**Behind the Prose Transcript**

Episode 33: Jacki Skole

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Guests:

Jacki Skole [KB]

JS I'm still in the process of figuring that out. I think for me the whole writing process has been interesting because when I started working on the book, I didn't come at it from the perspective of a writer, which may sound kind of odd because it's a book, I came to it from the perspective of a journalist who had questions that I wanted answered and then I was going to take that and tell a story.

Because my background has always been broadcast journalism, I was thinking that this would be a different way of telling the story but I didn't think of myself as a writer per say. Then when I got into the writing of the book after I'd done the research, yes, I got up in the morning before my kids and I wrote. I'm more of a morning person than a night person, so those early hours when I got the most done. Then I would try to squeeze in time when I wasn't chauffeuring after school activities or I wasn't teaching.

Now, I am trying to be more writer and journalist so I am trying to write everyday in some form or another, whether it's a writing prompt or writing my to-do list, I'm trying to do a little bit of writing everyday.

[KW] So for those who haven't read the book, when did you get the idea for the book?

[JS] I think that was back 2012, 2011 or so. My dog Griffin had died suddenly and we adopted Galen; she was about eight weeks old when we did that. IN the months that followed, my asking a lot of questions about many of her quirky behaviors, I recalled that when I adopted Griffin I had questions about many of his quirky behaviors, but I hadn't thought to do any research into where he had come from. He was also a rescue. But as luck would have it, the timing was also right for me to ask those questions and then go out and answer them. As I was trying to trace her origins - I knew she was from the south; I knew she was from a shelter in North Carolina - and as I began asking questions and getting answers, I began to think, you know what? There's a story here. It's bigger than just her story; it's the story of shelter dogs in America. It's kind of how it all began.

**[KW] So at that point, did you write a proposal to sell the book or did you decide to write the book first?**

[JS] So it's kind of funny because I was completely - naive is a nice way to put it - ignorant of book publishing. Like I said, I come out of broadcast. I worked at CNN then I freelanced as a broadcast producer. I was really just kind of naive. I thought I have a good story here and I'm gonna tell it. I did get to the point where I had all this stuff and I thought I don't  know what I'm doing or where to go with it.

So I signed up for a MediaBistro course on nonfiction book publishing and got lucky once again that I had an extraordinary teacher. Here's a shoutout to Ashley Shelby who was not only a great teacher during the course of the program - after it ended we stayed in touch. She was my soundboard. She helped me navigate the publishing process because she knew it and I didn't.

**[KW] What did that look like for you at that time?**

[JS] Through the course, I learned what a nonfiction book proposal looked like. I put one of those together. Also in the course of her class, we had to start writing some of our chapters. I did all that. I put the proposal together and sent it out to a whole bunch of agents and really didn't get any bite. One told me that she liked the concept, that she liked the writing and that if I was Wayne Pacelle who is the president of the Humane Society of the United States, she would take it. But because I was little old me, and I didn't have that platform that he had, she's gonna have to pass because she didn't think that she could sell it to one of the big publishing houses. At that time, I was reading Writer's Digest and I stumbled upon an article that said "Hey, if you're having trouble getting an agent, don't forget to look at the small presses."

So, I went online and I looked up small publishing houses that accept nonfiction and one of those that I found was Ashland Creek Press, a boutique publisher. They focus on environmental and animal literature and I thought they sound like they might be the kind of place that might embrace my book. So I sent my proposal to them, and Midge Raymond who is one of the cofounders got in touch with me and said "This sounds great but we are a small press and as such we don't take proposals but we'd love to see the full manuscript when you finish it.

So I said alright. And those were my marching orders and I continued to send it out to agents but I really went gungho in trying to complete the manuscript to them, and they did embrace it and the rest is history. So again, I guess you make your own luck, but I took that MediaBistro course with an instructor who guided me even afterwards. I came upon the Writer's Digest Story that told me to look at small publishing houses and I did that and that's how it came to be.

