**Behind the Prose Transcript**

**Episode #17: Running across genres with Rachel Toor, Part Two**

Length: [00:48:22]

Host: Keysha Whitaker (KW)

Guest: Rachel Toor (RT)

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00:00 (Music)

00:07 (KW): Hey, writer friend, I'm so sorry. I've been a little delayed in getting you episode 17 of *Behind the Prose* and I don't want to cause you any anxiety, but it's just been a little hectic. I was at a conference earlier this week, and ugh. But I have gotten up a few times this week to write. Not at five-thirty because, for me, that's crazy making. My brain doesn't really start working until seven. So, I've been getting up around that time and writing for an hour and a half. And I've been working on one specific essay so I haven't hit Chelsey Clammer's speed, check episode 12 to see what that means, but it's an essay that I've been working on off-and-on since 2012, and I think I'm done. So now I just have to decide if I'm going to send it to the magazine side of the publication or the website. Because the magazine is, like, the magazine, right? You want to see your stuff in print. But the website might have a quicker turn around, and I'm severely impatient. I don't know what to do. Stay tuned to next week because I'll tell you what I'm gonna do, 'cause I'm gonna do it, tomorrow. In this episode of *Behind the Prose* I'm going to bring to you, I'm gonna give to you what I've been promising, which is part two of Rachel Toor, author of *On the Road to Find Out*. She was on the show a few weeks ago and I have a total writer crush on her. And if you listen to this interview you will again be reminded or learn for the first time why. Without further ado, here's Rachel Toor.

01:59 (Music)

02:02 (KW): You mentioned one of these techniques earlier. I noticed two techniques in the prose. Alice, she has this SAT vocab thing that she does where she says a hard word and she explains what it means. And then she does have the list. And there's one point in the prose, it's later in the book. Page one o four, now let's see what section that is. I think it's the second section maybe. Part two. "Where in the church of writing people," everyone turn to page one o four in your books. Wait, it's in part two. Oh yes, page one o four. So she meets Miles for the first time. She's gone on—she's helping out on this run. And she's all tongue-tied and flustered and not being herself, and then on page one o four she says, she's talking to Miles, and then she says, or she thinks, *I thought here we are in the boonies to provide water for runners and the dude didn't even take any. What's up with that?* I said, quote. And then you have her list, "One, how come he didn't take any water? And two, what did he mean by needing you to pull him? And three, what happened yesterday. I got so caught up in the moment I forgot to be nervous and sounded like myself for the first time that morning." And on the side of it I wrote, the minute she gets to the list the reader recognizes that this is her, right? You know, who she is. And then I, I'm like yeah, yeah I do see you sounding like yourself now. Can you talk a little bit about that?

03:58 (RT): No, you're the best reader ever. I think that's just, I think it's such a smart insight. That, that's what I was trying to show. Like, that's who she is. She just this weird quirky kid who does thing like make lists, and then also is really nervous around the cute boy. And so I think that, you know, kind of, you know, she's both, like, I think, like many teenagers. You know, she can be incredibly insightful and so dumb ass stupid. Like, sometimes in the same sentence, right? And I think that's kind of one of those things where she can be both herself and not herself. And then, you know, kind of aware of how she's being. That's kind of the fun thing about writing for teenagers, is that the (Muffled Audio) incredibly smart but then also do such boneheaded things all the time.

04:54 (KW): When you were implementing the technique of the list and of the SAT vocab how conscious was that, how conscious were you as a writer putting that in? Or were you not? Was it always Alice?

05:13 (RT): You know, I think a lot of it was just, was kind of inhabiting Alice, and seeing the world through her eyes. And when she would, and when she gets nervous, you know, she goes to the things that make her comfortable. You know, one of them is making a list. And, also the desire for control. And, I think, you know, we, I think, a character who, you know, like me, loves words, loves learning new words. And because she's kind of hyper-competitive and an over-achiever she wants to do well on the SAT. And so, I wanted that to be something that readers who are like her could relate to and understand, "Yeah, there are other people like me. Who, like, think it's really fun to geek out on learning new words." So, and I think it was a combination of learning to be true to the character and then also wanting to, you know, kind of acknowledge that a lot of my readers, you know, were gonna be like her. You know, I mean, it's not a book for everybody. This is a book for, kind of, the weird, geeky, you know, smart kids, I think, in a lot of ways. Because otherwise you just think she's completely bizarre and, you know, over-the-top nerdy.

