**Behind the Prose Transcript**

Episode 28: Humor and the House of Kerouac with author and columnist Erik Deckers

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Hosts:

Keysha Whitaker [KW]

Guests:

Erik Deckers [ED]

[KW] So today, I have with me Erik Deckers. He's the president of ProBlog Service which is a content marketing agency. He has clients throughout the United States. He's also the co-author of several books on social media and branding. We'll talk about that. He's been blogging since 1997 and he's been a newspaper columnist, a humor columnist for twenty years. We'll talk about a lot of his work today.

One of the other things I'm particularly excited about is that he is one of the four writers-in-residence at The Jack Kerouac in Orlando, Spring 2016. Welcome to Behind the Prose.

Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

[KW] There's so many places where we could begin in your writing career, but let's start with the nuts and bolts of the process. What's your writing process like on a regular basis? Do you have a schedule?

[ED] When it comes to things like my column, I'm always scheduling something for that slot. Like, 8 o'clock, Thursday night, the deadline is midnight, so eight o'clock Thursday night, I don't do anything else but write my column. No evenings out with the family. No TV shows. No nothing.  It's been that way for twenty years. But everything else, I'm not super organized and so I just keep everything on a giant to-do list, whether it's client work or whether it's a book project I might be working on or even just extra writing that I want to do. As long as I'm getting the things done, I fit everything in where I can. I have meetings and I have lunch appointments and everything else fits around that.

So I'm terribly disorganized.

[KW] It sounds organized in a way. You have a list. Does it even really need to be organized - quote-unquote.

[ED] Right. As long as my clients are happy, that's what matters most and so as long as that work's getting done, there will be other time. So there will be weeks that are slow for client work because I've worked ahead, so I get to do more of the fun writing, because there other times where client work is so bad and so heavy, that I can't get any personal writing done.

[KW] Would you consider the newspaper column part of the "fun" writing?

[ED] Yes. Yes I would, also because I don't get paid for it so that makes it fun.

[KW] Laughter. You have to get something out of it.

I got something out of it. The column is called The Laughing Stalk, correct?

[ED] Yes.

[KW] I've read several of them. Take us to Thursday night. The columns that I've read, the content varies, from conversations with your friend who reappears throughout the series, Karl the Kurmugeon, and  some stuff that you'd done when you were writing for the Indiana tourism department - I'm probably saying the name wrong - to just kind of observations about life. Take us to a Thursday night at 8 PM. Have you been mulling your ideas over all night long?  What happens when you sit down?

[ED] Well, if I'm lucky, I have been mulling. If I'm super lucky, I've actually sketched out some notes in the days leading up to that. But I'll start looking at websites like Fark.com F-A-R-K and seeing if there are any fun news stories. It's a news aggregator to mostly just make jokes about the headlines but sometimes there are just these weird and unusual stories so I'll go through sources like that or I'll go through AP's Weird News or UPI's Weird News section and see if there's anything that I can make fun of. So I've been mulling it over for a few days. For me, that's part of the writing process, not just making words with my fingers at the keyboard. It's actually driving or in the shower or something where I'm processing ideas and coming up with language. And so Thursday at 8 PM, I sit down and start writing.

Depending on how distracted I am or how easily everything comes, I can do a first draft anywhere from twenty minutes to an hour. Then I have to go away for an hour. Come back and rewrite. Go away for another hour. Come back and polish. And by 12 or 12:30, I'm sending it off to my editors and scheduling it on my blog.

[KW] Let's talk about that go away for an hour part. Why do you do that?

[ED] If I finish the draft and I go back and edit and revise right then, I'm too close to the piece and I can't find errors as easily. I can't find clunky language; everything sounds right. And so even if I make two more passes, one right after the other, it still comes across as a a first draft, which I'm not a great first draft writer. But I find that if I can sit on a piece, the longer the better, the more errors and problems I can catch and fix.

Now, like I said earlier, if I'm really on the ball, I will have some notes sketched out. I've done an entire first draft a couple days before, then on column night, it's just a matter of doing that revision, and the piece comes out so much better than trying to cram it all in within a couple of hours.  So I try to do that when I can, but I never have the time.

[KW] It's good to hear that hour thing. I think that's something that I hear everyone say put a piece away, go back to it later. But when you're on a deadline, how do you build that in? It sounds like you have a good method for that within a small amount of time, you still find a way to put it away and come back.

