**Behind the Prose Transcript**

**Episode 18: Get your grown writer on with editor of Full Grown People, Jennifer Niesslein, co-founder of Brain, Child Mag**

Length: [00:58:29]

Host: Keysha Whitaker (KW)

Guest #1: Jennifer Niesslein (JN)

Guest #2: Alyssa Sorresso (AS)

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00:00 (Ad)

00:30 (Music)

00:35 (KW): Hey it's episode eighteen of *Behind the Prose* and right now I am in Pittsburgh. I am at the 2015 Creative Nonfiction Writers' Conference and if you're following on Twitter you know I tweeted a whole bunch today. I'm having such a great time. The conference really has a—there's—it really feels like a community, it's weird. Everyone is helpful and supportive of everyone else. And I tend to think that maybe this is because it's nonfiction, right? You really are dealing with people's lives in a more intimate way than fiction. It's personal stories. It's true stories. And I have today—I've been talking to people all weekend, and I have an interview with Alyssa Sorresso, she's a teaching artists and she had an article in the June issue of *Creative Nonfiction* last year. So I'll give you that interview, and then after that you'll hear my full-length interview with Jennifer Niesslein of *Full Grown People*. She's the editor of *Full Grown People* and the, on of the former co-founders of, well she's always gonna be the co-founder but, she sold the magazine *Brain, Child* magazine. And so you'll get to hear about how she—how I feel has the Midas touch. *Brain, Child* is a big hit and *Full Grown People* is making waves. She's already released an anthology of, for that site. So, check out the interviews and keep listening 'cause I'm gonna bring you more exclusive clips from the Creative Nonfiction Conference. And tweet me. Let me know what you think. And, oh, the check-in this week. This is the check-in. Here's Jennifer.

02:38 (Music)

02:40 (KW): Thank you for joining me today, Jennifer.

02:44 (JN): Good to be here.

02:46 (KW): I'm very excited to talk to you. We've been trying to get together. I had to push it off before because of my own crazy schedule, but we're here now, and I referenced this, I don't know if I said it on the air one time or in a blog, but I feel like you're the writer, the editor, the magazine founder with the Midas touch. You were the co-founder of *Brain, Child* magazine, which is a mega-hit right now. And you worked there for thirteen years. Sold it, I'm sure for beaucoup bucks. And now you are the editor and founder of an online literary journal, *Full Grown People - The Other Awkward Age*. So congratulations on all of that.

03:39 (JN): Well thank you. That's very nice of you to say.

03:41 (KW): What do you think the key is to your ingenuity?

03:47 (JN): In terms of coming up with concepts of the magazines or—

03:52 (KW): Yeah. I guess concepts. Like coming up with ideas.

03:58 (JN): You know, I have this weird knack, I think, of my life sort of coinciding with stuff before, like, about a year before the rest of the culture picks up on it. So with *Brain, Child* we were certainly not the first ones to take a literary stance with motherhood, but, you know, it was—we were one of the early ones of the, say the 2000's Yeah, and then with *Full Grown People* it was another thing with where I was just sort of adrift and thinking *Okay, this is yet another awkward age, and I'm middle-aged now.* And it's just something sort of weird about my life is that my career path has been, have a personal crisis, start a business about it.

05:01 (KW): And that works!

05:03 (JN): Yeah, I guess so.

05:06 (KW): So, how long has *Full Grown People*, how long has it been?

05:12 (JN): I've—the first essays came out in September, 2012. So, not two years yet.

05:25 (KW): And how did you go about—what was your launch like? At that time were you a one person shop? And what did you do to promote and advertise or call for submissions?

05:38 (JN): Well: through my work with *Brain, Child* I already knew a lot of writers whose work I really enjoyed and wanted to work with again. So I contacted them, I contacted Gina Easely who provides a lot of the photography for *Full Grown People*, just to see who wanted to get on board with me. And then, you know, I just tried to spread the word. Basically through word of mouth, 'cause I don't have, you know, I didn't and I still don't have a big budget. And it still is sort of a one person operation, other than Gina providing the photos and Zsofia McMullin doing the tweeting because I'm such a terrible tweeter.

06:31 (KW): That said, why do you think you're a terrible tweeter?

06:35 (JN): I can't keep it to a hundred forty characters. Under forty, yeah.

06:40 (KW): I guess that would be crazy, yeah.

06:43 (JN): Yeah. It's, yeah, it's too much, like— Yeah, so when I was doing it was like these weird cryptic, like, you know, messages into the ether. Like, nobody is gonna click on that.

06:59 (KW): What's that old philosophy or adage that says you just have to—you don't know how to do everything you have to like surround your people, surround yourself with people who know how to do everything or do the things you can't do.