06:34 (KW) Earlier you mentioned about the short chapters, and I write in the notes, "In parts one and two you move between short chapters and longer chapters. The short chapters might only have, like, a scene or exposition flashback." And then, part three has more of that, which I'll ask you, and I think we, I think we can suspect why part three have more of that, but let's look at one and two first. How did you go back and decide between the short and the long? Was there a balance? What metric did you use?

07:15 (RT): You know, I mean, one of my tricks that I use as a writer, and I do this kind of for everything is, you know, I think we get a feeling for what the experience of reading a piece of prose is just by looking at it and leafing through it. You know, something that when I was an editor and I had to like, I had a whole desk full of manuscripts and I had to decide which one to read next I would leaf through it and decide, "Okay, I'm gonna take you now." And really that detracted from the ones with giant pages of blocky prose, you know, that just offered no breathing room for the reader. Those I would leave for later. And so, what I do when I'm writing is, you know, after I have a draft, you know, whether it's an essay or full-length book is I shrink it down on my computer to fifty percent and I just kind of look at the shape of it. What is the shape of it look like? And, you know, a writer named (Muffled Audio) once said something in a workshop that I've stolen from him and, you know, used ever since. Which was, to say, "Don't write like a suburb," you know? You don't want the shape of your manuscript to look like a suburb where it's all the same. You know, you want it to be kind of interesting, and quirky, and give the reader a break. And so, one of the things that I did with this book was, you know, look at what's the experience of just, you know, just leafing through it gonna be like for the reader. And so, especially in the first few sections I wanted it to be fairly varied. And, you know, each scene, you know how much did each chapter require? And then, you know, there's a fairly catastrophic thing that happens at the end of part two, and I think after that the chapters are very, very short. Because, you know, Alice does not want to go there. She's really withdrawn.

09:08 (KW): So, one of the things that ties into the idea of this fictional world just appearing for you, for the writer we see Miles early when Alice starts running. And, you know, she notices him. He's running with his dog. And my question was when he comes back later we recognize him as the Todo dog guy 'cause she recognizes him as that, and I wondered when he first showed up did you know who he was then? Like, did you know this would be the guy that becomes her love interest or did he just—like how did that happen?

09:48 (RT): You know, like one of the weirdest things was, like, when I was asked to write for blog about romance novel, and I sent this panicky email to my editor saying, "I didn't write a romance novel!" Did I? Because, to me, their relationship was so not, it wasn't the thrust of the book. And, so yeah, he just showed up at the beginning because as you're out there running, like, you know, and Alice felt so self-conscious and she felt everyone was looking at her. And, you know, there's this dude who's hot and she doesn't want him to look at her. And I didn't realize he was gonna come back, you know? And I didn't realize that, you know, the relationship with him was gonna be important, you know? That was not my intention, but it just kind of happened. You know, the way it does in real life. And so, yeah, and then I didn't want this to be a teenage romance novel and so like there's no sex in the book, but there is, you know, a spark. And there is the sense—and I kind of wanted another character who would represent the hardcore of running. You know, the, "Really, if you're not fast don't bother to run." And I wanted to show that there are different ways you can think about running. And so Alice, you know, I have a bunch of characters who are all different types of runners and represent that. Different ways of being a runner to her.

11:13 (RT): And you have a way of drawing out the characters in time, I guess, drawing out when you introduce them so we don't meet them all at the beginning. And then, for example, Joan, I think somewhere in part one we get the hint that something happened with her at her Olympic trials that went horribly wrong. And then there's thing about her husband and, you know, "Ricardo, I'll tell you another time." And you pay that off later in the book. Was that something that you thought about in the editing process, or, also, I'm just so fascinated with the craft of fiction—did that just also happen?

