**Behind the Prose Transcript**

**Episode 16: An intimate conversation with Lee Gutkind, the “Godfather” of Creative Nonfiction**

Length: [01:13:40]

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Guest: Lee Gutkind (LG)

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00:00 (Ad)

00:33 (KW): This week's episode of *Behind the Prose* is sponsored by Scrivener, a powerful content generation tool for writers that allows you to concentrate on composing and structuring long and difficult documents. For a free thirty-day trial and a twenty percent discount on the regular version of Scrivener enter the code PROSE at www.literatureandlatte.com. Do it before August 30th.

01:03 (Music)

01:11 (KW): Hey, you writer. How you doing today? It's episode 16 of *Behind the Prose.* I'm your host, Keysha Whitaker. Thank you for letting me back into your android device. Into your iPod. Into your browser. I'm so happy to be with you, and actually talking to one of you this week. One of my colleagues who listens she mentioned about me broadcasting from a closet and she said, "Oh, well I thought that you know that you lived in this really large apartment." And I do. My apartment is a mansion compared to what I would get from this price in New York City. When I say I'm broadcasting from a closet I really mean I'm inside a closet, in my den. I just need to put up some, like, foam to try to soundproof it. So it's a literal thing. I never thought that maybe you might just think I was calling my apartment small. No, it's not. I love it. It's a mansion. A mansion to me. So, have you been writing this week? I have not. And, but I'm, you know, they always say that you should have an accountability partner that's supposed to keep you on track, and I feel like you have been my accountability partner. But, it's not working because—what's, what am I doing wrong? I'm publicly shaming myself, but I still am hopeful. I'm gonna get back on track this week. I have—school is almost over, and I'm gonna try to ward off the post semester depression that happens because after sixteen weeks of going really, really hard and being busy, busy, busy all of a sudden you have nothing to do. And I think that that's not good for me so tomorrow morning five-thirty. Plus, the interview that I have for you today confirms that I need to do this because none other than Lee Gutkind gets up at five-thirty in the morning. He goes to Starbucks and gets his coffee. Yeah, he'll tell you all about his writing process routine in this break the internet episode of *Behind the Prose.* Lee Gutkind, we know him as the Godfather of creative nonfiction, a title given to him by James Wolcott in a *Vanity Fair* article. It wasn't nice at the time. He was being, Wolcott was being kind of nasty when he gave him the title, but we're gonna take it and we're gonna use it. We're gonna appropriate that to mean something positive, 'cause it is. In fact, Gutkind is the founder of the first MFA degree in the world. And if it weren't for Gutkind all of us MFA nonfictioners, where would we be? You know, he's the founder of a creative nonfiction, he's traveled all over the world, he's published books, he is the Distinguished Writer in Residence in the Consortium for Science, Policy and Outcome at Arizona State University where he's splitting his time right now, and he's the professor in the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication. He's got an extensive bio and it would take me about the length of time of the interview to go through it with you so I'm gonna hook you up with a link on behindtheprose.com so you can check that out. In this interview I talk to Gutkind about his book, *Forever Fat*, which is a collection of essays. It came out, I think, around 2003, and it's a memoir, essays. And I really enjoyed talking to him, so I know you're going to love this intimate conversation with the Godfather of creative nonfiction, Lee Gutkind.

05:12 (KW): And so I feel like I know the answer to this question sort of from reading the book, but I usually start out with when did you know you wanted to be a writer?

05:21 (LG): Well, it's actually in the book, and it has to do with, well there's two questions in that: when did I know I wanted to be a writer and when did decide to become a writer. But, yeah, I was nearly a high school dropout. I graduated in the bottom fifth of the fifth, fifth of my high school class and therefore could not get into any university, any college, and had no choice but to go into the military. Which at the time wasn't the best thing to do since the specter of Vietnam was facing us all. But anyway, I did, and came out after being in the Coast Guard for awhile, and went back to school, went to the University of Pittsburgh evening program. I was able to get in and be a part-time student in the evening, and one day, well, first, freshman English class, in fact. The freshman English instructor asked us to write a little essay just so he could see what our writing was all about, and I did. And I had a lot of fun doing it, it was something that made me very happy, and I was the last student to leave after class. And he looked at me and he looked at the essay and he said to me, "You know, this is pretty good. You ought to be a writer." And, nobody's ever told me what I should be. They always told me what I shouldn't be and I thought, *Well, I really liked doing that.* And I loved reading. I was obsessed by books, so that's what happened. I started writing based upon his early college career encouragement.

07:21 (KW): And in your book you actually have an essay about him, Mr. Mires.

07:26 (LG): Mr. Mires, yes. His, oh my God, Robert Mires, and yes he was a TA, working on his PhD at the time. And at the time there was no writing program at the University of Pittsburgh, nor an MFA, hardly anywhere. And so he was just putting in his time doing freshman English, but, and I took a second course from him and he was so helpful and it's kind of funny, you know? I've been teaching for a long time and I teach a lot of people, and lots of times people come up to me or write me and they say, you know, "You really helped my career. Your really guided me." And it's uncomfortable sometimes 'cause after awhile you teach so many people you can't get one, you can't focus on one or another sometimes. But anyway, if it wasn't for Bob Mires, I don't know if I would've become a writer. I'm not sure. So, many months and some years past and I had, at that point, published two books and they were books that got a lot of attention. And I was in downtown Pittsburgh, saw him walking by and he, at that point he had left the University of Pittsburgh and gone to Illinois, and he was carrying a suitcase. And so clearly he was in town for a meeting or something. Anyway, I saw him and I got really excited and I ran outside, and started—he had gone pretty well up the street so I started running after him. And I was yelling, "Mr. Mires. Mr. Mires. Mr. Mires." And he turned around and he looked at me and I know he hadn't the slightest idea who I was. And I said, "You helped me so much in my career. I'm a writer. I'm a published writer now and it's all because of you." And he hadn't the slightest idea of who I was and, in fact, I was so enthusiastic, I was kind of over the top, and I think he was a little afraid of me. He was backing away from me actually. So yeah, I'm never—that was the last time I saw him. And I've mentioned to colleagues that knew him that, you know, that I really wanted to get in touch with him, but he never, that was never possible. So yeah, but we have certain people to thank. And for me it was Bob Mires.