**[KW] So at the time when Ashland told you send a full length manuscript, how much had you already completed?**

[JS] I probably had a half to three quarters of the book done. There were probably several months  between when they were interested in the proposal and when I actually sent them - for some reason, I'm not sure if this is right but for some reason I have in my head, February or March, and I think I said, I can have it to you by July maybe?

**[KW] In terms of completing the manuscript, you mentioned you did broadcast journalism, how did you manage your own deadlines.**

[JS] Well, the course I took the Media Bistro Course, really helped me figure out what the structure was going to be. Afterwards, I did change it a little bit because outlines get changed as you tell a story. IT really helped me focus on what the structure would be but I wrote it in order - chapter one, then chapter two, then chapter three. I think that may be different than what other writers do, but again this was very new to me; I'm a very linear person so I don't know that I could have done it any other way.

**[KW] Where and when did the research come in? You have so much research. You traveled across the country to Tennessee, to North Carolina, to Florida talking to rescue organizations, where did that fit into the writing of the book?**

[JS] I didn't write a thing until I did all my research. The trips were essential. That's what I love. I love the reporting; I love the meeting of people. I love the learning from people who save lives of these dogs and cats. The book's focus is on dogs but when you're talking about shelters and rescues, the cats are there too. That's where my high is - finding these incredible people. I would find time when I wasn't teaching, when my mom could come over and help the husband with the kids because he works, and I would just go South. So I did all of my research - because I had to know that I had a story.

As I was writing I had a trip here or there, but for the most part, that was all first. I had some ideas what some of the answers to some of my questions would be, but I couldn't have known until I traveled and I couldn't have written until I had that information.

[KW] So did you, had you started your research before you took your Mediabistro class?

[JS] Oh yea. The reason I took the Mediabistro class is because I had all this research and knew nothing about book publishing so I didn't know what to do with it.

[KW] Because when I was reading it, I was thinking oh, well maybe the publisher paid for her to go all these places.

[JS] Laughter.

[KW] - but I guess you self-funded your research then . . .

[JS] Yeah, yes, no. All self-funded. I was fortunate having worked at CNN, I had good good friends who lived in Atlanta and I stayed with her a bunch of times. I had girlfriends who I went to college with who lived down in Atlanta. My trips to Georgia never cost as much as some of the other one.

I say that timing is everything. At the time, I was having what I call a mid-career crisis. And I was debating whether to go get a Ph.D. that I could take my teaching from being an adjunct to searching for a full-time tenured position, so I had this inkling and idea for the book. But you know in a heart-to-heart with myself and my husband, we decided it would cost a whole lot more to get the Ph.D.

And we're very happy with our lives here. So even if I got it, I would be very limited in those universities I could even apply to because we were not going to pick up and move for my job. So it kind of was like, okay, I could spend a fraction of that money and see if this book would turn out. From the start, I was kind of like, I'm going to self-fund this; I'm going to spend less than I would to go get my Ph.D. and it's for a really good cause which also sort of made us say, if it comes to fruition we will also donate the profits to animal welfare.

So that's kind of what happened. I mean hey, I'm very fortunate that I could do it, I'll definitely say that. I'm very fortunate that we were able to put the money aside for me to go able to do these trips and now that I'm donating a lot of the proceeds.

[KW] So you sent the book - or you told them you would send it back in July, did you meet that July deadline?

[JS] Oh yes.

[KW] You say oh yes, like you are a deadline-oriented person.

[JS] I am much better with deadlines. I am a better worker when I have a deadline ahead of me.

[KW] I have a side question to ask. The deadline you gave them was self-imposed. How do you make yourself deal with self-imposed deadlines? For example, if I tell myself, I'm going to have an essay draft written by next Friday, and no-one knows that it's coming, I'm like eh, who's going to punish me?

[JS] I'm exactly the same way. If I say to myself, I'm going to have an essay written next Friday, the chances are good that essay's not being written. But I had them - I had a publishing house that was interested in my work so, that work was done.