11:56 (RT) Yeah, you know, I knew. At some point I realize, *You know, like, this book is gonna be about failure and loss, you know?* Like, that's really like what I'm interested in failure and loss. And so for each of my characters, each character really has, deals with in different ways, failure and loss. And I think, like, Joan came in much later as—I didn't know that she was gonna be important. And so she came in much later and I think one of the things that was so interesting was— Oh my God, really.

12:40 (KW): Hello?

12:44 (Phone Ringing)

12:48 (RT): Am I doing something wrong?

12:50 (KW): Well I was hearing you and I think I heard you when you said, "Oh me God, really," and then you hung up. Because I think you thought I wasn't there, but I was like, "Wait!"

13:02 (RT): Wait, wait.

13:03 (KW): Are you in—I know you're on a cellphone, right? Are you in a good signal area?

13:09 (RT): I'm completely stationary. Yeah.

13:11 (KW): Yeah, okay. I heard everything and then you said, "Oh my God," and then you hung up.

13:17 (RT): I looked at my phone and said, like, you know, call ended, and like, "Really?"

13:21 (KW): Oh, wow, that's so weird. So, where were we? Uh, you didn't know that Joan was gonna be as much an important part as she was.

13:31 (RT): Yeah, yeah, yeah. It's just weird, Keysha, it's just weird. I mean, really, have you done it? Have you tried to write a novel?

13:43 (KW): No, you know, no. A partially lie. I started one when I was eight and then in high school I started one, but I have finishing issues, so. But they terrify me, but this is why I'm so intrigued also. I just think it's a fascinating process. So, continuing on with the characters we begin to get on an emotional journey with Alice, and in part two, chapter six, in part two I write, "Is Alice self-absorbed?" Because of the details she notices, but doesn't reflect on them Like, she'll see something, and at that time it was Jenny's smudged mascara. And I was like, "This girl's obviously been crying, and Alice sees it, but she doesn't reflect on it." And then a lot of things she does this with, but the other ones were the cue that Walter is sick. And Jenny first notices, "Hey, does he look skinny?" And then Alice starts to notice some details. So I guess again, maybe I would ask the same question and I think that, *Oh did you go back and add in stuff to make her seem that way or did she just came off that way?*

15:03 (RT): Yeah, I mean, I think they're are a bunch of things about that. One of the things that I was really interested in, you know, the conversation was kind of going on literally while I was working on this was about female characters who are unlikable. And so, you know, I think that's kind of a gendered narrative, and so Alice is completely self-absorbed, like many teenagers. And I think with this thing with Jenny is she's self-absorbed and then she notices things, but then she gets uncertain about what the right things to do is, so she's kind of socially awkward. So that's the thing. And with Walter, you know, part of it is she couldn't afford to see things that were in front of her 'cause they were too upsetting, you know? So he's risking getting skinny, and she's kind of in denial. But I did want to write a character who was, you know, not a nice girl. You know, not, like, so she has a best friend who is sweet and nice and warm, but Alice is, you know, kind of more prickly. And so I think some readers struggle with that, that they just don't like her. And I struggled with that, I thought, like, *Oh does she need to be more likable?* But, you know, one of the things that I, that was really important to me was, you know, she writes her college application essay about how much she hates Holden Caulfield*,* 'cause she thinks he's a self-absorbed little asshole, and who goes around, you know, calling everybody a phony when he's the biggest phony of them all. And, you know, what she doesn't realize is, you know, *Catcher in the Rye* is really about grief, you know, that he lost his brother and that's why he was so unhappy, you know, during that period. And I think for Alice she becomes absorbed by her grief and can't see her way out of that. At first, you know, at first it's a kind of more minor form, you know, the grief of not getting what she thought she wanted, which was getting into her first choice college, and then it's a much more profound grief and how that changes you. And so that was something I was really interested in looking at. And, you know, it's hard to write a character, you know, who people say like, "Ugh, God, why can't you just, you know? Or why can't she be nicer to Jenny?" But I kind of wanted to stay true to that. The quirky, awkward, socially ungraceful girl that she is.