09:58 (KW): That scene that you're describing comes later in the one of the other essays, and when I read it I could just feel the awkwardness when you describe—he's standing there holding his suitcase, and you're realizing that he doesn't recognize you. And that actually ties into one of the questions that I want to ask you about the structure of *Forever Fat*. So, I believe I read somewhere, maybe it was in the intro or the back of the book, that all of the essays were previously published. But as I go through the book there is a narrative overall, right, that happens within the structure. So characters come back, we see you moving through time, we learn about, you know, going off to the Coast Guard, and I wondered how did you decide, how did you craft that structure as far as connecting the elements in time, you know, through the book? Did you have to go back and add some things to make it all work like that?

11:03 (LG): Well, I'm not sure this is true and, that all of them were previously—if you're telling me they are and it says so in (Muffled Audio) then I'll believe you, but I'm not sure they were all previously published. I think there were pieces that were not published before. I'm almost certain of that.

11:24 (KW): Okay.

11:25 (LG): Maybe as many as half of them, and my recollection is that these new pieces allowed me to use them to—I used these new pieces as the glue to formulate or to be the connective tissue of the narrative. And so I had three or four or five pieces that were in there that were published before, but the new pieces kind of filled in the gaps. And made it the narrative or made the stories merge into one another, build, and move forward with a certain amount of momentum. And, you're question is really an interesting question because it is so hard to do that with essay collections because, you know, you're writing from—about different people from different perspectives, from different points of view. And you're writing pieces that have to stand on their own. They can't lean on, you know, if you're doing a memoir, it can lean on the chapter before or the chapter after or the beginning chapter or the prologue. But when you're writing a collection they have to stand alone, yet there needs to be a connective tissue or connective glue to make them relate to one another, so it's interesting that we're talking now because I'm just about finished, I mean, I'm really just about finished too with a book I consider to be the next *Forever Fat*, that is to say, my next collection of personal essays that follow in the sequence of *Forever Fat*. So, and I've been fighting with that same problem. How do I make 'em stand alone as an island and how do I make them connect one to another so that the reader is not jumbled about. And so, it's a big challenge and it's hard to do, and sometimes you have to take pieces, especially pieces that are already published and reformulate them in one way or the other so that they fit into a different kind of narrative.

13:45 (KW): Mm.

13:46 (LG): The thing is writers, of course, are incredibly egocentric and we need to say things that will make—and write things that will make us feel good and make us feel artistic. But in the end we're writing for a reader and we're doing absolutely, positively everything we can to connect with the reader, to make the experience for the reader comfortable, entertaining, informative, impactful. We don't want to lose the reader. We're doing everything we can to make that reader stay with us. The worst thing that can happen is, I mean, I would rather have someone not buy my book then someone buy the book and stick with it halfway and then go away and say, you know, "Eh, it was okay, but it wasn't worth my time." SO, you do all these things to keep that reader connected and making sure these essays are connected themselves is an important way to do that; an important thing to do to keep your reader with you.

15:01 (KW): One of the things that I feel in terms of your prose, I was trying to say, "How, how do I describe this?" And I feel like that it's very accessible, but at the same time you, so, like some people will write and it's hoity-toity and lofty and you can't really follow along or get there with them, like on personal level. And I feel like you do that well, but then there are times where you do throw, you use words, you throw words out, and I'm like, "Oh, I gotta circle that. What does that word mean? I gotta look that up." But it's not, like, it's not over the top. Is that intentional, do you do that or this just part of your style, this accessible writing?

15:43 (LG): I think it's just me. I mean, I really, like I just said, this is so important to me, you have no idea, that when I'm speaking I'm speaking to you. I'm speaking to other people who will listen to me when I play this back if I don't connect then I'm a failure. I'm a failure as a speaker. I'm a failure as a teacher. I'm a failure as a writer. And so I do what I can. Yes, I don't want to be, I want to be accessible, but I don't also—'cause that's how you make your connection, but I also don't want to be minimized and so I want someone to respect me enough to want to know what I have to say and to learn from it. Then it's a challenging balance that writers, that many writers have. It's one that I have, and it makes me happy when I do make these connections, it really does.

16:38 (KW): One of the things that I noticed that you do throughout the essay is it seems like sometimes you're telling two stories really. So you'll start with whatever's going on in the present and, you know, for example, "When I drove up to the house Danny was walking toward me." We're talking about your first essay in the book.

16:55 (LG): Yeah.

16:56 (KW): "Who, What Is Crazy" and then within that you give—we start to meet young Lee and his experience as a child with his mom and his dad, believing, understanding or believing who God is. But then you always come back to the original story and bring it all together.

17:19 (LG): Right, I do.

17:21 (KW): And I guess I'm curious on your editing process how do you achieve that when you're doing multiple storylines like that?

