

*Nicholas Petrie*

83: Writing Outside Our Experience

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.

Random Fact, Number 71: In high school, I was a total Latin geek. I read all of Catalan; plus, a whole bunch of Virgil. And by the way, I could totally cuss you out in Latin, just saying. Now, let's talk writing.

Hello, hello, word nerds. Gabriela here, and welcome back to DIY MFA Radio. Today is Episode Number 83, and you'll find our show notes over at diymfa.com/083. Today, I have Nicholas Petrie on the line. He is the author of the new book, *The Drifter*. Nicholas received his MFA in Fiction from the University of Washington.

He won a Hopwood Award for short fiction as an undergrad. And he's basically just this great debut author who has written a book, I have to say, I could not put it down when I was reading it. So, I'm absolutely thrilled to be talking to Nicholas about *The Drifter*. Welcome.

Nicholas Petrie: Thank you so much for having me, Gabriela. I really appreciate it.

GP: Oh, I am so thrilled to have you on the call, and if I am correct, this is your debut novel, right?

NP: Well, this is the first novel that I've been able to get published, but it's the fourth novel I've finished, and this is very common for writers now.

GP: Absolutely. I love talking to debut authors about their journey, because I think it's always very encouraging to authors who are pre-published, as it were, to hear about someone who's just published their first book, what that journey was like. Can you tell us a little bit about how you went from writing four novels to finally publishing this one?

NP: Well, my first novel was what I think of as my "angry young man" novel.

[laughter]

NP: It was a little short to be a full-sized novel, and I couldn't get any literary agents interested. I got some encouraging letters. I also had someone tell me that really I should just probably never pick up a pen again. I mean, it was really quite that unpleasant. But, you know, one of my responses was, "Oh, I'm no good at this." And another response was, "Well, I'll show them," which I think is the appropriate response.

If you are a creative person and you want to make something, you just need to keep making. So, the second book was kind of, my "less angry, less young man" novel, still a little more autobiographical. I found an agent for that book, but a California agent, not a New York agent; so, someone not in that first tier. Again, we had some encouraging notes from editors, but nobody was interested enough to want to publish the book.



And the third book was kind of a hard-boiled crime novel, and I'm a big fan of crime fiction, in general. And I thought, "Well, maybe I should try to go a little more commercial." I found a great New York agent for this book, but it began making the rounds with editors in August and September of 2008, and that was when the economic crash hit. The publishing houses basically said, "Oops, we're not going to acquire any new authors right now until the economy improves." So, again, I had some encouraging feedback. There was an editor who wanted to see a revision, but then when I got it back to her, she'd taken another job; and that was the end of that.

So, that was sort of the story up to this book. And then this book, I sort of decided, "Well, I'm going to stop writing." The economy had beat the daylights out of my small business, and I needed to really focus on that. And my wife was tired of the kitchen that I had been promising for nine years, my not delivering that kitchen. So, I focused on my kitchen, and that distracted me for a while, but you know what, my wife does like to remind me that I'm kind of a pain in the ass when I'm not writing. And so she encouraged me, just to go, do something else, go back to work.

I was talking with veterans in the course of my day job. I still work as a freelance home inspector. So, you buy a house, you hire a guy like me to tell you what's wrong with it. I kept meeting these men and women who were coming back from overseas and, and it was a slice of life I really hadn't had a lot of exposure to. And so I kept talking to people and I did more research. I discovered really that it was an issue I was really passionate about is, how were veterans managing their return to their civilian life? And that's what ended up really at the core of the book.

And so this book then took me another, you know, took me probably three and a half, four years to write. Again, my wife was wonderful. Kind of gave me a kick in the pants and said, "I'm tired of hearing you complain about this, either put it in the mail or stop." So, I tried to see if my old New York agent was still interested. I sent her a query, and the full query, basically I had assumed that she'd forgotten all about me, but she had really tried hard before. And her reputation had only gotten better. I sent her an email saying, "Would you like to see 20 pages?"

