**Behind the Prose Transcript**

**Episode 20: Writing intimacy, pain, and hope with memoirist Kate Walter, author of Looking for a Kiss: A Chronicle of Downtown Heartbreak and Healing**

Length: [00:58:17]

Host: Keysha Whitaker (Keysha)

Guest: Kate Walter (Kate)

Released: June 27, 2015

00:00 (Ad)

00:30 (Keysha): This week's episode of *Behind the Prose* is sponsored by Scrivener, a powerful content generation tool. What does that mean? It means it helps you generate your content in a way that makes sense. Check out my post on *Behind the Prose* where I tell you how I'm using Scrivener, the software that I'm falling in love with. For a twenty percent discount go to literatureandlatte.com and enter the code "Prose" at checkout.

01:02 (Music)

01:12 (Keysha): So thank you for being here with me today Kate. Kate Walter, she is a master teacher, an award-winning writer. She has over thirty years of writing experience in editing, and she's a teacher in Manhattan. A college professor. And I met Kate a few years ago through Susan Shapiro, who is like New York City's official Writer in Residence. If you're, like, a writer in New York (Muffled Audio). And I attended some of Susan Shapiro's workshops with Kate Walter. And I actually remember, at times, when she was bringing in pieces of her memoir, *Looking for a Kiss,* which is out now, right?

01:57 (Kate): Yeah, out on June 16th. Yeah, next week.

02:01 (Keysha): Next week, June 16th, Heliotrope Books. But, though, by the time you hear this episode it's out so you need to go and get it. I'm just very, very excited to have you here, Kate.

02:13 (Kate): Thank you, Keysha. I'm excited to be here.

02:16 (Keysha): Again, congratulations and we're gonna get into, you know, your writing process, how you went about finding your agent, pitching the book. But first, I want to ask you, "When did you know you wanted to be a writer?"

02:37 (Kate): Oh, at least when I was in high school, definitely. I was writing for the high school newspaper and I was writing opinion pieces. As early as when I was in high school. And I continued writing for the paper in college and I first started getting published professionally when I was in college, at a local alternative newspaper.

03:03 (Keysha): And in the book you even mention, you know, you do primarily nonfiction. Was it always nonfiction when you started?

03:10 (Kate): Yeah, I didn't have any—I didn't gravitate towards fiction or poetry. Yeah, it was always nonfiction. I guess I have this kind of outspoken voice, and it just kind of fits nonfiction better.

03:24 (Keysha): And how has your writing practice developed over the years when you're not necessarily working on an assignment or covering something?

03:34 (Kate): Ooh, that's a good question. Well, I do keep a journal. And I write in my journal about once or twice a week, or about that. I'm always writing, or if I'm not I'm thinking about what I'm gonna be writing, or I'm editing something in my head. Or thinking, *That would make a good piece, or that would be a good lead.*

03:58 (Keysha): Do you have a specific—so I know you said that you write in your journal a couple of times a week, so then you don't, I assume, have a writer's time where you get up at five or six.

04:10 (Kate): Uh, I like to write in the morning, but sometimes I'm teaching in the morning so that makes it difficult. I'm not one of those people who has a religious routine about, you know, "I write at X-time every day." I write when I have the time, and I write when I have the ideas and when I'm charged up. Which is often.

04:36 (Keysha): So, going a step further, writing when you're charged up, writing when you have the ideas. When you think of your overall publishing plan, like sending essays out, do you have a schedule that you try to keep to where you want to send three or four essay in a specific month?

04:55 (Kate): No, I'm not that, you know, rigid. I mean, I have a full-time job as a college teacher, so I can't do that. What I really like, though, is rewriting, okay. I really enjoy rewriting and I find the first draft is the hardest. hardest thing to do. Once I do a first draft and I take it into the workshop, Sue's workshop that you were just talking about, I'm totally charged up about rewriting. And then I'll rewrite it and rewrite it and rewrite it. It's that first draft that's hard for me.

05:26 (Keysha): Let's talk about that first draft. How do you get through it?

05:31 Oy, well, you know, there's that great quote from Anne Lamott about shitty first drafts, that, you know, "Don't expect it to be perfect." So I don't I just write down whatever I'm writing down, and I know it's gonna change. And I don't get attached or hung up on, "Oh that sentence has to stay there." Because I know very well that when it goes through five or six rewrites, which a lot of the work does—the essays, that first sentence is not gonna be the first sentence. It might not even be in the piece. I'm kind of, you know, just trying to get it on the page and literally fill up the pages in the first draft. Have something to bring in. And the workshop, as I have mentioned in a couple of guest blogs, is so motivating. 'Cause it's like, "If I'm going to the workshop I want to bring something."

06:18 (Keysha): Now let's just explain for someone who's listening who might not necessarily be familiar with the workshop process. A bunch of writers get together and they bring in their work, and they share it, and others talk about it and tell you what they think is working, what's not working, what do they want to hear more of. So let me ask you, and I've seen you've gone through workshop processes, I said, with this book I've brought things. And I first learned—I wasn't aware of the workshop process until I took the (Muffled Audio) at the New School. And it even, in watching you, like, in bringing stuff back you'll have a lot of different opinions. And sometimes people will say, "Oh, change this," or, "I don't like this. This doesn't make sense." And then I've seen you bring something back, and myself included, and somebody else'll say, "Well, why is it *this* or *that*?" And then you're like, "Hmm, but last week somebody said they didn't like it."

07:15 (Kate): That is so true. "Cause, I mean, not everybody, not the same people show up every week. So something that you loved, next week someone will not like. Or people will say, "Why did you take that out? That was so good!" "Oh, well, 'cause someone suggested I take that out." Yeah, you have to weigh it. You have to bring it in a few times. And, you know, ultimately you have to be the final judge of whose comments to take or not take. But it's good to have a lot of choices. I'm sorry, didn't mean to cut you off.

07:46 (Keysha): That's okay. What's your internal barometer for that? And what's your internal barometer for when the comments or when the comment gets to be too much? Or does it ever?