That was the other good thing about working with Ashley because I would say to her, I would have a chapter for you by X date. By doing that, I wasn't going to not meet the deadline. If I were my only deadline, I would not necessarily meet it. But if there' someone waiting on my, I'm going to meet that deadline.

[KW] Do you think that somebody has to be someone who is removed from you in a personal capacity, like if you said to your husband - Kevin right? - do you think you were more compelled to meet the deadline since it was like a teacher that you were giving it to?

[JS] I'm pretty sure that if I told Kevin that if I had a chapter for him, I'd have a much easier time saying sorry, it's not there. But having someone outside of me - and having somebody who was going to help me - I mean Ashley's critiques of my chapters were insightful and helpful so I was not going to get something to her on time.

Ashland Creek Press was the one publisher that came back to me and said hey we're interested. I was not going to miss that deadline.

[KW] And how long after you sent them the manuscript, did they reply and what was that like?

[JS] It's all kind of a blur. I can't remember how long it took before they got back to me. I was ready to just throw myself at their feet and say any changes you want, anything you want, just please, please, please. So it was actually a couple  months because they obviously had to have time to read it. I can't remember the timeline; I'd have to go back and look at my contract date and everything.

[KW] You said that you're donating all or most of the profits to animal welfare shelters. Would you be willing to say what your advance was? Five figures? Four figures?

[JS] [Laughter]

Yeah, I can tell you. It was no figures. It was no figures. I mean - Ashland Creek Press is a small boutique book publishing company. The books that I have read, that they have published, are outstanding. The fact that my book was accepted by them, makes me shake my head sometimes. The books they publish are of the finest quality but they are a very small publishing company. That's why they said to me look, we can't take a book from a proposal, we really need to see the whole manuscript.

Then they said look, we're a really small publishing company, we can't give you anything upfront. I would have self-published if I had to because the project was that important to me and I wanted to get the information out there, knowing that someone else who the this is what they do versus me who didn't know anything about book publishing and went and wrote this book, I said that's fine. I wasn't going to hold out to look for someone else. I liked them; I like the books they published, and if this was the way they did it, then fine.

**[KW] So what did it feel like getting that first box of books in the mail?**

[JS]  Amazing. Amazing. I'm still in shock. I don't know if all first time authors feel that way. I'm still in shock that someone embraced the book and ushered it into being. When I got that first batch, it was really remarkable. It was awesome.

**[KW] So let's transition into talking a little bit about the craft of the book, Dogland: A Journey to the Heart of America's Dog Problem.**

**How did you come up with the title?**

[JS] The Dogland part, I have to say I did not come up with; Ashland Creek Press came up with and I loved it. My original - So the Dogland part they came up with, "A journey to the heart of America's dog problem" came out of that Mediabistro course. And suggestions that I threw out that Ashley threw out, sort of a combination. Ashland Creek Press kept that part. My first part was actually called "Daisy's Daughter" because that is who Galen's is and I kind of like the alliteration and looking at a lot of books in the genre, they had the name of the dog and that's kind of what I went with, but I have to say, I liked Dogland so much more, while the book is about Galen, I think Dogland really embraces the bigger message of the book because it's not just Galen's story. It's the story about shelter dogs in this country and how we're going to stop euthanizing so many healthy, adoptable shelter dogs and what we need to do and how we can do that.

So I am grateful to them. That's another reason why I'm glad I didn't self-publish. I had other brains working on the book.

**[KW] Did you work with an editor specifically at Ashland Creek?**

[JS] Midge first - Midge Raymond. She went through it first. I have to say her hand was far lighter than I thought an editor's hand would be. So, then after that, they give it to, I guess a proofreader who looked at it after the editing. She had a light hand. I did have Ashley first who read through every single chapter and critiqued them and I went back and reworked them. It wasn't though I sent to them something that no-one with an expert eye hadn't seen. It wasn't like my husband read the book. He's a great grammarian and he's really smart but he's not in publishing. It's not like he's the one who read it and then I sent it off.

She read it and then critiqued it and then I rewrote and rewrote and sometimes she looked at a chapter again and then it went to Midge, and she had suggestions that were made and that was it.