17:30 (LG): Well I always work on the premise that at the end, certainly not at the beginning, that at the end I have to have, as most writers will tell you, a strong overall narrative or frame. And that story, again, needs to be broad enough to contain all kinds of sub-stories or smaller stories but specific enough to be able to keep the reader with you and focused. And so what I always say and what I always teach is that the story, the overall story determines the information and the ideas that you provide. And I think that's a good way kind of think about what I'm doing and what I think writers should be doing, and that is, you pick an overall story that will be compelling and that will keep the reader guessing, the reader with you, but it's a story also that will allow you to insert as many other characters and as many ideas, and to go, sometimes, incredibly far afield. Because, in the case of that essay with Daniel, I mean it's not about God, it's not about religion. It's about the fact that Daniel is mentally ill. Daniel has a number of serious mental illness issues and he is suffering from PTSD because of the way in which his parents treated him, but I was able to find a way, because of how Daniel conceived of God, to be able to go back in time and think about my own conception of God when I was Daniel's age and much younger. And keep 'em, and keep—and two different ideas that were connected by the one storyline about, you know, about, well, the one storyline about God and also about this incredibly thin line, which is part of the overall focus, between who is crazy, what is crazy, who is mentally ill, and who isn't? And the line, as you well know, is incredibly difficult to define because of the way which we are today in this country and in this world. So, you know, Daniel may have had many, many problems, including his conception of God, but I, when I was a kid, was supposed to be not mentally ill and quite emotionally healthy, and, you know, in fact, our emotional states were very close.

20:20 (KW): When you said about keeping the reader engaged and hooking them on the first page, well, page one in your book, the "Who, What Is Crazy?". You have the paragraph that reads, "When I put my hands on his shoulders Daniel immediately began to whine like a frightened child. Tears were streaming down his face. 'A man molested me.' " And then I wrote on the side here, "The reader is left dangling," at that moment because we don't what happened, we don't know anything else at that point. And then you go on to engaging with Daniel and we see the narrator's at first, I guess, questioning—maybe belief, disbelief, and then we follow that through ill you actually, you know, you end up getting in the car with him and you drive to the direction of the store, and then you get to, for the first time I began to believe that the incident could have happened. And then I wrote, "Reader clearly knows his feeling," 'cause we were with you throughout the process of, you know, figuring out what was going on at that moment and revealing to us a bout Daniel.

21:29 (LG): Right. Well, one would always, I mean, good advice to writers is to start with a situation where there's something at stake for the main character or main characters and something that's action-oriented, and use that as a jumping off point to explain why there's something at stake and who the characters are and to spend as much time as possible providing backstory. But keeping this what's at stake element hanging there for as long as possible because the more you get the reader to want to know something the less chance there is for the reader to go to the bathroom, order a pizza, turn on the television, or walk away from your work. And so, yes, I crafted that scene, I mean, it's certainly a true scene. It's exactly what happened, but I used that scene to get readers intrigued by what I was gonna do, what Daniel was gonna do, and who Daniel was. And then I went off explaining all kinds of things, knowing, hoping, that my readers would not leave me because they wanted to know because of this what's at stake factor. Because they wanted to know what was gonna happen to Daniel and what sort of decision I would make. So it's a calculated thing that writers do to start with a great deal of action, I mean you see this on TV all the time. A crime is committed on sort of detective show, like Law & Order, and then slowly but surely, we don't know anything about the—we don't know a lot about the crime and we don't know a lot about the perpetrators, but slowly but surely we find out and hopefully the viewer will stick with the show just because there are certain things they want to know. You always try to when you're writing nonfiction, creative nonfiction, you're trying to establish as many storylines as possible with as many what's at stake factors as possible just to keep you're reader wondering. Once they stop wondering they're gonna say goodbye to you.

23:53 (KW): And that actually speaks to one of the notes that I had. I underlined the first line or first few lines of all the essays, and they have that element of being dropped in the middle of action or dropped in scene in conflict. So I'll just read a few of the lines. The first line in *Forever Fat*, "Now when I was growing up food was my support system. A history of my father. About ten years ago my father decided to write a letter explaining himself. The teeth. After breakfast her husband looked up from across the table and announced that he was taking her into town to have all her teeth pulled out. Do story. In my early thirties during the waning days of my first marriage I experienced true love for the first time." And so, in terms of—and I feel like those, that really speaks to what you're saying about crafting, in starting right in the beginning where the action is.

24:50 (LG): Right, right. You're word is good. I mean, craft is so important. It doesn't necessarily mean that the first thing that I did when I sat down and wrote any of those essays is to start with some of the things you just read. Certainly not the case. I mean, there's these two phases of writing. After you're research is done, if you're writing nonfiction, you sit down and I like to think that I explode when I first write. I don't worry too much about craft, and I don't worry too much about structure. I mean I know what craft is and I know what structure is, but I don't really allow myself to think about it, and I certainly don't allow myself to edit myself very carefully as I move forward. I want to put as much down on paper or on my display as I possibly can. I don't want any second thoughts or any idea about editing to stop me from going off on whatever tangent I feel like going off on. I really want to just explode and write everything that I can. And I feel that if I end up wanting to have a three thousand word essay I feel like I have not been successful if I haven't read, sorry, written at least double or triple that amount on my first draft. It's kind of like—I like to think about it as if I'm kind of a sculptor, and a sculptor starts with a gigantic block of granite and then begins to shape whatever it is. His or her vision as to whatever that block of granite is gonna end up being. And I think that's the way in which, certainly the way in which I work. That the creative part is the explosive part. It's building the block. Saying anything that you possibly, writing anything that you possibly think is relevant and important, that makes you happy, that peruses the subject, or describes the character. And then when you're all finished and that's done and you have the block then it's the second part two is the craft comes in, and you start worrying about or knowing about what good structure is all about. And that doesn't mean you have to follow all of the structural rules or guidelines. But you ought to know them to be able to make the decision as to whether you're gonna follow those guidelines or not. And so the things we're talking about so far today, like the overall narrative frame or structure, ninety percent of all of the best creative nonfiction, narrative nonfiction, has this overall narrative structure or story. That doesn't mean that every single one of them will have it, but if ninety percent have it then it's something that a writer ought to say, "Well, why don't I have," if the don't, "why don't I have this." And if there's a good enough reason that they don't have this overall structure or if there's a good enough reason that there isn't, kind of, a what's at stake scene or story near the front of the piece, well then, that's okay. That's just fine. But it's good to know what most writers do and what the guidelines are. And so we have this block of granite and we begin to shape it the way in which we want to shape it. And slowly but surely it takes it's form as whatever essay you're writing. And you ask these questions that I've just talked about, just of yourself. And if the questions, while you're doing this craft, if there are reg flags then you look and the red flags and say, "Well, I don't care if this follows what everybody else does, or if this follows the structural formula. I like it this way. It works this way. That's just fine. But, so the process is long. It's—I always tell my students that Ernest Hemingway, who worked on a typewriter obviously, wrote the last chapter of *Farewell to Arms* thirty-nine times and he did it on a typewriter. And, that's not so unusual to have happen, for us to sit down and play with things, with, on a typewriter or on a yellow pad or on a MacBook, whatever. Many, many times in order to sculpt it down for the way in which we would like it to read.

