**Behind the Prose Transcript**

**Episode 27:**

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Hosts:

Keysha Whitaker [KW]

Guests:

Sean Ennis [SE]

Thank you Sean Ennis for joining me today on Behind the Prose.

[SE] Thanks for having me this is fantastic.

I'm excited to talk to you. I read your short story collection, Chase Us; I have a bunch of questions to ask you about some of the things you do in the text in regards to your narrators and all the characters and we're going to get to that, but before we do, I want to start off with when did you know you wanted to be a writer?

[SE] So, I've always enjoyed writing in sort of a casual way. It wasn't until I went to college, that I started to understand that it would be able to do it professionally - semi-professionally at least - and in college I made the really smart decision of being a philosophy major, and I realized at the end of it - if you want to pursue that decision you have to go to graduate school, and you have to learn like six other languages, and I didn't really want to do any of that. What I realized I really liked was the big booming voices of the philosophers that we read. I didn't really expect to have some theory about the meaning of life, what I really liked was especially those philosophers that said like really outlandish things which is I think very much at least the fiction I like to write often does. And obviously really good fiction maybe does have a philosophy sort of lingering in the background - hopefully it's not too overt.

So not surprising after I got my illustrious degree in philosophy, I worked in Barnes and Noble for a while and that wasn't going real well. I worked like a job in child welfare for a while, which was also kind of a nightmare, and I just sorta thought I should maybe think about trying this writing thing and see if I could get in anywhere for graduate school. And shockingly I did so I suddenly found myself saying I'm going to take this seriously and hopefully get better at the craft and figure out what I'm doing right and what I'm doing wrong. So it's always been something that - I teach Freshman Composition at the moment - and 95% of my students are like "I hate to write," and I've always enjoyed it. It's always been fun for me and therapeutic for me, something that made sense. As you'll probably see from this interview, I'm a bit of a blabbermouth, so it was yet another way of running my mouth a bit.  So that's the story. The deep down psychological reason why I came to writing, I'm not 100% sure, but it's always been something that has made sense to me.

[KW] Being that it always made sense to you, did you or do you go through any struggles of when to write or what type of writing practice you're going to to have - in order to produce - you've been published - besides your book - in Tin House, Mississippi Review, Greensboro Review, what balance did you strike in terms of making yourself write on a schedule?

[SE] Well, at first it was - and there's lots of complaints about MFA programs that maybe some of them are legitimate, but for me I had three years to say this was going to be my focus. I was also surrounded by a bunch of talented people - not that it was like aggressively competitive - but I wanted to when we would get together either together or outside of class, I really felt compelled to bring my A-Game with these people, which obviously means working pretty hard. In terms of process, the physical process for me has changed a lot over the years. It's one thing to do that when you're 23 in graduate school; you know we have an eight-year-old now so that's obviously changed my work habits so I can't just write all night or something like that. But I think every writer needs to figure out how to do it on their own as well and stay motivated. I mean it's absolutely a struggle.

There's no doubt about it. And also a bit of a puzzle why one writing night it's fantastic and the next four are kind of miserable. I still haven't figured out why that's the case. I don't know. I'm always suspicious of people who seem to just pump out gold all the time. Maybe suspicious is the wrong word -

[KW] Laughter

[SE] - maybe I'm just jealous but - and to be clear, I don't sit around and wait for the muse to touch me on the head. I think ideas like that of inspiration can be overrated and also be a really good reason not to write and not be inspired at the moment, but I think probably that's my biggest struggle. Writing takes a lot of time. I think the physical aspect of writing is often neglected when people talk about it. Just carving out the time and the space and the other aspects of the body that no one ever really - not no one - but I never really got a lot of good advice about that. Certainly, that's been one of the main struggles. Am I answering your question about process?

[KW] No, no, you were answering the question. So, you have an eight-year-old now, and you said you can't write all night - so what has you found - mmm. Correct that.

[SE] Laughter

[KW] [In high-pitched voice] What has you found that world for you? Whether it be in the morning, what do you do?

[SE] I'm a big believer in the idea that the best thing a writer can do is be honest about themselves when they work best. Identify that as soon as possible and once you've identified that, maximize your opportunities to make that happen. There was plenty of times starting out, I was like, oh, I'm going to be on the plane, I'll write on the plane. I'm scared to death of planes. I didn't write anything on the plane. I'll go to a coffee shop; I know I'm not going to get any work done there. I know people do. People write on planes. People write in coffee shops, and some people get up five o'clock in the morning and I tried all those things and after a while realized okay, here's when you work best: you work best when your son is asleep; the dishes are done; the laundry machine is running or whatever it does - whirring away or whatever - I have to be in a space where the rest of the world is put away, at least for the time being. I don't think that's particularly unique; I think it's just the flip of people who get up in five o'clock in the morning. It's the same thing, right? The day hasn't started yet. I think maybe some level I waste - maybe waste isn't the right word - I spend a lot of time thinking like, 'oh yeah, I can write anywhere. I'll write on my phone.' No, you're not going to write on your phone.  Just be honest with yourself.

