



Will Dowd

198: Discussing the Personal Essay

Gabriela Pereira: Hello, and welcome, word nerds, to DIY MFA Radio, the show that will help you write more, write better, write smarter. I'm Gabriela Pereira, instigator of DIY MFA, and your host for this podcast. Now, let's talk writing.

Hello. Hello, word nerds. Gabriela here, and welcome back to DIY MFA Radio. I am so excited about today's interview; I think it is going to be so much fun. Our show notes are over at diymfa.com/198 because it's Episode 198. OMG, we are almost at our 200th episode; I think I just might faint.

Now, today, I have the pleasure of speaking with Will Dowd, who is the author of a collection of essays titled *Areas of Fog*. And I kind of feel like Will and I have been living in like parallel universes – and, probably, like missing each other – because he is a writer and artist from the Boston area.

He went to Boston College for his BA, and MIT for his Master's – whereas I went to college in Western Massachusetts; and then he got his Creative Writing MFA from NYU, and I got my creative MFA in New York as well... at The New School. So, we've kind of been in these parallel universes.

He has received numerous fellowships and other honors, and his writing and his art have appeared in lots of really high-profile places; places like LitHub, Tin House online, Post Road Magazine, and NPR[dot]org.

Areas of Fog is his debut essay collection; it is awesome people. I am reading it and literally laughing out loud; it is funny and engaging – and just, so New England. And it was published last year, at the end of 2017, in November by Etruscan Press. Welcome, Will. It is so great to have you on the show.

Will Dowd: Thank you so much for having me, Gabriela. I'm really excited to talk to you.

GP: I always like to start out our interviews, you know, getting a little bit of context. I mean, I have a sense already of why, maybe you may have written this book, but I was hoping you could share with our listeners; what inspired you to write this particular book, at this particular moment in your writing career and in your life?

WD: Okay, so the reason why I wrote this book was because I was suffering from writer's block which is something I think most writers encounter at some point. Maybe there's a few lucky writers who never face down that demon. But for me, it was very real and profound and along.

And so, it was after my MFA program, which you had mentioned, and if I had to attribute it to anything, I think sometimes an MFA program could be really helpful. But what happens is you start to internalize a kind of committee of voices, you know, through the writing workshops.

GP: Yes.

WD: And it can be easy to kind of lose faith in your own voice, in your own instincts, because you're already skipping ahead to the, you know, a kind of group of people critiquing what you're putting down on the page.



And so, I think, afterwards, it's somewhat common to get a kind of hangover; and it requires you to kind of dig back deep into what made you go to the program, and what made you want to be a writer in the first place.

And so, for me, I was kind of in that dry spell after my MFA program. What I turned to, and the way I found my way out of it was by realizing the kind of genius, in our regional New England habit, of talking about the weather all the time; especially, when there's nothing to talk about.

It's how everybody around me, where I grew up and where I currently live, starts every conversation. You know, the weather is just this perfect icebreaker; and you know, you think of it as like neutral conversation filler.

It's kind of boring, and you think, 'Oh, we just do it, because we have nothing else to say.' But actually, I used it as this technique. I open every single essay for a year by talking about the weather. And as I wrote, I kind of, in retrospect, figured out what was so great about it; and it's been that the weather is completely universal.

It's like, you know, right now, we just had a Nor'easter yesterday, so there's like a foot-and-a-half of snow; and the sun is out, and it's melting – it's defrosting. Like, I had my window open earlier, and I could just hear – all throughout the neighborhood – the scraping of shovels on pavement as people are kind of shoveling out their cars... and you know, throwing out their backs together in unison.

And I just, it's the weather has this kind of quality where we're all in it together. And so, it's the kind of perfect way to draw in a reader because you're, kind of, making this intimate connection right away.

GP: So, there's so many things there that I want to unpack. One of them is the MFA hangover, which, by the way, is very real; and we need to talk about a little later. But the other thing is this idea of the universality, right?

And I feel like while the weather itself is very universal, there's also-- You touched on something else there too, that it's also kind of a thing in New England; and each region has its thing – like in New York, it's like talking about real estate or talking about the subway systems.

And in LA, my husband is from California, and he has a lot of family in the LA area. So, there's like the freeways; like that's what everybody talks about is traffic, and the freeways – and the best way to get from Point A to Point B... and what freeways you take, or whether you take service streets or whatever.

And New York, it's about, you know, it's the subways or it's talking about real estate – and like, what's up, what's down and what... where are people buying, and what's the hot new neighborhood or whatever?

So, it's interesting that there are these like little regional topics. And in New England, it very much is the weather. I mean, I went to college in New England, so I remember how powerful the weather can be in your entire life – and how it can shape your existence, right? And so, yeah, can you talk a little bit more about that - sort of, how to find that unique but also universal thing to latch your writing onto?