29:44 (KW): As I hear you talk about sculpting I'd like to get your thoughts on—I had a teacher in grad school tell me that one of her revision processes, one of her techniques was to write a draft and then throw it out and start over, which horrified me at the time and still does.

30:02 (LG): That horrifies me too.

30:05 (KW): I hear you sculpting, and I'm like, "Wait, this feels safer."

30:12 (LG): Well, I certainly will write—I'll take it as far as—this always happens, or at least it always happens to me. I'm sorry. I take it as far as I can go. And, you know, one day, you know, you work on an essay and you work on an essay and you work on an essay, it's a week, it's two weeks, three weeks, whatever. And then you make a lot of progress, and you see it. You focus it. You see it clearly. You see it taking shape. You see it and it's very exciting that it begins to be really meaningful to you. And you know that you're making some interesting points for the reader to consider. But then one day you get up and you look at the piece and you know you've gone as far as you can go. Now some writes will say, "Okay, it's time to send them out, send this out. I've gone as far as I can go," but other writers, I hope they don't throw them out, they put them in the drawer for a week or two or three or four or five, and then go back and take a look at it. And almost always you discover that it's really not as far as you can go. It's as far could have gone at that particular time. But, you know, a month passes or a week passes and you see it differently, and that's kind of what I do. I keep going back and forth to these pieces until I've gone back and forth enough times to really believe that that's as far as I can go. And then I often do a couple of other things. After I think it's gone as far as I can go I will look at it in a different way. For example, I will read it aloud and tape record it, so when you read it aloud it certainly sounds differently and is different than when you read it to yourself. And then when you play it back on a tape recorder once again it's a different experience. So, I don't do that all the time, but I do it sometimes and, again, when you read it aloud or when you play it back on a tape recorder you're hearing it like you are a reader rather than the writer, and sometimes you found out that you've said certain things that the reader probably won't understand, you've made references that aren't clear, or parts of the story or the characterization isn't quite right. So it's a long process, and I don't know about your teacher but that's quite an interesting idea, to just throw out the first one and start again. Oh my God, I don't know about that though. That's interesting. I mean, I've written a couple of essays, not often in my life, that the first draft was the best draft, you know, and so. . . .

32:57 (KW): Mm. Wow.

32:58 (LG): Yeah, so, you know.

33:00 (KW): Well yeah, I think her argument was she said that the best details that you remember are the best one or the retained details are the most important ones.

33:10 (LG): All right. Okay.

33:17 (KW): So, in terms of the editing part you said you read aloud and then you tape record. Do you have a personal editorial board? Do you have an e-board, people that you still go, "Hey, check this. Can you read this for me? What do you think?"

33:36 (LG): I actually don't. I wish I did, but I don't. I envy people who have trusted members of their group or a writing group. And I know that many, that there are many really terrific writers who actually don't need a group, aren't part of a group. That's great. I don't, which doesn't necessarily mean that once in a great while I won't—I have in the past, one time, one time, actually hired an editor that I admired, whose work I admired as an editor, to look at my work. And I liked doing that. I liked the, and I will do this again by the way, the same editor, I like hiring someone to look at my work on a professional business basis, so that whatever personal feelings they have for me, whether they like me or don't like me, it won't enter into it. And whatever dynamics there are in a workshop situation that won't enter into it either. I'm giving it to a professional writer whose business it is or professional editor whose business it is to help writers be better. And I do this as well with my students and with the magazine and with the essays we publish in our books and also for friends from time-to-time. But less for friends, again because there's this personal connection. I would much rather have some stranger look at my work and tell me that it sucks or tell me they like it and tell me why. So, no I don't have a group and I said to you that I envy people that do, and I do envy them but I don't think I want to belong to any of them.

35:41 (KW): Mm-hmm. What feedback do you give your students in workshop for how they should discern between, you know, comments that are good or not so good. Or helpful or not so helpful.

36:00 (LG): That's really, you know, it's so hard because, that's a hard question because in a workshop situation you are—if you tell a student that one student's comments may not be helpful that's unfair to the student who made the comment. I think you have to shut up and just listen, although what I try to do in workshops is to get people to begin broaden—and this is such a struggle, I mean, I beg my students. I say, "Well, what do you think of this essay," or whatever and I beg my students not to raise their hand and say, "Well, I like the sentence," you know, "on third page, fourth paragraph," or, "What a great metaphor on your last page." I ask, and that's what they do, they kind of cherry pick stuff they hated or liked and I want them to look at the piece as—so I make them or I fight with them to look at the piece, first and foremost, as a whole. To look at it not—not take apart it's little piece, but to kind of look at, begin discussing it in a workshop situation in relation to it's overall stroke, it's overall shape. Because, and then, once they begin talking about how it is all shaped and how it is together and how it works as an entire piece then I let them go dig deeper and talk more about the paragraphs and metaphors and relative ideas. But, so I do try to control the workshop just so there's some sort of coordinated effort, and I can't stand it when they argue over a sentence before they've decided to talk about the piece as a whole.

