**Behind the Prose Transcript**

**Episode 35: Kim Brooks and The Houseguest**

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Host:

Keysha Whitaker [KW]

Guests:

Kim Brooks [KB]

[KW]

Behind the Prosers, it is Episode 35. Thanks for coming back to me this week. We're going to revisit one of our previous guests. Ironically, she is the author of a book titled The Houseguest which is out on April 12.

We're releasing this show a couple days before her book drops. Make sure you are at Barnes and Noble or wherever you get your book from, because we really are going to get into that.

But first, we got to check in. Last time I told you that I had one or two to go on my last chunk. So I finished that and I'm on a new chunk. I'm actually seven in; I've been kind of on a roll this week. And I have really three big acceptances to tell you about, but they didn't run, so I feel like is it writer's superstition that you don't want to say, well, 'this place accepted me, this place accepted me.' But keep listening, keep watching.

Make sure you're on the email list, the Twitter list - the Twitter list? What is that? - Make sure on our email list - you can join by email if you text the word prose to 22828.

So some people are sending me shout-outs and you'll see those in the newsletter. You can do that to or email me at info at behindtheprose.

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Kim Brooks, she's a graduate of the Iowa Workshop where she was a teaching and writing fellow. She's got fellowships from all kinds of foundations, The Corporation of Yaddo, The Posen Foundation, and more.

Her fiction has appeared in Glimmer Train, One Story, The Missouri Review - essays all over the place. She wrote her way into the personal essays editor position at Salon Magazine. And she's been in Buzzfeed and New York Magazine.

She is on a book roll right now. Her first novel is coming out, as I said at the top of the show, and she's got a memoir coming out next year. That's called Small Animals.

So we're going to talk to Kim; thank you Kim Brooks for being with us on Behind the Prose today.

[KB] Thank you for having me.

[KW] Before we get into your work, I want to ask you something about what I said on the check in. When you get things accepted, do you say it or not?

[KB] Well, I am a little superstitious but I also am completely incapable of keeping anything to myself, unfortunately as my family or friends will tell you. So yeah, I usually tell people just everything immediately. Even though there's a part of me that recognizes it would be wiser to wait a little bit, but that's just sort of not in my skill set.

[KW] Do you think the waiting part - for me I feel like if I say it and they don't run it, maybe somehow that's a reflection on me, that I'm now going to look bad.

[KB] I mean yeah, well, it definitely sucks to have to say to your friends, oh, I wrote this piece and they had to kill it for whatever reason. Although, I feel like sometimes I would want to share that anyway because I want the support. But yeah, there's definitely that feeling that nothing is definite until you can see it and read it and hold it in your hands. But yeah, it's always a dilemma. I had the same thought.

[KW] When you got your first -I'm going to jump into a question that's related to what we're talking about now. When you got accepted by an agent or an editor, did you run out and tells somebody.

[KB] Definitely. I definitely would have told about 40 people every step along the way. I'm sure my husband; I don't know who else. But for me, this was a long process. I definitely hear those stories about people who, oh, I wrote a book, and a few weeks later I got an agent, and a few weeks later, I got a publisher.

I hate those people but they're there. For me, it was a very different process. For me, **it was a much longer and difficult process with lots of successes and failures along the way. Whenever** there was a moment of triumph, I shared it with everyone, I knew and whoever was standing in line next to me at the store.

[KW] When did you begin working on the novel?

[KB] I was just thinking about that. It's a little bit tricky to say because the novel grew out of  a short story that I wrote and published and actually that story which was also titled The Houseguest, I wrote it when I was pregnant with my son, it had to be about eight and a half years ago, that I wrote this story. It wasn't like I wrote it and immediately started writing a novel about the same subject matter, but that was the first kind of seed. Probably a year later or something, I continued writing on this subject. It wasn't straight through. There were definitely lots of breaks in the process, but it's been on and off for about seven years.

[KW] What was is in the short story that drew you back to working on it or who was it?

[KB] It was this family. The story just focused on this particular family living in Utica, New York who takes in a Jewish refugee. It was a very kind of contained scope. It just took place over a couple days and involved sort of a snapshot of this family. There was something about, in particular, the husband, the father, Abe Auer, there was something about him, his sensibility and his point of view that I found very compelling and that sort of held my attention in a way that made me think that there's more here, there's more that I want to explore.