17:38 (KW): And we are, I think, sympathetic with her and, you know, as we ramp up to the death of Walter in the end too it really is an emotional roller coaster. And she has that horrible gift that she gives her mom at the birthday party. And, you know, and, Rachel, I have a lot of things in my own life that I should probably be sitting and crying about, but in chapter twenty-four I am there sitting and crying about the death of a fictitious rat. And I'm not sure how I feel about that.

18:22 (RT): Yeah, you know, like, I get this is again one of those weird things about writing fiction. Like, I sobbed writing that chapter, and then I couldn't even really look at it again to reread it and edit it. It was so hard to write. And that's what I wanted. I wanted readers to feel that death. And also, to know that Alice was gonna be okay, but that, that was really hard.

18:54 (KW): Would you consider that point— I had to put the book down. I had to go away. I was like, "I can't."

19:07 (RT): So think about that the next time you see a subway rat. You know, maybe you'll throw him a little piece of bagel.

19:15 (KW): So I feel like that is part, the climax of the book, I guess. I don't know. Everything was just one thing after the next after the next and then Walter dies and then it's so emotional and then you turn the page and you have this poem. And I was like, "Wow. A breath." And it was kind of comforting in a—I didn't expect it. How did that arrive there? And the title of it, "Pied Beauty" she calls Walter Pied Beauty through, somewhere in one of the earlier chapters I believe.

19:54 (RT): Yeah, wow you are such a good reader. Yeah, I mean to me, you know, I had to think about like what do you do when the world ends, someone you loves dies. Where do you go for comfort? Especially if you're someone like Alice who, you know, doesn't do people that well. And to me, where you go is, you know, you get your (Muffled Audio) form literature. And so here's a geeky girl and one of the things that she shares with her dad is love of poetry. And so, that's where she goes. She goes to poetry to comfort herself. And that's the only place I could go. I didn't, you know, what else to say. I mean, I really wanted to have six blank pages, 'cause that's what it feels like. And, yeah.

20:46 (KW): Yeah, that twenty-four and twenty-five really hit. I, and I think, you know, anybody who has a pet or has ever loved a person and, you know, you feel that there. And what you said about the denial, her being in denial I kind of got that she was in denial when she comes home after the run and she notices that he doesn't get up, and she's like, "Oh, he's just as tired as I am." And I was like, "Okay." So I did ind of start to pick up on that too. So then part three begins and the chapters start over and there super short, very disorienting because, you know, now she's lost, right? And the, I think a few chapters before she realizes Walter's seriously ill she has a sentence where she says they would be diminished without each other, or something.

21:43 (RT): Mh-hmm.

21:44 (KW): And so we see, just, her, she falls apart here. And then by chapter seven it starts to, she starts to get back on track, and I'm just looking through the pages I have here. And chapter nine I feel like the narrative is building back up now and she comes to this run where she hits this quote unquote wall, this runner's wall. And I feel like that is the point where the reader knows she's gonna break through. 'Cause she breaks through that wall itself, the running wall.

22:35 (RT): Yeah, I mean, the physical sort of catches up with the emotional at that point, right? It, like, it all just goes to hell, you know?. And she's just at her lowest and then she, you know, she got to pick herself up and get back home. And so, yeah, I wanted that, the way that running can both be a release and a comfort and then also make manifest and physical your emotional pain. And, you know, that's certainly my experience with running is that it, you know, it makes you feel the things that you feel.

23:12 (KW): And you do that a second time in the end of the book, this is in chapter twenty-five on page two ninety-two. She's running with Miles—I feel like we haven't got there in the conversation yet, and I almost don't want to. But she's running with Miles, no I'm gonna wait. I, this is so exciting for me. Okay, so we're gonna go we're ramping up. She's at the run. She hits the wall. And she runs through it and then after that I feel like there's tiny explosion of, like, revelation or resolutions or something that happen in each chapter where there's like there little, you know, transformations. Tiny moves that she makes that show the reader that she's changing.

24:05 (RT): Mh-hmm. Yeah, yeah. She, you know, learns a lot at the end of the book. I think that's really the thing is that she has a whole bunch of things where she realizes what she's been wrong about, which is another thing I'm really interested in, being wrong. And so, Alice has gotten a whole bunch of things wrong or she's missed things, and for somebody who's an overachiever, you know, that's kind of a hard thing to deal with. But she's got to deal with it.

