**Behind the Prose Transcript**

**Episode 14: Rachel Toor, author of On the Road to Find Out**

Length: [00:54:42]

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Guest: Rachel Toor

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0:01 The week's episode is sponsored by Scrivener, a powerful content-generation for writers that allows you to concentrate on composing and structuring long and difficult documents. For a free 30 day trial and a 20% discount on the regular version of Scrivener, enter the code PROSE at [www.literatureandlatte.com](http://www.literatureandlatte.com/) before August 30th.

[REDVERS WEST-BOYLE MUSIC]

0:38 You're back. I'm back and it's episode 14 of Behind the Prose. Today, columnist and author Rachel Toor keeps it real about moving from nonfiction to fiction in her latest work. I'll give you an update on the news story that I did last week, the Reject Pile. You know, it's that new site that's going to take all the stuff that nobody else wants? Not all of it. Just the stuff that they don't want that was good and they should've wanted it but they didn't. Anyway, now, the most anticipated moment of the week - The Writer's Check-In.

1:20  SO I'm down to eleven submissions. I can't take credit for that one that went out this week. It's a collab piece that I did with one of my two writing buddies and she sent it out. So, it's like a low maintenance submission for me that's inching me closer to knocking out this chunk of twenty. I did get a couple acceptances -this week - no, nope, I got one. [Laughter] I got one acceptance this week. I submitted to The Reject Pile actually and I submitted three things that had been rejected by McSweeney's as I've talked about, and if you go back and listen to the interview, if you haven't had a chance to or if you've already heard it, you will know that Joel Miller who is the editor and founder of the site talked about really trying to give positive - I guess positive feedback in a way that most of the time you don't get feed back at all. But he really was going to tell what was working for him or what wasn't working in his response. In that sense, as long as he has the time to do that, it's a real learning experience for writers. So I sent three things. He didn't take them all; he only took one of them. I think that's also obviously encouraging because we just don't want people to take anything if it's not good. I just wanted to share a little bit of the feedback he gave for one. I'll actually put a post for this on behindtheprose.com. It's about one of the lists I submitted. He said, "This didn't land as well for me. I can't really pinpoint why, I think it might be just that there isn't enough variation in the underlying jokes. Each title seems to hit approximately the same note or something." That was really helpful to me, when he said it, or when I read it, I said wow, he's right. It is the same joke over and over. It's given me a new perspective to go back to the drawing board. So if you have something that has been rejected, I encourage you to go to rejectpile.com and get their submission information or especially listen to episode 13 and you can hear straight from the editor himself, what he's looking for. So do that. That's my recommendation of the week.

[MUSIC]

4:06 In a recent column on the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Rachel Toor writes, "Writing is hard. For most writers, the financial rewards are few. I know the best I can hope for and I hope for this daily, is a nice email from a stranger letting me know that something I wrote helped or moved them. Or made them laugh."

That was my first introduction to Rachel Toor when I read her column, "Mamas don't let your babies grow up to be writers." She is as funny as she is reflective, and I became completely engaged with her voice. She is an associate professor of Creative Writing at the graduate writing program at Eastern Washington University. She's a columnist at the Chronicle of Higher Education and Running Times Magazine. A graduate of Yale University, and holder of MFA in Creative Writing, she is the author of several nonfiction books and now a young adult novel, titled On the Road to Find Out.

In this interview, which is two parts, you will be on the road to find out why Rachel Toor is so amazing.

5:28 Thank you for being with me today Rachel.

5:33 Thank you for having me.

5:38 I'm very excited to talk to you. I came across your writing on The Chronicle of Higher Education. I immediately fell in love with your voice. I have a writer's crush on you; I have to admit. I am like obsessed now with your work. So I'm glad you're here.

5:52 It's completely reciprocated by the way. I just read your piece on the friend breakup that I loved. Loved. There's not enough writing about friendship, especially about friend breakups. It's a mutual crush.

6:08 I mentioned a little bit about your background earlier. I want to find out  - before we get more into the things that you've done - when did you first know you wanted to be a writer?