07:14 (JN): Yes, and thank God she offered to do that, so. . . .

07:20 (KW): In—currently you publish two times a week on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Did you always do two times a week, and if so what was the decision process that lead to that?

07:36 (JN): Well, originally I was gonna do every weekday. And then I realized I can't do this without either a big staff or a lot of drugs. And so I had to switch, and I can't remember if I went down to three and then two or just went to two, but it's a manageable amount. And I also think people have a lot to read because there's a lot of great work being put out online now. And I'd rather people savor what we have there instead of rushing through what might—or skipping it altogether on *Full Grown People*.

08:20 (KW): I think that is a strategic move because when I discovered the site, and I think it might have been through twitter. I'm not sure. And I came across, "I Know That Elmo In Not A Child Molester" by Andrew Bomback, who was previous guest on this show. You know, and I thought that you did twice a week. It felt like, "Oh, this, this manageable. This is a site that I can actually follow and not feel overwhelmed or not feel lost by."

08:50 (JN): Right. Yeah, that, I mean that's the idea behind it, so. . . . And then if you're new to it and want to binge you can just, you know, keep on reading back.

09:06 (KW): So, the essays that you published, obviously they fall under this full grown people theme, this awkward age where people are middle-aged and they're coming to terms with what it's like to really be an adult. Or realizing aspects of adulthood that are hitting, dealing with things. You know, role-reversal, parents getting old, death, and marriages, and everything. And what do you think is— Outside of that theme, narrative-wise or craft-wise, what do you think are the strongest elements in the essays that you select?

09:50 (JN): I mean, I think the writing is, first of all, just super-strong in all of the essays. And that's important to me. I like ones that make me see things in a different way. You know, just kinda whatever your editor says, but, you know, I'm not sure. 'Cause they are different styles. Like, Jody Mace is hilarious and I run her stuff. Sarah Beer is another funny one. But the one I ran today by Lesléa Newman, which is called "Like Mother, Like Daughter," it's, that's one that is not especially funny. And, you know, it's sort of about her fraught relationship with her mother, but I think all of them have that great way of being very specific about a situation but being well-written enough where you feel like you can take something about this and maybe see yourself in it.

11:03 (KW): I read that one that you're referring to, "Like Mother, Like Daughter." And I immediately said, "Oh my goodness. She's talking about me and my mom." And it's so ironic because it was just earlier today or yesterday I was thinking about feeling frustrated because I didn't feel my mom had—I felt like she made too many sacrifices for me, you know, and gave up on her own dreams. And then I read this essay that is essentially— I was like, "Oh my goodness. The Universe is speaking through *Full Grown People*."

11:41 (JN): Yeah, it's funny. I mean, I thought of my own mother, even though my mother had different ambitions and she was an excellent, excellent teacher. She's retiring this year. But she has supported my ambitions from the very get-go and I can't imagine who I would be without her, you know, cheering me on throughout my life. And I just thought, you know, my mom did it in her way and Lesléa's mother did it in sort of an invisible way, but just didn't stand in her way in achieving her own ambitions, so. . . . I don't know.

12:29 (KW): About—and, you know, I mentioned this earlier, I was published in *Full Grown People* after I leaned of the site. It was like, "Oh my gosh!" I had an essay that I had been working on and—unsuccessful, I couldn't get it placed. And I went back to it, changed it a thousand times. And when I thought about your site I said, "This sounds like a stage, you know, something that someone in this awkward age is going through. They're losing old friendships, getting new ones, or maybe not getting new ones." And so I submitted it to you and I was so very happy when you accepted it, so thank you.

13:10 (JN): Oh, thank you. It was a wonderful essay. And that's another one that I think is universal yet very specific one. It's, I mean, there's a lot on the site that—it's funny 'cause we're talking about the ones that have to do with loss, but I think there's something about this awkward age too that you're encountering things for the first time. Like, you know, dating after being married for a long time or, you know, changing careers or, you know, things like that too. It could be—it's not all sad stuff is what I'm trying to say.

13:51 (KW): And one of the other things being on the site as an essayist on your site when someone, and stop, you can tell me, I'll stop if this is private information, but when someone gets accepted you have a special group on Facebook for contributors of the site.

14:11 (JN): Yes.

14:12 (KW): And you invited me to join it, and I joined it, and it's not like seven thousand people. I think maybe it's like two hundred or one hundred something. So it's still at this moment a manageable number of people, you feel like you know them. And they're people—like I'm on a lot of writer Facebook groups, and most of the time it's a lot of nonsense, right? People are just posting promoting stuff and random nonsense. But this one it really feels like a secret society. Like a literary community. Like, people, they're saying things they're giving real advice. And, you know, I found it to be really rich and that's like one of the only Facebook groups that is probably one of the two that I go back for writing and actually check to see, like, what people are saying, and will respond. So that was a refreshing to see and a great concept.