24:36 (KW): What was the editing like in this part three where you now have to tie up all these loose ends that have, you know, loose narrative or threads of story that had started?

24:49 (RT): It was, actually that was kind of the fun part. To figure out, okay, you know, what does need to be resolved? Because, you know, there are all the problems and so it was like, "Okay, how do we resolve all these different problems?" But the thing that I felt best about, and this came at the very, very end of the process, like really after I thought it was done. There's a scene with Jenny and her mom, and she's all excited about, you know, Miles and she comes home and her mom's there, and, you know, she was in kind of, you know, giving her mom the Heisman the whole time. She just wants her mom to go away. Leave her alone. She's annoying. And then I decided at the last minute to have her allow her mom to stay and hear her excitement and, you know, hear her plans and kind of appreciate the mother that she has. And that was really late, 'cause it was, it had to do with understanding the development and the growth of that relationship, and so that was a change I made late. To let her have her mother stay in the room. And then I felt like, "Ugh," you know, that again I'm sobbing myself as I'm writing that scene, which is so weird to, you know, make yourself cry over your own writing. It's so weird, I can just tell you. It's weird, but I did.

26:25 (KW): I, she has a lot of things where, you know, the mom—she learns about her mom's past. Things that she didn't know, and so I guess what I'm hearing when you say you went back, where you decided to have the mom stay in the scene in chapter twenty-six. You mean you the writer in the editing process.

26:47 (RT): Yes.

26:48 (KW): When—okay. And what about the other things where the mom learns, where learns about her mom's past? Was that also back on revision?

27:01 (RT): No. I think it kind of grew organically, you know, as I was working. You know, I wanted there to be things about her mom, you know, like, I had to figure out, like, who are each of these people? Who are each of these people? What are there stories? Where do they come from? You know, what losses have they suffered? And so, I think it was, I think that was, it became essential fairly early on, you know, when I was thinking about it that I wanted Alice to not be aware of the people around her and how kind of awesome they were. Because she was self-absorbed. To see that and then to gradually realize and to gradually find things out, you know? And so, yeah, I didn't want to kind of dump all that at once. I wanted her to be, I wanted the reader to learn as she learned.

28:05 (KW): Well we're talking about the editing of this book, but just reflecting on all the things that you do: you teach full-time and you write two columns. Where do find time to write books?

28:22 (RT): I don't have a life. It's really easy. Like, I don't have a life. And so, yeah, I mean, I think when I look at people where I think, *How do they do it?* it's the, you know, the moms who have kids— What?

28:38 (KW): Yes?

28:39 (RT): Keysha, did you hear that?

28:41 (KW): Yes. No.

28:43 (RT): "You are now in the host queue." It said, "You are now in the host queue."

28:46 (KW): Okay.

28:48 (RT): Some British voice just came out of nowhere.

28:51 (KW): It's probably, they're having something with their software today. They usually really don't. I'm gonna send them a message, but I can still hear you.

28:59 (RT): Okay. Okay. Yeah, it was like being on an airplane, and, in England. It kind of came out of nowhere. Wait, so, what was the question?

29:14 (KW): I'm so sorry about this interview. The question was—what was the question? The question was, wait give me a second, oh, how the hell do you find time to write all these books?

29:26 (RT): Oh, how do I do it?

29:28 (KW): Teaching a full-time— You're an Associate Professor of Creative Writing at Inland Northwest Center for Writers in, it's Spokane, right? Is that how you say it?

29:40 (RT): It's Spokane, yeah, it's actually Eastern Washington University in Spokane. And, you know, I mean, for me I think, you know, I have one fifty pound extremely demanding dog and that's it for my dependence. And so, and I'm really good with being protective of my writing time. I write every morning at eight, from eight to eleven, eleven-thirty. You know, I go to the same coffee shop. I sit at the same table. I drink three cups of decaf and, it's just like, I show up. I just do the work. And so, you know, it's just developing that kind of discipline has allowed me to do a bunch of different things. And, you know, I'm better when I'm busy. And so, and I have a great job. My job is really, it's completely awesome. I'm lucky to have it. I teach mostly graduate classes. All of our classes are in the evening, and they meet once a week. And so, you know, I'm teaching two nights a week. And so it gives me all day, you know, where if I don't get work done, if I don't get writing done, like, I've got only myself to blame. And believe me, I blame myself for not being as productive as I think I should be, or as good as I should be. But it's really, it's kind of an ideal setup for me as a writer to be able to do this.