[KW] When you say that, it reminds me of the things that other fiction writers have said - when the characters take a life of their own. And you say that something about Abe compelled you; can you break that down for us a little more as far as the part where you realize that this is sort of a living, breathing thing? The character is pulling you?

[KB] Right. Yeah, I guess I would start by saying for me that's not unique to this book or this character but sort of the overall way that I always experience the writing of fiction. Maybe all writing - the material has to sort of take control - but especially in fiction where you're trying to create these other characters. I'm definitely not smart or powerful enough to have control over it in any conscious way to say, 'I want to write about this person who feels like this.' For me, it has to very much - I guess the best, this is not very original but for me it ranks true - the best analogy is just the way we experience people in dreams. You dream about someone and someone appears to you in a dream; obviously that's emerging from your brain, right?  Your own imagination, but you're not in control of it in any way that you are aware of.

For me, at least, fiction is the same way, at least when it's going well. Someone sort of, a character emerges, you start to have an experience of them, and at some point it feels - to me at least when I'm immersed in it - that that's a real person as opposed to someone that I'm sort of painting.

[KW] I'm gonna comeback to the aspect of dreams later because tat relates heavily to some of the things that happens in The Houseguest. When you were working on it for the last eight years or so, when did you decide that I need to get this published and send out for an agent?

[KB] Well, you know what, I already had an agent at the time. I had an agent since I graduated from Iowa which in some ways was way too early. There was this sense of oh, well you have to have an agent when you leave graduate school. I kind of see now that's not a helpful mindset. So I had an agent who was working with me on other projects that never went anywhere, who ultimately was great but not the right agent for this particular book and so I think it was somewhere along the lines, somewhere near having the completed first draft, and there were many drafts - maybe it was about half of the first draft I started saying I was going to look into other possibilities, but it was a very long sort of process.

I can't remember, there wasn't one specific moment.

[KW] So had you finished book before you started to solicit a new agent?

[KB] I think I certainly had a draft. I worked in a strange way where - there are some writers who they work very very slowly and deliberately and when they get to the end of the book, they've gotten to the end of the book, and that's sort of what you end up seeing.

For me, I sort of have to just have something start to finish. I'm sure I had a draft, I also knew it was going to change very much by the time it became a book. If I'm remembering right, I think I did probably have some kind of completed draft.

[KW] What was the agent process like for you?

[KB] Yeah, it was alway very, a little bit stressful. Basically, I sent out emails or talked to friends or people I knew who had written books and that always helps to have some kind of connection or referral. I would email different agents and sort of introduce myself and tell them about my background and my work, and if they were interested, send them the draft.

[KW] When did you get - do you remember when you got your agent and how long after that it took for them to sell the book?

[KB] Um, from the time I got my agent, it was probably about a year or so, it was not like a very quick process. I think it was about a year.

[KW] The book is out on Counterpoint Press of Berkeley, it's "The Houseguest" and so, that was probably then around last year this time.

[KB] That I learned it would be published?

[KW] Yeah.

[KB] Actually, it was longer. It was in, I'm trying to think, it was in September of 2014, so it was about 18, 19 months ago that I would learn it would be published by Counterpoint.

[KW] And what was the process like working with the editor at Counterpoint.

[KB] It's been amazing. It's been wonderful. It's funny. I heard a lot, or you read a lot these days about editors not really having the time to do hands on editing, they sort of want the book to be ready to go by the time they buy it, you know? I'm sure that is true at a lot of houses and presses, but that has not been my experience at all with my editor Dan Smetanka at Counterpoint. He did so much work with me on the book in terms of structure, story, really getting it as good as it could be. He is brilliant.

That was a very wonderful experience working with him.

[KW] So, let's get into the content of the book a little bit. One of the things I noticed about the book is that you seem to be really good at character development. We switch from character perspectives in alternating chapters. So I wondered how you approached developing those characters? Did you sketch them out?

[KB] How did they sort of emerge for me. What I said before is very true for me. It's not a conscious or deliberate process. Characters begin to emerge for me in the same sort of way that I perceive someone in a dream. But certainly once they're on the page and you begin to work with them, it becomes more conscious. Then, there's a lot of thinking 'Okay, well, how would this person react in this situation? Or how would they deal with this conflict?'