Two and a half hours later, I get an email back saying, "Of course, I remember you. Don't send me 20 pages, send me the whole book." And two days later I got a phone call saying, "You know, this is really an excellent book. I would love to, if you still thought I was your agent, because I think I can pick up several people who I think would be very interested in it."

Two weeks after that, Platinum said, "Yes, we'd love to publish this book. And we'd like to publish another book that you probably haven't written yet." So, the big challenge then was the next book was due in 12 months, and what the heck was I going to do? I actually managed to hit my deadline and the second book is done, and they've just offered me two more books.

The short version is, I won the lottery.

GP: That's phenomenal. You know, there's so many things— I want to just unpack that story a little bit, because there's so many different threads in there that I definitely relate to as a writer, and I'm sure a lot of our listeners relate to as well.

First of all, this idea that you have to just keep at it. You can't take "no" for an answer, and you have to keep at it the right way, right? It's one thing to not take "no" for an answer and keep badgering agents and whatever, but no, it's about, you know, the way you did it; that you were persistent, but you were smart about how you kept coming back at your writing. So, I think that's really important for writers to hear that, like, this is a very common situation, not everybody's first book, like, the first book they write actually is the first book they publish. So, I think it's very normal.



Another thing I loved about what you said was, sort of, the, you know, having the support network of people. You talked about your wife and how she sort of would nudge you, or maybe shove you in the right direction from time to time.

I can say that my husband is probably my best cheerleader, but also my best reality check with my writing and with my work at DIY MFA. It's almost become this inside joke between us that I'll be tearing my hair out with writing a draft of something and he'll be like, "Oh honey, it's just your creative process. Get over it. Get back to work." And it's like, it's funny how you need to have these people who know your process and can sort of push you in that direction because sometimes, we derail ourselves as writers. Go ahead.

NP: Somebody asked me the other day, what was the most important thing to have as a writer? I said, "A supportive spouse. To have someone who appreciates what you're trying to do, and who will support you in that, because it's a long haul and it's a lot of hours." And unless you're connected to somebody who understands how important that is to you, it's even harder to do that way. So, I'm glad you have somebody who supports that process for you. You know, also sounds like, kind of gives you a kick in the pants too every once in a while.

GP: Absolutely. I think it's important also for people to have that support network, but have a support network that understands kind of the different things that happen, that go on inside the writer brain, because my husband, for instance, is not a writer. So, even though he can relate to it and he understands my process, he also gives me this outside respective of like, "Okay, your nose is pressed up against the window way too close. You need to step back, honey."

[laughter]

GP: I think that's important too, to have like a grounding force that also isn't knee-deep in the business. So, yeah, having that behind us as writers I think is really important, or else we go down that rabbit hole of craziness and rejections, and that could just be bad.

Anyway, let's talk a little bit more about your book because clearly, a lot of research went into it. You said that you came across this idea by showing, you know, talking to war veterans who had just returned, but clearly a lot, you know, between these conversations and then the portrayal that you have in the book, there's a lot had to happen in between. Can you tell us a little bit about that research, how you did it and how you translated research into actual words on the page?

NP: Well, I have sort of a strange brain. My wife refers to me as a veritable fund of useless knowledge. I take in a lot of information. I read a lot of stuff. I talk to a lot of people, and I just have a pretty deep interest in the world. I don't take notes. I don't really organize it. I just take it in. I'm having a conversation with somebody somewhere else, and some funny piece of information comes out, something I heard in a podcast, something I read in the New York Times. It's not so much that I have a process, is that I just try to kind of have my antenna up and I try to be receptive to the world.

And for me, this book was really a way to kind of take these three elements that were swirling around in my head. There were all the veterans that I was meeting. There was the economic collapse. I was also inspecting all these foreclosures. So, I was really seeing the effects of the economic collapse in people's daily lives. You know, and also, the crash itself. I was reading all this economic news, and getting frankly pretty upset about people who had done some financial engineering to make themselves wealthier that had basically blown up the world for everybody else. So, you take all of these, I kind of had these three elements, and I just wanted to get them out my head and onto the page. So, you know, there are times when you want to be a little more methodical about research.