[ED] Right and then I have to do something else that really distracts me from it. So then I will watch TV or read or watch a couple of episodes of Archer on Netflix or do something that completely takes my mind off of the piece so that when I come back to it - It's almost like I forced the rest and forced my mind to really rest on it not just go away from it but I'm still thinking about it because I went for a walk and I'm mulling it over.

[KW] So with that said, do you prefer drafting or revising?

[ED] I think I like that first draft process - you know coming up with the ideas. I get to surprise myself sometimes because some times my fingers will go faster than my brain and sometimes what comes out makes me laugh and that's what I keep in.

[KW] That actually brings me to my next question. As a humor writer, what is your editing process like?

[ED] Well I have an odd sense of humor so I don't know that my humor always resonates with other people, but if it makes me laugh, it automatically stays in, that's almost a given. But I also know that because most of my readers are at weekly newspapers in small towns, their sensibilities and senses of humor are going to be very different from my 12-year-old boy sense of humor. So I can't make a lot of the jokes that I would make otherwise, so I have to keep that in mind as I'm writing. But then if I can still make myself being a little bit naughty then I'll do that.

But then if it's a piece that I'm writing for somewhere else, I can be completely inappropriate if the work calls for it, but I couldn't do that for the newspapers.

[KW] How did you become a newspaper columnist?

[ED] I met the editor of the Wakarusa Tribune which is a small town and a small-town newspaper in Northern Indiana and I'd had the idea for writing a newspaper column after trying to write a complaint letter to Fresh Air with Terry Gross but I kept making jokes in it because I didn't want her to be mad at me for having a complaint so I would try to lighten the mood and make a joke and I did so many of those that when it was done, I thought 'That was fun. I should do that again.' And when I wrote a couple more essays, I thought that's what I'll do, I'll be an essayist because there's money in that. [Laughter] And I just happened to meet this newspaper columnist a month after I'd started that and I asked him are you taking any columns. And he asked me, are you a Democrat?

I said, well, yeah, we met at the county Democrats' meeting. Then you're a newspaper columnist. And that's how I became a newspaper columnist, and he's still my flagship paper. And for over twenty years, this past April. Every Thursday at midnight he gets my column, and so do nine other papers in the state.

[KW] Would that be considered a syndicated column now, since it's in multiple papers?

[ED] It would be. It's a self-syndicated as opposed to having somebody like Kings Features Syndicate handle that for me.

[KW] So you obviously have the editor at your flagship paper - what's the name of that paper?

[ED] The Wakarusa Tribue

[KW] Is that in Indiana?

[ED] So you have that editor that you've been working with but outside of him or editors that you might be working with on a project, do you have a personal editorial board?

[ED] I don't. I have a couple of people that occasionally I will send something to. Sometimes I'll have my wife read something, more when I want either her approval because she's in the piece and I want to make sure that she thinks she's coming across well or sometimes I'll just have her read something to see if it's on the right track because I'll struggle with something and the jokes don't seem to be coming very well and I'm not enjoying writing the piece but I'll have her read it and she'll say 'oh yeah it's fine.'

What I find then too is that those pieces that I struggle with and I don't like the humor - people love those. The ones that make me laugh, I don't hear anything. It's like crickets. So but other than that, I have no editorial board whatsoever.

But I've listened to your podcast before and every time I keep thinking, I should do that. I should find people.

[KW] I'm always - I like it when I hear people say that. I listen to Sherman Alexie and Jess Walter's podcast and Sherman is very big on he doesn't get opinions from people. He'll send something to Jess, just to show it to him not for feedback. Not that feedback is bad, but do you think there is a fine line between feedback - as an artist - that's positive and not positive?

[ED] One of the issues that I have trouble with, especially when it comes to humor writing, is that I don't know that many humor writers. There are a few, but there just aren't many of us. But the ones that I do know, they're also as busy as I am and don't have the time. A good friend of mine is the weekend features reporter for our local CBS affiliate here in Indie, and we trade ideas back and forth and we meet every couple of months just to talk about writing in general but I know he has about as much free time as I do and to read someone else's work it's just not going to get done in a timely manner.

So, my requirements for finding someone who could read for me is someone who is a humor writer who has been doing it for a while. Almost somebody who can play that mentor/adviser role and I'm old enough that they're harder to find.