38:11 (KW): So you teach, you run a nonfiction journal, you do, like, twenty thousand other things that require time. What is your writing schedule? Like, do you have a schedule, like, how do you get that block of granite in front of you?

38:29 (LG): I get up very early and I write. And, you know, what's happened to me, I used to—my students used to kid with me that I was the Marine Corps boot camp kind of writer because I got up so early and I was so rigid about getting up early and working and refusing to answer doorbells or telephones or emails until I got my four or five hours in. And that's the way I used to be, but lately, lets' say the past few years, I have become extraordinarily busy. But it turns out that I have been able to get my four or five hours of writing in on a regular basis. Getting up early, but also going back to it in the afternoon and the early evenings, and I think too, I don't know why I can do this now and couldn't do it later or couldn't do it before, but now I seem to be able to kind of go back and jump right in and not worry about whether I can get back into the book or into the essay or not. I think in some ways that has to do with how writers mature, and when you're younger as a writer you're still searching for confidence and you're searching for a voice. And so often in the early stages, you know, if you write for four or five hours the first couple hours is just a fight to find that voice again that you liked. And after awhile, at least in my case, I may be a good writer I may not be a good writer, but I know what my voice is, and I can now kind of find it when I want to. And that's a great, it's just a great relief to be able to do that. I can hang up this phone right now and I can go to one of my essays and I can write at least a few paragraphs and jump right in there that I left when I was last writing this essay I'm working on now, six hours ago.

40:34 (KW): That's interesting you say that. I have this segment on my show called Writer's Psych with Doctor Ike where I have a behavioral therapist diagnose my writing psychological problem. Though one of the things that I talked about with him was the next day sometimes I'll come back at whatever I was working on and I'll be like, "Oh, I don't like it," or, "Oh, I don't want to continue that." And so as I'm hearing you say, "Oh, maybe it's where you are in your stage of writing, if you're less confident or if you're still figuring out your voice maybe it's that." That's why I can't continue one particular line. That's interesting.

41:13 (LG): Yeah. Well, don't you, do you—okay, so, I don't know how long you have been writing, but do you struggle to find your voice from time-to-time?

41:25 (KW): Well, you know I think also, and something you said in the book, I wrote on the side, "Oh my, this is my problem," or, "This was my problem." And I can't see, I'm flipping through to see where it is now. You write about reporters struggling in your nonfiction classes because, I think maybe this is in the intro, where you talk about the reporters struggling in your nonfiction classes because they're used to writing who, what, where, when, and why, inverted pyramid, short bites. And I was a reporter before I went to grad school and memoir, and I got there and I'm like, "Wait, what are people writing about themselves and they're twenty-two years old? This doesn't make any sense." So after I got through that I'm now at the stage of experimenting with the long, like you said, the three thousand word thing that seems to a reporter, like, "What in the world?"

42:20 (LG): Right, right. Yes, and well, reporters, yes. When I wrote that and it seemed like the reporters were, you know, there were more reporters when I wrote that then, then there are now. And they were trying to make this transition and it was a very difficult transition because they had one voice, the objective journalism voice or the objective reporter's voice, and they were trying to make this transition which was very, very difficult for them to do. And now it's somewhat easier because narrative nonfiction, narrative journalism, creative nonfiction is, I mean, when you say you have an MFA and twenty-five years ago nobody had, hardly anyone had an MFA. Nobody as far as I know twenty-five years ago or at least twenty-six or twenty-seven had an MFA in Creative Nonfiction. And nobody—and there weren't a lot of people writing it then. There were a lot—especially reporters, and so now things are quite different. So there are less, fewer struggles at least by reporters for finding their voice because they were trying to change their voice. Young writers, younger writers are, let's say less experienced writers, are fighting to find a voice. Period.

43:49 (KW): And I'll just add for people who might not know and are listening their MFA degree why we have one we can thank the Godfatherly Gutkind because you started the first in the world at the University of Pittsburgh.

44:07 (LG): That's right, and also the first low-residency one. I founded it at Goucher.

44:15 (KW): Mm. What did it feel like to have a genre on your shoulders like that?

44:22 (LG): Well, you know, I don't know if that's true. I'm not—I'm glad you asked that question because no one's asked that before, exactly that way, so I'm stumbling around. I'm not quite sure where I am in relation to the genre. Yes, in fact, quarter of a century ago or in this case, can't remember how many years ago that you said that I was the Godfather behind creative nonfiction, and that's non self-proclaimed that's *Vanity Fair*. It came from *Vanity Fair* magazine, and it was not meant, you understand—

45:09 (KW): In a nice way. Yeah.