Also just like setting up the physical conditions around you which is advice I give all the time. What do you need? Do you need classical music? Do you need a glass of wine? Do you need this mysterious totem that you found in Hawaii sitting next to you? Just be honest about how you work. I do think kind of like the physical space a writer works in is much more important than we give it credit for. Writing isn't - it's not like digging ditches or something like that, but it is a physical activity and the body has to be situated in a particular way. I think there's the notion that - what doesn't work for me, especially these days in sort of a mobile world is that I can just be genius anywhere and that's simply not true, at least for me. That the best - one of the best things that happened for me was just be honest.

I'm not much of a schedule guy, like everyday from 8:30 - 10:30 I'm going to write. That's not exactly how I work. I do plan the week out a little bit and see where those openings are going to come and try to make sure that they do which means that you have to say no to some things sometimes. You have to be - writing in a weird way - I don't know if this is a quote from somebody smarter than me, but like you have to put yourself away from the world to write and it's antisocial and it's not that easy, but I think being honest about that. And also - I'll say this and I'll shut up - it's - as much as you can surrounding yourself with people who don't think you're a weirdo if you say, you know what, I'm going to go in my little cave and write for a while. I'm not going to come out. I'm not going to sit and watch this movie with you. I think I've been lucky in finding people that that doesn't seem like a totally weird thing to do. Cuz it is weird. It's easier to sit and watch a movie or go out with friends or what not. But I think finding people, obviously they're not going to write for you, but for them to understand that you value this and it's time that you see as well-spent, I think is also pretty important.

[KW] So the - earlier you said about writers often neglect the other aspects of the body. So that's what you were talking about when you mean like what type of environment you need- like you need music - is that what you were referring to?

[SE] Yeah, so there's this book I return to a lot and I think about a lot, and I don't read a lot of books about writing but by the writer Madison Smartt Bell. It's a craft book called Narrative Design.  I don't love the whole book, but he talks in the beginning about how writing is like a form of - I haven't met a writer who can't relate to this - that when the work is going well, the rest of the world kind of falls away; it's just you and the page, and you're not really even conscious of the page. And to be clear, I'm not like some kind of hippie-dippie person about this, but that made sense to me. And his argument is that there can be physical triggers to this that tells the brain, okay it's time to write. That if I put this particular music on, or if I make a pot of coffee at ten o'clock at night, I'm saying - I guess it sounds a little weird - I'm saying to the brain like, Okay, you have ten thousand other things to worry about but it's time to write. That really resonated with me, and like I said, when I share this idea with other writers, even my freshman composition students, they're like 'yeah, no that's happened to me.' To me, like the quest - I was gonna say quest that sounds really dramatic - the thing that I'm always striving after is to figure out how to maximize that.

For most of us, unless you're really lucky or really lonely, you're probably really busy, so you're time to write is going to be limited. So the more that you can maximize that time, you know, the better. Most working writers that I know don't have just days and days to work. There are other responsibilities in the world. IF I could figure out a way to trick myself into being halfway decent in that two hour space that I have, I want to figure that trick out. To be clear, I wanna figure that trick out. I'm not going to say that I have, but I think that it's possible. I've never been hypnotized, so I don't know if that comparison is accurate. He claims to have been hypnotized, and he claims when he writes it's exactly like that, but

[KW] laughter

[SE] plus his middle name is Smartt, so there you go.

[KW] With that said, do you then prefer the initial drafting of a story or something that you're working on or do you prefer the re-writing process?

[SE] I think I've come to prefer the re-writing process. I think that's simply a necessity. I think you know, the first draft is kind of sexy but it's usually not where it should be. But my habits now are - especially with short stories - let's put an ending on this sucker as soon as possible. And then we'll go back and actually make it halfway good. Sort of give in to the fact that the first draft is not going to be - I'll say probably not going to be perfect. The real work is that revision process. I think the irony of it being that most people get into writing because they love that first draft, but then you realize that's not then end of the story - that's a dumb pun - that's not the end of the work. I like editing but up to a point. Sometimes it can get tedious and unlike baking a cake or building a bridge, it's never clear that a piece is done, so I think that can be a bit frustrating. I think probably one of the biggest challenges is figuring out when to stop.

[KW] - What's a clue that you use when you figure out when to stop? That's actually one of the notes that I have on for the stories in Chase Us - my MFA in is in nonfiction, so I don't know the complete structure of a short story  - but it seems like that the short stories end on a note, more or less like, nothing is resolved. Like something happens - there's a situation that will happen, and we see that situation play out, but then it's not a neat bow at the end. It just tends to be like a moment in time. So that actually ties in with one of the things I was going to ask you about the purpose of a short story.