I was lucky enough to have a friend who worked in finance. You know, we talked about, what are some slippery things that people do that are legal in the world of finance? So, we talked a little bit about some of that.

I really dove into reading about war and people's experiences in war. There's a deep well of literature on that going back, you know, to *The Red Badge of Courage*, going back to, you know, Hemingway's first stories, going back to— There's a deep thought there, and there's all this stuff that's contemporaries, there are blogs and websites and chat-rooms online where people talk about this stuff too, where you can— You know, I'm not participating, I wasn't a veteran, but anybody's welcome to come in, and kind of read the comments, and see what's happening. It was a great way to sort of— What I really needed was that character. So, you know, kind of, what is the— what's the soul of the character? Once I felt like I sort of had that attitude, then the rest of it was easier.

GP: So, here's a question for you. I think this extends beyond just your particular book, but you just said, you're not a veteran yourself. And then you clearly are writing from the point of view. I mean, it's a very close third-person point of view of a veteran. I think a lot of writers run into similar situations where they might be writing about someone who's a different gender than what they are, or a different race or ethnicity, or what have you. I mean, at any point, did you worry about whether you were being true to the experience, whether you were capturing, or whether you had permission to capture this experience that wasn't your own?

NP: Oh, absolutely. It's something that I still am concerned about. Although the reactions from the people that I know that are veterans have been very positive, but really up until publication date, which was just a couple of weeks ago, I mean, the book had great reviews. I've had people say some very nice things about it. It was an Amazon pick for January. It was an iBooks pick for January. So, I've been very lucky in that regard. But I didn't have 100 veterans to show it to ahead of time to say how much of a jerk am I being. I was very concerned about that.

It's been nice now because I've been doing a little bit of a book tour to talk to veterans who are showing up at these events and saying, "You know, I really like the book," and "Thank you so much for kind of shining this light." I had lunch with a guy weekend before last, who was a captain in the army and his last job in the army was training Special Forces guys, so this guy is the real deal. I just came right out and said, "Look. How do you feel about this, that I'm writing about these issues?"

And he said, "I'm glad that somebody is writing about these issues in a sympathetic way that feels truthful, that honors and respects what people who have been through." To me, that's the response I've been getting, which is what I was shooting for. I just, again, feel like I'm lucky that I've managed to achieve that in some way.

GP: So, let's talk a little bit more about this. Do you have words of advice? I mean, and not necessarily for capturing the experience of veterans, but any situation where one is writing about a character whose experience is very different from our own. Do you have advice for writers who might be afraid to tackle that, writers who don't know quite how to tackle that, but kind of need a little nudge in that direction? Because I think this is really important. And especially nowadays, when there is a push to have more diverse voices represented in literature. I think it's really important that writers can respectfully write and capture the experiences of people who are different than themselves, but it's sometimes hard to do that and to feel okay with doing that.

NP: You know, if you think about, actors, every great actor has had wonderful roles where they're representing people who might look like them, but don't have their experience. I think it's a job for



writers. I don't know that I really think of myself as an artist. I guess, I think of myself as more of a craftsman, maybe my years as a carpenter that makes me feel that way.

But, you know, you have that responsibility to not just write about your own life. You know, the goal is to experience as much of the human experience as you can, and you can't just do that— I'm a white guy from the suburbs; if I did was write about white guys from the suburbs, I'd be bored to death. My life is not that interesting. You know, I want to write about— You know, I write crime fiction. I want to write about people who are living in a more extreme environment.

But to me, the secret to writing characters that aren't like you, is to find the part of you that's in that character. One of the characters in this book its name is Diana Johnson. She's an African American woman, who's lost her husband to the war. She's got two kids, and she works as a nurse and she's working double shifts. She's working her butt off, she's by herself. What do I share with that person? Well, we've all had those days and weeks and months and years where we're just trying to hold it together. We're just trying to make it through the day, to make it through the next day.

You try to find that part of yourself that you hold in common, and we all have so much in common. I know talking about race and gender is very much a big part of the national conversation now, and I think it should be, but I also think a lot of the conversation is about how different we are. I think there are so many similarities, and I think as a writer, that's how I try to access people who are different from myself is to find the ways that I'm the same.