WD: So, one thing you could do is look seriously at the clichés that abound around you because the things you roll your eyes at and the things that you feel like you're above because you're maybe a creative writer or an artist – you know, I get it. But it can be interesting to kind of dive into those, and take them seriously and try to figure out why.

So, when I was thinking about it as I was writing throughout the year, and again, it was sort of, you know, I'm talking now almost in retrospect, it was things I figured out along the way. I kind of just



flung myself into the project on a whim. But as I went, I realized that the weather is seeped into New England literary in kind of philosophical history.

So, if you look at all the writers – from like Emerson, Thoreau, Dickinson, Frost – they're kind of these poet philosophers, and they all use the weather to ask big metaphysical questions about the nature of existence and God. And you know, is nature beneficent? Is it scary? Is it against us?

And then if you even track it further-- As I went along, I realized that it really comes from the Puritans who took the weather as, kind of, God's pen. You know, the way God would, his creative agency in the world – is how God would express himself, and also how he would show his judgment. You know?

And if you look back in Puritan, you know, diaries and Puritan sermons, they're always attributing the weather to God being happy with them or not. Even George Washington, you know, when he crossed the Delaware, he said that God sent fog to cloak them.

And so, there's just such a history of the weather having huge import; metaphorical, religious, artistic. And so, it can be-- You know, when someone's at a bus stop and they just comment on how hot it is or something, you don't really think of that – but you just kind of go along with it.

But if you really start to take seriously what people say in that little small talk and why we still obsess about it and why we still – in New England – talk about the weather as if it's sentient and doing something to us, you can find these, kind of, historical roots. And so, yeah, it's refreshing, cliché is kind of a, can be a writer's job.

GP: I love what you said at the beginning there too; that, you know, sometimes as writers, we kind of want to think that we're above the clichés – but yet, they're almost like little clues, like breadcrumbs, that point us in the direction of where our writing can go.

And it points us to what people are thinking about and what people are really interested in because there's a reason those things are clichés, right? The reason that they're shorthand, essentially, because that's what people think about and that's how people talk.

And so, it's very much, I think that's a really great piece of advice. Circling back to the whole MFA hangover and, you know, writer's block thing, because like while you were describing the writer's block, I was kind of like over here like raising my hand, like Hermione in like Professor Snape's Potion class, being like, 'Me, me I've been there, oh my gosh.'

So, there is that feeling when you're in an MFA program – and I was there too – that idea that you have this chorus in your head of people's opinions. And for a while, after I graduated, there was definitely that feeling like I could almost anticipate what different people in my workshop might have said about things that I was writing.

And then, I would sort of censor myself accordingly. So, how do we get out of our own way? Because it took me a long time to figure this out, and I'm curious to hear how you did it.

WD: Yeah. I mean, one of the problems with those voices is they're always telling you what's wrong, right? They're, you know-- Or, at least, that's what we pay attention to because that's what lands, sort of the arrows that land – is the kind of critique part of the discussion.

And I think that everybody, every writer has two brains. You know, you have the brain that creates, that sort of dares to try to write something new. I mean, how many years of literature do we have?



And yet, there's a part of you that kind of dares to think you've got something to say. And then there's the part of you that's more socially attuned – that thinks about, you know, is this going to humiliate me? Is this going to be shot down? Is this going to ruin me? And so, the trick is you've got to turn the inner critic down.

You've got to turn the volume down, somehow. And you've got to just let the kind of crazy person inside you, the wonderful crazy person, have the floor at least for while you're drafting.

I think, one of the ways that this project – this Weather Project – was able to help me do that is because I chose a subject, you know, the weather that's kind of like, 'Well, who's going to read that? You know, how serious could that be?'

I mean, you know, you're not going to make literary history writing about the weather; therefore, the burden was kind of off. You know, it sort of-- It started off modest; and so it just freed me of the kind of burden of feeling like I had to be creating something incredible, right off the bat.

And so, I think sort of letting yourself off the hook – whatever standards, whatever high perfectionist standards you have it... you know, whatever it takes, because as I said, the weather just sort of is usually the first paragraph and then it sort of starts to go somewhere else, my essays.

But that opening just kind of got me going and lightened everything up. And so, I was able to kind of lighten up on myself. And then I also think changing your relationship to the reader, because if your reader is this committee of very sharp, critical, you know, grad students – then that's tough to write to.

I mean, how are you ever going to satisfy that? But maybe if you think of one particular person in your life or a particular reader you have in mind, and just write to that person, that can be a nice trick to kind of get you out of your head and get some of the other voices to go away – and just focus on one person who's a little bit more welcoming and inviting, and you feel like sort of simpatico with.

GP: And, you know, the workshop environment too, and don't get me wrong, I had a wonderful experience in my MFA program; I thought it was very valuable overall. I am not, however, a huge fan of workshops for a few different reasons.