One of my writing teachers Ethan Canin would always talk about this question of how do you develop characters which is something of all writers of fiction have to deal with. He'd say that a lot of times a reader will say 'I want to see more of this character.' As a writer, you're kind of like, 'What the hell does that mean? I want to see more of this character.' That doesn't really tell you a lot of what to do as a writer.

HE would always say - and I found this very helpful - he would always say there are two really, really, good ways to develop ways to develop characters, to show a character on the page. One is to have them do something or have them act or react. It's very easy to sort of fall into this trap of how do they look? Or they're just sort of standing there.

But real people do things all the time. We make decisions, we make choices, and those choices that we make reveal who we are. So one thing is to think about what would these characters do. How would they act? The other way he said, which is something I would have never thought of on my own but has been enormously helpful, is he would say, you know, have your characters think about other characters in the book.

Have them think about what's going on and the people around them, which is something that we all do in life, right?  We're constantly thinking about, oh she said this, what does she mean? What does this other person in my life trying to do? We're making judgments; we're evaluating other people.

He would say that when you have a character think meaningfully about another character, it's kind of like a two-for-one because you're characterizing the secondary character, but you're also characterizing the person who's thinking about them by their intelligence, their sophistication of thought, their sensibility, so that's always stayed with me, but I'm sure I tried to use those strategies as I was writing The Houseguest.

[KW] That's actually one of the notes that I had throughout the book, the first point that you said about showing the characters doing things, and there are moments between dialogue where someone is lighting a cigarette or moving in a certain way, it was so detailed, my notes were like "How did you think of this?" Do you see that in your head when you're writing or is it something that you go back and edit in?

[KB] I'm sure a lot of things have been in later drafts. Early drafts are always for me just very much about trying to get some sort of skeleton on the page, but those kinds of things are for are a question of point of view. I don't think about, I know this not everyone has this approach with writing.

I hear sometimes a lot of people will talk about writers making choices, and people will ask that question, 'how did you make the choice to portray this in this particular way?' But for me, I feel like I'm not smart enough to make those kinds of choices. For me, I can only do it sort of in a, I guess this is kind of like a method acting approach, whatever character I write, whatever point of view I'm in, I sort of have to become that character and inhabit or embody that character and then everything becomes clear to me: what needs to be observed what needs to be thought about because it's what that particular character would be thinking or observing in that moment.

If I'm a male character who happens to be attracted to this woman, it's not like I'll say to myself as the writer, okay, now I'll choose to have him notice her shoulders. It's just, I'm thinking, if I'm that person, that's what I would be drawn to. That's what I would notice.

For me, it's all a matter of point of view and inhabiting point of view.

[KW]

I think a good example of that - I'll read it and when I finish if you want to speak to it, you can, is this one of the notes I put down, on page 114 and 115. This is when and Ana and Abe are in the junkyard: "She was wearing something silk beneath it, a gown a negligee, something through which he could see the lines of her torso, the curve of her breast. She rounded her shoulder, lifted her arms, encircling a partner who wasn't there, tilting her head as she began to sway and twirl across the gravel. She's mad, he thought. Yet her madness seemed natural and right. His own sanity, a handicap."

I just underlined that last, I was just like wow.

[KB] Yeah, that's an example where I guess I, that feeling that I think most people have had where you're sort of enamored with someone and everything they do just seems right. Seems compelling, even if you could take a step back, and say, you know that's a little bit odd or strange. But when you're in that state of enchantment or projecting, that's an example of how our point of view sort of changes our reality.

[KW] And you talk about the characters sort of developing then, organically. I noticed in terms of a character, when the reader gets to see life through them, Ana doesn't come in until around chapter 10 which felt like it was sort of the middle of the book, and I wonder if that was intentional since she seems to be like the heart of the story.

[KB] That she comes in, page 110, is it that late that she comes in?

[KW] It's chapter 10 and -

[KB] Oh you mean her point of view.

[KW] Yeah.

[KB] Okay, yeah, she appears earlier but her point of view comes later. I guess I felt like, my primary interest as I began to write the book and as it developed was sort of the idea of disruption, emotional, psychological, political disruption. The way that these characters Abe and Max and Spiro and Irene who are sort of in their different ways complacent and going about their lives, the way that their world is disrupted by these various forces and one of them is this woman Ana arriving.