31:12 (KW): So when you're writing from, like, eight to eleven or eight to eleven-thirty that's seven days a week you do that?

31:19 (RT): Well, you know what, it used to be six days a week, and now I've started going to Pilates and bar class on Saturday mornings and so now it's like five days a week. But I decided that that's okay. That's it's okay for me to take off, you know, two mornings a week. And, yeah, and I think there's a great book by Betsy Lerner called *The Forest for the Trees*.

31:43 (KW): I have that book!

31:44 (RT): Yeah, it's awesome. But she talks about, like, different types of writers. Like there's the neurotic writer, you know, who thinks she can only write in the morning, and then I realized, *Oh my God, I'm a neurotic writer 'cause I think I can only write in the morning.* And, you know what, that's not true it's just one of the lies that I tell myself because I don't want to work in the afternoon. But, you know, if I have a deadline or if I'm behind I can work in the afternoon, you know? I can work on planes. I can work, you know, pretty much anywhere. And so, it's just a question of, you know, yeah, getting it done. And, you know, feeling like crap if I don't, that's I think the main thing.

32:22 (KW): Is that time for new work or is that like all your work that you'd be doing? I mean, obviously, if you have a deadline and you can't finish something, but is that, does that time include, like, the stuff you would do for *Chronicle* and the stuff you would do for *Running Times* or is it like book stuff?

32:42 (RT): It's all, all of my writing gets done between those hours. Like that's it. And then basically I'm like spent after three and a half hours I got nothing left. And so, and then I prepare for class or I read, you know, I take my dog for a long run. But everything I do gets done in those three and a half hours, that has to do with writing. So that's, you know, columns, it's book stuff, it's revisions. You know, sometimes it's shopping for shoes, sometimes it's looking at cute animal videos, but, you know, I kind of, like, that is my dedicated work time. I make no plans ever to do anything during that time. And fortunately in my program most of the faculty write in the mornings so we never have morning meetings ever, it's just part of our culture. And so I get to protect that writing time, and I think many people don't have that luxury. It's a big luxury to say that I'm not available to the world from eight to eleven-thirty. And so, I, you know, feel grateful for that everyday that I have that ability.

34:06 (KW): So there were two monologues at the end of the book. One of them I'm calling Walter the Man's Manifesto. After I read that I had this thought, *I guess he told you Alice.* That was kind of a point there. You know, the reader feels like she's starting to get called out on her mess, and kind of, you know, brought to task there. From this character who's—

34:48 (RT): That's a pain in the butt. She's a pain in the butt.

34:54 (KW): Is Walter's Manifesto also something that just, that came in that organic, magic fiction way?

35:04 (RT): Yeah, I mean he was, you know, he was a dude where like he's kind of weird, sad, slacky guy, but who also, you know, she has a special bond with. And is able to tell her things that she an't here from her parents or her friends. And so, and he's kind of you know a little bit didactic and so he just kind of lets her have it. And, you know, I felt like she needed to hear that and readers needed to know that, yeah other people are really getting annoyed with her too. You know, that, that was, you know, it's kind of a reaction shot too, what a, you know, pain in the butt she had become.

35:49 (KW): And how long did you say, I know you say it went pretty quickly, but from the time when you started writing this book to the time when it was finished. Do you remember how long it was?

36:03 (RT): Yeah, I mean I know I got the email from my editor in September and I got the contract, so we worked on it, worked on it, worked on it. I got the contract right around Valentine's Day, so in February. And then I sent him the manuscript that August. And so that felt pretty quick to me. And I also knew, you know, I had had just read Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In*, and I knew that, you know, done is better than perfect. And I knew that I needed to get a complete draft. I just had to do it. And so, you know, if I had taken more time, like, you know, I hadn't reread the book at this point because, you know, I'm sure there are a million things that I would do differently now. But it felt like just such an achievement to actually have finished it that, you know, that's, it didn't, it wasn't, like, ten years of my life. It was wow, this is an amazing, incredible very short journey.