But one of them is exactly what you're describing, this idea that people are in the workshop for the purpose of finding what's wrong in a piece; like that's their job as like fellow workshop participants, right?

And while it's good to get feedback on what's not working, they're not necessarily going to tell you what is working in your piece. And the other piece of the workshop puzzle that I think can also be problematic is that it's retroactive, right?

Like people are getting feedback after the mistakes have already been made, as opposed to like doing it right first, and then figuring out how to improve it even more.

So, there is that part of your brain that, like, you almost, for me at least, I almost had to rewire my brain to stop writing to other writers and start writing to people who would be reading my work. And now, for DIY MFA, that's kind of weird, right? Because the people who would be reading my work as readers are also themselves writers.

And yet, there was something very like liberating just that subtle mindset shift of like thinking that these were people who were reading my work to embrace it and potentially get something good out of it – as opposed to reading my work in order to criticize it. Just that shift was huge in just being able to open me up to actually do the work. Otherwise, DIY MFA would not exist if I was still in that, you know, post-MFA mindset.



WD: I think that's so-- That's so interesting. And it's true, when I read something, when I approach a work as a reader – I'm excited for that and I'm looking for what's right about it. You know, I'm going-- I'm taking a leap. I want to be transported. I'm rooting for it to work.

I'm not really reading it with such a critical eye – unless something really starts to ruffle your feathers and you start to really hate something. But most of the time, I'm enjoying what I'm reading. I'm just enjoying the experience. And if you think about like all your favorite books, they're all flawed. I mean, everything has problems.

You know, if you submitted any great work to a workshop, they would rip it apart. You know? It just shows the kind of-- Yeah, it's like the workshop can be just this kind of unleashed critical eyes onto your work – and I don't know that they're really ultimately saving you. Like, what would be a product if you listen to every single voice, what would come out would actually be readable. I think it would be unreadable in the end.

GP: It's interesting also because if you think about it too, from the purposes of like-- And this is as someone who has led workshops, who has taught classes – like, you know, your job as a teacher is to have a good discussion. Like that is what you need to bring to the table.

So, if the work is too good, it doesn't make for a good discussion. So, it's almost like people are hunting for the problems as opposed to hunting for the solutions. And so, that's definitely something that I think while it's not--

And it's not just in MFA programs too; I mean, I've noticed the similar pattern in any sort of 'workshop critique receiving scenario' that it's really important to also put focus on what's right – and not just on sort of finding what's wrong and unearthing those problems.

WD: Yeah, I think you're right. If you focus too much on that fixing, how would you ever start?

GP: Exactly.

WD: And also, I mean, I think you've probably had this experience too. I think if an entire room of people with different perspectives is pointing to like one paragraph or one element where there's some kind of issue that might-- You know, if there's unanimous opinion, it might be a good indicator that you should look at that, but you'll get completely different opinions on how to fix it.

So, I think sometimes the workshop can be helpful if there's a something glaring that you didn't see, but readers will all kind of pick up on, but they're never going to tell you exactly how to fix it. You kind of have to go back to yourself in your own voice and figure out your own solution to it. And I think that's important too.

GP: Exactly. So, shifting gears to look at this collection of essays, because what is really interesting to me as well is this took you a year, right? Like you had to go and actually experience the weather over 12 months in order to write, you know, this collection of essays.

What were you doing with the essays? Like, were you kind of storing them up? Did you have a vision of this project as a whole? Were you submitting essays as you wrote them to various places? What were you doing with, like in terms of kind of figuring out the project overall?

WD: So, one of my friends from graduate school started a website and a podcast called The Drunken Odyssey. And you know, he put a call out for kind of weekly bloggers; and then, you know, you would sort of review something, you'd have a category – so, you know, Schlock movies or something like that. And every week, you'd submit a review.



And I pitched him, I said, “Well, I want to review the weather.” And he was like, ‘Oh, okay.’ He wasn’t really sure what I meant or, you know, but he was kind of-- You know, it was just again, for him it was just a labor of love.

He was missing the kind of the communal aspect of his MFA program and wanted to kind of recreate that from afar with this blog and this podcast. And so, I kind of was just the barnacle on his project; and I just submitted these essays every week, and he would put them up on his website.

He wouldn’t say anything; and I didn’t really hear much from an audience, but it was just a way to log them so that it was like a true journal, you know, each week coming out. And then, I absolutely did not think of this as a book when I was writing it.

It wasn’t until like a year after I wrote it; I finished on January 1st, you know, at the end of-- You know, I sort of went January 1 to January 1; and then I had the hip surgery and just was, you know, forgot about this – and just went through that whole process of recovery, and then went on to other projects.

And then it wasn’t until about a year after I had finished that, I was talking to my brother, and I said, “Oh, I wonder if I should put those all together and see what it looks like, all kind of stuck together in one place.” And, he says, “Yeah, do that.”