**[KW] Your chapter titles have names versus numbers chapter one, two. What was the decision process like for that choice?**

[JS] I just - from the moment I wrote the book, I gave them titles. I don't think I ever thought about just one, two, three. I don't know if I thought about other books I read and they had titles. That's a great question because I never really thought about it. I just did it.

**[KW] Seems that - they're titles and mostly all of them feel like they could stand by themselves. Almost like mini stories or essays.**

[JS] I think that probably, interestingly enough and I didn't realize it until now, I think that might have come out of my broadcast background. When I was at CNN and I was part of this documentary unit, we would do hour-long programs on a particular topic but the pieces within them stood alone. I think the narrative about Galen is the spine that takes you through the story, but each chapter addresses a different issue with regard to shelter overpopulation and euthanasia and what can be done.  So maybe in that respect, you've definitely hit on something because each one - the non-Galen story stands alone.

**[KW] One of the things that I feel that you do very well in this book is transitions - moving from present to past or scene to scene. It first started to stick out to me in the first chapter which is called "Ready or not, Here She Comes." And it's on page 17 where you are talking about how Galen starts hurting the girls and she's nipping at their feet and it's becoming worse and worse and your husband is getting frustrated with her and he's afraid that  she's gonna attack one of the girls. And the just you have one-paragraph sentence: "He knew all too-well what a dog could do in an unexpected moment of aggression." Then the next paragraph, "It was July 4, 2003  . . . " and you go on to tell the story.**

**And there's so many places where you do these smooth and tight transitions. What do you attribute that to?**

[JS] I think I'm going to go back to my broadcast background on that, perhaps. I think something about rhythm that kind of comes out naturally - I don't know if I'm going to make sense here - but I kind of feel like in some of the longform broadcast stories that I did, you would be telling a story but then to fully understand the concept, you would go to something else and it's easier to do visually with pictures, but I think maybe that's what did it.

I also have to say, I read "Beyond the Beautiful Forevers" - did you read that book?

**[KW] No I haven't.**

[JS] Oh, God, and the author - She's a New Yorker writer. Katherine Boo, I think. I had read that book and she does a lot of that. And it had just sort of struck me as an interesting style to kind of move from past to present to past to present and it kept the story going. I know that I got my idea for the preface from reading her book because she has part of a scene at the preface and then you read the book and you're reading it, and that scene comes back and it's more fleshed out and you understand it better later on.

I had read several prefaces that kind of didn't seem to work. And I think it kind of hit me that I could do what she did. So, I copied her idea.

**[KW] That's interesting because one of my questions was about the preface. We start where you are at the house where you believe that where you believe Galen was born? I had wrote down, in your mind what's the purpose of a preface and why did you decide to do it?**

[JS] I think it was to - as with Beyond the Beautiful Forevers - it grabbed me as a reader and I wanted to know more. I was trying to think, okay, how can I hook the reader to want to stay with this book. And I thought, well maybe this would do it?

**[KW] Do you think that's more important with a book that's blending research and reporting into it? That's not necessarily all, personal story?**

[JS] I think so. I had a number of people say to me, wow, I really liked your book and I usually don't like nonfiction. And I thought there are those nonfiction works that are narrative and to me, they are as good if not better than any fiction book I've ever read. And then there's nonfiction that come across more dry or academic. I think if you have a bad taste about the word nonfiction, maybe you haven't read more of the nonfiction that's out today, which is real story. It's just true story.

**[KW] When you were on the ground reporting? Do you take notes? Were you recording these people?**

[JS] Both. It depended on who I was with. When I met Galen's previous owner, I think it was just me. I might have had a pad, but I did not have any tape recorder or anything like that. I was hoping that she would talk to me and I didn't want to scare her off.

If I was talking to a shelter director or someone who I knew was used to talking to journalists, then yes, I used a little tape recorder. I talked to a lot of people on the phone, because I was traveling, I had to set this all up, which was very much how I used to do in my broadcast days which was you do the research by phone, by computer, you talk to people, you decide who you're going to go out there and meet; you set it up, and you go down there and spend time with them.