37:16 (KW): We talked a little bit about the running and the book mirroring the emotional, I guess arc or moments, and there's a point in chapter twenty-five when she's running with Miles. They're going on their first car hike, not car hike, but they're going in a car ride on a run, wait. They're getting in a car and they're driving to somewhere to run. Sometimes I have problems.

37:49 (RT): Wait, I thought you were perfect.

37:55 (KW): They, on this run and oh and at the same time they're talking and she's talking about the things that she's sharing with him now for the first time about Walter, which she had kept hidden, afraid of what he was gonna think. And then, you know, they're having this conversation and she says on page two ninety-two, "We had gotten nearly to the top and the path was starting to flatten out. Could I? Could I go woofing? The trail opened into a clearing. You could see all over the valley. It felt like being on top of the world." And, I just felt like, at that moment she's now open to everything. That if—she has reached a clearing, mentally.

38:43 (RT): Yeah. Yeah, you're making me sound much more intentional and smart than I really am so thank you for that.

38:51 (KW): No problem, anytime.

38:55 (RT): Can I call you when I need a little fluffing? It's great.

39:00 (KW): I always ask my students, well we'll read something and I think, *Do you think that the writer knew what they were doing when they did that or did they*—and then, you know, someone says, "Oh no, I think they knew," and then they have this debate about— What I find is fascinating the things that happen in the text—

39:20 (RT): Yeah, to me, like, you know, becoming a writer after being an English major and then publishing literary theory, like, I have zero tolerance at this point for the work, I mean I'm gonna say this, for the work of English professors. Where they talk about meaning and symbols and, you know, like, I just feel like yeah, no, that's not the way it works. And so, when we study writing, which, you know, I think the only way to become a good writer is to study writing we study it for moves that we can steal, you know? How does this writer get from here to here? You know, what is Joan Didion doing with her sentences that makes them so unbelievably great, and, I just—when people start talking about, you know, hidden meaning or symbols I just think, *Are you kidding? Like that is so not the way it works. I really don't think that's the way it works as a writer.* Yeah, but sometimes it's just, you hit on these little, you know, the kind of the echoes or the resonances and you're like, "Wow, that was really fortunate!" And then when you go back and you see them there're ways that you can kind of turn up the volume on them to bring them out a little bit more. I think a lot of it is just the work of the unconscious, you know? Like, it gets in there and then it's like whoa look how this talks to that. And you can, you know, you can ramp it up a little bit, but I don't think anything ever, I don't think anything was planted in there. You know, I think with the theme you just talked about, like, I was actually visualizing a place where I run and what it looks like. That you come up to the top, you're at a clearing. And, you know, I love that you said yeah that's exactly what happens with her, like all the crap is cleared away. She can see where it's going, and actually in that scene, you know, she starts singing this Cat Stevens song because the movie *Harold and Maude* is kind of the thing that goes between her and Miles. And the title of the book, *On the Road to Find Out*, is from that movie. It's from the soundtrack by Cat Stevens. And she kind of, that's where she feels where she is, like, hey, like the world is all before me, you know, the last line in *Paradise Lost*, you know, like, she's going out into the world. And, who knows where it's gonna lead, but, you know, that's kind of what I had in my head. But I was just visualizing what it's like to, you know, run to the top of a peak and have it open out, but I love the way you read that. That was probably somewhere in me, that feeling came out, but I was certainly not aware of it.

41:53 (KW): Well I truly want to say congratulations to your unconscious and your conscious for bringing *On the Road to Find Out* to the world.

42:05 (RT): Well, and thank you for being such a great reader, and you know, for asking such good questions.

42:12 (KW): Oh, my pleasure.

42:13 (RT): Your students are very fortunate to have you. I'm sure they realize that.

42:17 (KW): I don't know.

42:20 (RT): Well they should.

