**Behind the Prose Transcript**

**Episode 19: Memoir meet Poetry – Kira Lynne Allen crafts debut book in two genres**

Length: [00:25:56]

Host: Keysha Whitaker (KW)

Guest: Kira Lynne Allen (KA)

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00:00 (KW): 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.

00:32 (Music)

00:40 (KW): This week's guest is Kira Allen and I have to thank her for being so patient with me. And her interview was supposed to come out the, I think May 31st. The last Sunday in May. And, you know, it's a couple weeks later but it's finally here, and I hope that you enjoy it. I tried a little something different with the audio this week, which also added extra time into the editing process, but I hope it works out for you. I enjoy talking to her. I met Kira in twenty twelve at the Voices of Our Nation Arts Foundation Workshop for Writers of Color. Kira Allen, she's a poet, a teacher, an activist, but I didn't know that then. I just knew she was a warm and inviting person who was ushering people to give voice to their writer's dreams through a week-long vision board project that we completed at VONA. And I never would've imagined that a person with such a beautiful and peaceful presence had undergone so much life trauma. Sexual abuse, racism, epilepsy. In her new book, *Write This Second*, Allen takes us through her journey. It's a poetry memoir. When I interviewed her I admitted that I was curious about how she would pull off a strong narrative through line and I was also concerned about my own ability to even understand the poems. Like, my childhood poet influence is Shel Silverstein, so heavy abstract lines are lost on me. Suprisingly, Kira moves through time and space and plays with imagery with still having a concrete aspect to her poetry that I can grasp. In short, and I don't feel stupid at the end of the poem either, and here's her view on her poetry style.

02:41 (KA): First of all, let me say that I know that there are lots and lots of books of poetry in the world. I'm not one that really believes poetry should be abstract. I came up through a program called Poetry for the People out of UC Berkeley. And it's poetry written by and for the people. Speaking for the masses. Speaking for the voiceless. And the whole idea of, you know, an allusion to the seventeenth-century, or, like, I'm not mad at anybody who does that. I'm sure it's very brilliant and it takes lots of time. Not what I do, by any stretch of the imagination.

03:25 (KW): What Allen does do in her book, *Write This Second*, is craft a memoir that has as strong of a through line as any prose book. It gives you all of the tension and conflict of a narrative arc that pulls a reader along, keeps you rooting for the narrator, and just when you think everything's okay and what the hell else could possibly go wrong, there it is. Another trauma that catches the reader and the narrator by surprise, and almost, Allen recalls, curtailed her life recovery, not to mention the book.

03:59 (KA): The song that you're talking about that comes toward the end of the book is also part of what took me so long to bring this book to market. I ended up in 2001, I was halfway through grad school, and I was, you know, I'd been writing at that point prolifically for about ten years. I'd been teaching. I'd been in school. I was a professor. I was really, really as engaged as I possibly could be as an author, a community organizer, et cetera, et cetera. And two weeks before 9/11 happened my daughter—

04:48 (KW): I know, I know. I never cut out spoilers, but this one, this one you have to read for yourself.

04:54 (KA): And I kind of lost it. And I lost it for a long time. I kept up the pretense of living, but I didn't really write. And I didn't really engage with people. I had a hard time opening mail, or answering calls. I was pretty checked out.

05:14 (KW): Kira says through those years she didn't realize she was lost.

05:18 (KA): Because it wasn't something that I just woke up and someday and said, "Oh, I think I won't participate anymore." It just sort of happened. And I just kept puttering along. And showing up in some ways, but in a very sort of minimal way. And so, one of the things that I think is a phenomenon of that is that I continued to do VONA every summer as a way of saying I'm still a writer. Even though I wasn't writing. But also to say that when you choose, as I did, not everybody does, but when you choose recovery life still happens and you still have to find ways to function, and so—

06:04 (KW): In February 2013, Kira did have a wake up moment, which we do see in one of the poems in the later half of the book. In August she met a friend and former editor of Prashanti Press who encouraged her to submit her work.

06:18 (KA): The initial response was not yes and not no, we want you to really work on title and structures and order a little bit.

06:29 (KW): She made some changes, resubmitted it in October, and signed a contract in January, beginning an editorial process that went well into 2014.

06:40 (KA): I originally had this book—I want to say it was fifty-five poems, so it was significantly longer when I originally submitted it. Completely different order, completely different title, like, kind of all over the place. And it really wasn't until I sat with editor and sat with the (Muffled Audio) itself, and looked for, you know, what made sense in terms of how things happened, because it is a memoir.

07:13 (KW): Kira used her prime writing time, usually at night around ten p.m., to finish her book.

07:19 (KA): I was really, really obsessive. I would go in bursts bases on what kind of was the section or the goal. So, you know, just like I submitted originally kind of late August and turned around and resubmitted in October. And my publisher was like, "Wow! That was really fast. I didn't expect that." But it became, sort of, an obsession. October is my birthday month. And I really wanted to be able to say, prior to my birthday, that I had done this.