For me it made intuitive sense to begin, in the sense, it's more a story about Ana and her arrival and her presence than it is Ana's story. For me, it seemed logical to begin with the point of view of these other people and sort of how their world is disrupted by her.

Ultimately though, I think there were drafts where I actually didn't have any of her point of view at all for that reason, but ultimately I found that I was interested in exploring her perspective, though her perspective wasn't at the heart of the book. I felt that was an important element that I wanted to include.

[KW] When you're writing a book with alternating points of view, do you write one character's point of view from beginning to end and then break it up into chapters amongst the others or do you really write in alternating chapters?

[KB] Gosh, I probably tried that. This book took me a long time to write and was very challenging for me to write. I think I probably tried that at one point. It sounds familiar, like I would have said, let me try to write each person's story through. It obviously I don't think worked; it's not the book I ended up with but, you know, I think at the end what I tried - the approach that probably worked best and I'll probably try next time is to focus on the thread of the story as opposed to any kind of external devise. This is something with my work as an editor that just helps me a lot. When I read a personal essay or a short story, even though it's obviously a very different form, I've learned to focus on this question of story. What is the story here? What is the story we're telling?

I think that in a novel, that question is still valid and can be useful. To first of all, figure out what the story you're telling is. When you have answered that question, I think a lot of these smaller questions fall into place in terms of how to actually write it, how to execute it, when to shift point of view. If you're trying to make each of those decisions - for me, I find if I'm trying to make each of those little micro decisions, it's impossible. How could I know?

But if you have a bigger framework in place, you don't have to make those smaller decisions. The answer becomes more obvious.

[KW] one of the things I notice you're really good at is similes. You use a lot to describe characters or scenes. And one of the early ones that struck out for me was in chapter four, I'm not sure, "A look like he stepped out of an elevator on the wrong floor."

[KB] [Laughter] Something I've done many times myself, right?

[Laughter]

[KW] The reader can just see that so clearly.

You do several of those throughout the book, more than several. Is that part of your natural leaning towards writing similes or do you focus on that in editing?

[KB] I probably write way more than I should or that I end up keeping. I suppose that's sort of just a stylistic thing. I definitely end up eliminating a lot of similes and metaphors and attempts at elevated language during the editing process. But usually for every four or five I write, maybe I let myself keep one.

[KW] If you're in Barnes and Noble listening to this, you can go to page 48, she's got one of those great descriptions there, this is I'll just share one more: "Abe nodded, observed how stiffly the man stood. His eyes were large and grey. His skin hung slack from the bones of his face like a sheet draped over a post.

I just highlighted that, I'm just curious to hear if you remember writing that or how that came to you.

[KB] Yeah, I feel like definitely with language things like that. It is the dream logic with characters. Definitely, if I stop and say, I need to write a really great metaphor here, then that is not going to go well. But I think when I'm kind of in point of view and I'm not thinking about it too much, sometimes things will work, language will work.

For me, you write the book you want to read. Just like you write the story you want to read. For me, I love language where it sort of disappears - the language itself - certainly where the language doesn't get in the way. If I'm reading something and thinking, oh my God, this is not well written, but I love books where the language, there's a certain elegance or spareness that allows it to sort of fade into the background and so what you really experience is the characters, the stories, the ideas that are being presented as opposed to the beauty of the language. So that's just sort of my taste.

So that's what I've strived for in my prose. Not that I always achieve it but that's my goal.

[KW] Is that the same rule for dialogue? You also seem to have a really good knack with that. One of the examples is page 76 to 77, which is an exchange with uh, as I muddle through this, go ahead and tell us about your approach to dialogue.

[KB] Yeah, so dialogue is a little bit easier for me. It comes kind of more naturally. I find it easier than exposition. I sort of follow one guideline with dialogue. I feel like good dialogue has one of two things going on, usually, but there' always exceptions.

Usually, either it's funny and witty, or it has conflict or it has some kind of conflict. It doesn't have to be conflict like 'Hey buddy, you're a jerk.' It doesn't have to be external outright over the top conflict, but it contains some kind of conflict. It could be subtle; it could be quiet but there's some tension in the dialogue.

I tell people when I'm teaching writing, when I'm editing, often if I'm reading a passage of dialogue that just falls very flat and is boring and could easily be put in exposition, it's often because there is no conflict. I try to keep that in mind when I'm writing scenes and sort of ask myself what are the strands of conflict in this scene.