GP: I love that. I think that that's so important for any writer, because at the end of the day, every character has something in that humanity of them that is to us as the writer, because otherwise, we wouldn't be writing that character, right? If we didn't find that compelling, if we didn't find something to identify with in that character, we wouldn't include them in our books. So, I think it's important to, like you said, focus also on the similarities and not just on differences. And I think also not be so scared to, you know, and tiptoe around some of these things. I think taking the plunge and then showing that work to— I think you mentioned that you didn't have a whole lot of people to show it to, but I think you did— Did you show this to veterans before you went ahead and got it published?

NP: I didn't really because I— Well, one of the things about being an unpublished writer for 25 years is it becomes sort of a secret, and it's sort of embarrassing to talk about with people you don't know. My wife is my first reader. My wife has an enormous heart, and she's a very sensible person. She's kind of my assistant bullshit detector, if you don't mind the expression, that's one of Hemingway's terms.

GP: That's awesome because that's what my husband is for me. [laughs] I just had to interject.

NP: Writing is not something anybody does in a vacuum. We all need help. We all need people to share it with. We all need people to read our drafts. It's actually funny that my readers are all women. My wife is the first reader, and she is a wonderful editor. She's always reading with a pen in her hand.

But I show it to my mom, who's a voracious reader of all kinds of stuff. And I show it to my sister who is a huge reader also, and reads a little more— Well, they both read kind of literary to crime to kind of the whole spectrum.

And I have a neighbor, who is more voracious than anyone. I mean, she's got four books going at once and she can tell exactly where she is in every book and what's going on. I don't know that it's about, that it has to be true to life, but it has to be true to something.

And a great guide— I don't know if your listeners are big science fiction readers or writers, but one of the great things about Science Fiction, is you really, Science Fiction writers have to be wonderful world-builders. They have to be wonderful describers of characters because you're on a different planet; it's a different time. There's a lot of legwork that you have to do if you're writing fantasy or science fiction and you have to do it very efficiently. So, that's a great way to learn how to think about and to write characters that aren't like you.

But to me, it's all about compassion and not being exploitative. You know, to me, if I wanted to write something where my character had posttraumatic stress, and it turned him into a terrible rabbit killer, or a serial killer character; you know, I have some little more exploitation, and that would've been a little harder for me to do without showing it to more people. But the core of this book is really sympathy and compassion and understanding for people who have had that experience. I guess I felt a little more comfortable with that *per se*, but it's hard to know how anything's going to be received.

GP: It's so true. I think that it's just important to have these conversations and for writers to hear that, like, it's okay to worry about this and to think about these issues, but then you also have to, like you said, as long as you're coming from a place of compassion, I think you have to take the leap and do it. Otherwise, like you said, we'd be writing about ourselves and the world would be incredibly boring.

Let's shift gears a little bit. One of the things I love about this book is the military precision of language and how you offset that with this like fluid imagery. What I wanted to know is like, how do you choose your words? I mean, when you're sitting down to write, is it instinct? Do you rewrite intensively in order to choose the right words? How do you do it?

NP: Some writers are all about telling the story and they're not about language. They're not about the steps. For me, certainly the story is very important, but it's hard for me to read fiction, where, you know, the sentences are clunky, or there's repetition. The prose is very important to me, and that's kind of nice starting point, is I have to find a way in; and it's almost always with language. I write and rewrite— I'm fairly obsessive about it. I'll begin every day by reading and rewriting what I've written the last couple of days. And then that kind of helps keep the tone the same for what I'm going to do that day.

I write forward until I get, sort of, stuck. I'm not someone who'll outline ahead of time. I write kind of the way I read, which is, I just want to find out what happens next, but sometimes I don't know what happens next. And so then I go back to the beginning and I begin rewriting, and I try to find a place where maybe I took a wrong turn or I made a character decision that wasn't the right decision either for character or for the story. What I have found is that when I get stuck on something, it's because I made a choice that was the wrong choice, but I don't always know what that choice is.