And so, it was like, sometimes you’re at a crucial crossroads and you need someone in your life who says, “Yeah, yeah, do that.” So, that came from him, and I did it; and I sent it out to some small presses. I was like, ‘I don’t know if this is-- you know, it’s about the weather, who’s going to publish this?’

But sure enough, Etruscan Press grabbed it, and off I went. So, it was-- It was also nice. I mean, talk about unburdening yourself. One way to write a book without much anxiety is to write it without realizing you’re writing a book.

GP: Right. I mean, in some ways, you know, that’s sort of the inception of DIY MFA as well, right? Like when I first started this thing, it was a blog, like an experiment.

Actually, it wasn’t even a blog all by itself; it was an experiment on my personal blog that I decided to just test out for a month – and then suddenly, like the seeds were planted and it kind of grew into DIY MFA, as it is now... but it kind of wasn’t really a book idea or a business.

I mean, heavens, it wasn’t even a business idea at all for years after that. But yeah, it kind of takes that pressure off, right? Like when you don’t really know that you’re working on a thing – until suddenly, you’re like, ‘Oh look, there’s a thing, maybe I’m working on it now.’ And then, you can kind of forge ahead with it.

WD: Yeah, I mean, talk about workshop consciousness; if either of us had sort of pitched our individual projects to--

GP: Oh my gosh.

WD: -a committee, we would’ve heard, ‘Here are the 12 reasons why you shouldn’t even bother.’ So, sometimes you have to just, sort of, let things grow because you don’t know what it’s going to turn into.

GP: I think what’s interesting too, and I’m curious to hear if you had-- Like, were you looking at comments or – did you get comments on the posts or on the, you know, the journal entries as they



were going up on that blog? Because for me, that was a huge indicator that this was hitting a nerve for people, that it was salient to my word nerds because I started getting feedback from people and emails and comments and people going, 'Oh my gosh, more of this.'

And then I'm like, 'Oh, okay, I'll do that.' I'm curious whether that feedback also influenced you.

WD: So, one thing that happened that was really funny; going back to when I pitched writing a Weather review blog, one of the reasons I did it, I was like, I didn't want to write anything hip or like political or topical, which is what the internet and clicks kind of thrive on a lot of times.

And I was like, I just want to completely go against that. I'm going to write about something that's, you know, happening exactly this week. And then, in a week, it expires, the weather's no longer relevant the week before.

And you know, I'll talk about history. I'll kind of go-- I'll go places that aren't, you know, that aren't like the Twitter moments, you know. So, I was like completely shocked in, I think it was in November, one of my posts was picked up – because it was a WordPress blog – by the WordPress editors and sort of minted Freshly Pressed, which is one of their distinctions, and then blasted out on there on their, like WordPress blasted it out.

And it just like, I think it almost crashed my friend's website because it was, all of a sudden, it had all these eyes – and just like hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of likes and comments. And that was when I was-- I was completely shocked because I'd been writing, you know, just in my own little corner with zero feedback; and all of a sudden, it was getting tons of exposure.

And I think that is what, maybe, planted the seed like later when I was like, 'You know, that was such-- I got such a reaction to that, maybe I should think about these as being something publishable.'

GP: It's interesting also, like what you were saying about, you know, when people try to write something in order to make it go viral, as it were, it's like inevitably you set yourself up to fail.

And yet, it's those moments when you suddenly, a piece of your writing suddenly just like explodes, and you're like, 'Holy cow, people really liked that – that's interesting.' And you know, it's been-- For me, it's been really interesting at DIY MFA that certain things that, you know, go viral, as it were, are things that I'm like, 'Oh, okay, I can see where that comes from.'

And then there are other things where I'm like, 'Where the heck did-- how did that happen? Okay, now we're going to like do more of that. Like, the internet is telling us something.' So, it's sort of unpredictable. You'd never really know. Like sometimes, you can get a-- you have a hunch, but you never really know.

WD: You're right. You're absolutely right. It's like impossible to predict; and you don't know what's going to tap, what's going to just like tap into something for readers. I think that people are hungry for other types of content; they have to be, I know I am.

You know, like if you're just surfing the web, you're getting a certain kind of very-- You know, it's usually super argumentative, you know, kind of comments and thoughts; and everything's reactionary, bouncing off different things.

It's very different to get something that is kind of meditative or self-interrogating. I mean, it's just kind of a different tenure, but I don't think it's because people don't like that or aren't interested anymore.



I think they like taking a deep dive, or going into somebody else's mind in a really in-depth way. It's just they've got to discover it, and you just don't know where they're going to find it.

GP: And you know, this leads into something else I wanted to talk about too, which is the nature of creative nonfiction or writing personal essays, as it were – because like the stuff you were describing that's very opinionated and, you know, there's a lot of that right now... both in terms of like just what's been happening current events-wise, and also just kind of what the internet tends to favor, right?