15:06 (JN): Well I think community is important both among writers and also among readers. So, I mean, I can count maybe on two fingers the amount of nasty comments we've gotten on the site. You know, 'cause I think the community is just supportive and lovely, and, you know, the readership—I don't know, it's something I really treasure about *Full Grown People*.

15:38 (KW): You know, it reminds me of, I watched a DVD of, who was it, ugh the writer's name just went out of my head. A real messy one. Oh, Susan Sontag, and, you know, they were talking about her life. And then she was running in these different literary circles and had these different friendships and relationships with people and, you know, I feel like that community that you've established twenty years from now, thirty years from now for people are even doing documentaries about people who, you know, were writers during this time period. That's where those types of connections are made, right? "Oh, so-and-so knew this writer," you know what I mean?

16:23 (JN): Yeah, yeah. And it's funny 'cause I, you know, I don't have an MFA. I've long considered myself sort of, you know, sort of an, you know, I'm not anybody's darling basically, in big literary circles. But I have to say it's nice to—you don't really need to be. In New York, going to parties or at a whole bunch of academic premieres or whatever, but it's you could just have this and be quietly supportive of people no matter where they are. I mean, I have, you know, some of the *Full Grown People* writers, one of 'em lives in Hawaii, one lives in Montana, I mean, we're all over the place, so. . . .

17:17 (KW): Let's talk a little bit about the day-to-day editorial work of *Full Grown People*. About how many submissions do you receive, say, on a weekly basis? Or a monthly, whatever you track it by.

17:36 (JN): I don't know, probably about twenty on a weekly basis.

17:40 (KW): And what's your schedule like? Do you have a certain time of day where you're editing for the magazine and then doing your own work? How do you manage that?

17:50 (JN): I do, let's see, I do most of the editing on Tuesdays, most of the bulk of the editing. And then I make drafts other days of the week. And then, you know, I write intros the night before an essay comes up, which I should really get better about doing so they're more meaty, but I'm not really sure the people want more meat in their inbox. The intros are the ones for the newsletter that I send out. It's just a notification of a new essay that's up, and I write a little intro to each of 'em. Let's see, and then I also, I spent a lot of time last year working on the first *Full Grown People* anthology, which is the Greatest Hits, Volume 1. And I had a huge learning curve with that 'cause I was trying to get, trying to, you know, how to make an ebook, figure out, you know, I was a master of Quark. But now nobody uses that anymore so I had to figure out, you know, different layout program, all that boring stuff. But now I know how to do it and I'm working on *Full Grown People's* second book, which is gonna be an anthology on love and sex. And it's gonna be about half essays from the site, half new work, and I'm really super excited about it.

19:27 (KW): And so the people, if they want to get the anthology now they can go to your website, that's *Full Grown People: The Greatest Hits Volume 1*. And they can go to your website and there's a big banner—

19:41 (JN): Right.

19:42 (KW): Promoting it.

19:43 (JN): And they can click on that and you can order the print version through fullgrownpeople.com or if you want an ebook you go to most places where ebooks are sold, like Amazon or Smashwords or, is it the iBook, I'm not sure. The Apple Store's affiliated one. And you can order it there too.

20:12 (KW): And you are publishing this under *Full Grown People*.

20:16 (JN): Yes. So it's sort of my own imprint, I guess.

20:25 (KW): So and you're gonna do a second one. So are you thinking that you're establishing now, possibly a publishing arm?

20:35 (JN): Yes, that's the idea because I don't make any money from the site and neither do the writers. And that's kind of just a labor of love, but the business part of it comes in with the anthologies and that's how I'm, I'll be able to pay myself and pay the writers. So, you know, in order for this—and I think this will—last one I think I just about broke even and I'm hoping we're gonna pick up steam with the next one. You know, and then people will be able to order some of the books from the back catalog. So I'm planning on putting out a book a year. So we'll see. We're still not quite two years into this so, but I'm committed for a good chunk of years.

21:44 (KW): In what influence your decision to publish independently as opposed to get a contract somewhere?

21:53 (JN): Well, frankly, I can keep more of the money. You know?

22:06 (KW): It works with me.

22:08 (JN): Yeah.

22:13 (KW): Do you. . . . I'm thinking of a question relating to self-publishing. Not just for other, like, writers out in the sphere. So I feel—and I guess the question is. . . . Maybe I'm trying to phrase my words carefully because someone—I think that with your skill. Right. So I feel like someone can, people are very successful independent publishing, right? And then we have people who do it and aren't, but they don't necessarily have, like, the literary skill behind it. If you have, like, the skill that, you know, you obviously have from *Brain, Child* and with *Full Grown People* that buffer that I feel like people rely on, quote unquote, like the publishing industry to provide you essentially already provided as the founder of a—you know what I mean?