**[KW] When you met Galen's mom's mom, is that the impetus for the idea for the book?**

[JS] Uh, yes. IT took me a while to find her. When I started doing the reporting, I didn't know if I was going to or not. I didn't know how the book was going to end. It could have ended with I tried to find her and I'll never know how she ended up in that shelter in the first place. All I knew was that she was surrendered. So I was doing all the parallel research about the broader story around the same time I was trying to find her.

I did end up meeting her before I was done with all of my other research. That's when I said the structure of the story did change, because at one point I had meeting her earlier in the story, but if it came to early, why would I bother finish reading?  It ended up at the end - moving it to the end of the story. To me, that's the one narrative part that really keeps you reading to the end.

**[KW] There are points throughout the book that touch on as you said, broader levels besides just what is going on with the dog and cat population. And I tweeted this earlier in the week around page 52 you get to sort of this cultural nugget where the book begins to peel away layers and make the reader think about cultural differences between the south and the north. And why there is a widespread certain belief of the way they treat pets as more as property in the south and how it ties back to the Civil War days and the South's mentality.**

I wasn't expecting it to take that turn and then about 20 pages later or so, you get a feeling from the book of a woman on a mission where you're starting to dig for more information. Did those things come to you organically or is that something that you thought about on revision?

[JS] Well, from the start, one of my question was why do we have so many Southern dogs in New Jersey? That led to that studies show there is less spaying and neutering going on in the South which led to how come. I kept having to answer the question. That was one of those questions that fascinated me the most or really interested me was the complexity of the South's relationships with dogs.

I know you can get into a lot of trouble when you start stereotyping regions, but it was really interesting to do research and begin to find out that there actually were differences of how quickly the North vs. the South embraced the idea of animal welfare. And that so much of it had to do with the North being more industrial and more densely populated and the South being more agrarian, and the South euthanizes so many more dogs, so it's easy to say they must not like dogs, they don't care or they're just property to them. But at the same time, Southerners love dogs. There are so many Southern artists and writers who incorporate dogs into their works so that makes it kind of complex and rich.

I did want to find out about that. I wanted that to be explained early on because I feel like I needed to get that out there. As someone who lives in New Jersey, far too often you hear "If they would just spay and neuter down there. Or what's wrong with these people?"  And it's so much more complex than that. That's what I found that was so fascinating to me, for every on one hand, there's another hand, about shelter overpopulation or should we have laws or not have laws or what's the role of an animal shelter. There's so much on one and then on the other hand.

It's so much more complex when you get on the ground when you start talking to people.

**[KW] You did a lot of talking to people and you portrayed them in this narrative nonfiction vividly between their personality quirks, what they look like, the shelter, the stuff on their desk. In terms of your portrayal, did you immediately go leave your interview and transcribe and write down the details that you saw so you could capture that accurately in the book.**

[JS] Yeah, a lot of times the I was away in Tennessee, in North Carolina, in Georgia, I'd be out during the day doing my reporting and at night I would be sitting in front of my computer trying to put down everything I remember and doing some transcribing. That was the hardest part of me because I always had the video that took care of the visuals. Because when you're writing for broadcast, you don't have to describe people, because your audiences sees the people.  You don't have to describe the setting because I can see it.

So that part was very different for me because I hadn't done that before.

**[KW] In the beginning of your book there's a disclaimer that says some of the names have been changed. Then throughout the book, I'll say someone who I will call Josh or whatever, did you, explain to us what was the decision process for who got a fake name and who didn't?**

[JS] As sort of part of the process with the publisher, they asked me to get signed releases from everyone that I spoke with and I did, unless the person worked for a shelter director - that's a governmental position and I had to go through the county to be able to speak to that person, so none of those people had their names changed. Most people didn't.

The hoarder had her name changed because, I think we decided that who she was specifically wasn't as important as what she did which is representative of the problem of hoarding, so she didn't need people knocking on her door. In that case, a name was changed.