Like the way people write headlines nowadays is different than how it was, say, 10 years ago. Things are much more opinionated and trying to click Clickbait-y, you know, for lack of a better term.

And so, that made me start to think like, where the heck does that leave the personal essay? Because like, the personal essay is generally not Clickbait-y, and it's not-- You know, it can be a deep dive, but it's not that kind of 'tug your heartstrings' opinionated.

It's like opinionated because the person who's writing it has a personal opinion, but it's not about, you know, getting other people riled up necessarily, which is a lot of this sort of online pseudo journalism is about these days. So, what do we do with the personal essay?

WD: Like I think what's going, kind of, what's going on online is like the antithesis of the personal lyric essay because online forces all of us to have a kind of online persona or avatar, right? You're, kind of, like-- You go on Twitter, and a stimulus floats in front of you; and then you react to it, you know?

And so, you know, plus or minus. It's pretty much that binary; and you're expected to have one opinion and you're kind of one person who has like, 'Okay, these are my exact beliefs and so I'm on this side, or I'm on this team.'

And to me, the self is, like, plural. Like I don't feel like one person with one set of opinions; I almost always feel like I could see both sides of almost every issue, or like, I don't feel that attached to a particular set of beliefs.

And so, to me, the personal essay is like, 'Okay, if you're writing a novel or a drama, there's multiple characters talking and each one has a different opinion.' I feel like you can have that same dramatic content within a personal essay.

It's just that it's the different sides of yourself batting around an idea, right? So, to me, it's just a different mode of being. Because you're, instead of trying to be persuasive, you're asking yourself questions – you know, and then you're questioning your own answers.

And so, yeah, I think it's really hard. I think people are so in the space of being argumentative right now because of the online culture – that it's almost exotic to write an essay where the ending, there is no point to it. You're trying to create an experience rather than make a point.

GP: And even essays that are not necessarily like the personal Lyric Essay, but more sort of like compressed memoir-esque type personal essay, right? They're a lot more nuanced than what we see, like what the internet generally allows for. There aren't that many places.

I know this because I took a non-fiction writing class about a year ago; I decided to go back into the workshop as a student, and take a class. And I remember every time I pitched ideas, it was like-- you know, because you pitch ideas to the class and then you'd write them for the next week.



And I'd be like, so, you know, it was always nuanced in me, in my mind. I was like, 'Well, this is how I feel about it, but here are the shades of gray and yada yada.' And the teacher's like, 'That's not going to fly. Like that's not saleable. It won't get posted. No one's going to pick it up.'

And I'm like, but what if that's what I want to write? And she's like, 'That's fine, but it won't get picked up anywhere.' I'm like, ah. And, it was very frustrating. Like, what happens to the nuanced writer in today's day and age? It's a very complicated question.

WD: It is. I know as someone who likes to write about history, I'm always, it's like, 'Oh, I want to write about this historical figure.' And it's like, 'Well, is there an anniversary coming up?' [laughs]

GP: Exactly. How is it timely?

WD: Yeah, exactly. You know, and it's timely because it's intriguing to me right now, you know, I'm passionate about it, but that's not good enough. So yes, I totally sympathize; and I do feel like there's a flattening effect, not only of personality, but also of time and historical sensibility.

Again, I think a lot because of the internet and the news cycle. And memoir is nothing if not historical, right? Because to me, my favorite memoir is there's always this fruitful tension between the writer who's writing it – you know, them and the present who's writing it... and their self at the time of whatever event they're describing.

And so, there's always this subtle interplay between that, the perspective switch. And so, again, that subtle shuttling between those two point of views – which makes memoirs to me so incredible – it's a doubleness that we don't really have a lot of cultural respect for right now.

GP: And it's unfortunate because I think a lot of writing is not, you know, getting a platform or is not getting visibility, that is really wonderful writing. So, to me, it's very unfortunate.

Shifting gears a little bit now, one of the things I wanted to do, and we chatted about this a little bit before we started recording, is talking about one specific essay – and sort of looking, unpacking some of the techniques in that essay that you use.

The one that I'm thinking about is an inner scheme, which is early, I think it's in the February block of essays. And so, there are a couple of different things going on. I was wondering if you could sort of describe some of the different techniques you used in order to sort of put that essay together.

Because this was one that like, for the benefit of our listeners, I was literally falling out of my chair. I was laughing so hard at certain points because I thought it was just so hilarious, like in so many, in nuanced ways. So, can you talk a little bit about how you assembled this essay, because there's a lot going on in it?

WD: Yeah, I mean, this is because-- Okay, so when I started the essays, you know, I started writing them in January, I didn't quite know like, what are these essays going to look like – you know, how far and whatever direction can I take them?

And so, this was maybe the first one where I really let myself kind of off the leash in the sense of letting my kind of patterning mind do its thing because, you know, I'm kind of a pattern finder; I really love that.