[SE] My thought is, one of the pleasures of a good short story is that maybe in a way that novel or memoir doesn't, it allows the readers to continue to imagine the world of the story. And to be clear, I'm not saying that's better or worse, but to me that's one of the pleasures of, as you say, usually there's not a tidy - unless everybody dies or something like that - then there isn't really a tidy satisfying end - I don't want to say satisfying - there isn't a tidy happily-ever-after cliche because obviously that's never true. And lots of novels do this too and memoir and stuff like that but I think that's one of the - for me at least it is - look, I'm going to give you a brief glimpse of this world, and if I've done my job, and I'm not saying that I have, but if I've done my job, there is a space for a reader to continue to imagine the world of the story, and maybe for different readers to have different paths or different ideas about where things are going to go. I mean . . . yeah, no sorry. That's all I got.

[KW] Laughter.

So let's actually transition into Chase Us because I have a million pages of questions and I want to keep this interview under three hours.

[SE] Fair enough.

[KW] So let's get into talking about Chase Us. So I want to start with the first story in the collection which is Going After Lovely. We were talking about where to end a story. One of the notes I have here is how did you decide to end a story with the dad breaking into the greenhouse.

[SE] The end of that story is - well I had a weird experience with that story. So this is a story that I wrote in graduate school so it's one of the older stories in the collection, and the original version of it, and to be honest I can't even remember how it ended. But it wasn't right, and I knew it wasn't right. Everyone else knew it wasn't right. The workshop leader at the time actually came in and rewritten the end. I had never seen this happen before and it never happened again. And his ending wasn't very good either and that's fine, but it just sort of brought it home to me that the end of the story wasn't satisfying in a way - or it wasn't respecting the rest of the story. For me in that piece, at least at that moment in time for the family, I mean I think this goes back to your earlier question, there is not going to be in 15 pages a quick resolution to what's going on with this family.

There can't be a solution, and the suggestion for me trying to force a solution onto this family, it would have been false. It would have been disingenuous; it wouldn't have respected the world of the story that I'd created. I've been advised - I've seen this advice too, like I said earlier, sort of ending on a moment that allows the reader to keep thinking about the story. To me, at least of the stories in the collection - that's like the most dramatic one. It ends with like a command where the father is like get out, and so, I think if the story works, the idea is like is something finally going to be resolved for this family?  My hope is the father's final command to the son "Run" is kind of terrifying, especially if you're eleven or twelve years old and your father said to you. But it's also like maybe good advice for that particular moment. Honestly when I wrote that line, I was like that's it, I'm done. Where exactly that came from, I wish I knew because I could tap into that every single day. But it was just - not only was it like a nice moment that came out of the blue - but it also was a lot of work. I worked on that ending for a long time and had to admit a number of times that what I had wasn't respecting the story.

And so, that was a big lesson for me as a young writer. Most writers I talk to struggle with endings. You know, endings are hard. How do you - when do you choose to end, whether it be short stories or novels or memoir because there's always another day. There's always one more hour; there's always one more minute. I think I read a lot and I've written a lot of endings that feel like an afterthought; the writer's kinda done. That said, there's a whole mess of stories that I love not because of the ending. You know? I think sometimes on the flip side that writers sometimes fetishize endings. Whereas lots of readers, they're okay if the ending isn't everything it could possibly be. I think it's probably the most difficult thing to do.

[KW] In sticking with this first story, "Going After Lovely," and it's something that I think you do throughout the book, you do this thing where you tease out the details in the scene I feel like. The father gives Lovely a telescope for Christmas and we don't get the size of the telescope until around page 15 when the narrator says the telescope barely fit in the backseat. And through other stories, you do this - there is something that is introduced - just a little bit - and then later on you kind of tease it out and you bring that through. Is that something that you go back and do on revision, or is that something that you naturally organically come to?

[SE] Well, I mean it's certainly a product of revision, but I think for me, especially thinking about issues of detail and description, there's like a fine line that a writer has to walk between allowing the reader to imagine the world of the story and providing the necessary details so that the piece is also vivid and simply makes sense. Since all the stories in the book are first person, I think it gets - those sorts of slights of hand are a lot easier because a first-person perspective doesn't necessarily notice everything about their world. You know, in a way that some sort of omniscient third-person narrator, probably, there's a little more onus to describe the world, whereas my narrator doesn't notice everything all the time. Also, I mean speaking to that particular moment, also the telescope looks one way to him in the house, it becomes even more, I'm hoping, even more ridiculous.

[KW] *Laughter*.  Yeah.