Every sentence in the book has been read and reread and rewritten, at least, a half a dozen times, if not two-dozen times. There are scenes that just sort of come out, where I don't change them a whole lot, but, you know, when my wife pulls out the red pen, you know, there's a lot of work to be done.

I think that's part of the secret to success is to really make sure you're focusing on the whole package. Good stories really start with character, and the character drives the story; not the other way around, but you also really need to know how to build a sentence. You really need to choose your words well.

You asked about word choice, and part of it with this is that it's a certain kind of story. So, the language is relatively simple. But then we get if the character is claustrophobic, he can't go inside. To be outside, especially after being inside, there's kind of a rapture to that. And so the language reflects



sort of that feeling of freedom and openness, you know, if you're stuck inside and you really need to be outside, to get outside, so then the language needs to reflect some of that stuff.

When you're writing an action scene that really needs to hum because there can't be any sharp corners for the reader to get caught on. So, some of that stuff, reading aloud is a great way to really think about what your word choice is, how the sentences flow; or you're going to write short sentences, long sentences, or you need to have some variations between them. But reading aloud is really a great way to do that.

Another thing is to find a story that you admire, that you can't stop reading, and read that aloud, a story from somebody else. Another way to do that is to take a story that you love and to read it three times in a row. This is a trick I've used for years and years, where the first time I just read to find out what happens. And then the second read-through, you start to see, kind of, how the story is made. And then the third time through, you can see where the pistons and the springs, and you can see how the whole machine is built. If you want to learn how to write a short story, that's a great way to learn how a short story can be put together. And if you do it enough times with enough different stories, you can learn an awful lot that way.

GP: I love that, and it's something that I do all the time. I mean, I pick apart short stories constantly. One thing that I loved about what you said also was this idea of how, when you hit an impasse in your writing, it usually shows that there was a choice that happened well before that, that maybe wasn't the best choice for the story. I think that's so important for writers to hear because a lot of times, I think when we hit that wall, when we hit a roadblock in a book that we're writing, our instinct is to think, "Oh, there's a problem here." The block is in front of us, but usually, that block is actually the result of choices and sort of like a domino effect that start way back in some very early point in the book that has now sort of led up to this point where you've sort of veered off in the wrong direction. I think that's so, so important.

Can you give us an example of something like that, where you discovered a wrong turn that happened in your book and then, sort of, course-corrected accordingly?

NP: Oh my goodness. There are so many.

[laughter]

NP: There's a character named Lewis in the book, who's sort of a career criminal who is also a returned veteran. He's basically taken the skills that he learned in war to make him a more successful criminal. Lewis had, let's see— Lewis started out as another character's uncle, and I wrote that— Boy, I wrote probably three or four different versions of the scene of meeting him, and what that was like, and what the relationship with the character Dino was like. It was a little bit patronizing, a little bit condescending, and it just wasn't the right. And what was that relationship— I couldn't figure out where would that go?

But I had a couple sentences I really loved. I had some description that I really loved, and I realized that I was just stuck on kind of the sound of my own words, that I was keeping this in this way, because I'd written a couple of paragraphs that I just couldn't part with. And that's the kiss of death, when you love even the phrase that just doesn't belong or it's sending the wrong message, you're hitting the wrong note.

I mean, I wrote that scene with Lewis as the uncle for, you know, probably three or four versions of that before I realized, "I just have this all wrong. He's not her uncle; he's her ex-boyfriend from



years ago." And then suddenly, that relationship opened up; and I could actually repurpose some of the stuff I liked the best and throw the rest of it out. But it not only changed who the character was, it changed what the relationship was; and it changed what that relationship, how important that relationship could be later on. And it was an incentive for that character to get more involved as opposed to just, to dismiss the whole thing: "What does this have to do with me? I'm living my own life. I know you're my niece, but who really cares?" So, it was, that kind of paying attention as you go has dividends later on.

GP: That's so, so eerie, and kind of— That's awesome, but also kind of eerie because when I was putting together my questions for this interview, I had copied out a short passage that was my absolute favorite, sort of, linguistic passage. It actually features Lewis, which is sort of interesting. The way you described him, do you mind if I share it on the air, just a paragraph?