The name of the rescuer who ended up being indicted by the ASPCA, we ended up changing her name. Again, because the issue for us wasn't her so much as how she's representative of a problem within rescue today, so that's what ended up happening.

**[KW] So the end of the book contains an afterword. And it is a scene with you and your family on the porch during a thunderstorm and there is kind of this melding or meshing of Griffin or Galen that goes on throughout those pages. The ending, I thought, was very poetic. Can you tell us a little about writing the afterword. Why did you decide to write the afterword and what influenced your decision to put what in it?**

[JS] I felt like I needed to sort of close up the story. And I think one of the things for me that I felt like - that I hoped kept readers turning the page was sort of the narrative of this dog that we hadn't intended on getting but we did and where we were with her now. As I was writing it, I was thinking about Griffin, and I do, I think about him a lot because one, he was my first child, but there's so much about them that is similar, so I think it sort of happened organically. I sat down and thought to myself that I need to kind of wrap this up in a way that speaks to the love we have for our dogs, because that's really what this is about.

And why to me this whole - these high numbers of euthanasia are so depressing and surprising because for most of us, you really love these animals. They're such a part of our lives. I wanted to end on that note and hopefully that speaks to why something needs to be done.

**[KW] So we're coming to the end of this, in the picture in the back of the book, you have About the Dogs and you have Griffin's picture here and you have Galen's picture here, Lokey, and then you have the cover dog. They're so adorable.**

**Did you find yourself struggling to leave out stuff or cut stuff?**

[JS] Yeah, and that's hard. You work so hard. But again from my broadcast background, we always left stuff on the cutting floor. There's only so much time and space. Sometimes you think something will work, but then you tell the story and you find out that as much you are in love with it, you have to say goodbye.

**[KW] Do you have any plans for future book length manuscripts?**

[JS] Oh, I don't know. I'm back in mid-career crisis now that I've finished the book. I have some ideas for magazine length stories and we'll see where the takes me. I'm also kind of interested - now that I guess I'm going to call myself a writer - I'm interested in exploring flash nonfiction and more literary writing. Because I see myself as a journalist and a very literal writer, not a literary person, so I kind of feel like I'm going to explore that now.

**[KW] You have been in broadcast journalism, news writing, and now you are a book author, so I'm going to ask you about what do you think is the superpower as a broadcast journalist that helped you the most as a manuscript writer?**

[JS] Hmm. I didn't know you were going to come at me with that question in this way. Like I've said, I listened to you before and I knew it was coming but not in this way.

[Laughter]

That throws off my answer. I think there's something about broadcast writing that has you linking soundbites - what people have to say which is so important to hear from your characters - and kind of what you do as the writer is you're stitching together these soundbites to tell a story. I think that ability to stitch together soundbites, or in this case it would be whole scenes with information in an internal rhythm that you hear might be that superpower.

If you haven't written for broadcasting, that may make no sense whatsoever.

And a little shout-out to you, I listened the other night to Lee Gutkind's speech at the Creative Nonfiction Writers' Conference. I think it is what he talked about with creative nonfiction; you have these scenes that goes to information that goes to scene and I think I did that not because I ever had a class about that, but because that in a sense is what telling a broadcast story is all about. It's letting your characters speak and having that information that ties together to get to the next character speaking, so I think that all goes together.

When I went to grad school, I had to choose: do you want to go newspaper? Do you want to go magazine? Do you want to go broadcast? That's out the window. Right? You would never go to a journalism school today and have an administrator say "Well which track do you want to go on?" I think there's so much more overlap than I think we all realize back in the day when we had to choose our tracks.

**[KW] I'm glad for whatever track you chose. I thought the description was cool when I read it in Publishers Weekly. I'm just amazed at the amount of research you did and how you pulled this book together and really as you said, exercising that power of linking the scenes and information. Sometimes the reader sees you making links to people in the story.**

**I encourage every one to check Dogland: A Journey to the Heart of America's Dog Problem.**