[SE] It started out as kind of like a weird but an acceptable gift. Nobody puts telescopes in the back of their car and so it would be a weird thing to do, whereas having it set up on your patio wouldn't be like 'that's crazy; he's got a telescope.' So I think slights of hand like that - especially when you have a first-person narrator who - you can never rely on a first-person narrator to fully see their world so I think in a moment like that, he starts to realize this is crazy. Telescopes don't go in cars, and also, it doesn't fit. I'm a big - in terms of description and details, I'm a big fan of finding the one detail or description that will sum up like a larger reality, you know. I don't need to describe exactly what kind of car it is. I don't need to describe how it smells. I just give you the telescope and hopefully the reader fills in the blanks of what a ridiculous car-ride this is. But also the goal is - I'm running my mouth - but I don't need a first-person narrator to say 'This is odd. Telescopes don't typically travel in cars. I think Dad's losing his mind.' I just want to put it in the backseat and let's move on. You know?

I look for those details - I mean many of the stories in the book came from some sort of detail like that, that I've seen where it's an object out of place and there's usually some drama to be explored there when that object is out of place.

So can I tell a brief example of this?

We live in a small town of Mississippi called Water Valley and our grocery store is the Piggly Wiggly.

[KW] I know Piggly Wiggly.

[SE] So when I first moved here, they had a freestanding ashtray in the meat department.

[KW] An ashtray? A cigarette ashtray?

[SE] Yeah, one that stands on the floor and it's like three-feet tall and to me, there's a detail that's like obviously an ashtray doesn't belong in the meat department but it also serves to- I think if I tell you that detail, you see everything about the store, and I don't have to describe every dismal thing about the store. All I have to do is describe there's a cigarette ashtray in the meat department and hope that it's that kind of detail that I hope a reader would say, I see the place. It's not Whole Foods. I'm on the hunt for those all the time. Especially with a short story, you have to be as precise and economic as possible. And so, if I can find the one detail that will do the work of four or five, then I think I'm on to something. I hope.

[KW] I think that a lot - if I flip through my notes, I have 'star- amazing sentence.' You do these moments where you break into appositives or something  where it does speak to more than what it's doing on the page. One of them is I marked on page four in the same story that we're talking about. We will talk about more of the book people I promise. But in Going After Lovely, the narrator says - I feel like this might be - is this the adult narrator that creeps in as well in this one?

[SE] A little bit.

[KW] A little bit okay. I feel like - okay - so he says "I guess at that point mom was on medication too. She did seem fainter and fainter, almost blurry to look at, charged with a purpose none of us could understand and focused on something just above our heads and out of the frame."  Tell me about that sentence. I love it.

[SE] Uh, well, so a sentence like that demands that it's an older version of the narrator looking back with a decent amount of distance. To be fair - or not to be fair to be honest - I think there are some moments where that point of view distance maybe does kind of fall apart a little bit. I mean the impulse behind the sentence is that terrifying moment when you grow up and you realize that your parents are like regular people with lots of anxieties and lots of stresses which sometimes they are capable of shielding their kids from, but as an adult you realize what might have really been going on. To me, as a boy the narrator is kind of clueless about what's fully going on, but to me that's a moment that - and maybe it's cheap - but it's a moment to like make clear to the reader. This isn't just a wacky character. Something is wrong. Something that when looking back the narrator may have made different decision about how he treated his mother or how he dealt with this particular drama.

On hearing that line back, it feels a little more - what's the word - poetic - maybe cheaply than the rest of the book.

[KW] Hmmph. I feel I'm insulted.

[SE] I don't know that's a line that I would write now. It feels a little precious to me. But I think it does it's job, but I think kind of straddles the line between some sort of clinical diagnosis from an adult and the sort of strangeness of the child's experience of how his mother is acting.

[KW] So, it's a book of short stories but essentially we have the narrator who is pulled through and we have the characters who are pulled through but at some point I feel it's like - I wanted to read it like a novel, right because I knew that - that was just my natural thing. I kept trying to make direct connections, like okay this is the lovely who ran away, but even though Lovely is the same and the narrator is the same, there's a point where I think Clip - he gets the dog King Kong, but then in another story, Clip shows up at someone at a friend's party so it's not the same Clip. So essentially they're the same characters but it's not the same storyline of characters?  Am I asking a question that makes sense to you?

[SE] Yeah, this is a question that - this was like one of the main questions that I got about the book. To me, and like, the reaction to that for the most part were either - this doesn't make sense: just complete confusion about why maybe some of these details don't push forward.

[KW] Let me just stop you for a second, reactions from potential editors or after?

