**Behind the Prose Transcript**

**Episode 1: The Writing Process with Tavonne Carson, MFA**

Broadcast date and time: Sunday, January 18, 2015 at 6 PM EST

Station: BlogTalkRadio.com/behindtheprose

Length: [00:34:03]

Host: Keysha Whitaker

Guest: Tavonne Carson

Transcriber: Keysha Whitaker

Note: [italicized words in brackets were added in for clarification]

[KW] = Host Initials

[TC] = Interviewer Initials

00:00:24 [KW]

Hi, I’m Keysha Whitaker and welcome to the very first pilot episode of Behind the Prose. This is a new show that I created and what we’re going to do during this show is explore the craft of writing through interviews with authors, journalists and editors. It is my hope that by illuminating individual approaches to the writing process, it will help us to demystify the craft by focusing on what other writers are doing in terms of their drafting and revision. This is going to give us writers an opportunity to learn from established and emerging writers, so I’m very happy to be with you today. And I’m happy to have our first guest. My first guest today is Tavonne Carson. She is a writer living in New York City, and she has an MFA from The New School. We’re going to talk to her about her writing process with specific focus on an essay that she wrote that was published in Gastronomica, the Journal of Critical Food Studies.

Tavonne, can you hear me? Tavonne?

01:44 [TC]

Yes.

01:51 [KW]

Welcome. Thank you for joining me today.

01:54 [TC]

Thank you for having me. I’m excited.

1:55 [KW]

I'm excited to talk to you about this essay. In full disclosure we did go to New School together, and that’s where we first met. I’ve had a chance to read your writing through the years and one of the things that we’ll be discussing with our listeners is your unique ability to capture details with description and really come up with these awesome metaphors, analogies, and ways to bring the minute things that we don’t think about to visualization for a writer. That’s definitely something that I want to focus on with you. But let’s get into “Closer” first. Would you mind reading us an excerpt? And if you’re following along out there, you can go to our site. I have a link to the essay “Closer,” and you can click that and you can follow along.

2:57 [TC]

Okay. Should I start now?

3:00 [KW]

Sure. What paragraph are you going to read?

3:04 [TC]

I’m going to read the third paragraph of “Closer.”

Just to give a little bit of introduction; This is an essay about the very last Thanksgiving I spent with my paternal grandmother. Thanksgiving was a big deal - getting the family together for food and just fun - and it was a really big deal that she was able to participate because she had, prior to, been very sick and in the hospital. I’m going to read the third paragraph of “Closer.”

3:42 [TC]

There was a time when she moved from refrigerator to stove and back again in such a way that you’d want to imitate even that, not to mention the dishes housed by the metal-domed cookware that seemed to magically stream from her modest oven. The tin-foil-covered containers accumulated like glistening building blocks on the counters; they took over tabletops. In her slip-ons and sweats, blues wafting like smoke in the background, she chopped the staples—onions, celery, green peppers, a triad of pixilated shades of white and green—shredded cheese for buttered elbow noodles, and basted a turkey that always appeared too large for consumption, with its specially seasoned juices. A boiling blend of collard and turnip greens rattled the lid of the marbled green pot. Chicken and dumplings simmered in creamy, pepper-flecked gravy. A peach cobbler bubbled over in the oven, saturating the air with the smell of caramelized sugar and cinnamon. It was an amazing culinary marathon, not just the meal we’d been waiting for all year but the manifestation of a fullness far beyond the bounds of our stomachs. Grandma made us whole.

04:54[KW]

So how did this essay begin for you?

5:05 [TC]

I think it just began as an idea of the tradition, of having this moment with my grandmother and cooking and there were just so many layers to it because cooking is what brings the house together, brings the family together. I wanted to capture what it really meant to me beyond the mechanics of food and the preparation of food.

5:43 [KW]

In this section you read, let’s just take a look at some of the details you have: “The tin foil covered containers accumulated like glistening building blocks on the counter. Blues wafting like smoke in the background.” When we think of writing and capturing that type of imagery, is that something that comes to you on the first draft or do details like that come through revision?