[KW] Did you do any writing programs formally?

[ED] I don't. I've been in a couple where I've been a mentor but I haven't done as many as a participant.

[KW] So I'm looking at your books here. You're the co-author of four books on branding and social media, and we will have the link to that on Behind the Prose show page. Three of them are on a publishing imprint of Pearson.  I wondered what is the best - looking back on the process of working with another author, what do you think the best thing about that process is?

[ED] The thing that I've liked about having a co-author in all these book is that my workload was cut in half. Because we were working on such a tight deadline that was very important. When you're writing a book for Que - that's the biz tech line of Pearson - they give you four months so when you're writing a book that's sixteen chapters and that can be difficult if you're not a fast writer. My co-author and I were lucky in the sense that we knew the subject very very well and a lot of times we're just writing from memory or from knowledge without having to do a ton of research. But I've known people who tackle a subject and the writing takes them a couple weeks just to do a single chapter because they have to do so much research and reading and testing and trying out.

And so, having that co-author there really does make a big difference in the quality of the work because we can spend more time reading and revising each others' work and we can spend more time developing those ideas.

If someone was going to come to me and say, hey I'm going to write for Pearson, what do you recommend I do? I'd tell them start now and build up a stockpile of chapters, so that when you actually start to process, you're not killing yourself off with a lot of late nights.  Which I've done that.

I'll be up until two o'clock in the morning a lot of nights almost falling asleep at my computer trying to get chapters done.

[KW]  On the books that you sold to Que, did you guys sell those on proposals?

[ED] We did. And this is where networking really helps. We talk about that in Branding Yourself is the importance of networking. My co-author Kyle and I met our editor and Kyle knew a guy who worked for Katherine and he got us the interview with Katherine and she happened to be local, here in Indianapolis. There offices for their biz tech imprint are in Indy, and we got to go in and meet with her and pitch her the book and she said 'hey that sounds great. Send me an official proposal so I can run it past the editorial staff.' So that's how we got in and she even coached us on how the proposal should look and the things that we needed to say and talk about in order to get it past her editorial board, so that's where networking makes a big, big, difference.

You can pitch books to publishers all day long. But solicited or unsolicited, if the editor doesn't know you or doesn't have a vested interest in you being successful at their place, it's harder to get in than if you even meet that person for 15 minutes and talk to them.

[KW] I talked to one of my last guests - Well - the last person I interviewed who I'll be airing her show next week, Gwen Hernandez, she's the author of Scrivener for Dummies, and I think their turnaround was pretty quick as well - and that's Wiley. So we were also talking about being on a major label on a Wiley or For Dummies or Pearson and how people often think 'Oh, well wow, you've made it, or you're making a lot of money now' and she revealed that her advance was in the four-figure range. She didn't say what it was, I asked generally what could you expect. Would you be able to say within your books that you've done, what your range is?

[ED]  So a lot of - You're never going to get rich publishing a book unless your last name is Grisham or Patterson. And the figures that we get in advances tend to be anywhere from $7500 to $15000. I'm sure if I had written one of those books myself that might have been my advance as well. But these advances, not only do they serve as loans because then you have to pay them back through book sales but they are also to be used for things like promoting and PR and if you want to do a book tour, you're going to fund it with that, and if you need to go to a site to be able to write about it, you're going to use it for that. So if we had to travel to Google for the book, that's what the advance was for.

A lot of people think big, giant, advance and you're going to live on that, and for those numbers and for what the publisher expects you to do with your own self-promotion, that's not anything you can just live on. So it's never much to begin with and then after you make up that advance in sales, what you get when it's done is definitely not enough to live on.

So this more of a labor of love and it become a calling card for like a speaking career.

[KW] I didn't realizer that the writer also paid for their own travel and stuff.

[ED] Right, maybe some of the big fiction houses will do it, but if you're writing for a small press or one of these nonfiction business-publishing houses, they are publishing 30-40 books a month, every month. So they don't have the thousands of dollars to do that whirlwind book tour and press junket.

[KW] I think that looking at some of the things that you have done, if anyone might be suited self-promotion, it seems to be that it would be you.

You've got your books on social media. You have a content-marketing agency, and you also ended up writing at one point for visit Ireland.

[ED] No visit Indiana.

[KW] OH that's right. Why did I say Ireland?