[SE] This is like - it's when I was in workshop as a graduate student, when I was trying to find an agent, when she was then trying to sell the book, this was the question. Like I said, it seemed to fall in two camps. One was like, just total confusion, like I don't get it. So obviously that's not exactly what I wanted to hear. And the other was 'why don't you just make it more like a novel.' To be honest, at first when these sorts of objections were coming out, I was genuinely surprised. Not because I had struck on some genius idea of narrative or something like that because I thought this sort of story telling was relatively familiar. I feel like the storytelling I grew up on, by which I mean cartoons, by which I mean, sitcoms in the 80s, this is basically how they work. Which is that there is a cast of characters who play relatively repeating roles but most episodes but most episodes don't relate to each other. There's no real reference back. So I guess I was playing with that a little bit. But I also thought that the concept to me didn't seem all that foreign. For instance, my son watches Sponge Bob Square Pants. In the first 15 minutes -  I can't believe I'm talking about Sponge Bob - so Sponge Bob and his friend the starfish Patrick and they have a relationship which repeats over time. But they do all kinds of things that don't repeat. I think there's literally an episode where Sponge Bob and his friends destroy the town that they live in and then we go to commercial and we come back and the town is there, and there is no reference to the fact that they had once destroyed the town.

I mean TV is different now and there's much more interest in these long dramas that carry through every episode, but I mean for the most part, the early storytelling that I was exposed to didn't really work that way. I mean Vanessa would never say to Theo Huxtable, like remember that thing that you did two seasons ago that's come back to haunt you. I mean, those things wouldn't happen. So at some point, I kind of just dug my heels in and said, you know, short of rewriting the book - I mean some people were like 'just change people's names' and that just felt superficial and you know, it didn't seem to me to improve the stories on any level. If he's Clip in the first story and Victor in the second story and Leroy in the third story - that doesn't change what's happening in the book. So I dug my heels in. And it took a little while. And I understand that people - short story collections in general, everyone is kind of like skeptical about. But it seems to me - but also I stole that idea from these shows that I'm talking about, but I stole it from the writer Rick Bass does it in his short story collection The Watch, a little bit. The writer Barry Hannah does it a little bit in his collection, Airships, and I feel like I just sort of blew it up. I mean, I thought more than anything, I was going to be exposed as a thief.

I mean, it's kind of funny because I would have conversations with people and I think they thought I had some deep narrative philosophy and I had no good answers. I mean, I'll never forget the way - cuz my agent was like 'I like the stories but I just don't get what's going on,' and this was before she was my agent and I was desperately trying to get an agent. She was like 'I really like the stories, but I don't understand what's going on with this issue.' I was like it's like Tom and Jerry. The first episode it's like Tom and Jerry on the beach at Normandy and the next episode it's Tom and Jerry in that nebulous apartment they're always in and the next one they're in outer space. And she was like 'I get it now.' And I was like 'wow, I just pitched this as Tom and Jerry.'

[Laughter]

[KW] Oh, so that brings me to one of my other questions which is in the back of the book you say to who your agent is -'Renee Zuckerbot and her staff who were patient, insightful, and believed in the Tom and Jerry Pitch for the project.' I was gonna ask you, what was the Tom and Jerry Pitch?

[SE] That was it. It was funny because people wanted me to say it was like from complicated deconstructionist. I'm like - 'No, I'm mainly thinking about fun stuff - Tom and Jerry. Does that make sense? Hope so.' I like to think my explanation makes sense, but maybe not.

[KW] So you had this - you finished this collection while you were in grad school?

[SE] A version of it. Yeah. It was - the end of the MFA program is - you turn in a manuscript - it was really only at that point that I started to think about it as a whole. You know? After graduate school, it was sort of like okay, if I'm going to dig my heels in about this thing with the characters repeating or not, then let's look at what's missing. So I wrote maybe three or four more pieces for it in terms of what's missing from the subject matter, what's missing from the - themes- or whatnot, and try to expand it from there from the point-of-view of the collection as a whole and not just these individual one-offs. Because as one-offs, nobody knows that I'm repeating these characters, but obviously when you put them together that becomes kind of obvious. So, it was sort of about, how can I solidify to readers this is not a mistake. I'm not being totally uncreative by not coming up with new names for people, so but yeah. I was lucky enough that much of that work was done by the end of my time in grad school.

[KW] I want to play a little game if you don't mind.

[SE] Sure.

[KW] It is called "Find the Writer." So I have a bunch of little questions or things that I've written down, based on things that I feel that you've described well. Now that one of them I know is true; you said you had a son. You have this sentence in one of the later stories, the story called "Dependence" when the narrator is an adult and has a wife and a kid. The wife is talking - "The baby is crying,' she said. This was also true. He does this in split seconds. He is so genuine in his emotions; there is no lag time. His smile cracks on his face like an egg. Then it's pure misery, pure tragedy."

[Laugh] Wow. I was like that's exactly what a baby looks like. One place you say, "the sun and the moon did a showdown." So I'm going off track from what I wanted to do about the game.

