the story. I can come up with that fairly quickly. Sometimes I'll maybe kind of, I guess you could call it an outline, it probably doesn't look like an outline to anyone else if they were looking at it, it'd just be a jumble of words, but you know, I'll basically type a quick outline for myself - okay, I want to focus on this thing, then I want to do this. And maybe there will be an interesting quote and I know it's going to go in the beginning and then I know this is the thing that I want to close out with . . . so when I'm running on all cylinders and everything fits together, all of those things kind of move together really quickly.

There was a story that I did recently that kind of worked out like that. I did a story on Elton John basically announcing that he was going to boycotting Dolce and Gabbana because of these inflammatory statements they'd made that said children created through in vitro fertilization  were synthetic and that they didn't support adoption, and they don't support gay marriage, and that people should basically just be creating children the old fashioned way with good old heterosexual sex. I'm kind of like - putting together - you know I need whatever it was Elton said, and I need - what exactly did these guy say that was so terrible - I know I need that.  Then I remember, I was like wait a second, because you know I have an interest in fashion generally. I was like wasn't there an entire runway show this year about mothers and pregnant women. And oh yea, it was. That just sort of puts things in a completely different light. At first you're thinking oh, this is so great, here are these two fashion designers celebrating motherhood and are sending models down the runway who aren't necessarily like stick then because they're obviously pregnant and how great is that? Then when they opened their mouths to do this interview, it kind of cast their art in a different light because you wonder, okay, what exactly are they trying to communicate? Is this celebration of motherhood actually a very specific celebration of what they see as "natural" motherhood as opposed to the other ways that people become parents. I'm like, okay, that's really interesting. It also helps if - to be honest - if you're looking around and no one else has said that so far, and thankfully, I was looking around and no one else had said that yet, and I was like great. I'm always kind of looking for those things where hopefully it's not just - you know because there are the things that we see when the news is reported, it's kind of the first layer of the story where this happened, then this happened, but almost everything happens with some sort of context. That's what I'm usually looking for, just to be able to provide folks with context because nothing happens in a vacuum or doesn't get created in a vacuum. So when I can kind of provide that, I get really excited about that.

15:59 I'm sorry these are such long drawn out answers

16:13 No it's great. Better to have long drawn out answers than short and uneven ones. You know.

16:14 You asked about my drafting and revising process. I am accustomed to moving quickly. That's kind of been my experience through my entire journalism career. Especially if you're covering sports. If you're games, you're usually covering them on very tight deadlines. You're usually fighting depending on what time kickoff is and what time tip off is, to make it into the last edition of the paper, so you're working on a very tight schedule. And you get accustomed to just writing quickly and formulating your ideas quickly.  After that once I've basically got my first draft done. I would go through quickly - even as I'm writing, I tend to edit as I go. In the back of my mind, I'm thinking how can I be more concise? How can I tighten this up? So once it's done, then I will go back again and I'm looking for what I can get rid of. What do I not really need?  What is slowing this down? When I'm doing that, I'm also looking for missing words or typos. Then after that is usually when I feel comfortable basically pressing submit and sending it off to an editor.

[KW] 17:58 The voice in your articles is often colloquial and I feel at times comic. How do you craft that? Is it something that you concentrate on? Is it a reflection of your personality?

[SM] 18:14 Yes, I would say it's a reflection of part of my personality. One of the reasons for that is because when we started Morning Mix, one of the sort of central ideas is that we wanted it to kind of be the un-Post. We wanted it to be interesting and fast moving, and we didn't want it to feel stuffy. There's a lot of freedom there to play with language and play with humor and maybe adapt a more causal voice than I would use for straight new stories or just in other sections of the paper. So, yea, that's mostly where that comes from. I hope I'm funny. When they're something that comes along that's not horribly serious and depressing [laughter] it's nice to be able to make people laugh.

[KW]  19:20 I did find your writing funny. A couple parts - there's one article - the retellings of Romeo and Juliet and you rank from the worst to the best ten retellings of that classic story. Did you go and re-watch all of those to do that post?

[SM] 19:45 Oh my gosh. [Laughter] That's one of those things where I was lucky enough that I could do that because - no I did not go and re-watch all of them that night. Like mostly I was writing off of memory, because it's one of those weird sort of idiosyncrasies about me and my life that at some point I watched all of these.

[KW] You've seen ten versions of Romeo and Juliet.

[Laughter]

[SM] 20:20 You know, I want to say my sister took me to see the Baz Luhrmann version in 1996, so I would have been like 12? Yeah. It's so funny. Juliette is 13 years old and my sister is 11 years older than I am. She took me to see this movie, and I remember thinking, this is wildly inappropriate for me. This is kind of responsible.

[Laughter]

[KW] 20:56 But she gave you fuel for an article, some years later.