6:21  I was one of those weird little kids who grew up writing. I wrote all through school and I wrote a lot in high school and won through national acclaim - small scale - but national acclaim, so that's probably why I got into Yale. And then about 15 minutes into my time at Yale, I realized oh my God, I can't be a writer. There are people here who are real writers, and I thought I'm not one of them. So I was cowed and intimidated and scared. I went right from college to work in publishing where I never wanted to write. I just wanted to help authors bring their books out to see the light of day. My wanting to be a writer got squelched in college. It didn't really re-emerge until, oddly, I started to run when I was 30. There was something about the act of running and how it provoked me to have lots of thoughts. That's what made me start writing. I started writing for my running club newsletter. Then I got a piece published; then I started writing for running magazines.  So it's been kind of a weird process for me. I still, my identity, even though I've been running for twenty-something years, I still don't think of myself as a runner. I also don't really think of myself as a writer. That feels kind of self-important and pompous to say. I just tend to say that I write instead of that I'm a writer.

8:06 Hmmm. So, actually the piece - one of the pieces that I want to start with is from The Chronicle of Higher Education, September 3 last year. It's titled, "Now I'm a needy author." If you go to the BehindtheProse website, you can pull up Rachel's piece. If you are writing or editing, you need to look at this piece. What you were saying about being in Yale and feeling not confident, in this piece you talk about the confidence wavering between when you are editing someone's work and when you are looking at your own. Can you talk about that a little bit?

[RT] 8:51 Yeah, it's, God. I loved being an editor because I always felt kind of smart. Being an author, I always feel really dumb and really stuck. I think I said this in the piece, if I went back to be an editor now, I'd be so much better because I understand what emotional basket cases most writers and authors are because you have to put so much of yourself out there, it's just so hard all the time. Where as an editor, you just have to read and then, you know, you see problems. My former agent used to say to me, which I now say to my students, "If I say there's a problem, there's a problem. I might not be able to tell you how to fix it, but you have to trust me if I see the problem."  For me as an editor, it was always easy to see the problems. And as a writer, as you well know, that's a skill that we have to develop - how to see our own - how to see the problems in our own work. I'm so much less confident now than I was when I was a 26 year-old editor.

[KW] 10:22  In that piece you talk about the sort of cycle that writers go through: you get something up; it's published, and in twelve minutes you're back to picking apart the next thing you're working on and being unsatisfied with it or struggling with it.

[RT] 10:38 Yeah. I mean, I know there are people who you know, feel really proud of their work, and occasionally, I'll feel proud of a sentence maybe, or maybe a paragraph. If I have to read from my work in public, before I read it, I'm always editing it and finding things I want to change. IT's really frustrating. I would like to be able to say, oh it's perfect it's done, but things never feel that done to me. That's one of the reasons for me, having deadlines is so important. I could just be picking at something forever. I know for The Chronicle, I have a piece due every month. Usually, I spend three months working on them, but if I didn't have them due, I would just keep picking away because everything can always be better. So with a deadline at a certain point, you have to say, okay, it's as far as I could get it.

[KW] 11:40  I think you have a section in this piece about deadlines  . . . um 'For me it's having clear deadlines and regular assignments. It's also having an agent and editor to respond to ideas and nudging me along when I get stuck. For you and your regular writing practice, who is on your editorial board, say when you're not necessarily on a book project, do you have friends besides formal editors that you go to, to share?

[RT] 12:11 Sometimes I want to stop people on the street and say, hey will you read this and tell me what you think. IT's really hard to find good readers. I've been writing for the same publications for so long, and I've had really the same editors for years and I've been really fortunate because they are all really smart and they know me and know my bad habits. I've incorporated their voices into my own little editorial critical head, that before I send something, I say, oh she's gonna say it takes to long to get to the point, so instead of her saying that, I'm going to cut down a little bit at the beginning. It really depends. Different pieces need different kinds of readers.

There are often people who say, well I don't really know anything about this. I have a friend who is a physicist, and he'll always say, like 'you know, I don't really know anything about it, but I'm happy to read anything you write.' He always gives me really interesting feedback. Just smart interesting feedback. Not so much about the prose, about the ideas. I find in nonfiction, I always say, writing is easy; thinking is hard. So to me, having somebody to push you on the thinking is really kind of a gift.  But it's hard to find good readers because it's kind of an imposition to ask someone to read your unfinished, unpublished, or unpolished work. You could be my reader, when I listen to your podcast, you're such an exquisite reader; it would be great to have someone like you send me stuff.