23:32 (JN): Right, I mean, I think the landscape is changing too. I think there's less and less stigma attached to publishing your own work, especially if you do it right, if you get people who know what they're doing., like, you know, when I used to—I can do a little graphic design. But, you know, when I do it I do it I just do it as a rough sketch sometimes and we call it Jennifer's "uglification process." Before I sent it to the real designer who would actually, you know, get the concept of what I was trying to accomplish and make it look like a real thing. So, Anne, my friend Anne did the graphic design on the first book, but she set up a template so I can do it in further ones. And, yeah, I get what you're saying, so, if, you know, as a writer myself I appreciate a good editor. I didn't do a lot of writing for this book. I wrote the intro and then I had my friend Stephanie, who, Stephanie Wilkinson who I co-founded *Brian, Child* with edit my intro. So, you know, it's all been vetted. It's not like it's, you know? It's not like, "Oh, look what Jennifer stapled together." But I'm also from, like, you know, I came of age in the 90's era when jeans were big, you know, so, it really doesn't take much of a leap for me. I sort of have this ethos of, you know, I'll just do it myself, 'cause I can't—I think it's partly being a 90's kid and partly having grownup without a whole lot of financial security, but I, just feel very strongly that you can't count on other people, or not necessarily people but you can't count on an institution or an industry to take care of you, and shepherd your product the way you want it done.

26:08 (KW): You know that reminds me of a couple of weeks ago I did an interview with Rachel Toor, and she is a writer of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Running Times* magazine. And she has a new book out, called *On the Road to Find Out*. And we were talking about her first book, *Admissions Confidential*, and she said she didn't like the title. And she didn't pick the title, the publisher actually picked the title. And then we're talking about the jacket cover of one of her other books and she was like, "Oh, I don't like that jacket cover. Or the jacket text." 'Cause they pick it, you know? So that's exactly what you're talking about, I believe.

26:39 (JN): Yeah, exactly.

26:43 (KW): What's the editorial process like once you receive a submission and you like it? Where do you go from there?

26:53 (JN): If there's, there's sort of two ways. One is if I like it, sort of, unreservedly I'll accept it. Go through and edit it. And, you know, I edit pretty thoroughly. I'm a very hands-on editor, but I always view it as a collaboration between me and the writer so, life is to short for writers and editors to go around pissing each other off. So, you know, if—we'll come out with a compromise. And if not, the writer can take the piece elsewhere, but that hasn't happened at *Full Grown People.* And the other way is, sometimes I'll like a piece and I'll see something in it that I think is strong, but I'll have concerns about other areas of it. And sometimes I'll kick it back to the writer and tell them what my concerns are, and other times I'll accept it with a caveat, you know, if you're open to working on this for me, just sort of flagging that there's gonna be some big work ahead and if you're up for the task let's do it together.

28:14 (KW): In that process one of the things that you sent back to me, I don't remember specifically but it was something it had to reference, it might have been my friend's first marriage or something. There was some timing that was off and in one of my twenty million previous drafts I kept changing, like I couldn't figure out how to fix—I kept moving this thing and then I think I finally had taken it out, 'cause I didn't know— And you said, "Well, sounds like something should go right here." And I was like, "Oh my gosh, it goes right there!" So I went back to draft like nine hundred and eighty and pulled it out, put it in the section where it was supposed to be, and I was just so amazed.

28:58 (JN): Oh, I mean, the power of fresh eyes is—you can't underestimate that either, right?

29:06 (KW): Yeah. And so what's your editorial calendar, like how filled do you like to have your calendar?

29:20 (JN): I like to have about a month's worth of essays scheduled out. So, you know, a lot of them come from the submissions I get through the website and some of 'em also come from writers who I've also worked with before. And, you know, if I'm feeling that we're sort of hitting too much of the same tone in a given two week period I might reach out to a writer I know has a different sort of tone and say, "Hey, got anything in the works for me?" So, yeah.

30:13 (KW): So in addition to being the entrepreneur that you are you as well are a writer yourself. You have a memoir out, *Practically Perfect In Every Way*. And I would love to have you back after I read it so we can talk more about that. And when you do come back, will you?

30:35 (JN): Certainly.

30:36 (KW): When you do come back we'll talk more about your own writing process and your own editing process. But I am curious about when you write now. When do you write now that you are a full-time editor of a journal?