[SM] 20:56 She did. You know, and then you wind up reading it in high school. In the course of that, if you're reading it in high school, then your teacher will show you whatever version they like. I think that was probably the Franco Zeffirilli version. And then, I remember I was a theatre geek, so I watched West Side Story and sort of fell in love with that. Each one of them has its own little story. [Laughter] And so when I saw there was going to be another version, I was like oh I could totally, that's something I can crank out. That's a topic I'm intimately familiar with.

[KW] 21:54 In the first, I think it's one of the first graphs, you talk about the upcoming movies, you write, "From the limited description, it sounds like a very butched up version of the classic." [Laughter] I mean it's just little lines like that you drop that I was chuckling throughout the piece.

[SM] 22:13 I think because, it's so funny. Romeo and Juliette is obviously this tragedy but so often it gets billed as a romance. With romance, it's so associated with everything feminine. Then somewhere along the line, that becomes a bad thing. RomComs just have this terrible reputation or they're impugned as chick-flicks as if men aren't interested in stories that have any sort of romantic story line. So I just thought it was really funny because, I'm like, really? 300 meets Romeo and Juliet just sounds like, oh we're making Romeo and Juliet for dudes.

[Laughter]

23:20 Like okay, we have all these re-imaginings, and all of those were maybe possibly too sissified, or there just wasn't enough violence or whatever. The Hollywood type has this conception of what the average straight American male is interested in, so they're like all right, we're going to do it this way.

[KW] 23:41 In that you write, one of the recommendations is the one with Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes. There's a line in there that is not opinion, but it's a joke, it comes across as kind of a joke, but it makes me think as a reader. I feel like it might hint a little bit at what the reporter thinks, but I'm probably projecting my own feelings. I want to read it to you and get your feedback because I think it might show how journalists can poke reader or make the reader think about something in a way that's still objective. You write, "Thanks to Romeo and Juliet, Leonardo DiCaprio became the face that launched a thousand teen and tween crushes. Seventeen years later DiCaprio was playing another doomed lover in Luhrmann’s Gatsby, but he's still searching for his first Oscar.

[SM] 24:50 Yeah. Poor Leonardo DiCaprio.

[KW] 24:57 When I read that, I was like "Oh was like, oh right! Where is his Oscar?"

[Laughter]

SM 25:04 Yeah, you know, there are always these people who are sort of kicking around, who have these great bodies of work, who for some reason don't have Academy Awards. For the longest it was Martin Scorsese. And I remember when 36 Mafia won for - it must have been like best original song - and I remember somewhere on some form of social media, Jamele Hill was like '36 Mafia has an Oscar and Martin Scorsese still doesn't.'

[Laughter]

KW 25:50 Oh, dilemmas. Dilemmas.

[SM] 25:53 So now, it's like Leonardo DiCaprio is kind of in that same boat, especially after Wolf of Wall Street. It's like we're kind of waiting for it to be his turn, because it's like really?

[KW] 26:13 It's like the Susan Lucci effect.

[SM] 26:18 Exactly. Exactly. Yeah.

[KW] 26:21 Another thing, I have to compliment you on the pacing of the articles. I feel like there's a lot of info, but it doesn't feel like info overload.

[SM] 26:30 Well thank you. You don't want to read something and get bogged down and then you end up, you stop reading it halfway through, or at least I don't. I want you to read to the end. I want people to stay interested. So, yeah, I try not to overwhelm people, especially when it comes to, I think, if you have too many statistics in one paragraph, that is a turnoff unless you have some sort of way of visualizing what that information looks like, you can really sort of get mired by that. But thank you.

[KW] 27:30 Your day-to-day writing lives in nonfiction. Is that the genre that you prefer to write in?

[SM] 27:37 Yes. Yes. Mostly I like writing about other people. It's much easier than writing about myself. It's much easier than trying to make people up, at least for me. I've tried my hand at fiction writing. It's so much easier when you're a child because it seems like you have all of these ideas, and all of these characters just come into your head, and you don't think about them. You don't overthink them. I have a couple fiction projects that I've been kicking around for a number of years but I feel like the older you get, the more mature you get. At least for me, I definitely - and because it's more difficult - I'm thinking is this realistic? Does this seem like something that this person would do? You want to develop a whole personality instead of tics and character traits about them in order to make them feel rich and realistic, you know - a character that someone wants to invest in, and that takes up a lot of psychic energy. I greatly admire people who can do that. I think that's probably why, as a critic and as a viewer, probably why I'm driven towards character-driven television shows. That's probably more than anything else the reason why I'm so obsessed with Mad Men because I think it just has fantastic characters. For me it's very easy to get caught up in and worried about all of those things and almost, and harder to just write and just have a plot and fill those things in, which is probably what I should do.

[KW] 30:00 Would you mind playing a game with me?