[KW] 14:04  Well, I accept and I'll send you mine . . .  Thank you. [Laughter]. I'm going through that right now too, so I accept.

[RT] 14:12  So who reads your stuff, do you have an editorial board?

[KW] 14:16 I have one. It's kind of on hiatus. It consists of two people at the moment and one of them is in a busy season at work. Like you said, everyone has their own life thing going on and nobody's gonna be around for - hey take these ten pages every week.

[RT] 14:37 It's hard. It's just hard.

[KW] 14:47  But you can send me stuff. I'll accept.

[RT]  Laughter

[KW] 14:50  You started writing with the running newsletter, and somehow, from there you ended up at the Chronicle of Higher Education and you write a column for Running Magazine - Running Times.

[RT] Running Times.

[KW] 15:03 And Athelta Chi.

[RT] 15:21  That was the blog for the Athleta website that I'm not doing anymore.

[KW] 15:29  That was the first one you meant, when you said you started running?

[RT] 15:34 No - so I started running and I did a 5K; it was kind of in the early days of Race for the Cure - a race to raise money and awareness for breast cancer. There was all these women wearing pink because they were breast cancer survivors and there seas all these people wearing race numbers and then on the back they would have signs that said running in memory of, or running in honor of, and they would write the names of the people who were affected by breast cancer, and there was this overwhelming feeling of being surrounded all in this race. I was so moved, I remember sitting under a tree sobbing and thinking about this. I just felt like, okay, I'm going to write this, even though I hadn't really been a writer. I submitted to an online publication, a running publication which kind of shocked me. I did another little essay, a brand new magazine that was called Trail Runner, and they took it. Then I did an essay for Running Times. So I've been writing for Trail Runner for 15 years and for Running Times for 14 years. I think many, many people do something that feels big to them, and they want to express, and then they go to write about it. For me, because I'd been an English major in college, I was always a crazy fanatical reader of everything - from 19th century novels to cereal boxes - and because I'd also been an editor, I was able to think about the craft, not just my emotion, how could I write this in a way that someone else is going to want to read it. That's what got me in. I was doing some freelance editing for a professor at Duke and he'd been asked by the Chronicle of Higher Education to write a piece for them, kind of like an essay, and he asked me for help on it.

I started working with him and I ended up doing a lot of work on it so he said 'Okay, I'm going to make you co-author,' but he so managed to annoy the editor at the Chronicle that she fired us and basically said, 'Nevermind but here's a kill fee' which he gave to me, and I'm like 'Wow, I just got money for doing nothing, basically.' A couple years after that, I approached the same editor - and this was after I'd left publishing and was kind of thinking about that experience and I said to her - If you recognize my name it's because I worked for this really annoying professor at Duke and you fired us. But I kind of - I wrote this article that is kind of a Dear John letter to scholarly publishing. She said yes, and then years later, maybe two years later, I get an out of the blue email from another editor at The Chronicle who said, 'A couple years ago you wrote this nice piece for us. Would you be willing to do another one on publishing? I was like, okay, but there's something else I really want to write. I really want to write about dating academics.

So she says, do both of them. That was, I think that was in 1999, and I've been writing for them ever since. It's become a publication that - it has always been widely read by academics - they have fabulous writers and they're wonderful to work with and I'm really lucky to have that relationship.

[KW] 19:32 A few years after that in 1999, your first book came out: Admission Confidential, An Insider's Account of the elite college selection process. Tell us about the impetus to write that book and the process of getting that first contract.