[ED] I don't know. That would be cool though. Let's give them a call.

[KW] Where do you think that comes from - your ability to be this type of marketing octopus?

[ED] well a lot of it is just - this is one of the things about writers, who's the guy that wrote the War of Art? Pressfield?

[KW] Oh yea, Steven Pressfield.

[ED] He talked about for professional writers, there's no inspiration. You sit down and do the work. You don't wait for inspiration. I have adopted that mindset that whatever needs to get written, just gets written.

And whatever needs to be promoted just gets promoted. So I may be promoting a client's blog for an hour and then look at my list and then realize 'Oh, I need to write this blog post for Visit Indiana or I need to write my column or I need to something or I need to make phone calls' and I just get it done. And so having done enough sales and marketing over the years, it's just that next thing that has to be done.

I sometimes worry that I'm not doing a good enough job because I'm not really thinking about and processing what am I doing? What's my goal with this phone call? What's my reason for writing this blog post? I just do it without necessarily an end-goal in mind, like this will one day lead to a paid travel writing stint with a travel writing magazine. Or this will one day lead to a big publication and award.

[KW] Well, let's talk about your writing a little bit more specifically. I've read several of your Laughing Stalk columns. When you said earlier about you focus on cutting clunky words from your writing, and I think that comes across in your style. It's very clean. The content moves quickly but not in a rushed pace. If that makes any sense, right?

I can read through it quickly; I can follow it. In your column, you have this character "Karl the Curmudgeon" that I've seen him at least two of the columns. He comes up in more than that, right?

[ED] Oh yeah, he's a favorite recurring character.

[KW] One of the things I noticed that was interesting is that it's constructed mostly in dialogue. A couple I've read has been a scene with you and Karl, and he's talking about something or giving his views and the one I'm talking about is the July the 24th post, Karl the Curmudgeon says Pluto's not a planet. It touches on the idea that when Pluto was downgraded to not being a planet after for all these years.

You put his dialogue in quotes and yours is not. How did you arrive at that stylistic choice?

**[ED]** You're actually the first person to catch that so well done. Karl the Curmudgeon was sort of inspired by a character named "Slats Grobnik" from Mike Royko. And Mike Royko was a famous newspaper columnist from the 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s, and even 90s. When I used to read Mike Royko, he made me want to be a newspaper columnist. So his Slats Grobnik was this fictional character - they would have these discussions where Slats would rant about the thing that made him mad, that were usually the controversial side of an issue. But it's the stuff Mike wanted to say but he made Slats say it. And then Mike was sort of that voice of reason saying, does that make sense? A lot of people would think the other way, and Slats would argue with Mike when really Mike's trying to tell all these people this is what you sound like or this is what you should be thinking.

So I was like I'm going to create my own version of Slats where I've got a character who I get to have those discussion with. So as I started writing and developing the idea of Karl, I needed a way to set what I said apart from him but I didn't want to rely on "I said" all the time and I didn't want just a bunch of dialogue and so I thought, I'll drop my quote marks and make it part of my narrative. So you're reading my narrative and you're reading the things that I said, but it's a description not a direct quote. It's not inside the quote marks.

I tried that a couple times just to see how it would go and see what people's reactions would be and nobody said anything so I just thought, I'm going to keep doing this and maybe one day somebody will pick up on that, so you're the first.

[KW] I think it also give the piece a little bit - a feel of like - being specific and general and the same time - I'm gonna find a better way to articulate that. It's almost as if at times, I felt like I was having the conversation with Karl because there's not that specific line of demarcation - this is the narrator speaking, you know what I mean?

[ED] Right. The other thing I wanted to do is, I tend to be a nice guy and I always care about what other people, not really think of me, but what do they think and what do they feel, and did I make somebody feel bad? And so I never want to do that. So Karl sort of gets to be that foil that if I argue with him and I win - which I always win - assuming the other person has the same viewpoints as Karl, I don't want them to feel bad that I think they're wrong. Or in some cases, I think that it's not a good argument that they're presenting.   So for Karl, I mean I happen to agree with Karl in this case, I think Pluto should still remain a planet, but at the same time recognize that it's just never going to happen just because a lot of people want it to be that way.