07:59 (Kate): You mean too much? Too harsh? Or too—I don't want to—

08:03 (Keysha): Too many changes.

08:06 (Kate): Too many changes, yeah. Um, I've gotten to the point where I have just said, "This is it." Or, well, if you have a deadline then that's it. There's only so much you can do if you have a deadline. So sometimes that kind of makes it—and also I think you can overdo it. I mean, you can keep rewriting and rewriting and it gets to a point where it's not getting any better, so stop. So you kind of have to know when to stop. I think six drafts has been my absolute maximum on any piece that I've written and sold.

08:36 (Keysha): And you've written and sold a number of pieces. Let's just go through some of the list here. You've been in *The New York Times,* you've been in *Newsday, Christian Science Monitor, The Villager, Daily News, New York Press, AM New York.* Out of all your, out of all the places been in—I guess the question is when you started writing—how does it feel now looking back at this long list of credits? To see, you know, that you've had, you've hit all these places that are coveted for writers.

09:19 (Kate): It feels fantastic. I mean, I'm gonna go back, I mean, I started out as a music journalist. That's how I started out I was, like, you know, the hippie chick, rock reviewer for the school paper. I got into this, you know, underground paper in New Jersey in the sixties and seventies. I came to New York. I was writing music reviews. I was a music reviewer. I wrote for *The Voice,* I wrote for *Spin,* I wrote for *Miss* and, you know, that is a form of expressing yourself, but it's not writing an opinion piece or memoir. And at some point, within the mid-eighties, things were really whacky and out of control in the East Village. And I wrote this piece, it was called "The East Village Flea Market Swamp," okay. And I mailed it into *The Times'* op-ed page, and they published it. And I was like out of my mind with joy, like, "Oh my God. Not only can I write this and get it published, but, you know, it might even have some affect on changing the neighborhood or having an affect on my life." So then after that I kind of switched, and plus as I got a little older, I felt, "I'm a little old to being doing the music thing. Now I'm in my forties, I guess." So, it just switched. I went from music critic to op-eds to personal essays and now the memoirs. So that's sort of been the journey. But it's always been about expressing my opinion.

10:40 (Keysha): What has your experience been like working with editors through the years on your op-eds or personal essays.

10:47 (Kate): Editors make your work better. "Cause, I mean, all the editors that I have worked with have been excellent. I mean, I can't really say I've had any bad editors, and I mean, I'm not a prima donna . If someone wants to change something I go along with it unless it's something that's really like—I mean, I will only fight for a sentence if it's really, really, I think, crucial, okay. And perhaps the editor doesn't realize why. I mean, I'm pretty accommodating and I want to be easy to work with. I don't want to be difficult. And, as I said, I'm not a prima donna and I think that's a mistake because no one's gonna know whether that line came in or out except for you. So, you know, my advice is to be cooperative, and editors make your work better, okay. I mean, I learned so much. When I was at *The Village Voice* doing music reviews I worked with Bob Christgau, Robert Christgau, who's like considered the top rock critic, maybe, who's living today. And he taught me one thing, I'll never forget, he said, "You got the first line, you got the whole piece." And I thought, *That's really good.* And I still think about that today, r you got the first line, you got the whole piece. Yeah, and I mean so many things I've learned from editors, really a lot.

11:56 (Keysha): And you said that editing, you prefer editing, we just heard that little nugget. Are there any little editorial nuggets that you use when—

12:06 (Kate): I prefer rewriting. Rewriting. Not editing.

12:14 (Keysha): Explain. What do you mean?

12:15 (Kate): Well, I mean, I like when I've gotten feedback on the piece and then I sit down and rewrite it. In other words, I'll go to Sue's workshop, okay. There's eight or nine people there. They all put comments on my piece. I'll go home and I'll look through every single one of them and I'll go through, "Okay, here's all the comments on the first page. Hmm, what do I want to change? Here's all the comments on the second page, the third page, the forth one. And then I'll—I consider that rewriting, maybe you call it editing. I guess maybe we're talking about the same thing with different words. I mean, to me, editing is what editors do. Writing and rewriting is what writers do.

12:49 (Keysha): Interesting. Okay. Yeah, so I think we were talking about the same process. When you're sitting down with your work and you're changing it, revising it.

12:59 (Kate): It's rewriting.

13:00 (Keysha): You call it rewriting. That's an interesting distinction.

13:05 (Kate): Right. I think editing is what the editors do, or even what the people in the workshop do to my work.

13:14 (Keysha): Hmm, I like that point of view.

13:16 (Kate): Mm-hmm.

13:17 (Keysha): So, besides, the, going through peoples' comments are there any other rewriting go-to bag of tricks? What else is in your go-to bag of tricks?

13:27 (Kate): Uh, well, I mean, it's really great to have feedback. I mean, if you don't have the wonderfulness of a writing workshop like I have in New York you can always ask a friend who's a really good writer or editor. I mean, I've done that. You know, if I had something that, for whatever reason, couldn't get into the workshop, you know, send it to someone and ask them to have an exchange where I'll edit this woman's work, she lives upstate. She doesn't have a workshop. I'll send her stuff and vice-versa. I mean, always get feedback. I mean, I can't imagine going without it. Although when I was starting out and I didn't have Sue I guess I did do that more so than I do now.

14:12 (Keysha): Are you, when you're working on something and you've gone through the process of getting feedback are you patient in terms of how long it might take? Say you might need to bring something in or when's there's something you want to send out right away how do you manage that?

14:31 (Kate): Right, well, yeah, in that case, you know, maybe I'll ask someone—let's say I'm at the workshop. I might say to Sue, "Could you take another look before." Well also, now Sue has two workshops. I don't know if you know this or not, okay. Sh has Thursday and Sunday, so I can go to the workshop twice a week sometimes, okay. Or, I would ask someone to take a look at it online. Send it to them by email if there's enough time to bring it back to workshop and it has to go out. But most of the stuff I write is not that timely, but sometimes.