[RT] 19:48 So I kind of went downwardly mobile from being an academic editor of scholarly books. I kind of wanted to do my own freelance editing, then I got crazy desperate and needed a job so then I got a job in undergraduate admissions at Duke. I spent three years doing that, and that was when I started writing for the Chronicle, and I could write about anything except admissions because there was kind of a gag order about writing about admissions. While you were an active admissions officer. So there were a whole bunch of other things. And when I quit, I felt kind of dirty.  My job was that I would run around the country and get kids all excited about applying to Duke so we could reject them in April. That's pretty much what it was; it's so hard to get in and even harder now. Most of the kids who applied to get in were awesome and could have done the work if they'd been admitted, but just didn't get in because of the vagaries of the process, because the odds were stacked against them, because there are plenty of kids who get an extra boost, you know if your family can build a new gym, you're going to get in. So I wanted to write about it. I wanted to write a book that just kind of laid bare, this is how the process worked. If I wanted to get rich, I would have written, here's what to do if you want to get your kid into Harvard. And I wrote the opposite book, the book that basically says, even if you do everything right, you're still probably not going to get in. Because I knew a bunch of people in publishing, I was able to find an agent pretty easily and it sold pretty quickly.

Just before the book came out, I was on the Today Show, and the publication for the book was September 9, 2001. So you know, a couple days later, nobody wanted to talk about admissions. You know, 9/11 happened and it was the last thing on anybody's mind, mine included. That's what you learn in the book business. You can't predict what's going to happen. It's just - that's just the way the world works. Sometimes things get in the way of your plans to be best-selling author, but what it did, writing the book helped me think about how do you write a book, which is really different from writing an essay. So I got it out there and started working on the next book.

[KW] 22:53  Had you written the book before you got the deal?

[RT] 23:02 I have never - I'm so pragmatic that I've only ever written books based on proposals. So I get the contract based on proposals, then I write the book. And so yes, I had written a proposal, and I got the contract based on the proposal. That's been true for all the books that I've done.

[KW] 23:28  I guess that method actually helps with the deadlines too because you have external deadlines then.

[RT] 23:36  Yes. It helps me because, I don't know if I have that kind of confidence in myself or faith in my ability as an artist - to just - you know, I want to make a piece of work. That's not enough for me. It's  I want to get it published. I want to know that there is going to be a publisher for my work. I also know with nonfiction in particular, most agents and editors don't want a finished manuscript. They want to have input into the process; I knew enough to know that. I knew enough because I'd worked in publishing to know what a proposal looks like. Writing a proposal is really hard work. You have to do a ton of research and thinking before you can write the book, and before you can even write the proposal. So I went into it - for anyone who really wants to be a writer - there's nothing better you can do than to work in a publishing house because you really understand how things work and how editors think and what can make your proposal more appealing, so having all of that background really helped me a lot in thinking about how to position my own proposals.

[KW] 24:56  And so after Admission Confidential, you went on to publish a memoir, The Pig and I which is about your, the academic dating - as in learning to love men as much as you love animals?

[RT] 25:18  Yeah, that's kind of like my embarrassing book. Admissions Confidential came out and I was looking for like - okay, what's my next book, what's my next book? Right after that, I had been very good friends with a psychiatrist who specialized in sleep. And I got very interested in all this crazy stuff about sleep and sleep disorders, and I was like, I'm going to do a book on sleep, and I really had no expertise. And I had this friend who was an expert, and it just wasn't going anywhere. And finally my agent said, what do you really want to write about?  And I said, I really want to write a biography of my pet pig Emma. I knew that Virginia Wolfe had written a book that was a biography of the dog Slush that Robert Browning had given to Elizabeth Barrett Browning. I knew this was like a weird idea to do a biography of an animal, and my agent said, just try that. And the way she sold it to the publisher was, she pitched it by saying, gets and animal and starts dating a man, and then the animal dies and she dumps the man. And this happens over and over and over again. And then it's a rat, and a dog, and a pig, and a horse, and that's not exactly what the book is. What I wanted to look at was how are the relationships between humans are the same and different from a very often kind of uncomplicated love for our pets. When it was first published, it had a jacket and title that I hated: the subtitle was why it's so easy to love an animal and so hard to love a man. That's not actually my argument in the book at all. Then when it came out in paperback, the subtitle was "How I learned to love men almost as much as I loved animals" and then when it was reprinted by the University of Nebraska Press, there was no subtitle at all which makes me very happy.

[KW] 27:43  Did you - so subtitles and things like that comes down to the publishing house at the end of the day?