6:07 [TC]

I think it’s a little of both. In general I feel like I’m a very visual writer. I’ll see chunks of things that I want to write about and then they’ll come together later. It’ll just stand out as a significant image or the sound of a specific phrase that I like; it’ll stand out to me singularly. Then later through revision, I’ll be able to piece it together a little bit better. But for the most part, the images and the way things sound together - the way the words sound together, the way the phrases come together - I think I fall in love with those first and then through revision, try to make it sing.

6:55 [KW]

There is a section in this essay where you write about making the sweet potato pie. This begins for our readers if they are following along - or our listeners - listeners and readers – [*laughter*] about the fifth paragraph down and you begin to describe what it feels like to make the sweet potato pie. This is one of my favorite lines in the fifth paragraph; “The skin of the sweet potato has had its fill of moisture and begun the job of removing itself.”

7:41 [TC]

I felt like the actual making of the pie would be a significant part of the story because specifically it’s what my grandmother and I focused on, and it’s the thing I did with a lot of repetition. I could literally close my eyes and sit and think, “What did I do here? What did it feel like? Was there any specific sensory image, any kind of smell or touch?” I really would just close my eyes and go there. It was not that difficult because I had done it so many times, but I really wanted the specifics and the steps to come out and be really poignant.

8:43 [KW]

I am going to go back to one of my earlier questions when I asked how did this essay begin. Can you tell the listeners, did you sit down and say, I am gonna draft this essay or did it come together piece by piece?

9:05 [TC]

It came together in pieces, I think. I did this for a grad school class, and I think I started with the idea of food writing, and so I wanted the food element to be really strong. But I also wanted to pay tribute to my grandmother as well. I feel like she was a very important element of the story. I think just trying to weave together the different elements - which would be the actual making of the pie and my grandmother’s last Thanksgiving and then her time in the hospital - I really tried to take it step by step but it got a little complicated or a little more detailed as I tried to weave and organize all the different elements that I wanted to include.

10:27 [KW]

Because the essay does open with your grandmother in the hospital bed. You use the awesome metaphor of the throne. Can I just ask you to read those first three sentences there for our listeners?

10:44 [TC]

My grandmother, Dot, oversees the preparation of Thanksgiving dinner from a hospital bed in her living room. She has held court in the kitchen for as long as I can remember. Now, though, her throne is railed, metallic, and fitted with a vinyl-coated mattress that squeaks to announce her every move.

11:07 [KW]

For me the vinyl coated mattress in the living room, I can relate to that on a personal level. What do you feel that metaphor sets up for the reader?

11:30 [TC]

The hospital bed in the middle of the living room is a striking contrast and I wanted to open with that because it gets the reader thinking. I wanted to get them thinking like okay, what’s the reason for the hospital bed? What is going to happen next? Why is she there? How will I get this information as far as to explain why the hospital bed is in the living room? I think it’s just a strong image or a strong place to start. In general the opening sentence should really grab the reader’s attention, and that contrast for me, I felt like it would work. The hospital bed in the living room.

12:38 [KW]

So within the essay you have a flashback of when your grandmother went to the hospital. Can you tell us how you decided where to break to the flashback and come back to the narrative?

12:52 [KW]

For me transition is something I focus on a lot. I see my pieces visually. I try to think of them as movies, like how would one scene transition to another scene? How would they do it if it were visual? I am at the 10th paragraph that reads, “The sign is posted on the wall. No more than three visitors allowed at one time per patient.” The previous paragraph was me getting the call while I was at work that my grandmother was in bad shape, and we needed to get to where she was. I feel the paragraph before puts me, the writer and author, in motion and [it reads] “unofficially my shift was over, I went home, got in my car, we were gone.” That paragraph puts me in motion so it makes sense for me to end up where I was headed in the next paragraph and that was the hospital, with the sign being posted on the wall, and we are clearly at my grandmother’s side.

14:28 [KW]

When you’re in the hospital, that section in the next paragraph, you make this commentary about the kids being left out of the loop. One of the things I think that writers struggle with is how much to include - how much additional detail is relevant? Why did you choose to include those elements about being left out of the loop for this piece?