Okay, so the game, initially was - "Find the Writer" - have you done or seen?

[SE] OKAY.

[KW] Because we also think fiction writers - no - I'm generalizing - Do I think fiction writers - do we think a fiction writer - like you said you're observing things, you're seeing things? Do we pull from our own lives? So, here is find the writer.

Have you ever cooked a lobster?

[SE] Not in a pot on the grill.

[KW] Do you play soccer?

[SE] I did actually. I just - not just - a couple months ago tore my Achille's Heel coaching soccer.

[KW] Oh wow. Do you skateboard?

[SE] Not anymore, but I did.

[KW] You're married?

[SE] Uh, not technically.

[KW] Have you ever been struck or seen someone been struck by lightning?

[SE] [laughter] No. Thankfully.

[KW] Have you ever been in a tornado?

[SE] Umm, probably. That's a weird answer. So we have a fair share of them here. I have absolutely hidden in a closet because it was very possible that there would be a tornado which is terrifying if you've never been in that position. And once I was on the highway driving to my son's daycare and I'm fairly certain we were on the verge of something very, very, terrifying, but I didn't go to OZ or anything like that. But yea, like green sky, terrifying noises, that kind of thing. So yeah, it's awesome. I recommend it.

[KW] So I asked you the lightning question because in one of the stories, a character gets struck by lightning. When you're writing, I've talked to a few people who've written novels and some of them say they end up - a character sort of becomes alive, or the start to hear a voice that is kind of guiding them or just like needs to get out. Does that happen to you? And in the instance of the lightening - did that come out of being in that space?

[SE] Well, that line in particular, I can actually account for. On one hand when - we do Little League here - and little league is in the springtime which also coincides when we get some of the worst weather down here. There have certainly been times when we've been down on the ball field and all of a sudden a storm whips up. All the kids are holding aluminum bats, and it's like 'Oh my God.' In terms of your larger question, I'm on the fence about it. Sometimes when I hear people saying that my characters talk to me and tell me how the story should go, I always feel compelled to sort of push back a little bit and say like, 'I'm in charge as the writer.' I don't see my job as simply some sort of Dr. Frankenstein way, just like conjuring something up and just observing and reporting on what has happened. I think - certainly there's something to be said for voice and consistency in characters or what a person might do or might not do or how they might evaluate a situation.

I personally wouldn't go so far as to say, 'Oh you know I just kind of turn the crank and let them all just go like they're sea monkeys, and I just sort of report - that was a really bad mixed metaphor.' There's no crank on a sea monkey, I don't think. Does that distinction make sense? I feel like there is danger in saying the characters are in charge. Or at least for me, it's never really made sense. On some level, I would love for my characters to be in charge. It would make my job a whole lot easier, but I don't think that so I think there can sometimes be a danger about some of the metaphors that we use to talk about the writing process. Especially ones like that that seem like vaguely mystical, you know what I mean?

I think it opens the door to being like, 'well my characters didn't speak to me today, I guess I'm not going to work.' Also, given the fact that I created them, if they are speaking to me, it's me speaking to me. I don't know if that distinction makes sense. I feel like that approach can sometimes end up in wishy-washy places, and I don't want to relinquish control. Or at it's very worst I think there's like an excuse, you know? Like 'Oh, that's what the character told me to do.' I don't know it seems weird to me.

[KW] So following that to the story - there's a couple. Earlier you said about the unreliable narrator. There's a point in the book right around - I think around the story Dark Flips and I don't know the if the other story I'm thinking of is right next to it, when they find the quote-unquote "Indians in a cage" in the park. I start to think is this guy imagining this stuff? Is this stuff really happening? Can I trust him? But, so that's just a side comment on that.

But the question in terms of the story ideas - for example Darkflips - we don't know if the narrator and his friends have actually committed a murder or not. It ends in sort of a way that's like is the guido in the skateramp or not?  And so, keeping in line with what we've just said, when you started that story, did you have in your mind, I want to write a sort of murder mystery and kind of maybe it is, maybe it isn't story? How did it start and how did it end there?

[SE] So two things. I  - I grew up skateboarding and it's a lot - it's a much more acceptable - it was kind of a fringe sport when I grew up. More importantly, after the idea came to me, I was like why have I never read a skateboarding story? I'm sure one exists out there, but I'd never read one. And it seemed like potentially interesting subject matter. But also for a writer, skateboarding comes with like all this like weird terminology that if you're not a skateboarder, it doesn't make any sense to you. I almost think that part of - because I wasn't a good skateboarder - but looking back, I think part of what I was attracted to, it came with this like secret language that is sort of like slang. It just came with its own language in the way that other sports didn't. And if I'm psychoanalyzing myself a little bit, sort of my own interest in language and things like that, it was cool. In terms of the end, I mean, I think - no I didn't know that's how it was going to end.