[RT] 27:57 Yep. That's really why for my third book which was about running, I went with a University press because I knew they weren't going to tell me, this is what the title has to be, this is what the subtitle has to be. I knew I would have much more control in that process. When you go with the commercial press, they're really interested in packaging it the way they want it to be packaged and making it into a product that they want to sell and often that works out great, but for that book, but for my first two books, I didn't like the titles or the jacket, and that's what you have to accept. That's just the way it works.

[KW] 28:47  Actually, in the preface of in the Admissions Confidential, somewhere in here you wanted to call it something else.

[RT]  29:02 [Laughter] I wanted to call it Admissions Impossible.

But you know what, it's really true! That's what the title should have been but who's going to buy that book? I think maybe the climate now is such that people realize that's true: it is impossible to get into these fancy pants college and you know what? It probably doesn't even matter that much. But the publisher was like no way are going to have a joke title for this book. And so it just - yeah - I kind of hate that title: Admissions Confidential because I didn't want to dish the dirt, I just wanted to say, here's what happens in the life of an admissions officer; here's how you get evaluated and often that's by somebody whose been reading sixty applications that day and it's three o'clock in the morning and she hasn't washed her hair in five days, and she's exhausted. That has nothing to do with you; that's just the way the process works.

[KW] 30:02  In your new book, On the Road to Find Out, from Farrar, Straus, and Giroux - is that how you say it?

[RT] 29:56 [Pronunciation - FAIRER STRAUS and GIROO]

[KW] 30:07 I was all off.

[KW] 30:24  In the new book, on the road to find out, your life experiences are sort of meshed in throughout this narrative. Obviously the main character begins the book with taking up running and she's just been rejected from her college of choice. SO before we get into the book, let me ask you to read an excerpt.

[RT] 30:58 Okay. Let's see. So my main character Alice is a little bit of a loner but she does have her companion animal who is Walter, a pet rat. So one thing she has to do is send off all the rat haters, so she talks about why she loves rats. And she tends to make lists. She's a girl who makes lists. So this is her reason for why rats are the best.

[Reads excerpt]

[KW] 33:22 Thank you. So my first question is, the dedication in the book is to your editor. It hints that this book almost didn't happen or you almost didn't write this book. Tell us a little about that.

[RT] 33:40 This story will either make other authors who struggle to get published want to kill me or it will inspire them and I hope it's the latter. But what happened was I was working on a proposal for my next book on rats, actually a serious kind of trade book for adults about rats. My agent had just sent it out to publishers and we were getting interest and got one offer, and then I got this one email from an editor at FSG - Farrar, Straus, and Giroux - my dream publisher who said, I've been on a month-long jag reading books about running and yours was the highlight. Have you ever considered writing a young adult novel about a teenage girl who starts running. And I said - after I ran around the room screaming - thank you but no. I don't write fiction and I don't know anything about the young adult world. And he said, that's ridiculous, of course you can do this. He's a crazy hardcore running and he really wanted me to write a book about running. So I started and I sent him hundreds of pages that were just awful but he just kept encouraging me and finally I realized that I could write a novel that talked about all the things that were important to me and sort of do the antidote to my admissions book. Because what I wanted to do was write a book that said - you know what? You probably think that you know where you want to go to college but you probably don't know. And you don't know what's going to be right for you and there's way more important things to think about. Not getting into the college of your dreams is no big deal and even though it feels like the end of the world. And anybody can run. There are lots of ways to start running and there are lots of different ways to be a runner and I wanted to get that message out to girls. I also wanted to share my love for pet rats. I was able to kind of put everything that I had in me into that novel. He helped me every step of the way. The book would not exist, literally, it was his idea to do the book, so it wouldn't exist without him. I never thought I wanted to be a novelist. I didn't think I could write fiction. It was an amazing experience working with this publisher and just feeling supported the whole time.

[KW] 36:18 When you got to the - when you reached the point "I can write about what I know!" - how long did the drafting process take?

[RT] 36:31 It went really fast. One of the things I've learned as a writer, I'm really okay throwing out hundreds of pages and starting over. And so my first attempts were so completely off and wrong and part of it is, realizing how boring it is to read about running; it's really boring. SO there has to be other stuff. I used to get annoyed with my novelist friends when they talked about how much they loved to write. Because I don't love to write. I find it really hard.