45:12 (LG): Yeah. So, now people say, "Oh, he's the Godfather behind creative nonfiction," but when my colleagues read that twenty years ago, whenever it was, they were embarrassed, so, that I was their colleague. So it's somewhat different. But yeah, I helped move it along and I fought for it. And the thing, it's so interesting to me that—so, I don't know how old you are, but young people, younger people, or people who are just getting these degrees five or ten years later, or even now, don't know— And now you can probably get an MFA degree, I'm sure, in at least a hundred and fifty places around the world in creative nonfiction. And a lot of people don't understand what a fight it was. Just with academic, not with other writers, but with reports who couldn't make the transition or thought that their turf was being threatened. And, also, with other people in the academy in composition programs and English departments, literature programs. It was a battle. It wasn't fun. It was interesting and it gave me a chance to exercise my reputation as the Godfather, but it was a stupid, ongoing, annoying yet the kind of exciting fight to make it all work. And, so, I haven't thought about it being on my shoulders because so many other people have been writing creative nonfiction, teaching it, especially over the past dozen years. And so many young people are pushing the boundaries and finding new ways to experiment in the form, but I mean, I felt like, I honest to God felt like a soldier out there just battling for something so silly, so, that, had been done for so long and suddenly I had to defend it. So in that way it was on my shoulders, and I'm not quite sure what has happened after that. I'm moving into—I'm doing something else, well, I'm still publishing *Creative Nonfiction*, the magazine, and we just had, the issue that just came out momentarily, just this week, is a memoir issue. And I'm writing memoir. But I kind of think that I may well have at least stepped back from these MFA Creative Writing programs. Right now I'm in Arizona. Well, I go back and forth from Pittsburgh to Arizona but I am a faculty member at Arizona State University and I'm the writer in residence at a think tank, a science, policy think tank at Arizona University called The Consortium for Science, Policy, and Outcomes. And they give me a lot of freedom. And what I have been doing is trying to touch on, is, what I have been wanting to do is take creative nonfiction to its next level. And by that I mean I just don't want it to be significant in writing programs and I just don't want narrative nonfiction to be something that reporters do, I believe that, again, I believe that we're trying to connect with readers. And I believe that today in America and in the world it's becoming such a complicated and difficult and challenging world, and there's so much for people to understand and appreciate. And I believe that what we do as creative nonfiction writers is story. Nonfiction storytellers can help communicate very difficult, hard to understand information about stuff like robots and genomics and personalized medicine and computers and the economy. If we use creative nonfiction techniques to do that then we can, kind of, help the people upon whom this technology, these new ideas are going to most impact. So I work with science policy people all over the world, literally, trying to teach them creative nonfiction techniques. And I try to teach students, writing students, and people who want to write how engineers and doctors and policy makers research and think, and try to get the two to kind of learn from one another and work together. And so, I do a lot of travelling. I speak to lots of different groups, many of whom there isn't a writer in the audience, there's economists and there's physicians and there're engineers and there're historians and I'm trying to tell them that they need to share what they know with the world now, and not just with the people in their departments and at their conferences. So I believe I'm taking, I mean, what I'm trying to do now is what I think is to take creative nonfiction to this other level. To make it embrace the world, not just the writing community.

51:08 (KW): And I hear a couple of things in that. You're saying one of them reminds in your book you talk about helping the NPR, the science reporters at the NPR, helping them turn—use narrative in their stories, and also the fact that you're out, you're working with science. Your books have been, you know, in the medical field as well. I fell like it's inspiring to see the range of things that you do, and you talk about this in your, in one of the essays, like, kind of following your passions or your interests into this immersion journalism experience. And it seems you're still, like, doing that in this path to take CNF to the next level.

51:52 (LG): Well, you know, you mention the journalism word, the immersion word and, you know, that's what's so, to me what's so incredibly exciting about this genre. That it's not just that we're writing. I mean, writing's incredibly exciting and it turns me on to write, I love it. That's why I spend so much time doing it, but you also get the opportunity to do so many incredible things. I mean, I can't—aside from people who are, aside from transplant surgeons I have probably seen more transplants than anybody else in the world, I mean, or at least I did when I was working on that book. I mean, when I say seen I'm not telling you that I've seen it on television, I'm telling you that I was as—I'm sitting here at a table with my computer in arm's reach talking to you and that's how close I was to a scene, I don't know, three hundred, four hundred liver, heart, lung, kidney transplants over four years, talking to those people who went under the knife before they did and watching the procedures and talking to the surgeons as they flew off in Lear jets to harvest these organs. It was—I learned so much, not just about science, but about life and death and heroism and heroism of the patient and the family and heroism of the surgeon. So that's so exciting in creative nonfiction, that you can do both of those things. You can be a writer using true story techniques, using the fiction writer's techniques to write nonfiction, and then you can explore the world. And I haven't just done science. I've done technology, robots. I did a book about baseball umpires. I traveled with a crew of National League baseball umpires for a whole year. I did a book about child mental health. You picked your subject and you join another world. It's really incredibly exciting to do and then you get a chance to write it, my God. And then you get a chance after you write about it to talk about it for awhile. So what a life, huh?

54:14 (KW) I feel like at this point in your career you probably can get a book contract off of a proposal the size of a tweet, but in earlier years— Did you sell, like, the motorcycle book or the umpire book on proposal or what? How did that happen for you?

54:38 (LG): That's a good question. Oh my God, I can't remember. The baseball book I'm not sure, I can't remember the proposal, but I did have very special access, you know? I did go—I must have written something, but not a lot because the challenge for the baseball book was to be able to get the access, to hang out with the umpires in the umpires' locker room and travel with them for the entire season. And once I go that access it was rather easy, at the time, to get a book contract. And the motorcycle book I did write a proposal. It wasn't a long proposal, but you're wrong about people giving me money these days on a tweet. That's just not gonna happen. And I must say that it's a great idea, but the whole idea of proposals now in this nonfiction field is that you have to write more of a proposal, rather than less. I did my, I did a book about veterinarians, and I absolutely remember that my proposal was five pages. And, I mean now, I'm working on another book. I have this collection of essays that I mentioned to you that's almost completed, and I won't—you don't want to do a proposal for a collection of essays 'cause they want to read the essays. But I'm working on another proposal now, and It's probably gonna be fifty pages. And in this case it's not necessarily because the publisher wants fifty pages. I feel, I mean, these long proposals are incredibly helpful for the writer to kind of figure out what he or she's gonna do, and in the end saves you a lot of time and trouble. I like the idea actually.