So in this piece I tried to help Karl understand that it's not as bad as it could be in the hopes that the reader who absolutely things that Pluto should be a planet, them might go, 'Oh well that's okay then. It's a dwarf planet. It's not quite a planet, but I could live with that.'  So in my own weird way, I'm trying to help the reader come to terms that these 400 astronomers have all decided for us what's a planet and what's not.

[KW] At the end of that piece, you do this funny thing with the pizza - fried egg on a pizza.

[ED] That's true. I've eaten that. I was in Holland at this Italian restaurant and they have pizza with a fried egg on it. They'll put one giant salami and one giant ham and a couple of pieces of green pepper on it, so that was a real thing. And that last line about the Italian gastronomical union came to me after writing about the International Astronomical Union and that just sort of flowed out by accident. I don't even know where that came from.

[KW] All the pieces that I've read seem to end on this - on a funny beat. Kind of like a quick punch.  Do you think that often comes on - is that a part of your style or do you focus on that in the revision?

[ED] I do that on purpose. You know how people say that you have to spend a long time writing your lead, I spend more time writing the close because it has to be funny. I don't know why it has to be funny. I've thought about that: why do I have to make this funny? I don't know that other humor writers do that necessarily, but it's something I started and now I can't stop doing it. I'll spend 20 minutes trying to write that closer. There have been times where I write the first draft and the closer doesn't come and I have to leave it. When I come back for revisions, I better have it by then, otherwise, I start to get really nervous.

[KW] One of the closers that I laughed out loud about is in the article - I'm flipping through my notes here - is in the one about - "I misunderstood in several languages, “you have these parenthetical comments that imply what's not said in the conversation with the person you're ordering from. In the last beat, he takes a shot at your accent. I just had to laugh because it's like a callback to what you said about the pronunciation of the word egg. You do that as well in your other pieces that I read; you execute callbacks really well.

[ED] Well thank you. That's something that I try to focus on once in a while just because it is funnier. I've seen standup comics do it. Dave Berry was a great one for callbacks. That last line where the person in German says --  ---- what's he's really saying is 'Ya'll want an egg with that?' That one just popped out and made me laugh. I just thought it makes me laugh it has to stay. It's probably good.

[Laughter] Doesn't mean it is, but I think so. And this is a true story. I was in Germany in 2005 and I would always ask for mayonnaise - and they all said, what?

I thought am I saying it wrong. He said mayonnaise. I said I've been saying that. He said, maybe you don't say it right. So I had several conversations like this. It's so frustrating.

[KW] Your columns as well seem to take that range - it seem like you do a really good job of harnessing the everyday experiences of your life.

[ED] It's partly because I'm always looking for something to write about. So it will either be a current event like the Pluto column; it'll be something that recently happened to me, like the one I wrote about Fred the White Goat of Indiana. I had just been down for their Fred the Goat Festival because the director of Tourism there is a friend of mine. And other times it's a matter of I can't think of anything and there's nothing happening in the news; I need to come up with something that happened to me once. So usually when you see those, unless it's something that just popped into my brain one day when I was in the car, usually when I write one of those columns, it was a matter of I don't know what to write about this week. That's when I sit down at 8 o'clock and I don't have a topic.

[KW] You mentioned the Fred the White Goat piece. I found that piece interesting as well. It appears on the Indiana blog. It reminds me of Fred - the way it's presented - Fred is a 4H goat that ran away and he ends up living in the woods and supposedly has a house. There's an abandoned house where he gets spotted frequently. I thought you did a really good job of personifying Fred and bringing him to life in this story. It's also part of a larger story. There's another post where you go to different places in Indiana where you're working in other - I guess you would say tourist sites - whether it's food or someone had an art place, like sculptures?

[ED] Mmmm-hhhmmm.

[KW] And so I thought that piece - the character of Fred reminded me of Lil' Sebastian on Parks and Recreation. I don't know if you ever watched Parks and Rec.

[ED] No I haven't. It's on my Netflix list.

[KW] There's this character - a mini pony - I don't know if Lil Sebastian is actually a real pop culture thing but anyhow it reminded me of that. But what I want to mention with Fred the White Goat, it ties into your experience of working with the state of Indiana. In March you posted that you were no longer going to work with them because of their passage of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. You write about how you didn't feel that you could write inviting people to a place where they might not be welcome. I wanted to ask you how you came to the decision process to be writer as activist and stand up for something that you believed in at the possible detriment to losing a paying gig.