They would say things like 'Oh, I sat down at the computer and when I looked up, five hours had gone by and I haven't even realized.' Or they'd say things that were dumb like 'Oh, I can't wait to see what happens' as if they weren't in control. And what I learned is when you write a novel - it's - you go into a different state. You don't know what's going to happen and you don't know kind of what stuff is going to bubble up and you don't know where there are going to kind of be echoes and resonances. You have to kind of listen to your characters and see what they want, so it was a really different experience for me from writing nonfiction. Mostly because it was super fun. It was really, really, fun.  I would go off on tangents that weren't working. My editor was really good at bringing me back, or letting me go, and then helping me think about how to get the whole thing into shape.

[KW] 38:19 It's quite fascinating about what you say about not knowing where it's going to go in a novel. I had a similar question for Natalie Baszile who is the author of Queen Sugar. I said that I thought fiction was harder because it's all made up. You have no idea. But hearing you confirm that it was like your friend said, yeah, I think it's a little bit harder.

[RT] 38:56 It's funny because I've always said, I have no imagination; I can't make things up so part of my character is based on my own experiences and then part of it is - you just - in a way you - it's what they all say, I just never really believed it until I did it - you just live in this world in your head, which lemme tell you took a toll on the relationship I was in at the time. I'd be staring out the window but really I'd be thinking, "What's going to happen with Alice and Miles? I wonder what they're going to do?" And then when I would start writing, things that I didn't realize were going to be important, became super important. I did not think this was going to be a book about mothers and daughters. That was not my plan, and yet that mother just kept popping up and the relationship between the mother and the daughter became really essential to it. I think it's a different kind of process - writing fiction from writing nonfiction. And in Ann Patchett's new collection of essays, "This is the Story of a Happy Marriage" she talks about for her, writing fiction is the hard thing and writing nonfiction is what she did for play and for work - that's how she made the money and it was easier. So I think everybody's different, but for me, I always, like you, thought writing fiction 'where oh my God you have to make up the whole - everything?' I can't do that. Too hard. But it ended up being not only easier but also way more fun.

[KW] 40:48 I'm really intrigued. Some of the questions I have reflect some of those - like the echoes. I'm very intrigued to hear more about it. Let's talk about the structure of the book. The book covers a span of six months. When did you make that choice? Did you have to back and structure that through your revision?

[RT] 41:22 So originally, I had it starting on New Year's Day of her junior year in high school. So she'd have to go through all that and doing the college tour, and then she would apply and get rejected, and I knew I always wanted to finish it with her graduation from high school. And again, this is part of my amazing publishing story, my first readers - so I got the contract based on a proposal on the first 75 pages of the novel, and so my first readers were editors at Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, and they said - "Maybe it should start after she's already been rejected." And I thought, 'oh my God that's brilliant.' That way I don't have to do all the other stuff. So I start with, here's the problem. She thinks the world has ended because what she thought she wanted, she didn't get. So she has the problem. What's she going to do? Crazy kind of New Year's Resolution - she's going to start running. That was really - that came from Matt. It was such clearly for me the right thing to do, then I just had this sort of six-month arc where she goes from getting rejected to graduating from high school. That to me made it feel manageable and it was all from them.

[KW] 42:58 As I hear the first one, I feel like, it would have been a much longer book.

43:15 Yeah and there would have been all the kind of typical boring high school stuff that I didn't want to write about. I didn't want to have scenes at lockers. Honestly, I said to my editor, 'I haven't read any YA. I don't know anything about the genre. I'd read two YA books before I started writing [On the Road to Find Out]; I'd read The Hunger Games - which I loved - and I read the  = which I thought, if that's YA, I want in. That's pretty amazing. He said, ' you know what? Don't read anything. Just do what you do, keep reading what you read.' It's really this kind of marketing slot that - don't think about the reader; just write the book you want to read, which is the best advice that everybody always gets.

[KW] 44:05 That echoes advice that Elmaz Abinadeer said at VONA - "Write the book you want to write." Confirmation there.  So structure. Six months. It's divided into three parts. The chapter numbering restarts. Can you explain the significance of that choice?