15:02 (Keysha): Looking back on some of the first-person essays that you've sold. Do any stick out in your mind as far as you remember distinctly working with this piece and you couldn't get it right or (Muffled Audio)? Or was there a particular outlet where, "I gotta get into this one. I gotta get into this one."

15:23 (Kate): Uh, I mean, there are still plenty of places that I'd love to be in that I've never been in, you know. I've never been in the *Washington Post,* I've never been in the *New York Observer*. I'd like to be in those places. I'm sure I could come up with a lot more. I'm sorry, I forgot the question, but I think that wasn't the answer. What was the question again, Keysha?

15:44 (Keysha): That was the answer. That was the answer. Probably a bad question. The first part of the question was, uh, of the first-person you've sold is there any one essay that sticks out to you in terms of if you could just process or really meaningful in some way or memorable.

15:58 (Kate): Okay, well the one essay that I am really very proud of, and it didn't run in big place, though it did end up in an anthology. Actually, it ran in a few places, but it was first published on a website, then it ended up in and anthology, and in a local paper. It was the piece about cheering the rescue workers after 9/11. I mean, that was such an emotional experience, I mean, the whole 9/11 was so emotional. And I live pretty close to the World Trade Center, and I work at BMCC which is right down there so I didn't have any work fr two weeks. And everyone was completely freaked out as I'm sure you might remember. So what I did was, instead of going to work, was I went outside every day and I sit on the West Side Highway waving my flag, cheering the rescue workers, okay. And I did this for two weeks I think, or maybe more, maybe a month. And the Highway was pretty much closed down, it was just rescue workers, and everyday I would come back to my apartment and I would write down what happened that day, almost like a diary. And then the next day I would go back and something equally amazing would happen. You know, like all these people were stopping the rescue workers and talking to us. Ever day it was something fantastic. Every day I would go there. Every day I would come back. Obviously, I knew I was writing a piece, and I didn't know how it was gonna end. So that was kind of emotional because it was such a powerful experience. And every day was an adventure. And I was just so psyched about writing that.

17:21 (Keysha): And from reading your memoir, *Looking for a Kiss*, I see the, one of the things that I want to talk you about is your ability to take the everyday life experiences, and you have these really good reflective moments.

17:41 (Kate): Right.

17:43 (Keysha): And so I think that essay that you just said is a really good example of what you do throughout the memoir.

17:50 (Kate): Thank you. 'Cause what I realize was it was convenient. I live right by where everyone was doing this. It was not a big deal to jump out of my apartment and walk five blocks to Christopher Street or six blocks. But what I realize, was like, I said to myself, "Why am I doing this?" And I realize this is my therapy. This is how I'm dealing with this horrible tragedy. I'm dealing with it. So it wasn't just for, to show support to the rescue workers. It was for me too. And that's where I think that shows the reflection coming. Plus, I have been in therapy for a long time. So I think that helps, but you're right. I mean, it can't just be like showing, telling. It has to be reflecting as well. To be a good memoir. Or a good essay too.

18:35 (Keysha): And I think that it shows through in *Looking for a Kiss* and I am anxious to get to some questions about that. But before we go there would you please read us an excerpt?

18:51 (Kate): Okay. I'm going to read you an excerpt now, as you know, the book is about the breakup of my long-term twenty-six year lesbian relationship. It was a terrible breakup. My ex just cut me off. Didn't want to talk to me. Didn't want to help me process the breakup or anything. So, we broke up in the spring, May or June, and I have not seen her at all since, and I run into her on the street and it's November, okay. So I'm going to read this scene. When I run into my ex it is like six months, about six months after the breakup. So I'm walking down Second Avenue in the East Village. Here we go, "The November after the breakup I was in the East Village when I saw Slim walking just ahead of me on Second Avenue. I hadn't seen her on the street since April. 'Hey, Slim!' I called out, and she turned and stopped. I had no idea how she would react to me, but I couldn't let this opportunity pass. Looking at her I was shocked. She looked like she had aged six years in six months. Th lines in her face were deeper, her cheeks were sunken, her skin was sallow, and she had more gray in her hair. 'Slim, you don't look good,' I blurted out as if we were still together and I had the right to scrutinize her. 'You're too thin. You've lost more weight.' 'I was exercising too much this summer,' she said. 'But I stopped doing that. I'm not sleeping well,' she admitted. 'That's because you miss me,' I said, and leaned over impulsively kissed her on the lips. I couldn't resist. She was startled but did not flinch. 'What's been going on?' 'I've been hanging out with friends,' she said. 'Like who?' I asked, upset she was hanging out with anybody but me. 'Oh I don't want to get into that,' she said. By now we were approaching the corner where she was going to cross the street. This was my chance to ask what I was dying to know. 'Why did you completely cut me off last summer? That was so cold.' 'I had to do it that way to move on,' she explained. I was tempted to say, 'If this is what moving on looks like then maybe she should have stayed put.' Instead I said, 'Now that time has passed, can we talk?' 'You're the one who wants to be friends,' she said snippily. While lesbians are famous for remaining friends with their ex's this was obviously too stressful for Slim. 'Any chance you'll consider therapy now?' I said, knowing this was a long shot. 'Neh,' she said, waving her hand. Dismissing this idea as if it was crazy. I was concerned that she looked like she was suffering emotionally. This was not just my impression. Slim looked exactly the way my friend Sarah had described her when she ran into her at the end of summer. Sarah said she barely recognized her. When we had reached the corner and I wanted to keep her talking to make her stay. We walked down Second Avenue together hundreds of times and now she was going to cross the street and walk away like I was nothing to her. Slim was the keeper of my history. The only person in New York who knew me when I was in my early thirties struggling to get my byline into major publications. 'I've seen some of your recent photos. Great work,' I said. 'Where did you see them?' she asked, as if I were spying on her. 'Where do you think? In the papers and online. I saw you shot Annie Leibovitz. What was she like?' I asked, knowing her diva reputation. 'She was nice. She was fun and wanted to take my picture too.' Oh great, what was next? Would I read about them together in the gossip pages? We were at the crosswalk and Slim was waiting for the light to change. I told her my niece had a baby girl in September and asked about Slim's parents. She said they were the same. Now she was ready to cross the street, my last chance. She had asked nothing about me. The Slim I loved for twenty-six years was beautiful and buoyant. She had been replaced by this tall, gaunt figure sprinting away from me. 'Why are you acting this way, like a different person?' I said. 'People change,' Slim said, walking away without saying goodbye. I felt the universe brought us together for a reason. While it was true that the breakup was harder on me because she initiated it my friend said that I had suffered well and looked good. It was distressing to see appearing older and unhealthy like something was eating away at her. I was stunned at how much Slim's personality and attitude, and even her appearance, had changed Seeing her this way shook me up. When I told my therapist about this encounter, Dr. R said the post breakup situation seemed eerie. She wondered whether I had been a stabilizing influence who kept Slim grounded and she was adrift without me. The fact Slim appeared to be struggling made our breakup seem more tragic. I wished I could heal her. Rescue her from herself, yet I couldn't even heal myself from losing her."