30:55 (JN): A lot on the weekends, but you know I don't write a ton, because I write really only when I have to figure something out for myself. And, you know, I have a pretty mellow life so I haven't had any major sort of things going on. But yeah I am working on a little side project that, who knows, who knows how many years it will take before I finish it, but it's a little genealogy type situation.

31:37 (JN): And that's encouraging to hear as well, 'cause what I'm learning even with the F*ull Grown People* essay I think I'd been working on that for a few years. No, not that one, that was just this summer. There's another one that I sent out. Oh, this Judge Judy essay that was in the foreword. I'd been working on it, like, since grad school.

32:03 (JN): I'll have to look that one up.

32:05 (KW): Yeah—

32:06 (JN): You had me at Judge Judy.

32:08 (KW): Yeah, I love Judge Judy.

32:13 (KW): So finally, Jennifer, my question for you is: what is your editorial superpower?

32:25 (JN): Hmm. That's a good question. I don't know. You've worked with me, what do you think it is?

32:40 (KW): I'm not allowed to answer.

32:44 (JN): Okay. I don't know. I mean I can work the command shift H pretty great so I can get rid of all those two spaces. I don't know—

32:59 (KW): Wait, wait. Command shift H does that?

33:02 (JN): Yeah if you do the, it's search and replace so it'll replace type in two spaces and then replace with one space.

33:11 (KW): Oh.

33:12 (JN): That's why I don't get why people get so bunged up about, you know, people using two spaces. It's literally like one thing you have to do on your keyboard, and it's fixed.

33:25 (KW): Wow, I didn't know that.

33:28 (JN): Yeah. I guess my, if I had to pick a superpower it would be hopefully being collaborative and easy to work with. I don't know.

33:43 (KW): I can concur.

33:46 (JN): Thank you.

33:48 (KW): And I would love to hear from you, who are— You know, I struggle with this because I read a book one time that said, you know, "When you're on radio or something, audio, you should address the person as you to make the listener feel like one person." But if I'm talking to you and I say, "You," you could think I'm talking to you, but I'm really trying to talk to you listening. And it just gets all kind of weird. So, that what, every time you might've, people might've heard me— I'm just, you know, I can't, can't. The point is, if you've worked with Jennifer and you think she has an editorial superpower please tweet us @behindtheprose and then I will retweet it and she will retweet it and I want to hear what you think Jennifer Niesslein—did I say your name right?

34:43 (JN): Uh, Niesslein, but close enough.

34:45 (KW): Niesslein, Niesslein. Jennifer Niesslein's superpower, editorial superpower is. Tweet us @behindtheprose and what's your twitter, what's your tweet name?

34:58 (JN): Uh, jniesslein.

35:00 (KW): Jniesslein.

35:03 (JN): Yes.

35:04 (KW): And you can get all that on fullgrownpeople.com. Thank you so, so much, Jennifer, for being here. And I look forward to having you back.

35:12 (JN): Oh, thank you, Keysha.

35:13 (Music)

35:17 (KW): Okay, as promised here's a *Behind the Prose* bonus for you. It's an interview with Alyssa Sorresso. She's a teaching artist who had her first major piece published in *Creative Nonfiction* magazine, and if you're gonna get a first major piece, like, *Creative Nonfiction* is the place to have it in. That essay was about finding out her mother had uterine cancer around the same time that she was getting married. Not around, but at the same time. And so the essay talks about her navigating that world and that experience and she was explaining that to me for a few minutes until I realized that my record button was still blinking and, so I'm gonna pick up when I actually pressed record. In *Behind the Prose* fashion, you know, from the earlier shows this is kind of a throwback. So we pick up with her talking about journaling as a kid, but don't worry there's a lot of good stuff still in this fifteen minute segment with Alyssa. And you really should go read her essay anyway, so yeah, I'm not mad. Enjoy.

36:31 (AS): I've been journaling since I was in second-grade. Back then I would call it keeping a diary, but now I've been more mature and I call it journaling. And this, you know, I wrote this story literally after it happened because I was still in the moment. And the piece itself is, it has a straightforward timeline, and at the same time it uses a lot of short, static sentences. And a lot of bouncing back and forth between emotions and how I'm going to deal with this and how other people might deal with this information. That is to say, when I saw the call it was specifically for the Exploring the Boundaries at *CNF* and I thought, *I think this pushes some of those boundaries. And I think it might be a good piece for that.* And so I just submitted to their open call and it was about four to five months after I had submitted that they reached out and they said, "We're considering your piece. It's one of, like, the finalists, so don't submit it anywhere," which I hadn't. I made, like, the mistake of not having too many forks in the fire where I was just waiting on this piece to be published. I'm like, well because also I know this is a good piece. I know that it has a heart. I know that it's breathing. And I think it's good for this, so I was content to wait. And it paid off fortunately, so. . . .