07:56 (KW): But the obsession to finish the book by her fiftieth birthday in October 2014 was driven by something not writerly at all. I was driven by a scary sinister suspicion that, once again, she'd befall another generational demon.

08:16 (KA): So my grandmother, my father's mother, died when he was nineteen and she was fifty. And then my father died when I was nineteen and he was fifty. So I was approaching fifty with a nineteen-year-old daughter and having a lot of fear that, you know, maybe, I would be—this book would be going out into the world without me. And so, you know, that kind of little window of time passed. Like she's turned twenty and I'm still here, and everything really did come out. But there was a point where I was pushing and pushing and pushing, just in case. Which is kind of an odd thing to say, but it's true. And so, you know, I wouldn't have—like I'd meet with the editor and I'd go with this set of things to work on, and pretty much that's all I would do for, you know, however many days or hours it took me.

09:29 (KW): The truth, telling it and protecting it, was also an integral part of the editing process. After many discussions with the publishing house and the legal team Kira opted for changing or omitting names, words, and some relationships to make certain pieces anonymous.

09:46 (KA): There was a whole long conversation about, sort of, the choice, you know? If I could have sawed out a couple of people. To ask for their permission, but it would have opened up a lot of cans of worms. And I wasn't necessarily interested in opening.

10:07 (KW): The legal potholes almost derailed the project.

10:11 (KA): It was a difficult, difficult couple of months where we both almost walked away from the whole deal.

10:20 (KW): Mm. Wow.

10:22 (KA): It was very strong emotional, moral dilemma on both sides. It was hard.

10:35 (KW): Eventually Kira and her editor found a compromise and brought the book to market. In retrospect Kira thinks that obscuring some of the relationships has a good literary effect.

10:48 (KA): I think a good part of changing that relative to something ambiguous is that it allows someone reading it to put whoever that person is into that narrative for them. You know, in other words, as soon as I name whatever relationship then if it's not that person in your life then you may read it differently.

11:16 (KW): Despite the learning curve of the publishing process and legal challenges Kira believes the process was beneficial.

11:25 (KA): And I have to say that it's a better book then I would have, you know, if I had just done a self-publisher. There was a lot of questions posed to me that really helped, you know, with what you're talking about. With really shaping the arc of it. It's a very worthwhile process, and I feel like the finished project, not just the written words, but the design of it, everything, came together in a beautiful way, so. . . .

11:58 (KW): From the beginning of the book Kira lays the groundwork for events to come in the narrative and indoctrinates the reader to her style of unconventional line breaks, spacing, and driving, punctuation free stanzas.

12:13 (KA): But I was really, really hard on line break. Or even spaces within the lines because I don't use punctuation in my poetry. I never have. And so, what could be a period is a stanza break. What could be a comma is maybe a small space on the line as opposed to a whole lot. So there's a lot of work and thought that has gone into that process. So, you know, there was a question at some point, "Oh, shouldn't we at least put commas on the dates?" And I was like, "Nope." People can think about it.

12:59 (KW): Kira says that much of her spacing decisions are an attempt to share her literal voice with you.

13:05 (KA): I'm a very oral poet. Like, my best case scenario is that I would just get to read this whole book to you, because I feel like people hear it differently. Like, that's how I actually read. I'm not a particularly well-read writer, and I know that's a big faux pas, but part of the aftereffects of my epilepsy is that I have a hard time absorbing any kind of writing if I just try and keep it flat on the page. I really have to hear it to fully absorb it. And so, part of the line breaks is me trying to get you to hear it how I would read it. Just trying to put those emphasis points and the musicality of it.

13:52 (KW): Beyond spacing Kira manipulated verb tenses to replicate the voice of a child narrator throughout the book. That voice haunts me especially in a poem where the kid Kira tells the story of arson.

14:08 (KA): So the first part of that poem that you're talking about, "Curly Joe two kittens and a sense of fire," I really focus initially on the dream sequence, which wasn't so much a dream as it was the house as it existed before the fire. And so I use the dream as a vehicle to just create that, and again, really, really focusing on the present tense as if it were all right there. And then of course it's not right there. Bringing that part and really, you know, darkly showing how it's not there, you know? The fish are all dead, the (Muffled Audio) destroyed, the all of that. And, the other part of the vehicle of the voice was actually Curly Joe himself whose, he was my birthday present when I turned four and I had him till I was twelve. And he literally was my best friend through all of those eight years. And so some places where it would have been more adult were making it about him being in that relationship again. And then, also, the little, tiny bit of grownup voice being my mother on the phone, so that I could get certain pieces in without losing that voice.

15:41 (KW): Kira honed her voice and craft by studying with poet June Jordan, a prolific African-American writer who was the leader of Poetry for the People at UC Berkeley.

15:53 (KA): And at the time of her death, I'm not sure if it's still true, but at the time of her death the most published African-American writer in terms of just a wide body of work, you know? From articles to essays to poetry to books to—and she was just prolific in her work.