22:55 (Keysha): Thank you.

22:56 (Kate): Yes. That's the excerpt I chose 'cause it's a tight little scene.

23:03 (Keysha): I—there's so much in that section that I really just want to jump into the unpacking of some of the things that you do in the book. But I also want to talk to you about the business of the book before we get there, so I'm gonna try to stick to format.

23:20 (Kate): Sure.

23:21 (Keysha): So the book opens in spring of 2005, right?

23:26 (Kate): Correct.

23:27 (Keysha): And at one point during the book you talk about how you had already finished a memoir that you were working on or trying to sell. And then I think—which is not this one, then later you begin working on, excuse me, *Looking for a Kiss*, right?

23:47 (Kate): Well, there's actually—if we count the initial attempts there's really three drafts, okay. The first draft I knew wasn't really something I could send out. I was just, like, getting scenes on paper. It didn't really have a shape or a format, so we can call that draft one if you want. Had a little too much about my childhood 'cause unless you're famous, that's probably not, people don't want to hear that on the whole. Second draft had—it was about my relationship with Slim. I knew it was going to be about that, but, and I did try to sell that and I did send it around. But that draft actually ended with the breakup, okay. So, I guess I thought people would want to read a book about this couple who was struggling and they would want to see, "Do they stay together or not?" So, I kept getting feedback from agents like, "Everyone—the reader knows what's gonna happen before the narrator does." Like, in other words, the reader knew this couple was gonna break up. And I thought *Oh my god that's a bad comment. I need to go back to the drawing board if the reader knows what's gonna happen before the narrator.* So, I completely switched it up and I basically created a new book that started with the breakup. And that showed how I healed my life. Now that was obviously salable and more interesting and it had something more to offer to the reader. And I was literally, like, doing my life and then writing about it the next week so it was like writing while my life was in progress, as opposed to writing about the past. Although some of it was the past, but I mean most of it was like I was writing as it actually took place.

25:20 (Keysha): What do you think that did for the details and the life of the work?

25:29 (Kate): Well I think it was very strong 'cause it was happening, I mean, literally while it was going on. And plus, again, I was bringing these pages into the workshop and I was getting really great feedback so that, you know, inspired me to keep going. And also, you know, at the time some of the book talks about going online and dating. And I guess to some extent I was dating to get material, to a partial extent. So structure's really important. I would have to say if you're gonna try and sell a memoir. I mean, you really have to figure out what the narrative arc is and the structure. And I didn't have it on the other drafts. When I got it then I was able to find a publisher.

26:14 (Keysha): You said that one of your—in draft two the previous comments were that the reader knew what was gonna happen before you do. And in this, well, the published version. In the final book, I made the comment, if I can loom on my list of scribblings here. I noticed that a couple times the reader is like, "Wait, what?!" When, at the moment the narrator's like, "Wait, what the hell's going on," the reader's like, "What the hell's going on." We're surprised by something Slim does, or we're just as—who is Slim, who is your ex-girlfriend.

26:54 (Kate): Right, I was surprised too, you know!

26:58 (Keysha): I was surprised at the same time. That, I think, is— How deliberate did you go through to get to that place? How deliberate was that?

27:14 (Kate): Well, I mean, I would bump into her at places. I certainly wasn't intending to do that. Like some of the stuff just kind of fell into my lap. Like I would go to a lesbian dance party and she would be there in some crazy outfit, or something. You know what I'm saying? It's like I didn't go there thinking, *Oh my God, I hope I run into her!* It was actually the opposite, *I hope I won't run into her.* But, a lot of these things, you know, I was just living my life and I was writing the book and I was recording what happened. I mean, a lot of the things in the book were kind of unexpected. Like joining the church. Meeting Reverend Jackie. You know, I just started going there 'cause I was sad on Sunday mornings and I felt, like, kind of lost and lonely. And it just, like, opened up this whole new door of this whole new life of going to this church. So then of course I put that in the book.

28:04 (Keysha): Oh, what I guess I mean is how did you have to craft, or did you focus on when the reader—withholding certain information or controlling the pacing to where the reader is surprised when the narrator is surprised.

28:18 (Kate): Uh, I'm not sure if I did that, that deliberately or not. I honestly don't remember. I don't remember. I can't really answer that question.

28:29 (Keysha): Well, it happened. So—

28:31 (Kate): Well, I'm glad. I'm glad there was an element of surprise 'cause apparently there wasn't in the other draft that didn't find a home.

28:39 (Keysha): No, and I think that, that's definitely one of the things that I noticed and it made me feel akin to the narrator. You know, puzzles and like, "Really, what the hell is going on here?"

28:54 (Kate): Right, right.

28:55 (Keysha): One of the other things that I noticed about your prose it that the pacing, so when we talk about pacing, the language is not like flowery and it doesn't languish. It moves, it's hard. I guess it's almost like on a schedule, right? It stops and it keeps going. It stops and it keeps going.