38:05 (KW): Can you describe the drafting process with that, the piece?

38:11 (AS): So, after I journaled, you know, I gave it a rest because it was obviously a really emotional piece for me. And even when I was writing it, well actually even when I was happening to me I was thinking, like, *I need to write about this. I need to write about this.* I was taking careful meta-notes, if you will, of what was actually going on, of all the minute details that were happening while I was experiencing them. Which is a very odd thing to happen, but it's also, I think, part of trauma, right? That's what happens, you become hyper-aware of the situation. And so, going home, just putting it all out, not thinking, which I love that Lee said that in the first day, he's like, "Don't think." And I'm like, "Yes." That is when I do my best writing is when I'm just in the moment and in the emotion. And after that just leaving it there for a couple days and, you know, going back and looking and thinking, *Wow, this is actually some really strong writing.* And it was just me doing what I always do and what I've naturally done. And I would say I probably went through a couple drafts of that, and I sent it off to some writer friends of mine who I trust. And they confirmed, "This is a really strong piece, and here's what I think you should do with it," and shopped it around. And I didn't send it out until I was absolutely sure that I couldn't push if further without an editor so I, which I had made the mistake before of just sending things out and having that niggling feeling of, *Oh that wasn't quite the best thing I've ever done in my life, but well, we'll give it a shot.* And of course it got rejected. And I'm like, O*f course Alyssa, duh. Don't do that.*

39:51 (KW): Are you impatient?

39:52 (AS): Uh, no actually I am a patient person. It's just that I'm naive, or I was naive about, like, the writing process.

39:59 (KW): I'm impatient.

40:00 (AS): Yeah, are you?

40:01 (KW): So that's why I was like, *Yeah, someone else's impatient!*

40:03 (AS): I've learned, I can totally understand that, I've learned to be more patient through the process. But, you know, I think, like, what was said on the panel today, "You have to have multiple projects going on." And one thing that I found that is really helpful too is, like, you submit it, you forget about it. You just move on. You go to the next thing, and you don't look back. Unless it's to follow-up and say like, "Hey, are you publishing this, or what?" So, yeah.

40:27 (KW) When you banged out the first draft of that how many words, or how many pages was that? And how did you whittle it down from there?

40:36 (AS): Sure. I actually love editing. I love working with editors. I love making things concise. I love essentializing pieces. I love taking a thousand word piece and cutting it down to a hundred words, which I've done a couple times, and it's just like a really fun exercise for me. I really like it. So this piece I would probably say was around two thousand words, and then I think the word count amount that they want to see is like fourteen, fifteen hundred for creative nonfiction. So I cut about that amount from it, and had a lot of fun doing it. I don't think I killed too many of my babies. But I'm also—you know, I'm not afraid of that. I actually kind of like it just because I always know that something else will emerge from it, and to really get to the actual voice of the piece.

41:30 (KW): When you revise do you start over with another draft? Do you put that one aside? How do you approach that?

41:41 (AS): Yeah, that's great. Because, just in terms of professionalizing myself, and I've been able to learn the difference between editing and revising. And just being able to look at a draft and go, "None of this is working. I'm throwing it out." I actually am lucky in that, that particular piece I didn't do that. I—and pieces that have come from my journaling I haven't necessarily done that. I haven't gone through and completely rewritten pieces. I actually perform Live Lit quite often in Chicago and that's actually where I start finding that I do actual revisions. The panel talked a little bit about the difference between talking a piece and writing a piece, and that's something I'm playing a lot with in my practice. And I love that. I love finding out how do I translate what I have just, the story I've just told to the page so it could really red. And I think in that instance I'm much more willing to, you know, transcribe what I've been telling people on the stage, look at it, and go, "You know what? I got to just like take out big, huge chunks of this. I got to take a different angle on this." And, so, that happens quite often when I'm working between those two modalities. Yeah.

43:10 (KW): In the panel, yeah, one of the panels yesterday they talked about having distance from a piece before you write it. And so, the piece that you're talking about, that describes your experience with finding out that your mom had uterine cancer and having your wedding around that same time. Came out last June. How far removed were you from that experience, and the writing of it, and how do you think that affected you and the piece?