[SM] 30:04 Not at all.

[KW] 30:05 It's called listen to these two things and tell me which one would you prefer or do. That's the working title of the game.

First one: Drafting or Revising?

[SM] 30:21 Drafting.

[KW] 30:23 Reading in bed or eating in bed?

[SM] 30:26 Reading.

[KW] 30:29 Local news junkie or international news queen?

[SM] 30:33 Definitely international news queen?

[KW] 30:36 Robin Thicke or Marvin Gaye

[SM] 30:38 Marvin Gaye.

[KW] 30:42 Reading e-books or hard copies?

[SM] 30:45 Hard copies always.

[KW] 30:47 Having name recognition or face recognition?

[SM] 30:54 That's tough. My mind immediately went to, okay, is it good name recognition? I certainly don't want to be recognized, I don't want to be notorious, but I would say name recognition. That's more difficult to disappoint people. Because if you look like one thing and then they see you in public and they're like, you don't look anything like your photos.  That's uncomfortable.

[KW] 31:28 Would you prefer to have a Twitter beef or Facebook feud?

[SM] 31:31 Oh. I've had a Facebook feud and it was not pretty. Twitter beef because eventually that goes away. People will get mad at you for like a weekend and then they're on to something else.

[KW] 31:53 What was the meat of the Facebook feud?

[SM] 31:55  Oh God. Um, I got into an argument with a close friend of mind - which thankfully we patched up - although it was bad, over knockoff mid-century designer chairs.

[Laughter]

[KW] 32:21 Because that's a common thing to get in an argument over.

[laughter]

[SM] 32:29 It got ugly. I hate to say.

[KW] 32:34 I thought you were going to say like knock-off Dooney and Bourke pocketbooks, but mid-century designer chairs. I have to Google that.

[SM] 32:42 Yeah. Yeah.

[KW] 32:48 Okay. Final one: book conferences or film festivals?

[SM] 32:52 I am going to have to go with film festivals.

[KW] 32:56 You went to Sundance this year right?

[SM] 33:01 I did yes. I had a great time.

[KW] 33:04  Was that your first time?

[SM] 33:04 It was. I think probably my answer there is informed by - the fact that I talk to - well author's just seem easier to talk to. When I've done stories about books that are coming out, it seems easier to talk to other writers. They have a basic understanding that you kind of want to have a conversation and they are usually very willing to provide details and talk about their work. I think actors are just much more guarded. And the more well known they are, the more that tends to be the case. You know, no one wants to be the next person that everyone hates because they misspoke, and now Twitter is up in arms about something they said. And so they tend to be much more guarded in interviews and they're just generally more protected because they're usually also a publicist who is also on the line and Sundance is not like that, which I really liked because you have people who are coming to support something that they've done. Usually if it's independent, it's more than likely a passion project. It's not something they're doing because they're getting paid tons of money to do it. And so there's some other motivation; there's something about that role that spoke to them that they're willing to sort of elaborate one. I think the film festival itself is a very supportive atmosphere because basically it's an industry event. I feel like people drop their guard a little more and you can get much more of a sense of what's inspiring them and what's driving them, and they're just more willing to talk about it. It's just more casual.

[KW] 35:27 My final question for you Soraya is, "What is your writing superpower?"

[SM] 35:36 My writing superpower . . . oh man. Oh this is terrible . . . What am I good at? It has to specifically be writing - because normally I would say like interviewing but that's -

[KW] 36:17  No writing.

[SM] 36:22 Um, I'm going to say - oh I know what it is! Pushing through writer's block. Because when you're a person who is constantly on deadline, you basically are not allowed to have writer's block. You kind of just have to - there may be days where there are things that you publish that you don't necessarily like as much as something else, but you got to get something done. You don't have the luxury of, after eight hours be like, I'm sorry, I just can't, I have nothing.

[LAUGHTER]

[KW] 37:08 Not today for me. Tomorrow.

[LAUGHTER]

[SM] 37:15 So that's my superpower.

[KW] 37:20 Thank you so much for joining me.

[SM] 37:22 Oh thank you for having me, this was so much fun.

[KW] 37:25 Likewise. I feel like we need to do it again. Soraya's back! Just come back anytime.

[SM] 37:29 Yeah. I'd be happy to.

MUSIC

[KW] 37:42 Make sure you visit BehindtheProse.com, check out Soraya's show page for links to the articles that we talked about in her interview as well as her work on The Morning Mix at the Washington Post.

37:58 Next week on Behind the Prose, I talk to Rachel Toor. She is a columnist for the Chronicle of Higher Education. She also writes for Running Times Magazine; she has a bi-monthly column on that site. She just has a new book out, a young adult novel called *On the Road to Find Out.* I get the chance to find out how did she craft such an amazingly engaging novel with a surprise character. I wonder who or what could it be.

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