And you know, I love the writer, Nabokov, who features really prominently in this essay because he was also kind of obsessed with these, sort of, that there might be a creative intelligence in the world,



you know? And looking for patterns between art and life and human life, and a possibly spiritual life.

And so, that was, you know-- That's something that I am always intrigued by. And in this essay what I did was I had thought that I was going to write about a couple of things, I think I mentioned like it was, you know, Groundhog Day, I was going to write about Punxsutawney Phil.

GP: And for listeners who don't know who Punxsutawney Phil is, because I know who he is, but can you talk--

WD: I thought everybody knew. Yeah, of course.

GP: I think it's a New England thing. I don't know that everybody knows this because I had to like look it up.

WD: Oh, you're kidding. Wow. Okay. Well, that just tells you sometimes you don't realize something's regional. Yeah, Punxsutawney Phil is a Groundhog that, it's in Pennsylvania; and he's taken out every February 2nd in a bizarre ceremony, I guess if you're seeing it for the first time.

It's like these town elders and top hats take him out of his little hut. And if he sees his shadow and runs back into his dwelling, then that means there's going to be six more weeks of winter. And if he doesn't see his shadow and he just happily stays outside, then that means spring is right around the corner.

I don't really understand that because if he sees his shadow, that means there's some sun going to Hawaii.

GP: Right. I know.

WD: So, yeah, it never really makes sense, but it's this like really bizarre way of fortune telling, you know, via Groundhog.

GP: And you know, it's interesting because like groundhog, I think, is like that part, I knew about. But what I thought was interesting was the fact there's an actual-- It's kind of like the Turkey that gets pardoned on, you know, by the president.

WD: Exactly.

GP: It's like, there's a figure -- like there's a legit groundhog that's like the groundhog. It's not just like you walk down the street and you find a groundhog and you see-- No, it has to be like that specific groundhog that determines whether it's, you know, six more weeks of winter, which I didn't realize. It was like there was a specific groundhog related to this.

WD: Oh yeah.

GP: It's amazing.

WD: My dad always tells this story, he drives me crazy; he tells the same stories over and over. But when I was little, I guess we have a, we had a old shed in our yard with a groundhog living under it. And on Groundhog's Day when I was a child, I would sit up on the windowsill before school and look for the groundhog to come out. Not grasping the thing you just pointed out, which was that, no, it's going to be Punxsutawney, the magical groundhog.

[laughter]



GP: Yeah. Love it.

WD: It's funny because now that I'm seeing it from the outside and having to describe it to, you know, theoretically someone who's never heard of it before, I'm like, 'Oh my God, this is bizarre, this is--' I don't even know where it comes from.

GP: It's like Wizard Magic trying to explain it to 'muggles' or something. It's like totally foreign.

WD: Right. Exactly. So yeah, so I was going to-- I was going to talk about Punxsutawney and then a couple other things; and then I just, I sort of got bored with it. Like before, as I started writing it, I was kind of like, 'I don't know, this is boring me.'

And of course, because I was writing this as a exercise to break out of writer's block, and I had no one to please – if I wasn't sort of excited at the beginning... I mean, why continue in that vein?

So, I sort of do this thing, which a lot of poets do, if you ever notice... sometimes if you are in the middle of writing a poem and you sort of run out of steam, a great way forward is to ask a question or to change directions... and sort of start to argue with what you've just written or negate it. It's a little trick you learn.

And so, I sort of did that, and I said, you know-- I started by saying, you know, "This week I was going to write about all these things, but I don't want to do that. It feels too, you know set in stone. I want to-- I want to venture off somewhere else." And so, I just kind of let my imagination run in a different direction.

GP: What I love about that opening, and it's such a-- It's a great technique for writers to use in prose as well, right? Because psychologically, essentially, what you're doing is you're saying, "I'm not going to do this; Thing A Thing B, Thing C."

And yet, there's a slight of hand trick there. It's kind of like you're the magician pointing to Thing A, Thing B, Thing C – when really the thing of interest is thing like X, Y, Z over way on the other side.

And so, like, and writers do that a lot. Like, we don't realize this until we like looking for it in literature – but like, a lot of times, writers will sort of highlight the things by saying, "I'm not going to highlight this thing over here."

And yet, they're just in saying that they are highlighting the thing that they were not going to highlight, and then they sort of elegantly swoop us in a different direction. So, that was a really interesting technique.

And of course, here it's played for humor, right, because you're talking about like, I'm not going to talk about all this – predict, you know – predicting-related stuff because that would be too predictable. And you know, that's about where I fell out of my chair.

WD: And then, of course, it goes on; and it is still about those themes.

GP: Exactly, exactly. And the other piece too, and it sort of leaps back to what you were talking about, how the weather is related to like literary history is like, then you started talking about how different authors sort of own different weather or nature-related imagery.

And that part too, I thought like was another way of sort of pointing at the thing, but not really talking about that thing and then talking about something else. So, it's sort of like the whole-- It all sort of looped together really well in that way.