29:21 (Kate): Yeah, I've always been kind of a like a very direct, fast writer. That's sort of my style. I talk fast. I walk fast. I eat fast, you know. I think that's just my style. I'm very direct. In fact, some people have even told me to be less direct, but that's just my style. You know, it's pretty fast-paced.

29:43 (Keysha): In terms of your editing with Heliotrope did you have any changes or recommendations in terms of style?

29:51 (Kate): Yeah the copy editor came up with a lot of ideas. And, in fact, the first chapter which is pretty wild about the vibrator and everything, that was not the first chapter. I mean, I believe—I'm holding the book right here in front of me. The first chapter when I submitted it, and when I sold it, I think it's what's really the second chapter when she breaks up with me. That was the first chapter. And my publisher had said that she thought, C*ould we begin with something a little sexier? And also show the relationship before it broke up.* So I said, "That's interesting." So the first chapter: Relationship as Reality Show, that was in the other version. The version that didn't sell. So, actually, there was some good merit in my having done that because, so I just lifted that chapter from the other version and made that the first chapter. So, that was a big change. That was a big change, was putting in a new first chapter, which came from the other version. And the copy editor made a lot of good suggestions, but that was the biggest change.

30:57 (Keysha): Did you have, and so in your book you have, you talk about different sex scenes, and— Did you have any reservation about, and I don't know in any of your previous essays, but do you have any reservations about being so graphic? And I don't mean graphic in a Puritan way, but like, putting it all out there.

31:16 (Kate): Well, I'm a little concerned about the reaction, especially from my ex. Assuming she reads it. She knows the book is coming out. I'm not really—well obviously I'm worried about my mother, and I asked her not to read it. I mean, she's ninety-three. I mean, there's even a piece on my blog about having nightmares, you know, about—and if someone said you've achieved your dream and now it's giving you nightmares. I mean, I went through just a whole series of incredible nightmares for months. And it was all about exposing myself, yeah. So, but I mean, it's happening, you know? I'm gonna try and think of that quote from the Don Miguel Ruiz, "Don't take anything personally when people"—that's one of the four agreements. Do you know that book?

32:03 (Keysha): No.

32:04 (Kate): *The Four Agreements.* Yeah, "Don't take anything personally." I'm going to put that over my desk when the book comes out, you know? As far as peoples' reactions.

32:12 (Keysha): I give you—I applaud you for that. Because I think it's awesome, courageous and awesome. I don't know if I would have the guts to do it. And I find it funny that you asked your mom not to read it. I think that's cute.

32:28 (Kate): Right, well she said wouldn't, but who knows? Maybe she'll read it anyway. I mean, you're talking about the lesbian sex scenes I'm assuming, right? There was a couple of scenes with men too.

32:39 (Keysha): Yeah, towards the end of the book, all of 'em.

32:42 (Kate): Yeah, yeah. I mean, I couldn't write this book without putting in the sex scenes. I mean, it's about a relationship that ended and it's about being gay. It's about my life. I mean, I couldn't write this book without that, you know. I don't think it would have been the right—a bit. The story's got to be the story, you know?

33:01 (Keysha): Now in terms of the story, because you do a placement of your, I guess before you came out, in dating men. And that comes, in like sort of, coming into who you are a lesbian and that comes like at the end of the book, not where we would necessarily think we would necessarily think, *Oh, we learn this information out earlier.*

33:24 (Kate): Right. I'm sorry, what was the question?

33:30 (Keysha): Explain that choice.

33:31 (Kate): Why I put it in there?

33:33 (Keysha): Yeah.

33:35 (Kate): Well, I mean, there was some discussion about moving that up. I mean, I know I do it as a flashback. I've gone to my fortieth college reunion and then I flash back to when I was straight and when I was going out with men, when I was in college. I kind of wanted to keep the Slim story going, fast. Again, the pacing. Okay, we've got this couple, they've broken up, there's only one flashback at the beginning, which is when I come out to my parents, 'cause I felt like that was sort of you really needed a bit of a background about my family, my Catholic background. So I put that in. It's obvious I'm a lesbian, okay. I mean, I felt like I could hold off on the coming out stuff until later because I didn't want to stop the narrative. I mean, it's the story of Kate and Slim that's the book, okay? So I was afraid if I put that in sooner it would slow it down. But that was discussed between me and my publisher and she said, "It's up to you." And I said, "Oh, let's put it in the back." Because I also felt, now you know me, now you're interested in me, now you might really want to know my whole story about when I was straight. "Cause I just felt it was okay to do that.

34:42 (Keysha): Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

34:43 (Kate): It was about pacing.

34:44 (Keysha): Yeah, and I noticed, and the reason I asked was to say, "Oh, this really works here!" You know—

34:50 (Kate): Oh, thank you.

34:52 (Keysha): Normally you wouldn't have expected to see that here. That's why I asked what was your—and it comes, I think, see now you sent me the Galley PDF and I uploaded that to my NOOK. So sometimes things are a little crazy, but as I'm looking at it but it looks like it comes right after the chapter where you meet your old friend.

35:14 (Kate): Exactly. I go to my college reunion and I thought, *Well that's a pretty good way to segue into it.* I'm on the train riding back from New Jersey back to Penn Station, New York. And it was really weird, again, a lot of weird things happened when I was writing the book. I'm on the train and I'm trying to nap, and there's these really drunk women on the car with me, and they're singing, "You've got a friend. . ." really off-key. And I said, "That's so weird. I just saw my old friends." And then I thought, and then as I was writing the book I thought, *That's a really good place to put that chapter with Joe, my college boyfriend.* 'Cause, you know, when I was hanging out with those women I was straight, and I was dating Joe, you know?

35:56 (Keysha): In, I have a note here, this was part two—you, I think this is after the breakup, or at the time of the breakup, I believe it might be a phone conversation. Correct me—and you give a list of things that you've done together, and it's like you're moving through time in the middle of this scene going through all places, like, where you've traveled and where you've been with Slim. And it feels like, you know, like sort of a plane flying over all these different elements. Okay, this is very broad but do you know what I'm talking about?