[RT] 44:30 Yeah, it was really clear to me what the three sections were going to be. I wanted to have short chapters and that meant there were a ton of them. And this was something that I hadn't really thought about; my editor said, for e-books you have to be able to index it, and so they have to have numbers or titles. I knew I didn't want to have chapter titles. IT kind of worked out that there are three sections that are about the same length and when I went through I didn't number them because I knew that some sections were going to have to be cut, and I kind of wanted to weave through the different - I had three main things I was working with. I was working with the college admissions decision. Her development with becoming a runner. I was also working with her love for her rat, and kind of later, her relationship with a boy. So one of the things that I stole from John McPhee was he - uses index cards to map out his essays and books and look at structure, with different colors for different sections, and how did I want those to weave together. So I was pretty careful on how much time I spent on each of those things because any one of them could get overwhelming for the reader at any given time so I wanted to kind of weave them together.

[KW] 46:25 As you said, at the beginning of the book - it opens on January 1, we have the narrator running. And through this chapter, - oh before, I go into this, reader this is an interview based on close reading and there will be spoilers, but it's for your own good. So go read the book and come back. So chapter 1 opens with the narrator running. You reveal what type of person she is; she doesn't seem to value fashion or materialism, and we are immediately drawn into her central dilemma. Chapter two, she returns home and the opening of it plays on the readers default assumptions when she starts having this conversation with Walter. So "he opened one eye, then the other" so in my mind - I'm thinking 'Oh I guess a person would do that" and then we have - then she talks about the use of his hands and he had four fingers or something - I was like wait, what? This doesn't sound right. And as we go through we find out that Walter is a rat. My note was how intentional was it to introduce Walter this way? Was that one of those things that just sort of happened? Did you think you needed to craft that because of as you say later in the chapter - people's unreasonable and bigoted fear of rats?

[RT] 48:16 Yeah, you know. I wanted - one of the things I really believe is that hatred and bigotry really require ignorance to thrive. If you get to know somebody, it is harder to hate them so I wanted to bring in the hater slowly, because I knew there would be people who as soon as they saw, Oh God, she has a pet rat, they would be "ick." So it was very intentional to humanize him, before she divulges the fact that he is a rat.

[KW] 49:01 I think that worked - well it worked for me - I probably like most people, I don't know if I'm bigoted, but I have like a fear - even though a rat did make eye contact with me one time in the subway in Union Square but that's another story.

I probably need to talk to you about this, when the rat stared in my eyes.

[RT] 49:34 Actually the book that I'm working on now, it's for FSG and it's a book called misunderstood; it's kind of the nonfiction companion to the novel. One of the questions I want to know is why do people hate rats if they've never even met one. That is a different conversation.

[KW] 50:01 It's so hard - Alice has a theory: "I have a theory that people's unreasonable and bigoted fears of rats has something to do with the tail and that has something to do with penises."

[LAUGHTER]

[KW] I would agree Alice.

[RT] 50:21 That may or may not be true. There's something about the nakedness of the tail, 'it's icky, it looks like a snake.' We associate hairlessness in animals with illness but you just got to get over the tail.

[KW] 50:43 The research you are doing probably creeps into the book because toward the end Alice starts to do her own research - she's already done research - and she's educating the reader along the way about the let's say, "the humanity" of a rodent?

[RT] 51:01 Yeah, I mean. I guess that's one of the things I wanted to show in the novel. You know? Where do you find your passion? That's one of the things about getting into college. You want students who are passionate about something. And she is passionate about Walter. She loves her rat. And because of him she gets interested in all these other things having to do with rats and that's really the ticket. That's kind of the ticket in life, to find something you're passionate about and pursue it. There might be ways that you wouldn't even think of that allow you to do that.

[MUSIC]

51:42 That's brings us to the end of part one of Rachel Toor's interview. Make sure you are subscribed on iTunes so you can get the next episode as soon as it comes out where we'll finish talking to Rachel about how she crafted this novel, and I just really get into this fascinating world of writing fiction with her. So join us next week for that. Make sure you go to her show page on BehindtheProse.com and you'll find links to the articles that we talked about.

52:31 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 where I found him on Soundcloud. Tell him Behind the Prose sent ya. The show is hosted and produced by me, Keysha Whitaker, from a closet that contains a few pocketbooks and some boxes of shoes in Pennsylvania. Until next time, listen, learn, and write.