56:39 (KW): I have a new segment that I'm actually debuting this week called Copywrite Conversations with Attorney Nancy Delpido—

56:48 (LG): Oh, nice.

56:49 (KW): And I talked to her earlier today about something that also sparked this conversation was a passage in one of your essays. So I talked to her about should writers change names of people when they're writing CNF and you, I noticed in the book, sometimes you just use a name and sometimes you'll say, "Well, this person whom I'm call blah." So I wanted to hear your thoughts on, you know, where you fall in the line of changing names and not changing names, and why you do or don't.

57:20 (LG): These days I try to always use the real names when I can. But more than anything I worry about the person about whom I'm writing, and so I change the name— When I change the name it's not to protect me legally, it's to protect the person, the person's identity. If that identity in any way, if the person in any way feels threatened and nervous. So, I think about that more than any other aspect. In the case of Dr. Mason, I don't know what to say about that because if you read Dr. Mason, and you did, I'm actually in this—I have another Dr. Mason story or a different one. But in the case of that, if you recall, he changed his name so I was protecting—I felt at the time that I was protecting him because he didn't want anybody to know that he—I mean, his name really wasn't Mason. I can say now that his name, the name he changed it to was Scott, but he had this Jewish name, and for some reason, I'm not saying he changed it 'cause he was embarrassed that he was Jewish, I'm not saying that at all, but I found out in the middle of the essay that he changed his name. So I thought the poor guy didn't want anybody to know who he was so I just used Mason.

59:01 (KW): I asked her about—there is, I think it is in the story where you're talking about the—is it the Stankos? I'm not— You were following a family around, a daughter had, like, mental illness and you were, I think—

59:17 (LG): Yeah, yeah.

59:18 (KW): (Muffled Audio) the story with Dr. Mason, right? And so you give the family a copy of the book to read before and you get worried when you haven't heard from them, and get worried that they're gonna try and stop publication. So I asked her, "Oh, well can they actually do that, like, legally?" So I was just curious about how many times with, how many times— Is that something that you commonly do with people when you're writing immersion journalism? Or was that a special request?

59:49 (LG): I try to—my recollection is I gave them the book after it was published, right, or after I had written it. Is that correct?

1:00:04 (KW): Before it was published.

1:00:05 (LG): Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I try to do that. I want it to be right. And I don't want them—I'm not afraid of anything— Maybe, at the time, I was afraid of legal matters, but I'm not necessarily afraid of that anymore. I just, I really wish that the characters that I write about who have trusted me will feel that I gave them a fair shake. they may not agree with everything I've said, but I'd like them to feel like I gave them this fair shake. And so yeah—

1:00:40 (KW): And, at that point— Go ahead.

1:00:43 (LG): Yeah, I was just gonna say that I let look, yes. Oh, but I don't always let them look. If I know, well I mean, it's still my book, so if I know that they're gonna read something and they're gonna hate it but I believe in what I've said then I may not even go through the process of showing them something that I know they're gonna disagree with.

1:01:08 (KW): A point you made right in that same section of the essay you say that people are, they're looking, if I can find—they're looking for truth. It's like what is the agreement on what the truth is ;cause the family comes back. They say at first they were mad and then they realize, well, you know, it's true. There's this (Muffled Audio) understanding of what truth is. So that was enlightening to me. I just want to touch back on your process a little bit. You said you get up early. What time do you get up in the morning?

1:01:41 (LG): I usually get up around five. Used to be four-thirty but now it's five.

1:01:48 (KW): About what time do you go to bed?

1:01:51 (LG): I— Whenever I feel like it. I don't—

1:01:59 (KW): The Godfather does not have a bedtime, y'all. He does what he wants.

1:02:04 (LG): Well it all depends on if I get a good, a great invitation to do something at night well then I'm gonna do it and have fun, and worry about sleep whenever the fun's over. So, yeah, it depends. And I don't sleep that well, I'm up constantly. So, let's say, when I don't get an invitation that seems appropriate and appealing I will probably start thinking about closing my eyes sometime before midnight. And then I'm up a lot. I have—since we're here and we're having this intimate conversation I will make a confession to you about an incredible weakness I have. It's kind of a vice, an addiction, and between you and me and I don't want you to tell anybody else, but it's—I can't resist Law & Order reruns in the middle of the night, and so—

1:03:11 (KW): I understand that one.

1:03:14 (LG): Do you? Okay, so it's so stupid, but I'm—if there's a Law & Order on, you know, if I get up and I can't sleep and I turn on there's a Law & Order on the one thing I know is that it's gonna put me to sleep. So I watch Law & Order for about fifteen minutes and I'm gone. And by the time I get up again there's another Law & Order and I can get another fifteen minutes. And that's the other good thing about it because I never find out what happens in the end because it puts me to sleep so I can watch the same ones again and again.

1:03:53 (KW): So when you get up in the morning do you, like, go get coffee? Do you write? Do you have a writing room? What's it like?

1:04:01 (LG): Yeah, I have an office and, remember, I travel a lot so right now we're, I'm talking to you from Arizona. And, so, it's a different experience than if I'm in Pittsburgh or Washington, but and wherever I go I, the first thing I do whenever I get to wherever I am is scope out the nearest coffee shops. And I find out, usually a Starbucks, and I find out how early they're open. And so, I've set my alarm for a half and hour or twenty minutes before the nearest coffee shop is open. So if I can find a coffee shop, like a Starbucks, that opens at four-thirty I'll get up around four-ten so I can be the first customer at four-thirty. So here in Arizona the Starbucks opens at five so I get up about a quarter of five and I brush my teeth and I walk down to the Starbucks and I get my Venti and then I go to my computer. And so that's, wherever I am, that's kind of my schedule. Up based upon the earliest coffee shop available and then go to work.