16:16 (KW): Kira says that one of her favorite books is a collection of poetry by Jordan, who, didn't use punctuation much either.

16:23 (KA): In that entire, you know, and it's not an entirety of all of her writing, but in entirety of all her poetry was a thick book. And I think there's seven poems in that whole book with any punctuation at all. She had a huge influence on me, because one of the things she used to say to us in class, she'd say, "If you have to pay five hundred dollars for every word in that poem what are you taking out?" And she was dead serious. She was very, very serious that poetry, as a form, meant minimum word maximum impact. What are you really saying and how are you saying it is really, really of utmost importance. And, you know, she used all kinds of ways to do that with us, and one of the things was if you need punctuation to understand the line then you haven't written the line in a way it really means what you say. In other words, if I need a question mark or I need an exclamation point to understand, June would say, "What the f— are you trying to say?" Then rewrite it.

17:45 (KW): And rewrite Kira did. She wrote herself right into a gripping poetic narrative that works double-time to confront and engage the reader in every chapter.

17:57 (KA): I feel like each chapter has its own climax for different reasons, and it's sort of the idea that life is not a smooth road, you know? I'm not writing a story of this happened and that happened and now everything's fine. It's not like that it. It's really the ups and downs and the twists and turns. And more than anything it's really kind of pointing to the idea that, you know, many, many, many -isms in this life, be it racism, you know sexual violence, sexism as it plays out in that et cetera, et cetera. Is that it's generational, you know, and so the ways—parts of the whole goal of the book is to paint that picture. It's clear that the things that I hadn't worked out in my own story then came visited upon my children because my mother hadn't worked out her story. And back and back. And we each have successively done better, but I felt a really, really strong responsibility to be part of changing the narrative of my family.

19:17 (KW): The responsibility that Kira feels to change the narrative is not just for er family. It's for all families.

19:25 (KA): You know, it's one thing to have the courage to speak, and it's another thing to actually have someone hear what you say, and it's a whole other thing to have them believe it, as a survivor. There are so many families where someone A never speaks up, or B they speak up and no one actually really listens and definitely doesn't believe them. And in that trifecta is where real change happens.

20:01 (KW): And the change that Kira is hoping for, it's not restricted to the pages of the book.

20:07 (KA): Yesterday I actually took some time and created a new blog post, Seven Reasons Why I Founded Write This Second. Because for me it's much bigger than a book, I'm calling it a movement, which is really about helping to end sexual abuse and also looking at the intersections of it. The way—not just the generational piece, but the race piece. The ways in which poverty plays a part. The ways in which lack of access plays a part. They're all kind of embedded in the book in different ways. And so my goal is really to be partnering with organizations who are already working with women who are in the process of recovery or, you know, who are caught up in the justice system, but who are trying to work their way out. Different avenues like that can really bring poetry as a feeling tool, as a place where it doesn't have to allude to anything it just is a place to work out, and in a way that it can be spoken, and heard, and believed.

21:29 (Music)

21:33 (KA): This is my poem called "This is who I am." Is who I am end enough twenty-seven year addiction can I stop when I stop living loaded I stop to breath I learn to tell my truth through poetry I got to see me I got to know how to say no I got to find my marrow I gotta say baby girl no more rape no more rape at home no more rape no more rape at home I got now I got backbones too I got marrow I got backbone too I got to speak up to people two thousand don't matter 'cause people don't matter you ask who I am and I tell you see I'm a poet gag off tongue free I'm a woman proud to say I treasure my golden-brown skin I trust my intuition 'cause when I honor my voice I got now I got backbone too I got spirit I got endless choices 'cause I ain't never going back to being voiceless I fight and I write for every woman who needs the good news you precious you got to make your own way got to overcome by giving the molesters back they shame paying the sisters who still numbing they pain by making a decision to live without dope we learning you got to speak up to coke what I want and I tell you see I'm a poet who wants your gag off and you tongue free I'm here to say speak up speak out find your marrow find your backbone too find your spirit find out you got endless choices long as you ain't voiceless

23:48 (KW): Thank you. I love the way you read.

23:51 (KA): Oh, thank you.

23:54 (Music)

24:00 (KW): Well that brings us to the end of episode nineteen. Make sure that you are subscribed on iTunes because I'm probably going to change the distribution to twice a month, and—but, you know, you can still catch me on twitter behindtheprose. You can still email me your successes for the check in next week or the week after. Info at behindtheprose.com. Next month I'm gonna bring you some special compilation episodes from the 2015 Creative Nonfiction Writers' Conference so make sure that you stick around for that. *Behind the Prose* is a podcast hosted by me, Keysha Whitaker, and usually produced from a closet in Pennsylvania, but today it is produced from my living room because the closet does not have air conditioning. And it's hot in there. *Behind the Prose* music is by UK artist Redvers West-Boyle. I'll be back, maybe next week, maybe the week after. In the meantime listen, learn, and write.

25:18 (Music)

25:26 (Ad)