[KW] And you didn't know they were going to hit the guido with the skateboard?

[SE] I knew that was gonna happen, but what the repercussions of that was going to be wasn't really clear. So one of the best advice that I ever got was - lemme try and keep this brief, was this idea that, I can't say for sure who it originated with - it didn't originate with me but I use it all the time. This idea that making use of the third option meaning when you get to any plot point, a writer has three options: one is a yes. Two is a no. Three is the mysterious third option and almost always the best way to go. To be clear, so the end of the story as you're getting there as a reader, the question is: did they kill the kid?

As a reader, I can anticipate, yes, yes they did. No, I get verifiable proof he is not killed. And neither one of those felt like it would be satisfying. If he just looked and there was a dead body and it's like roll the credits. If they didn't kill the kid, then the whole drama was false - then there was no real drama there. I don't know if this is the best example of it, but that's sort of what I was going for: a certain sense of ambiguity about what has happened. Again, to me the goal at least is, as a reader, going back to the idea of endings, the idea is like, as a reader now, I get to think about it - 'Did he kill the kid? Is he gonna kill the kid?'

To me, also that ending is an example of something that I struggle with is that when I don't know the story, I often try and like pretty my way out. I think I get a little in that one. I'm okay with it in that story, but sometimes when I don't know how to end a story, I suddenly get badly lyrical rather than dealing with the situation, so that's one of the things that I'm always on high alert for. If I'm doing that, I'm barking up the wrong tree. It's alright in that piece but I think it's a symptom of something that I'm always trying to avoid. It's a habit of mine. Lots of writers end their stories in really pretty gorgeous ways and it works, but I don't think that's me. I try and steer away from that.

[KW]  In this story collection, do you have a favorite story and why?

[SE] There's one thing in there that people don't really like and I kind of bullied it into the collection.

[KW] Oh man. I'm bad with guessing games.

[SE] Yeah.

[KW] It's either - the kidnapped

[SE] I was going to say it, but now you've reminded me that people also don't like that story. The kidnapped and the volunteers, I had to fight a little bit for it. It wasn't like people were like I hate this story, it sort of got meant with a level of apathy that I was kind of surprised about. And the story that I think is the weirdest is This Is Recession near the end. I thought it was fun. In retrospect, it was like one long inside joke to myself. It didn't always translate.

[KW] Is that one of the ones you had to battle for?

[SE] It was one of the more recent ones and I was like what do you think? And it was like 'Eh.'

[KW] This is your first book right?

[SE] That's right.

[KW] Were you nervous saying to the editor - giving pushback on what you wanted to stay or not?

[SE] Yeah. I mean yeah. I think that you know as a first book, I think most people feel like probably more grateful and terrified and so pushing back isn't easy. To be fair, the writer isn't always right. So I think one of the other important things is to surround yourself with people that you trust. That story is weird and it's kinda wonky. It's kind of all over the place. The only thing is that's kind of what I wanted it to be. In the end, they said, send me the final manuscript and I snuck it in there and there it is.

[laughter]

Nobody pushed back, so maybe I shouldn't be saying this, but . . .

[KW] They can't take it out now.

[SE] The other thing too is you spend so much time trying to make everything perfect. I think about all the collections that I like and I don't love every story. And different readers are gonna respond differently to each piece. I felt like I would have been disappointed if it wasn't in there. If it wasn't a deal breaker, let's put it in there. I don't think a reader of short stories, picks up a short story book, and if they don't like it, they just throw it across the room and never look at it again. They just move on. It felt like it filled a little bit of gaps chronology wise. I had a good time writing it and that to me is always a good sign.

I don't know that I had a good time writing every story in the book but I had fun writing it.

That story in particular is dated. It's called This is Recession and I was writing it right when everything just kind fell apart. You know maybe it's all a little bit dated at least in terms of the references and what I perceived as humor.

[KW] Well, It's interesting you say - the narrator - we go back to the beginning as all good conclusions do, in Going After Lovely, the dad wants him to see Pluto, and I wrote oh is that because of what happened to Pluto? Pluto's not a planet.

[SE] To me, that moment is like the dad's bad humor. He's meant to be endearing in that moment. I think we still had Pluto.

[KW] I think I'm reading too much into things.

[SE] That is also the problem - not the problem - one of the dangers. These short pieces, if you're lucky, you can get them out there in a short amount of time. The ones that aren't that great, they kind of date themselves pretty fast if you're making cultural references and things like that. At least with humor. I mean which is very important to me. Humor is often sort of dependent on the moment.

[KW] I also found that some of the references - I feel like we're in the same generation. I could, I know what he's talking about. It gives you more of a kinship with the narrator if you do get some of those references.