NP: Oh, no, I'd love to hear it.

GP: It's a part, for listeners, where Dee is talking to Lewis, and Peter is there with them. It's like the first time they're seeing each other after, I guess, many years. It starts, "Hey, Dee," he said. 'Been a long time girl.' His voice was like heating oil, slippery and dark, the heat and combustion latened within. Watching Lewis cross the room, Peter thought of the mountain line he had once seen in the north cascades. Lewis had the same elemental precision and economy of motion, a predatory indifference. Peter was sure the two men in the t-shirts were strong and capable, but compared to Lewis, they were bunny rabbits. Lewis didn't acknowledge Peter in any way, as if he weren't even there. But Peter knew that if did anything unexpected Lewis would be ready because Lewis was always ready. Peter was the same way."

That seriously gave me chills when I read it because of, sort of, the imagery, the very precise descriptions that also, like, when you refer to the voice as being like heating oil, slippery and dark, I totally know what that sounds like. I mean, I can't capture that in my reading of it, but it's exactly spot on. So, it's just kind of eerie that the thing that you went back to revisit and rework was probably the most impactful character to me as a reader.

NP: Oh, I'm so glad— It was so nice to hear you read it. I've read that so many times to myself in the process of writing it, so it's great to hear it with somebody else's voice.

GP: I think that's just goes to show, for writers, that killing your darlings, that old adage, is so important. You have to let go of some of those things that we love in our own work, because right on the other side of that is something like this, which is just awesome.

Before we wrap up, you mentioned that you have another book that you've just finished. Can you tell us a little bit more about what's coming up next?

NP: Well, it's another Peter Ash book, and this one takes place on the West Coast. I started out with the idea of, "Well, what would happen if Peter fell in love? And how would that occur? And what would this woman be like?" So, this is a story of Peter trying to help someone else, because this is sort of his DNA. But this is more a story about— Certainly, the veteran's element is very much still there, but it's also a story about kind of runaway technology.

Part of what I wanted to do was to write a series that would give me some freedom to write about different kinds of things and in different kinds of places. That's one of the reasons why Peter ended up as a kind of a rootless person, was that I love to travel and I wanted an excuse to go some



places, and I wanted to explore some other issues. So, the second book starts out in the Redwood and it ends up in a little pocket valley in Eastern Washington. And it was so much fun to write. My editor, who is normally, her emails are impeccable, kind of, every sentence is beautifully crafted. The paragraphs are great paragraphs. She's always kind of very crisp and polite. I'd sent this off to her. Am I allowed to swear on your podcast?

GP: Probably, better to not, but—

NP: All right. I sent her the draft of this book, and instead of three days later getting a very reasoned three-page email, what I got was— You know, I sent it at five o'clock and what I got was at nine o'clock the next morning, “I really love this—I’m a hundred pages, and I really love this book,” with some swear words in there, which were not at all part of our previous conversation. So she’s very enthusiastic about this new book as well; and so much so that they’ve actually asked me to write two more, which is, you know, incredibly exciting.

GP: That’s amazing. That’s, like you said, it’s like winning the lottery, but you know, a lot of hard work went into it. I think that’s also important to acknowledge that, you know, you did the hard work and you wrote many books before you finally landed on a character and a story that was compelling for you. And so I think that’s awesome.

I always end every interview with the same question. What’s your number one tip for writers? Think bite-sized or Twitter-sized.

NP: Never give up.

GP: Perfect. Well, thank you.

NP: No, that’s it. I was going to elaborate, but I don’t know that there’s any elaboration necessary.

GP: [laughs] Well, this is awesome. It’s been so wonderful talking to you, hearing about your journey from pre-published to now-published with many books on the way, and thank you so much for being on the show.

NP: Well, thank you so much. What great questions and a great conversation. I really appreciate the interest, and I hope we can do this again.

GP: Absolutely, looking forward to it. All right, word nerds. Thanks so much for listening, everyone. Keep writing, and keep being awesome.