WD: I think you're right. It's funny you brought up the, you used the metaphor of a magician because I think of that a lot because whenever I'm writing a poem or a short piece; it's like you've got a tabletop, and you are putting objects onto it for the reader to see.

And even when you say, you know, "Okay, I'm not going to talk about this," you're still putting it, you're still introducing it – you're still putting it onto the table, drawing the reader's attention to it; and then, you know, it's almost like a magician setting up the cups, you know, and then, where's the ball? And they're all--

You know, so yeah, it's a trick. But yes, for nerdy writers, we like to do these things. I always think of that with adjectives and metaphors because even if you're describing something metaphorically, so you're not saying, you know, if you're saying like, "Okay, that croissant looks like it has a lion's main."

Okay, there's no lion in the scene, but you've just introduced the concept of a lion, right? So, you know, I think writers are hypersensitive to this, and they kind of know what they're doing. They choose things that they want to somehow be in swirling in the reader's consciousness because, somehow, it's going to relate or echo or chime with what else is going on.

GP: And I think also as writers, like it's important to, first off, trust our instincts, right? Like what you were saying, how writers often just have that instinct and they just know that they should use the lion metaphor because it's what's going to work.

But then in the revision stage, it's important to also look at those things that you're shining the spotlight on – sort of, you know, with the magician slight of hand – and make sure that that really is where you want to shine the spotlight. Because, you know, it's happened in my own writing, where sometimes I'm like, 'Whoa, I had not meant for it to go in that direction – I didn't even realize it when I was writing it, now I need to dial it back.'

So, it's something to be aware of too. I think like in two layers; first, trust the instinct when you're writing it – but then also when you're revising it, really make sure that that's indeed where you want to send the reader's focus.

WD: Right. Because we're so suggestible as readers, if somebody introduces something, we can't-- Like some ideas are so powerful, it's like that old thing; you know, don't think of a polar bear with blue eyes.

GP: Exactly. Right.

WD: Impossible. There it is. So, you have to almost wield your imagery carefully and intentionally because if you introduce a metaphor, an image that's so powerful or out of the, you know, what's going on – and it's just sort of a spark shooting in a direction that you're never going to return to, it could be distracting.

You know, it could be-- It could lessen the flow of the reader's attention. So, yeah. I agree with you; this is something we writers have to think about.

GP: Absolutely. So, one of the things we were chatting about this before we started recording this interview – and it ties back to that idea of the writer's block and, you know, this idea that sometimes it's not all peaches and cream and unicorns and sunshine, right?

Like, there are times when the writing is really hard; a lot of times, it's even things that are outside of our own control. How do you muscle through that as a writer?

WD: It's something I struggle with, like, every day. You know, it's one of the biggest questions in my life because, I mean, I think a lot of people are drawn to writing because, in a way, it's something that



if you are in ill health or you have a disability... that's a little more controllable in terms of, you know, making your own schedule – and somehow, it feels like it can be something you can kind of mold according to your own needs.

However, there are problems that we develop as humans that can interfere with even writing; I mean, even sitting down at a computer and typing. That to me, because of had physical issues that have come between, you know, interfered with that, I now see that as this huge privilege and something that I look forward to – and when I can do it, it's just an incredible joy.

But there are a lot of times when I can't; and psychologically, I find it extremely challenging because I think a lot of writers probably will agree that when you're dedicated to this art form, it can become a huge part of your identity.

And if you have some kind of problem that prevents you from writing, it's not just like, 'Oh, I can't drive today – or whatever, or I can't go lift weights or something.' It's like throws in-- It can throw into question, you know, who you are, and really hit you at a deep place.

And so, I think being forgiving of yourself on days when you just can't write and letting yourself off the hook-- A lot of times you have grand plans like, 'I want to finish this, you know, chapter by the end of the week,' and then something happens and you can't, you've got to find a way to adapt to that without beating the crap out of yourself.

GP: I wholeheartedly agree. And you know, it's interesting what you were saying at the beginning about how a lot of times people turn to writing because, you know, it does allow for more freedom or for more flexibility, as it were.

And this isn't some-- This is something I actually don't know that I've shared publicly yet, but it's something that's been weighing on my mind a lot. The fact that DIY MFA would not exist if it weren't for the fact that I have bipolar. I actually had to quit a job in a career that I loved, that I was passionate about, because it interfered; like my health literally did not allow for me to do that job.

And so, it's one of those things where like, you know, in some ways, it's almost a little embarrassing to say that like; this current career that I am now completely and wholeheartedly passionate about, was kind of the second choice.

But in a way, it was. Like, I didn't even know DIY MFA was a choice until I was forced to have to find another way to exist and to be productive as a human. And so, it's also, I think, important for--

On my side, I found that it's been important to be compassionate with myself about the fact that I had to leave this other career that I loved also; and to recognize that had this difficult thing not come up in my own life, I would have just stayed the course and my life would be very different.