36:33 (Kate): I think there's one scene, yeah, it's towards the beginning. I'm talking about—there's pictures on our bulletin board that we had in our apartment on St. Mark's Place that had pictures of all these different places that we had visited. You know, I was trying to, you know, really establish, like, we were really a tight couple who took vacations together and went to family parties together. And all that kind of stuff. You know the kind of pictures you'd put on a bulletin board in your house. Sort of like an overview of the relationship I'm trying to give you, like, and overview from here to there.

37:07 (Keysha): Yeah and then you're writing you had traveled. You had went to Italy or something.

37:12 (Kate): I'm sorry?

37:13 (Keysha): You had traveled. You guys had went to Italy or somewhere.

37:17 (Kate): Yeah, Spain and, you know, Amsterdam, and places like that.

37:23 (Keysha): Yeah, I thought that, that listing worked well there. "Cause usually you'd—and it's not a list in order of one, two, three, but it's just item after item. And usually you would think that something like that wouldn't work, but I felt like it worked very well there—

37:38 (Kate): Thank you. Yeah, I was trying to give, you know, like a capsule overview of the relationship and the scope of it. And, you know, what we had done over the years.

37:50 (Keysha): So, in this book you have Slim, which is her nickname?

37:59 (Kate): Yeah, that's a nickname. Yeah, I'm not giving her real name.

38:04 (Keysha): Dr. R and then there's(Muffled Audio) and some other character, so I guess—

38:08 (Kate): Yeah, I mean the names of a lot of people have been changed. Dr. R, her real name is Ronny. That's a name I use. Slim is a name I've been using for years. We created that name a long time ago when I was writing a column and she didn't want me to use her name so we came up with that. Because at one point someone had said, "Oh, she lost a lot of weight." And someone else said, "Oh, you're so slim." And everyone kept saying, "Oh, you're so slim. You're so slim." So we called her Slim. And, yeah, there's a few real names, obviously, like Reverend Jackie. I mean anyone who's an identifiable public figure I use their real name. I mean, I'm pretty sure that was my rule of thumb.

38:52 (Keysha): So beside this journey that Kate sets on in the book to heal from this relationship and find, like, kind of figuring out what went wrong and how to fix her life essentially. There's also a religious or spiritual theme, sort of secondary. Tell us, when did you see that theme emerge and how did you deal with it in the writing and rewriting?

39:21 (Kate): Well, yeah, that's a good question. See, none of that was in the second draft, or whatever it is the earlier draft that didn't sell. Because, remember, that draft ended with the breakup. I was kind of just doing these thing 'cause I needed to do stuff to make myself feel better, okay? But then I realized this is interesting to write about. I mean, I sold as essay about how I joined Middle Collegiate Church. And, obviously, somehow I knew that had to be in the book. And then I realized there were lots of pieces. There was going to Omega, there was going to the Chant Weekend, there was going to the workshop where I learned how to become more intuitive. I mean I was doing a lot of, like, workshops and spiritual stuff because it made me feel good. And, but I also realized it was interesting and it would become part of the book 'cause it was part of the healing process. I'm not sure when exactly I realized all these things, but. . . .

40:21 (Keysha): Yeah, a side note, in your book you reveal that you went to Catholic school all your life, and so did I.

40:28 (Kate): Oh yeah, yeah. I didn't realize that, Keysha. Something we have in common. Something else.

40:35 (Keysha): Elementary school, high school, and college.

40:38 (Kate): You went to Catholic college too?! No.

40:40 (Keysha): Yes, yes.

40:42 (Kate): Oh my goodness. That I did not know. Yeah, so we were both really indoctrinated.

40:48 (Keysha): Yeah, it's for better or for worse.

40:52 (Kate): Well, you know, I felt I got a good education. I could've done without all the religious stuff, but you, you know, you can't separate the two when you go to Catholic school.

41:01 (Keysha): Yeah. And then my parents sent me to a Baptist church at home.

41:06 (Kate): Oh that's funny. See, my parents were very Catholic so it was all, it was reinforced at home and in school.

41:14 (Keysha): And, you know, in the book you talk about them with the, they have the statues of the saints and stuff up. And as you're saying that I'm just picturing burning the sage and all sorts of things like that. So—

41:30 (Kate): Yeah, I mean, there's a lot of parallels, you know, it's like, that's one of the things about joining the Church. When you come from a very, very religious background and then you kind of drop it all like I did there's sort of like this hole in your soul as I put it, that, something's missing. And for years I tried to, you know, replace that with yoga and the Hinduism and the chanting and stuff. And that was fine, but it wasn't really quite the same because I was raised Catholic, Christian. You know, it's different than Hinduism, and so by joining Middle Collegiate I was able to kind of, you know, bridge the gap of this something that was missing. But at the same time I knew I wasn't going back to the Catholic Church. So it was kind of like a great way to sort of fill in the pieces. And now I feel like I have this sort of very integrated spiritual life of the past, the present, and it's a mixed bag.

42:25 (Keysha): Now even though I said that your prose is very driving there are, you have lots and lots of lines in there that are just really, like, simple and beautiful.

42:37 (Kate): Thank you.

42:38 (Keysha): And I wrote a couple of them down on my little notes here and I'll try and pull up the bookmark on my—

42:43 (Kate): Thank you.

42:44 (Keysha): (Muffled Audio) You use the phrase, "Slim was the keeper of my history." And then another line, you said, "I regarded her journalism career as the child we had never had."

42:59 (Kate): Right.

43:00 (Keysha): (Muffled Audio) just kind of hit me. Can you talk a little bit about, you know, do you concentrate on crafting something like that?