14:53 [TC]

I think overall there is this theme in the piece of us all making a transition. There was a time when my grandmother did most of the cooking. Now we’re getting older; we have our own assignments. We started to come in contact with the doctors and get all the information we previously wouldn’t have gotten before. It’s showing we are transitioning into another phase. We are moving to a place where we are becoming, seen as more grown up. We’re getting more grown up information. I think that’s something that’s relatable to everyone. You go through these growing phases where you’re no longer the little sister, you’re the mom. You’re no longer you’re mom’s child, but you’re a grown up. Someone who has responsibilities of their own. I felt like this was a significant way to show, hey we’re adult and in this way, we’re starting to be treated like adults.

16:26 [KW]

I’m just looking through this, and I’m noticing now “bed” becomes almost a motif. You open with the bed, and then we have the actual hospital bed that she’s in, and you reference bed a few times as I’m looking through. Can you see any connection or meaning behind that might be related to the piece that subconsciously you weren’t aware of?

17:03 [TC]

I always wondered if other writers intentionally think I’m going to place this here and that's going to be significant of this. I really feel like if the significance is there it's going to come out in the draft and you know, I didn't intentionally to make 'oh this bed representative of this or I want to make it extremely poignant I started focusing on this cooking aspect and this transition of you know, having my grandmother to losing my grandmother, it wasn't something that was in the front of my mind. I feel like when you do write, everything is linked. When you do a free write, it's all connected. I think that explains why sometimes these things happen where other people can see in your writing things that you don't see yourself. And they can see those links that you might not have been aware of but they make sense, you know? There's support for it. But no, I didn't make that an effort of mine to focus on the bed.

18:30  [KW]

Looking back on this and your process is there a section of it that was most challenging for you to write or revise?

18:39 [TC]

Actually, I always struggle with endings. This was my first published piece in a magazine, and I had some back and forth with my editor. She was going through it [essay] with her colleagues and they were really hung up on that section where I talk about my sister in the end. It is the fourth to last paragraph. I will read it for you.

19:23 [TC]

My younger sister, Tanesha, would have you believe that the recipe is as simple as boiling the potatoes. We both know it isn’t. Still, I receive playful teasing when any family dinner, holiday or otherwise, is nearing. She asks, then answers, her own question with a smile so big I can hear that it’s destined to turn into a contagious, laugh-ridden monologue.

“What you gone bring? Sweepotatopie?” The words run together to form one newly termed dessert. “‘I’m Tavonne and all I make is sweepotatopie.’ Don’t nobody want swee-potatopie all the time! Can we get a cake or something?”

I say, “You know what? I can’t stand you,” more laughing than talking. I don’t have to tell her that I bring more than just a pie to the party. She already knows.

20:10 [TC]

I read more than that paragraph, but I just want to give the listeners a sense of the moment. That was a section where the editors were back and forth about “do we really need this?” I see how they could end the piece earlier.

20:38 [KW]

What was their suggestion?

20:40 [TC]

They wanted to cut that piece. Well, there were two editors. One was like “I'm not really sure” and one was like “leave it.” I wanted to leave it because it's the way I wrote it, but they both had their arguments for why it belonged and maybe why it didn't. For me it was important to have that moment. Being in grad school, it was a very workshoppy moment. Workshops at The New School were very much just learning how much of other people's opinion to take into consideration. So it was a really big teaching moment for me because these professional editors differed on what they felt belonged and what didn't, and it was good for me to see and to know that when it comes to your piece, you go with what you feel is the best representation of what you're trying to do. To have one editor on my side and one on the fence, it gave me a lot more confidence, and it helped me to know that writing is personal. You have to take revision with a grain of salt. They ended up leaving it the way that I wrote it so it was a win for me. It was a lesson for me also.

22:36 [KW]

Did you ever worry what would happen if you said no I'm not gonna take that out. Were you afraid they wouldn't run it?

22:50 [TC]

No. She never came across like that. She always came across as kinda unsure [*about it]*. It wasn't like 'Take this out or we aren't going to run it.' It was like, 'Well, we're thinking about this.’ She wanted my input. Honestly, I don't think it would have bothered me that much because I think the piece was good without and I could see the logic in wanting to close it off early, but I never felt worried that they wouldn't run it. It was just a matter of trying to convince them - or convince her - that it was fine the way it was.

23:47[KW]

Before that paragraph, you have some lyrics from the song "Closer" by Goapele. As I read that, it feels like a time transition is that correct?