But then this other thing, DIY MFA, which I love and has grown to be just like one of the central components of my world, it wouldn't exist if it hadn't been for this obstacle that came in my way.

So, I think for people who are listening, just know that you're not alone and that, you know, there's nothing wrong with having to course-correct; and you don't have to feel like, because I felt, like, kind of bad when I left my other career to be a writer.

People would be like, 'You're going to write what exactly, like you've never written before? What's wrong with you?' At least, that's what I was hearing, right? That's not what they were saying. But I



had this whole like, you know, monologue in my head of everything, all the judgment stuff that people were going to throw at me.

And so, yeah, to be compassionate with ourselves too and recognize that there could be-- You know, they say, "Where fate closes the door, it opens a window," or something. Like, you have to sort of recognize that there are opportunities that are opening up as well.

WD: I think what's so moving about what you just said, and thanks for sharing that, is that; you went on to create this podcast, in your company – what it does is it actually gives back to people in that situation... or people who are at these forks in the road, people who are adapting to life events.

I know that I find podcasts, yours included, really helpful; and especially ones that seem to create a community, it could be really helpful for people who are kind of going through that because again - it's like in retrospect, you can see how this beautiful thing came from this dreadful time. And yet, when you were in it, I'm sure it did not feel--

GP: Oh no.

Will Dowd: -like you were, right, about to just waltz into this wild success. It probably felt horrible. And so, I think maybe as writers, one of the things we can do for each other is – as you're doing – share your experiences so that we don't feel alone because writing is very solitary. So, thank you for sharing.

GP: You didn't know in the writing of it that you were going to ultimately be publishing this book and putting it together, all the pieces together in this way.

And so, I would imagine that there was probably also some trepidation as well, like, while it might have been liberating to not feel the pressures of having to write it as a book in a certain way, also having that flexibility might have been a little bit terrifying. Like sometimes a little too much freedom can be also terrifying because you don't know that this good thing is coming at the end of the line.

WD: Yeah, it was absolute-- Writing this was just kind of an act of faith. I'm a huge believer in that kind of, the old magic that, you know; somebody on their own, in a room and a certain place in time, can write something – put it in a bottle, throw it in the ocean, and somebody will find that bottle and read it.

And to me, that's what I was doing. And you know, in the book, there's a lot about kind of spirits and the dead and ghosts and, you know, kind of running; it's a little sort of vein that runs through it.

And it's because I felt like I was trying to conjure a reader in some ways that I was hoping to kind of have a reader somewhere, at some point, maybe read these and feel engaged. And so, yeah, so much of writing is just trying to keep that sort of flame lit – that hope that these words that you're writing will someday connect with another person.

GP: Love it. So, what's next for you? What do you have cooking now that this book is out in the world?

WD: I'm actually working on a project that has some art with it; it's kind of a Word Art Project. I've been working on it for a while, just on the side; and I'm hoping to kind of tackle it in earnest. And I think that'll probably be the next project that I finish.

If people are interested, some of the pieces are on my website. It also deals with historical figures which are part of the cast of the Areas of Fog book. Clearly, I'm a history nerd as well as a word nerd.



GP: Love it. And we'll make sure to include a link in our show notes. So, for our listeners, if you hop over to show notes, we will include a link to Will's website. I always like to end each interview with the same question, what's your number one tip for writers?

WD: I would say, okay, I don't know if it's a tip, but it's something that-- Again, it kind of goes with what we're talking about with the MFA program. I think we have an idea, kind of prevalent idea that we have to find our voice and sort of create it. Maybe, maybe our voice is a Ammo game of all of our favorite influences.

And if you kind of stack a bunch of your favorite books together and then sort of added them up and divide it, you'd get your voice, you know. But something that I've learned and might be-- I sort of wish I heard this earlier, is that I actually do not believe that we create a writer voice anymore.

I think that we already have a voice – in that, the job is more accepting our own voice because your own voice is going to be your best voice; and it's going to be, it could be incredible, but you have to sort of come to terms with it almost, because you don't always write the way you want.

I could, you know, I would love to-- I could rattle off a bunch of people, I'd say, "Oh, I'd love to write like that person," but it's never going to happen. You know, I can only write like me. And so, I think sort of embracing who you are – and the kind of writer you are, and the kind of person you are – can maybe save you a lot of time, because I think you'll get there in the end. But why not embrace it now?

GP: I wholeheartedly agree. I'm always telling people; you don't find your voice, you basically unearth the voice DNA that's already in you.

WD: Exactly.

GP: I love that. That is such great advice. Well, thank you so much, Will, for being on the show. I had a blast talking to you today.

WD: Oh, me too. It was wonderful. Thanks for having me.

GP: All right, word nerds, thanks so much for listening. Keep writing and keep being awesome.