43:14 (Kate): I always thought that about the child we never had, you know? 'Cause we had talked about did we want to have a kid, and I mean I don't think either of us was really that keen on it. And so we revisited that once or twice, and we both, you know, we just didn't think it would work for us. And, you know, 'cause she was so focused on her career, her career so it was pretty easy to see that. And I created her career. I mean, I'm not making that up she thanks me for it many times and told me her career was forever dedicated to me. You know, 'cause I started it by accident when I asked her to take some pictures to go with my story, so, you know, it was like the child we never had because she was, like, so involved with her career. There never could've been a child in the picture. 'Cause I didn't want to be, like, doing that full-time. So, it just—I always thought that in the back of my head. So when I was writing the book that just kind of came out. And, I mean, that's the thing when you break up with someone that you were with from when you were young. I mean, I was like thirty when I met her, fifty-seven when we broke up. I just, I was almost thirty-one. And, you know, this is the person who's kept your history. And, you know, I lost a lot of friends like my friend Joe died from AIDS. I mean, a lot of people who knew me when I was younger, unfortunately, are not around. So, to lost her and to lose the relationship and to not remain friends that was really like, a really big loss. Yeah.

44:41 (Keysha): So in the book we see you going through the psychic, through your therapist, through various spiritual channels and experiences, and then you begin online dating. And we see this, I guess a parade of dates that you go on—

45:06 (Kate): Yeah, there were more too that didn't make it in the book. Yeah, yeah, yeah. But also a lot of weird things happened like that woman I'm dating at the end, where again nothing happened, no kiss or anything, but I mean it was completely bizarre that she had dated Slim. And then she told me all this stuff about her that was like, "Oh my God." And I just felt like as I was writing the book too there was a lot of synchronicity, like things just kept falling into my lap. And even now as I was going over the book. Proofreading it for the last six months, all these weird, synchronistic things would happen like I would, you know, turn on—I would just finish reading the chapter about Joe and I would turn on the radio and I would hear "Ruby Tuesday" by the Stones which was one of his favorite songs. It was like, I don't know, I just feel like I was in this zone when I was writing the book and proofreading it. And, you know, I took that all to be a good omen.

46:01 (Keysha): At the end of the book was a person, I think the character's name is Dana. Is that right?

46:08 (Kate): Dana, yeah, yeah.

46:10 (Keysha): And so I think the traditional, and people I try not to give to many spoilers, but we really do have to get into how these writers do their stuff, so I have to give a little bit of one.

46:21 (Kate): Okay.

46:22 (Keysha): We see that Kate has been through hell, right, with this Slim breakup.

46:32 (Kate): Yeah.

46:33 (Keysha): And we're rooting for her and we're thinking she's gonna break through. She's doing this online dating thing, and we're gonna end with—

46:42 (Kate): With a kiss.

46:44 (Keysha): Yeah. We're gonna end with, you know, (Muffled Audio) parade of people, and she's gonna get there. And we see with Dana for moments it feels like she's gonna get there, and then she doesn't.

46:57 (Kate): Right.

46:58 (Keysha): And, you know, there's a different ending in the book. And so I guess—what is to be said for quote unquote "traditional happy endings?"

47:14 (Kate): You know, I joke around and, you know, a friend of mine who blurbed the book she said is was the queer *Eat, Pray, Love.* And I joke around, but I didn't meet the sexy Brazilian at the end like Elizabeth Gilbert did. So, in a way, I think it makes it more realistic. I mean, not that she made that up, she was just lucky that happened. Good for her. It probably helped her have a best-seller, but that didn't happen to me. I didn't meet the sexy love of my life at the end of the book so— But in a way I think that's more realistic, and I did come to another conclusion, which is just as valid, that I'm okay on my own.

47:47 (Keysha): Mm-hmm. I think that it was comforting for me because as you said it is a realistic thing that you can't necessarily, you can't package a life up into a happy bow ending.

48:00 (Kate): No. No, you can't. It's like, especially if you're writing a memoir. And as I said I was kind of writing this as it happened, you know? And then I rewrote it and rewrote it and rewrote it.

48:13 (Keysha): So in the last chapter of the book you have the scene with the lady who drives up.

48:20 (Kate): Yeah.

48:21 (Keysha): On the side of the road, and she's asking for a kiss. She says that she wants to figure out if she's gay or not, something to that effect, right? And, you know, you don't give it to her to your credit and you go and you find out that she's been doing this for years, driving around. And so one, I think this is an example of one of those synchronous events that you're talking about, but you use that to reflect on that, "Well, at least I don't need a kiss. Like, I'm fine."

48:51 (Kate): I'm not desperate.

48:53 (Keysha): Yeah. Did you know that at that moment or did that come to you in your writing?

48:57 (Kate): I was looking for the ending of the book. I really felt that was like a gift from the writing gods. I was like, "Oh my fucking god!" I ran home from the gay center and I was like (Typing Sound Effects). And I went to the computer and I was like, "Oh my god this is really a gift from the writing gods." 'Cause I couldn't quite figure out the ending, and I thought that was perfect, you know? I mean, it was like a real gift. 'Cause I couldn't really end it with I'm dating Dana, you know? So that was great getting that. Having that encounter. Yeah. And it was funny too, I thought.

49:37 (Keysha): It was funny. And I think it just adds this other layer of, like, life goes on and there's still gonna be crazy people out there.

49:44 (Kate): Right, right, right, right, right, right.

49:49 (Keysha): (Muffled Audio) watch yourself, you know?

49:51 (Kate): Right. Right.

49:57 (Keysha): Is there anything that you would do differently, as you approach—are you working on a second book?

50:06 (Kate): Not yet, but I would like to get started. I've been kind of caught up in the publicity element, you know? Working with a small press you have to do a lot of your own publicity. So I've been working on that. And once we get the book launched, and the parties and all that stuff an the events, yeah, I'll start thinking about another book. I was even toying, I know I said I don't write fiction, but I was even toying with that idea. But I really don't know at this point what the next book is gonna be, but I certainly want to have one.

50:37 (Keysha): What have you learned from this process that you think will help you in the next one?