[ED] Well I had thought about that for a little while.  What I do if Indiana passed the law? This was the law that would allow business owners to refuse service to somebody based on their religious principles, which for the most part - I'm not going to be able to explain the law properly, but it would keep the government out of interfering with the business. They couldn't make the business serve somebody. And so what that meant, and what everyone interpreted that to mean, is that a Christian business owner could refuse to serve a gay couple and the state wouldn't make them. And so I thought if they sign this into law, I don't necessarily want to be a part of the Indiana state government anymore.

And so this was just a smalltime freelance writing gig. I got paid by them, but better yet as a travel writer, I got comped certain things like meals and hotel rooms so I was giving up an enjoyable job that took me all over the state. But I thought, I can't ask people to come here when some of them aren't welcome.  So I emailed my supervisor at the office of tourism and development and they were all really understanding. They said yes, that's fine. At least emotionally, we support you. We wish you the best. Then I sent an email to my friends who were in the travel business to tell them what I was doing. Then I thought, I'm going to post this as a blog post. And no one's going to read it because no one ever does. I'll get ten or 12 readers whenever I make announcements no one pays attention. So I posted it, by 5 o'clock in the afternoon I'd gotten 3000 visits; and this was after posting it at 3:30. I got 3000 visits in an hour and a half.

Channel 6 which is our local ABC affiliate called me and said hey we want to do a story. I said well, I'm in a t-shirt and I haven't shaved, can you come up to my house? And they said sure, because they'd been here before. Sometimes I'd get to go on the news as a local social media expert for stories. I figured they were going to come and interview me and we are going to talk for 10 minutes and that's going to be - they're going to use a five second snippet of what I said in the whole story.

So they come up and do the interview and I turn on the 11 o'clock news that night - I'm the second story on the news. And it's all about this guy quit his job because of RFRA. I was like 'oh crap what did I do?'

The next day, The Advocate Magazine had seven immediate backlashes against Indiana because of RFRA passage. It was like - Mark Benioff - whose the CEO of Salesforce who said 'No more employee travel to Indiana.' And the CEO of Angie's List which is headquartered here in Indy said we were going to do a giant expansion and now we're not. And number seven on the list was me. I was astounded how much attention this got. I did interviews with the Toronto Star. I did an interview on a radio station out in California and I thought, I just quit a job. It's not even a big job. If I made a hundred dollars in a month, that was a lot. I was just surprised how quickly it took off.

[KW] Even on your - the post - you can see where people are commenting. They're going back and forth. That's pretty interesting.

[ED] They let me know who my true friends were. 'Cause I had people who were condemning me religiously and called me a sinner for supporting people, and I said well, I guess we're not friends anymore.

[KW] Well you are actually gonna be making some new friends because you are going to be moving to Florida. When you move there next spring, you will be living in the Jack Kerouac house in Orlando. So tell me about that. How did you hear about the Kerouac Project.

[ED] We're actually moving next month.  We just had - fingers crossed - we had an offer on the house - they countered and we accepted. I'll get to be down there and just kind of immerse myself in the Orlando literary community. And then starting in March, I will be the Writer-in-Residence at the Jack Kerouac House in the College Park area. And normally what that is, is that someone will come and stay there for three months. They only have one person stay in the house for three months at a time. They live there and get to focus on writing and not be distracted by anything else. Since I'll be living in the area, I will come in during the day and treat it like an office and then go home at night.

I'm still spending lots of nights there because you can't *not* spend nights in the Kerouac House, but it's not going to be a 90-day stay for me. And so I've talked to them about this and they're fine with this. I'd heard about this because I was in Orlando this past February and sitting in one of my favorite coffee shops called Downtown Credo. It's this pay-what-you-think coffeehouse, and Barbara Shoup who is the Director of the Writer's Center of Indiana - she wrote a book called Looking for Jack Kerouac which is a young adult novel. She posted on Facebook that she was going to be in Orlando doing a reading at the Kerouac House - tomorrow - the day after I was sitting there.

So I thought - there's a Kerouac House? There's a Kerouac House here?