43:38 (AS): That's a great question. I agree with what the panelist said, in connection to this being, like, essays aren't therapy because, you know, everybody reads that. You read an essay where it's just like— My rule of thumb and what I've learned about dealing with heavy topics like this is that you, the reader has to know you're okay. Like I once told a story about my best friend finding out that her sister had committed suicide, and I knew before her. And I had to go pick her up from the airport, take her back to her house, her whole family was waiting there, and I knew the entire time. And that was like, that was one of the craziest experiences I've ever had in my life. And, about like, I want to say even a year after that I told that story and I told it in a way where people weren't sure that I was still okay. And I think that's a really important part of it as well, is that, you know, for this story that I got published in *CNF* I did write it in the moment. But I took the time to step away from it, even though all of this kind of stuff was going on. I did put myself through a practice of stepping away. I knew that I had to do that to treat it like a piece of art. And that's what I find really important as well. I used to work within detention centers, and I worked with incarcerated youth. We had them write and tell their personal stories, and then we would turn them into a musical. And the beautiful thing about that, the main hook with that is that you're taking something that is very traumatic, very emotional, very deeply connected to yourself and you're letting it go so you can turn it into something beautiful. You can turn it into a piece of art. And I feel like I've been able to internalize that in my own writing so that I know that if I write something that's really emotional, that I need to go through that process of objectification. I need to step back. And I can't put it out. If I haven't crafted it then that's therapy to me. That's something I should be talking about in my sessions with my therapist, you know. So that was really an interesting conversation to me, just bringing that up.

45:56 (KW): You said that the *CNF* was your first big piece, but you've been writing professionally for about three years now, is that right? Tell me how you got started, and generally are you in nonfiction, and what else you're doing right now?

46:09 (AS): Sure. It's, that's pretty interesting. I, like I said, I worked with this company called Storycatchers and we were doing original musical theatre with incarcerated youth, and youth in the community. And with them I was working with them very closely with hundreds and hundreds of youth, writing personal stories. And I was actually, essentially an editor and a reviser with them. And I loved it, loved it. But I would, I never told my own stories. And I got burned out. It was about six, seven years of that work. I was very passionate about it because I'm very passionate about that particular social justice issue and that population. But I was like, "I'm not creating art to feed my practice. I'm not creating art to feed my teaching." You know, I was a teaching artist. I am a teaching artist. And that's part of the method, is that you are investigating your own self, your own work in order to support and feed the work of others. And I stepped away, and I said, "You know what, I'm gonna concentrate on myself." I went abroad and I got a Masters in Applied Theatre in London. And it was really just—

47:22 (KW): Wow. That's really fancy.

47:23 (AS): Yeah, I know. And it was at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, right? I know.

47:28 (KW): Can I touch your shoulder? Just—ohh!

47:30 (AS): I know. It's like gold. I'm like, I have tea constantly in my bag and we can whip it out.

47:34 (KW): Awesome.

47:35 (AS): Yeah, it was really, but really it was—I'm like, "I got a Masters." But really it was an excuse to get away, you know? And unplug myself and to really examine what I was doing with my life. And while I still love the work that I did I realized I really want to tell my own stories, and I really want to write, and I want to do, I want to do what I was doing with these kids for myself. And so, when I came back to Chicago I recommitted myself to doing that, and telling myself, "I'm not going to sacrifice my art and my artistic practice for something else, even if it is like a really prominent and important cause." And I've been still struggling to find a balance with that. I have a full-time job that is as, like, a manager of arts education programs. And that's great but that's also—meanwhile I'm like on the side hustling and like, you know, making as many connections as in like, especially, getting into the Live Lit community. That's been super helpful for me in terms of pushing my practice forward. That gives me consistent themes to write on. That allows me to workshop stories in a lot of different ways. And just being connected to a larger community. That's really helped ignite and start polishing my practice with that. So, that's this is where I'm at, at this point, you know? And this conference to me is just like finding out more interworking stuff. Like the pitch stuff that we talked about super, super helpful. Talking about publishing—I mean, this is all stuff that you don't know. You just don't know going in as a new person. And looking at this for me as a career change in a lot of ways, so. . . . But it's also, like, a blending of careers, in a way. So, yeah.

49:26 (KW): What is your— Before I ask you that last question it seems like you have a knack, not a knack, but from what you've said it sounds like you have self-awareness. That you've developed some type of technique to be able to manage things and, like, step back. Whether it's stepping back from something you've written and looking, and written and then going back and looking at it. Or step back, like you said you went to London for the Masters, and it was just kind of like a time for you to reflect. Where does that come from and how do you think that—I guess I'm really curious about that 'cause most people, you know, aren't that so aware of that.