50:42 (Kate): I have learned that you have to overcome the fear, okay? I mean, especially if you're writing a memoir, like you said, you didn't know if you'd be able to go there with the sex. I wanted to publish a book, okay? I mean, I'm sixty-six, I mean, how much longer am I gonna have. If I don't publish it now, it's like, "What am I gonna wait till I'm eighty?" I mean, I doubt that's possible, but you know. I feel like I want to do it now while I'm still working and really energetic. And I just kind of felt like, *This is it, Kate. This is your chance. And if you don't do it now you're not gonna do it.* So I just kind of went full steam ahead. And I'm gonna write this book 'cause this is my story, this is what I want to say, and I'm gonna sell it. And, you know, come hell or high water— This has been going on, this book's been going on for over like ten years, from start to finish. So, I mean, putting so much of my heart and soul and my life into it I was determined to do whatever I had to do to get it published, yeah. I didn't want to die without having published a book. So I feel like I took some risks. I took some chances, and I hope it'll be well-received.

51:59 (Keysha): Well, I'm definitely dedicated to helping put the word out, and directing people to look at (Muffled Audio) on Heliotrope Books, out on June 16th, which by the time you hear this it will be June 16th. Also, they should go to your website, which is katewalter.com and you have classes and workshops. You teach writing, besides teaching at the MCC you do independent work, and you have classes at NYU.

52:31 (Kate): Correct.

52:32 (Keysha): So people can sign up. And you have your list of upcoming book and events. Is there anything in particular you want to—

52:38 (Kate): Uh, I would really like to, you know, restart the workshops in my apartment again. They kind of went on hiatus when I was busy doing the book. And I'm also thinking of trying to start workshops that focus on writing for healing. I mean, I've seen a lot of people doing that. It seems like a really good focus, although, you know, in the past people can come and write about whatever they want. But, I mean, writing this memoir was really cathartic. It was really part of my healing process. And I feel that writing can really be a tool for healing. I mean, as I said, I'm writing about going to church and chanting and doing rituals, but really the writing itself was extremely healing. And I think I like to maybe start some workshops that focus on that. And I'd love to be one of those writers who goes to these beautiful places like Cape Cod and Key West and those workshops, so I hope that'll happen in my future.

53:30 (Keysha): Well I'm right here rooting for you on the sidelines, in the background. Kate Walter, you're described as the Village Scribe. I like that.

53:40 (Kate): Thank you. Well, Keysha, I really appreciate this interview and I hope I will see you in New York at one of my book events.

53:49 (Keysha): Oh, you will. I will make the trek. I have to. I feel akin to this book, like I've seen it in paper before it is in print, and I think that's a really, really cool and inspiring thing, so—

54:03 (Kate): Well thank you. I appreciate this interview a lot.

54:06 (Keysha): Tell me about the cover, the picture, the cover picture.

54:09 (Kate): Oh, the cover picture. This is hilarious. Some people think that young me. It's not. I took that picture last year at Gay Pride. After the Dyke March, the Dyke March is this illegal march. Please know about it, but they don't have a permit. The women gather at Bryant Park, 42nd Street. They march down Fifth Avenue screaming, yelling, whatever. When it gets down to Washington Square Park people get all excited and they jump into the fountain, okay? Some people take their clothes off, but that's not what's happening in this picture. So, I was just there and I was just taking pictures. And then that was a year ago, this month. And then my publisher said, you know, "I know you take pictures. Maybe you can come up with a picture for the cover." 'Cause I was sending all, these, like, little sunsets with the Empire State Building and she was like, nyeh, nyeh, nyeh. So finally I said, "Well, how 'bout this." And as soon as I sent her this she was like, "Oh my God. This is it." 'Cause she felt it was like showing her, opening the door to, like, another world. I mean, my publisher is straight and she thought, *This is, like, really showing us little glimpse of lesbian life.* And I've gotten a lot of great feedback about the cover.

55:20 (Keysha): Yeah, it's amazing.

55:23 (Kate): Yeah, I don't know how well you can see it from what you're looking on it. If you're looking at it online, but I mean if you see it, you can see the water from the fountain splashing up. It's a pretty cool picture. Yeah. And I'm dying to know who those women are. I was juts talking to my publisher about, maybe we should run a contest to see if anyone can identify them and the women and whoever identifies them get a free autographed copy of the book.

55:49 (Keysha): That's a good idea. It could be something—*Looking for a Kiss*, cover model. That's like—

55:54 (Kate): I have no idea who these two women are. There both really young and really cute, and I think it's hilarious that some people thought it was me, though it's not.

56:02 (Music)

56:07 (Keysha): So that brings us to the end of episode 20. I hope that you enjoyed it. I encourage you to check out Kate's book. I'm not there in New York with her tonight, celebrating her launch and celebrating pride. She actually had a book reading tonight in Westbeth, in Greenwich Village. But I'm glad that I am here and I was able to post her show page and post her show, so I'm still a part of it, kind of, in a way. Stay tuned because as I promised next month I have exclusive podcasts from the Creative Nonfiction Writers' Conference. I have an interview coming up with the author of *Boo*, it's a young adult novel. Neil Smith is the author, he's a Canadian author. And I also have an interview with the founder of Write a House. Are you a struggling writer who needs a place to live, like, for free. Well, make sure you listen to *Behind the Prose* next time. Possibly nest week. Maybe the week after. And I'll give you the exclusive interview on how to get a free house. *Behind the Prose* is produced and hosted by a writer, me, Keysha Whitaker, for a writer, you, insert your name here, from a den in Pennsylvania. Until next time. Listen, learn, and write.

57:41 (Music)

57:48 (Ad)

* Having trouble with first drafts? Maybe Kate Walter's perspective on them at [5:31] might help.
* Have an opinion about editors? Kate does, and what she says at [10:47] might surprise you.
* Interested in reading *Looking for a Kiss*? Go to [18:51] to listen to the author read an excerpt from her memoir.
* Coincidences are often built into fiction, but what about nonfiction? Listen to Kate discuss all of the coincidences that happened while writing her memoir by skipping to [45:06].