And I looked it up, and I saw I was sitting just four blocks away form the Jack Kerouac House. So I looked it up and read about them and emailed them and said, 'Hey, can I come in for a visit?' Thinking this is just a semi-public house. It's a private residence for our writer-in-residence. You can't just go traipsing through the house. I thought what's a writer-in-residence program. I looked that up through the website. I see they had these different writers coming in, so I went online and I applied. And after we made our decision to move and we were going to put our house on the market. They emailed me and said, hey you're in.

[KW] To date they've had over 51 people from all over the world. What did you submit? I think it seems to be open to all kinds of writers. What were you applying for?

[ED] I submitted the first chapter of a humor novel that I've been working on. Just kind of off and on for the last - almost two years. I thought this would be a great time to have to sit down and do it. The novel's one of those things that I squeeze in when I've got free time - which is not that often - so I thought this would be a great way to work on that.

[KW] I just interviewed Neil Smith, he's the Canadian author of the young adult novel Boo and also short story - a book of short stories called Bang Crunch. And he spoke about writing a novel when he didn't know how to write novel. He had to teach himself how and he ended up writing a plotless novel at first and then figured out how to plot and actually executed what I think is a pretty amazing plot. Do you have any - have you done one before - do you have anything that you might be not necessarily anxious about or how am I going to do this?

[ED] I wrote novel once. It wasn't very good. If I were to try to revisit it, I'd have to cut the second half completely and just start over. So I understand the basics of novel writing process but more from reading novels rather than reading about writing novels. I've not taken a novel writing class or anything like that. I think that's the think that makes me the most anxious because I don't know if I'm doing it right.

But then all my other writing friends say there is no right. You just do it and if it's a good story, it'll work. If it isn't, it won't. I also worry that I'm biting off more than I can chew with this. The premise of the story if what if Macinac Island which is up in Michigan right off of the fingertips, what if it was forced to secede from the country and become its own nation. And so as I think about it, there's so many different story lines that could come off of this, and I don't know if I've tried to tackle too much. So I have to make sure that I don't try to incorporate every possible thing that could go on. Then we're looking at 800 storylines in this one little book.

[KW] How did you find your humor voice?

[ED] It was one of the first essays I wrote. This was back before I started becoming a humor columnist. It was kind of funny and I showed it to my wife and she laughed and I thought oh, I could do that. It was an enjoyable feeling to hear her laugh at something I wrote. And I thought, I want to do that some more. And so I tried to write some more, again to get her to laugh. So when I met Al, the newspaper publisher, I thought maybe this is a way to get more people to do it.

So he really did read my stuff. It wasn't just a matter of was I democrat. He read it. He liked it. He really did ask me if I was a democrat but once I started hearing from other people that they enjoyed my column, that made me want to do it. And then, this is kind of a funny story; I was thinking about this guy the other day. There is a guy who had published - and this is 1995, 96, back when it took a lot of effort to have a web-page, let alone an entire website. This guy had a webpage of funny internet humor writers, and then two months later I went back and checked it and I wasn't on the list anymore.

And I wrote the guy and asked why am I not on the list?

And he said, you're just not that funny.

I got so mad. I thought screw you. I'm going to show you. So I just really started focusing on how do you write humor and learning techniques. And figuring out the difference between stand-up comedy vs. sitcom comedy vs. humor essay type writing and trying to incorporate the different elements and really studied it and wanted to be worthy of being back on this guys list. But if he had asked me if I'd wanted to be on it, I'd tell him no, cuz I'm too good for your list now.

I've no idea who that guy is, but it made me be able to study and focus on how to do this and how to use things like callbacks or different writing techniques to get the humor points across.

What - is there any book that sticks out in your memory that was most helpful?

[ED] The one that sticks out the most is any of the Dave Barry books because I could read about the techniques but I'm - if someone explains to me a process, I'm not that great at understanding it, but if someone tells me a story about it or shows me an example of that process in action, then I'd get it immediately. So I'd read these humor books and that'd help, but then I'd read Dave Barry and I'd see what they were talking about.

Then I was like oh, I could do that or I can steal that idea. So any of the Dave Barry stuff - especially his stuff from the mid-80s, early 90s, that was the stuff that influenced me the most.

[KW] My final question for you is, if you were a super hero and had to save the world, what would your writing superpower be?

[ED] I do think the ability to make people laugh. I would say that's part of it. I'd say dialogue is another part of it. How do I save the world with that?

[KW] We're gonna wait and see.

[ED] I'll write corny PSA's that encourage peace but with humor.

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