42:24 (KW): I have a follow-up question. You said that FSG was your dream publisher. Why did you say that?

42:31 (RT): Because, you know, when I worked in publishing in New York you sort of become aware of all the different publishers. And, you know, for me there was Alfred A. Knopf and Farrar, Straus and Giroux that published the books that I thought, *Oh man, those are so good.* You know, and FSG especially now that I'm writing non-fiction has published, you know, Joan Didion and John McPhee, you know, my two heroes, non-fiction heroes. And then, you know, they also have published so many other really exquisite books. And so, yeah, I mean, it's just kind of like the name brand thing that it just it's, that's what makes me weak in the knees, you know? It's not like, "Oh, here's some (Muffled Audio) shoes I don't care about that. I care about, like, company that I keep on the publishing list." And, I'm really, really humbled to be in such good company, on their list.

43:29 (KW): I think that's great for you to say because I think that it validates, and you hinted that, I think, in *On the Road*, no not *On the Road*, in the *Chronicle* piece that we referenced earlier that it's okay to want to be in good company. It's okay to want to be on a name brand, like, that's okay.

43:51 (RT): Well, I think it's okay, and it's also what you want to aspire to, right? Like, and, you know, if this hadn't worked out there I had decided at a certain point, like, *Oh, what if it doesn't go through? Like, what if this is a crazy idea that Wes had and nobody else was gonna be down with that. Like, am I still gonna do the novel?* And at that point I realized, *Yes, you know what, I am still gonna write this novel.* Like, I'd gotten far enough that I thought, *I'm gonna do it.* So if it wasn't FSG that's fine. But it was just like, you know, it was kind of my dream. And so, you know, maybe that makes me less of a real artist, you know, because I care about things like that, but I can't help it. I do. You know, I care about things like that.

44:35 (KW): I think it makes you an artist with a business side, you know?

44:40 (RT): Yeah. A certain pragmatic artist. Maybe more like an architect, or something.

44:48 (KW): Well thank you so much for joining on the show, and I look forward to the book about rats. To hearing more of your work. To following you on *The Chronicle.* I have to say, I tried to start running. Is that correct English? I tried running.

45:08 (RT): Yeah.

45:09 (KW): I tried running last year. It went alright until I sprained my ankle walking off of the treadmill, so, you know. But—

45:19 (RT): Oh, yeah, yeah. You know, it's not for everybody. You know, it's like you do what you do, you know? Like, I'm trying to do yoga now and it's not pretty, but it's, you know, everybody gets to do what they want to do. You know, for me, it's like I love to share the things that I love, so, you know, maybe you'll want to get a rat at some point. Who knows?

45:46 (KW): Or start to run again. Either—but I did love Walter, though, I did love Walter. But thank you for this and it made me—I think we're all on the road to find out. So this is great.

46:00 (RT): Well thank you, thank you so much. This has really been a pleasure talking to you, as I knew it would be from listening to the podcast.

46:07 (KW): Oh, thank you.

46:08 (Music)

46:10 (KW): Well, we're at the end of another episode of *Behind the Prose*. I hope that you enjoyed it. Thank you for bringing me into your electronic device. Stay tuned because in the next few weeks I have an interview with Jennifer Niesslein, who's the editor of *Full Grown People*, the online literary journal and anthology of the same name. She's also, like, the founder of *Brain, Child* magazine. Yeah, okay, Jennifer Niesslein, so you don't want to miss that. Plus, I have an interview with Kira Lynne Allen, author of *Write This Second*. It's poetry and memoir. It's a poetry memoir and so we'll talk to her about how she's bringing the truth of life and of love in this book. Plus, next weekend I'm going to be at Creative Nonfiction 2015 Writers' Conference. I hope you will be there. I will be there to bring you exclusive *Behind the Prose* episodes soon as the conference wraps up. So, if you can't go, we're disappointed, but I got you. *Behind the Prose* music is by UK artist Redvers West-Boyle. This show is produced and hosted by me, Keysha Whitaker from a real closet, that needs a comfortable stool, in Pennsylvania. Until next time, listen, learn, and write.

47:45 (Music)

47:52 (Ad)