Again, it's sort of weird to say I ask myself that because I'm sure I don't. But I'm not doing it consciously, maybe it's more an issue of revision where I look back at something I've written and it feels very dull to me. I can often trace it to that. There's not enough tension or conflict. It's not funny.

[KW] One of the things, so the characters in the book end up having an intertwined story. How did you keep all of that straight?

[KB] The different story lines? The different arcs?

[KW] Yeah.

[KB] I have a really good editor. That is the hardest part with novel writing? Absolutely. For me, it's sort of that feeling, you know when I was in school, I was very good at algebra, I could do that kind of thing. But then it moved up to calculus, I just  remember having this feeling that my brain can't do this. Like it was just moving to a dimension where I felt my brain could not conceptualize of what it needed to do to get what I was supposed to do, right?

I had that same feeling moving from story writing and essay writing to novel writing. I felt like there are structural things that I need to keep track of that I need to understand that my brain alone cannot do. That was probably my biggest struggle. Like I said I was lucky to just connect with this amazing editor, Dan Smetanka,  who was kind of a genius at that and just has this incredible sense of how story works in a novel, of how the different story lines need to be paced and intertwined in order to build tension, you know and to create suspense and have everything move along and crescendo when it should. He just has a very intuitive sense of that.

That was the thing that he was able to help me with the most. He didn't do very much in term of characterization. By the time Counterpoint had bought the book it wasn't like, well, I want you to rethink this character and their motivations. We didn't have to do stuff like that.

Mostly what he was able to help me with were these issues of structure of intertwining the different story lines so he was very good at that. I was very lucky in that regard.

[KW] I've asked all my guests, so I asked you as well. Would you be willing to share with us if it was four figures, five figures, seven figures?

[KB] Laughter. Uh, I don't think I should, even though of course as I said, my inclination is always to share everything, but I think I probably shouldn't. I'll say, I remember before I sold the book, I wanted to know that too from everyone like how much do you get for a book. I remember asking a friend of mine who also happens to be an agent, 'how much am I going to get if I'm able to sell my book?' She said, it would probably be between $1 and one million dollars.

And that was all she would say to me, so I think that's probably all I should say, but - I'm gonna -

[KW] I'm going to lower that, it's going to be between $0, our last guest, Jacki Skole, she didn't get an advance for her book, but they believed in it. It's a small press and they put it out. So it does vary.

[KB] Yeah, totally. For me, just for so long feeling like, putting all this work into writing and working on this novel. It's an incredible leap of faith for all writers. You're working on this thing; you have no idea if it will ever see the light of day, right? If it will ever be published, and you do it anyway, for whatever crazy reason. For me like finding out that I'm going to get paid something, even if it's not a million dollars, and these people actually want to work with me and want to help my book go into the world was like amazing.

It just felt like a miracle. That was definitely the most exciting part.

[KW] Are you headed on a book tour?

[KB] I am going on a book tour. I am going to New York and Boston and Iowa City and Louisville. All places where I have some friends who I really wanna see and I'm very excited.

[KW] Make sure - you're listening, you'll have the link to Kim's website and her tour dates so if you're in those areas, you definitely can go down, get the Houseguest, get a signed copy, meet Kim Brooks. Before you go Kim, I want to ask you one last question.

If you could go back in time to when you were writing this book, probably prior to get it picked up by Counterpoint. What superpower would you tell yourself to develop in order to help yourself along?

[KB] That is an easy question for me. I think about that all the time: patience. Patience. Patience. Superhuman patience I think would have helped me a lot. I think like many writers, I tend to be very impatient. I think I said this in my interview about editing. It's true in that too.

I think there are those miracle cases right, where people say 'I wrote the book in nine months and it got picked up and it was all done.' That's great, good for them, but I don't think that's super typical. I think that for a lot of people, certainly for me, writing a novel is just a really hard process. It's a long and very challenging process; it requires a lot of patience. That's what I would tell myself if I could go back in time.

[KW] Thank you for being with us. We didn't even get to talk about all the research that you had to do for this book that is research heavy.

[KB] Oh, well that's probably good. Research is not the most exciting part of writing fiction, but it has to be done.

[KW] I encourage everyone to go pick up The Houseguest. Thank you Kim for being on Behind the Prose and we'll see you next year when the memoir comes out.

[KB] Thank you so much. It was my pleasure.

#END