24:07 [TC]

I didn't think of it that way . . . but I believe it is. A lot of the transitions, I think of them kind of visually. I thought of that song being like the fade out to the next section so I guess it is kind of a time transition. I just never thought of it in those terms. It kind of just faded me out into the next section.

24:49 [KW]

And in the next section, grandma has passed, at the beginning of this paragraph, in time. Is that correct?

24:56 [TC]

Yeah.

24:58 [KW]

So I feel like the lyrics which are "I'm moving higher, going higher and higher, closer to my dreams," I also interpreted that as the grandmother was moving higher, like she's leaving this world. She's going on to her dreams, and then we are brought back to you and your sister talking about carrying on what grandma was doing.

25:24 [TC]

Oh, Keysha, I never thought of that. I never looked at it that way. I would like to take credit for that, but I didn't think of that. I think it’s really beautiful. Like I said, it just goes to show how interconnected things and ideas really are when you're not consciously aware of it. But yeah, that's beautiful, and I hope other people interpret it that way too. That song was just like on repeat the whole weekend. We were in the kitchen; it just never got old. I just wanted to be there. She really liked it to. We all just were vining to it. It couldn't have been a more perfect song for that time.

26:34 [KW]

I'm going to take a second and let our listeners know if you want to call in and ask Tavonne any questions about her writing or her essay "Closer" which we are discussing, you can call us, 347-857-2225, 347-857-2225 or click the chat link on the Blog Talk Radio episode page. As we finish up here Tavonne, I want to ask you a few more questions.

27:08 [TC]

Okay.

27:12 [KW]

Many writers say that looking back on their earlier work, that sometimes they cringe at it, that there are things they would change or do differently. Is there anything in this essay that you feel you might approach a little differently if you were writing it now?

27:34 [TC]

I don't know. I give it [“*Closer*”] its merit. This was a piece that the editors at Gastronomica saw something in, so you know, it's good enough for me. I feel like maybe, I could have put a little less hospital in there. Sometimes, I feel like when I'm speaking, I ramble in my writing, but then you get to go through revisions and kind of clean things up. I'm pretty proud of this piece as a whole and now, having been like years later, I can see that on-the-fence editor's point about the ending a bit more clearly. It could have been a little bit sharper, a little bit more not rumbly at the end. But you know I'm proud of it; I got good feedback from my family and that was like a big thing for me because I am writing about people that are here and I'm writing about my grandmother who everybody had so much to say about and I'm just glad. My biggest worry with this piece was that my family recognized my grandma in it. And I got lots of good feedback and so I'm proud of it. I feel like it got the job done.

30:01 [KW]

If you could go back to the Tavonne . . . when did you write this essay? In 2010

30:10  [TC]

Yes.

30:12 [KW]

If you could go back to the Tavonne in 2010 and give her some advice about her craft and her writer goals, what would you tell her?

30:27 [TC]

That's a good question. What would I tell her? I would tell her to trust herself more. There were a lot of times I heard in grad school, and just in general, there's this idea of “nobody wants to hear about that” or “nobody wants to hear about this.” I would tell her to just trust her gut and be confident in what she was writing because if there is a moment of significance or a certain moment that speaks to you, it can speak to everybody, if you write it well enough. I would just tell her to be more confident and go with your gut. I would still tell me that today, actually. [Laughter] Yeah, just don't worry about how other people are going to perceive what you write before you write it. You know. Just write. No person can write something the way that you can. No person can say the way you write something is not going to be interesting to somebody else. Just do what you were born to do.

32:30 [KW]

Thank you Tavonne Carson.

32:31 [TC]

You're welcome.

32:33 [KW]

Thank you so much for joining us. And by us, I mean all the people in my head because it's only one person in this room and that's me.

[Laughter]

32:45 [TC]

Today. Today, it's only one person. Tomorrow it's the world.

32:51 [KW]

This has been the very first episode of Behind the Prose. A show that explores the craft of writing through in-depth interviews with authors, journalists, and editors, so you can learn and be inspired, and more importantly, write. I'm Keysha Whitaker. Check us out at behindtheprose.com. I'll see you next time.

[END]