1:05:15 (KW): That makes sense because I'm looking at the cover of *Forever Fat* now and it has you, it's got this really cool, like, kind of reflection—well it's you and the window, which I appear, it looks like there's a Starbucks cup there in your hand.

1:05:30 (LG): You got it. That's right.

1:05:32 (KW): You know what? You got a little swag going on Lee Gutkind! What's going on? Oh my goodness. Let me find out. So then you're at Starbucks, you've got your coffee, and how long do you stay?

1:05:51 (LG): How long do I stay? Oh, I leave. I go back to my work. I don't stay. I don't write at Starbucks.

1:05:57 (KW): Oh, you don't? Oh okay, oh okay. So you take the coffee, go home, and then you're writing.

1:06:02 (LG): Exactly. Home or back to my hotel or wherever I am.

1:06:08 (KW): So, one of the essays in the book that I found extremely suspenseful, and we'll touch on this before I reluctantly let you go, 'cause I want to keep you on the interview all night.

1:06:23 (LG): No, we have to go because 'cause I got some students waiting for me here so we have to go soon.

1:06:29 KW): Alright, so "Desperately Seeking Irene."

1:06:34 (LG): Oh yes, one of my favorite essays.

1:06:37 (KW): And I had to actually make myself stop reading it because I was, I had to go do something and I didn't want to, like, stop. But it touched on, it resonated with me for so many things. One, because I'm also a teacher. Two, the book you mention, you tie it back into this experience with Mr. Mires.

1:07:03 (LG): Yes.

1:07:04 (KW): Three, it's just the ending of the essay, I wrote, "This ending reflects how messy life is." Like, no perfect ending, no satisfying, nothing.

1:07:18 (LG): Yes. And to give you the updated ending I sent—I never heard from her again and now can't even find her.

1:07:27 (KW): Yeah I, it's completely fascinating.

1:07:31 (LG): I know. It just killed me. It was just really quite amazing and that's the kind of thing I could've made up but I didn't. It was too stupid to make up, it was too, like, crazy to make up. So, yeah, it was weird.

1:07:45 (KW) And, you know, the funny thing is as you're doing the essay we go along, and there's a part where I forget that you don't know these people. And then you say to them, "Oh, yes, that's right." It seems like me and the narrator realize, *Oh yeah, wait, these people are strangers.* I truly, truly enjoyed—go ahead.

1:08:09 (LG): It's just nice to talk to you. I got these two student waiting out there. I got to go talk to them.

1:08:13 (KW): Yes, you must do the work of the Godfather.

1:08:18 (LG): That's right.

1:08:19 (Music)

1:08:21 (KW): Here's a fun *Behind the Prose* fact: my very first guest Tavonne Carson talked to me about her amazing essay in *Gastronomica*, the food journal, was inspired to pursue creative nonfiction because of her professor at UPitt, Lee Gutkind. That's like six degrees of creative nonfiction right there. You can't make this stuff up. That's one of his books, *You Can't Make This Stuff Up*, it's the one of the latest ones. And you should pick it up and then register for the 2015 Creative Nonfiction Writers' Conference this month in Pittsburgh, May 22nd, 23rd, 24th. You can get a three day pass, I think you can get a one day pass. There's gonna be a lot of heavy weights there, in the arena of nonfiction. Adam Kushner, Editor at the *Washington Post* is gonna be there. Hattie Fletcher, who is a Managing Editor of the *Creative Nonfiction* magazine. Saeed Jones, *BuzzFeed*, LGBT Editor. He won the Pushcart Poetry Prize. Of course, Dinty Moore, Dinty Moore, you know him from *Brevity* mag and all of his amazing writing books. A ton of other great resources in terms of people will be there, and information for you to better your writing career. So I encourage you to check it out, I will be there, and if for some crazy, insane, unbelievable reason you can't be there I will be bringing you a special compilation episode of *Behind the Prose* after the conference, so look out for that. And I know you won't miss it because you'll be subscribed on iTunes and you'll be listening and telling your friends that *Behind the Prose* is a writer's show that wants you to listen, learn, and write. I promise that I'm gonna get up and write this week. It's gonna be easier for me because I am using Scrivener. I learned about Scrivener a couple of years ago at a writer's conference, and I played with it for a little while and I'm finding one of the most useful tools, now that I'm trying to use it diligently, is it's merge factor. So you know how you have all those different version of things in your word document or your folders? You can merge all of those into one area, one window, and you can flip back and forth between versions without having to close a whole window, go to Explorer, open a file, find a file. It's so easy. It's a way to manage the chaos. You can manage the chaos for thirty percent off, enter PROSE at literatureandlatte.com.

1:11:20 (KW): Well, this brings us to the end of what I hope was another great episode of *Behind the Prose*, providing you thought the previous ones were great. This might be your first great episode. At any rate, we're at the end of it. Thanks for listening to me, I appreciate your feedback, and accomplishments info at behindtheprose.com or tweet me behindtheprose. You can find m eon Facebook, Keysha Whitaker. That's who I am, broadcasting from an actual closet in Pennsylvania that is very hot today. And I don't think I'll be broadcasting from this closet in the future because if I pass out no one is going to come and get me, so. . . . *Behind the Prose* music is sponsored by, well, that's not the right word. It's brought to you by UK Artist Redvers West-Boyle. You can find him on SoundCloud. I'm your host, and I want to urge you until next time to listen, learn, and write.

1:12:38 (Music)