50:12 (AS): Sure, yeah, thank you by the way. It is a skill. Well, it's a skill that you gotta build, but honestly I think it really started when I started writing and keeping a diary as a second-grader. I mean, I was constantly reflecting on my life. I had some traumatic things happen to me, and that is where I went. That was my saving grace. That's where no one would judge me. That's where I could just, like, write whatever the hell I wanted, and figure it out. Writing has always been figuring it out. Trying to understand. Trying to answer the questions. Trying to be like, "Why did this happen? How am I reflecting on it now?" And that always gave me, that process, even that tangible process. The process of sitting down, writing, closing the book, and then going away from it. Like, just leaving it there, and that, to me, that's exactly what you do. And then I think that also translated for me into the work that I did with incarcerated youth, is that, that was a skill that I was trying to teach them, you know? Because there's a lot of impassivity. There's a lot of reasons why they're in there. And a lot of them have to do with not having the skills to step back, and stop, and reflect. And I feel like as an artist that is extremely important part of my practice is to be able to reflect and think deeply about the world around me. About relationships. And about situations that I'm in. So I think it really started when I was very young, and then my career demanded that I hone those skills. And then my artistry demands that I hone those skills.

52:01 (KW):What is you, the final question is, what is your goal for yourself within the next year? We saw on yesterday, I think Julie, I'm gonna mispronounce her last name. Her last begins with a B, I'll put her on my Twitter. I want to say Bettenfield, but that's probably not right. Anyway, (Muffled Audio) introduced her and she was here last year, I think, and she's here now and with a book in her hand. And I feel like there's some type of, there's a connection to the conference here. What's your goal for yourself? At *CNF* 2016 when I interview you again what do you want to have accomplished or done or achieved?

52:41 (AS): Well, honestly, I think I want to have achieved, at least, the start of a real career change. Right now, like I said, I'm still entrenched in nonprofit and arts education. I don't know if that will ever go away because I could actually, like, make money doing that. I like to set really realistic goals for myself, even though my husband would probably be like, "Those still are not realistic." And I'm like, "What are you talking about?" I know. He's like, "Stop being so ambitious." And I'm like, "I can't help it." So, like, you know, people have New Year's resolutions in, right, in January. And I was like, "Okay, this year what I want to do is every month to two months I want to at least submit one piece for publication and I want to perform Live Lit somewhere." Right. Those are like my goals throughout the years, and I keep—I have, this is totally nerdy but, I have, I bought a passion planner. I don't know if you've ever heard of these things.

53:42 (KW): No.

53:43 (AS): They were a breakthrough phenomenon. This girl designed them, and it's like the combination of a vision board and a planner, right? Really cool tool. She had a whole successful Kickstarter about it, and I bought one. And I don't put anything about work in there. I just put about my art, and I'm like, "These are the goals that I want to reach as a writer and as an artist." And I can follow myself and journal along the way for that. So the goal that I have for next year, this is funny, I don't think anybody at work is gonna hear this, which is good, so I maybe—

54:23 (KW): If you're really scared don't say it, but I can't promise they won't. This is the internet.

54:29 (AS): Well, here's what I'll say. I hope to be traveling extensively with my husband in the near future, and taking that opportunity to really immerse myself in writing. And writing and crafting probably about seven personal essays that I have to craft that are, like, sitting on the back burner. As well as, I think especially, after having heard this last panel about publishing really starting to focus on research, and researching a possible memoir, a possible book for the future. And really getting to know the publishing industry, I think. I mean, I was, I'm a big admirer now of Emily. I mean, she's full of pertinent information. So, that's what I'm hoping to do. It's gonna be beginnings and it's gonna be continuations of a lot of different things, so. . . .

55:26 (KW): It was great to talk to you, Alyssa. I will, I haven't read the piece in *CNF,* what's the title of your piece?

55:33 (AS): It's called "Don't Borrow Trouble."

55:35 (KW): Okay, so we'll look for that and that's in last June's issue. And I'd love to talk to you again later this summer and after I read it we can talk a little bit about some of the moves you made in the piece.

55:47 (AS): Yeah, absolutely. That would be wonderful.

55:49 (KW): Alright, good luck.

55:50 (AS): Yeah, thank you.

55:51 (Music)

55:55 (KW): Well that brings us to the end of episode 18. Tomorrow's the last day of the Creative Nonfiction Conference and we have master classes. I have to get off of this recorder and go do my homework. Dinty Moore gave us homeowner for our master class tomorrow, and it's a few pages of reading that I have to do. I want to say that everyone who was at the conference has been really good, and I even met a few people who listen to *Behind the Prose*, prior to the conference. I just happened to stumble upon it so I think that's awesome and I want to shout you out. I think the gentleman's name was Josh. I hope I'm not mistaken. If I am I'll find him tomorrow and correct myself on the next time. I wish you were here. You should be here next time. But I'll still have some more special episodes, more compilation episodes, so you can sneak peek at the conference this year. *Behind the Prose's* music is by UK artist Redvers West-Boyle. It's produced from a closet in Pennsylvania, usually but today it's produced from a king-sized bed in La Quinta, in Pittsburgh. Until nest time listen, learn, and write.

57:21 (Music)

57:30 (Ad)