Final thing I'ma point out here is toward the end of the book, you did something that I thought was pretty cool. It's the last story - and the last story is called "This is Tomorrow." This is the story where they are caught in the house and the tornado is approaching which is why I asked you.

And so his dad is calling back and trying to find out if they are OK. "John, and Janet, and Lovely are crying a little. Warren and Milk are daring each other to go outside and watch the storm approach. Clip and Roger are silent for once in this whole book."

I just though that was cute.

[SE] That's a line I thought was going to get nixed. It never did. I just liked the line. I'm trying to think - I think that's something that I stole or borrowed or was inspired by - I'm not a big metafiction type of person but those kinds of moments, I just kind of like those little winks. Especially if you read the book from the beginning and you're in the last story. I don't know what - I don't think it's like any mind-blowing moment or changes the nature of the story. Honestly I would just kind of like a chuckle there. But, yeah,

[KW] You got a chuckle from me and a highlight in pink.

[SE] It's a little cutesy but I just thought for the narrator to acknowledge what he's doing. I'll say this: First person narration can be like weird. Like who is this person talking to? Are they writing? It's not always clear. It's just sort of this disembodied voice most of the time and it's something that we take fore granted as readers and people don't pushback on it too much. But I think if you really think about it - I'm gonna use a fancy word - if you think about this sort of metaphysical stance here, it is odd. Like what - I have a writer buddy - Emma Walsh who's fantastic by the way - he can't write a short story that doesn't have a very specific reason for the narrator to be speaking. I don't think a lot of first-person narrators usually tell people why we're speaking. We're just speaking and going with it. I think it's an interesting idea and something potentially worth playing with. I think it can make your head hurt if you think about it for too long, but I think that's maybe just a brief nod to the fact that there's disembodied voice through the whole book, and in fact it is that these things have been constructed or at least organized by him in a deliberate way.

I'm glad you chuckled. I don't often feel this way - I kinda wiggled in my seat when I wrote that.

[KW] What's next on the horizon for you?

[SE] I spend so much time talking about this group of people, so it's really been a struggle to not start another story that's like "Clip came over and he had a bag of dynamite." Obviously I have to move on. I've been working on this novel idea for a awhile and it's been kind of kicking my butt a bit. It's revealed itself to be a very different animal than writing these short pieces even if they are linked in some ways.

It feels like a dramatically different process. On some levels, it's kind of like a release. The short story has this kind of breathless, economic stance and a novel can take it's time and digress and wander a little bit and hunt out subplots. So I'm working on that but also trying to write the stories that aren't about these people which is also proving a little difficult, but it's sort of exciting but I find it's also pretty anxious making. I mean - what next is just like a terrifying question.

But most novel projects, unless you're like really lucky or super talented, it's years in the making. I'd really like to be still producing work that has a beginning, middle, and end. So if the novel isn't revealing itself, to maybe publish a couple more, or at least write a couple more short stories, and try to figure out who I am as a writer if I'm not talking about these same six people.

I'll be honest. I dug myself that whole. I knew the day was coming when I would have to stop talking about them and I just put it off. But now we're where.

[KW] I appreciate your honesty. You seem like a very self-aware writer.

[SE] Well thank you. It's a pretty humbling process. And a certain amount of honesty and humility about the work is vital. It's always the writers that seem to think that what they're doing is genius or perfect on the first round that make me the most nervous. It's the writers that say God this is hard or God I don't know what I'm doing, I feel like they're more a part of my tribe so I try and keep it - I'm not trying to be Woody Allen.

[KW] Final question for you is not a humble question. This is a brag question. If you were a superhero, what would your writing superpower be?

[SE] The thing that interests me the most - is - I'm sorry you want a short answer. Infinite ink toner. No. The thing that really inspired me from the beginning. The moment - whether it be a short story, a poem, a novel, or movie, any constructed drama, when it just takes that turn that the reader couldn't have anticipated or when the writer says something - the greatest moment is when the writer says something you've never heard anyone say out loud but you know immediately whether it's an emotion or a description or a plot point. You know immediately that it's true. I would be True Surprising Boy.

[KW] I can attest to that after reading Chase Us. I highly recommend it. I enjoyed it. The funny thing was - I think I had just read the St. Kevin of Foxchase story, and I went down to my mailbox, and there was flyer and on the back it was for like Foxchase golf course.

[SE] The funniest thing is - in terms of publishing - so Foxchase is where I grew up as a kid. It's a small neighborhood in Philadelphia. I came to discover that there is something called the Fox Chase Review. I was like, I'm going to send them something. And they rejected me so fast. It wasn't like, I deserve to published here. But I was like I can't even be published in the Fox Chase Review - This whole book is about Fox Chase. So I have sour grapes.

[KW] I'm gonna find that flyer and tear it up.

[SE] I know.

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