diyMFA

Ken Murray

067: Teaching and Learning to Write

Gabriela Pereira: Hello, and welcome 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.

Hey, there're word nerds, Gabriela here and welcome back to DIY MFA Radio. Today, I'm interviewing Ken Murray, who is a Canadian author and just released his first novel called Eulogy.

You'll get to hear all of the great juicy details in the interview, but one of the things I loved about recording this episode was being able to talk to a fellow writing teacher and really dig into the being a writer – the sort of heart and soul of what it means to be a writer. And this was just such a wonderful interview. So, I hope you guys enjoy listening to it.

Before we dive into the interview, I just wanted to remind you that the show notes are over at diymfa.com/067 because it's Episode 67. Now, without further ado, here's that interview.

Ken Murray: Okay.

GP: Hello. Hello, word nerds, Gabriela here and welcome back to DIY MFA Radio. Today, I am interviewing Ken Murray, who is a writer and Creative Writing teacher.

He teaches multi-genres. He uses fiction, non-fiction and poetry to help his students not just get started with writing, but to learn how to listen to their work and then amplify the opportunities within that work.

He teaches at the University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies and also at the Haliburton School of the Arts. And by the way, we are both graduates from the same MFA program, so like, yay, New School shoutout.

And also, he's a teaching-- He's also teaching at the Teaching Artist Program at Community Word Project. Ken writes mostly fiction, and today we're going to be talking about Eulogy, his first novel. So welcome, Ken.

KM: Hello. How are you?

GP: So great. Absolutely thrilled to talk to you today.

KM: It's a pleasure to be-- It's neat to be talking at length about teaching. It's an opportunity I don't get to talk to about that much. I mean, I love talking about my books – or my book and my stories – but the idea to do this in the context of teaching's great. So, really looking forward to this.

GP: Awesome. Me too. I love, love, love talking to fellow renegade writing teachers, so this is like super fun. So, you know, let's start, though, by talking a bit about your book, because you know, this is going to sound totally cliché, everybody, you know, you go to any author reading, there's always that one person who raises their hand and says, "Where do you get your ideas?"

But like, seriously, when I was looking at Eulogy, I couldn't help but wonder that there has to be a story behind the story. So, I was just curious, like, where did this novel come from? What inspired you to write it?

KM: Well, how much time do we have? There's two points, I guess, to begin talking about that. The actual story in terms of, you know, meet my scribblings leading to this publication, started a little more than 10 years ago – in fact to be the summer 2004.

I remember the day very specifically; it was a Sunday afternoon, I had been hanging out with some friends just enjoying some time and walk…then I was walking home in the sunlight, and this image just got under my skin and wouldn't go away.

And the image was a father and son at an amusement park. And there's just something a little askew about it. Like, you know, they're not having fun. They should be having fun, but they're not. And there's something just kind of wrong with the day, and with what's going on there.

And, you know, that wouldn't go away. So, as I do, when something won't go away, I'll write it out. And I wrote a little short story about that, and I really couldn't contain it. So, I kept writing it and writing it, and writing it in different ways.

And you know, all told with all the push and pull, and throwing things out and, you know, putting it away, and coming back to it. You know, here we are 11 years later, and I have this novel; and that scene, in fact, is still there in the middle of the book, of a father and son going to an amusement park.

And you know, at that time, I was looking at that scene way back when I'm going like, 'I don't know what this is…I mean, that's not me, that's not my dad and I didn't live this, but there's something going on here and it speaks to me.' Like, I couldn't let it go. So, that's what happened there. So, that's kind of how the writing of it started.

In terms of my background, I mean, this is not an autobiographical book by any stretch. These aren't my parents and this is not me, nor is this my life. But I did grow up, you know, in a pretty hardline, kind of fundamentalist church, kind of--

If you look, actually, you know, I just published on Friday an article in The Humanist, which is called raised on Televangelism, which kind of talks about how we grew up.

And so, I did have that background of, you know, having been in-- In my novel, William Oaks, he's not raised in fundamentalism – but what happens as a young man, as an only child in this household where the parent's marriage and mental health is not well, he – the boy – turns to religion and finds it to try and help his parents.

And once I had that in place, the whole story really started to intrigue me, this idea of a kid trying to fix his parents' house by him being born again. It doesn't work out for him, but it really works out for them as a coping mechanism.

And that just seemed to really be energizing for me to write and to explore and to find out who these characters were. So, yeah, there's the two parts. One, something got under my skin and I had to write it.

And the other one was, how do I, I guess, I mean, I don't relate my experience because it's certainly not my experiences in this book, and I'm thankful for that because it's a sad story in this book.

How do I relate what I know or what I experienced into informing this story? So yeah, it was tough and I'm glad-- I'm glad it's out there now.

GP: I love it. And you know, it's interesting because I've had that experience myself where I start writing something because it's gotten under my skin. And I'd start as a short story, and then I kind of know I'm onto something when the short story can no longer be considered a short story.

And it's, you just kind of unpack and unpack; and then, eventually, you're like, 'Well, I guess I'm working on a book now.'

KM: Yeah. You know, it just reminds me of something; I have students come to me all the time going, 'You know, what is this that I'm writing? Is this a short story, or is this a novel, or is this a memoir?'

And I'm like, 'Write that mother, just write it. You know, the story will dictate what form it's going to be, and you don't know yet and you can't guess.' It's sort of like, you know, looking at an infant child saying, "Well, what will it-- What will she become?"

You know, she is a child. So, let her grow, give her nourishment and see what happens. And I sometimes have to give myself that advice too when I'm early on in a story – and just have to let myself go, and let the story go where it wants to go. And then I'll figure out how to tell that story to the reader.

GP: Exactly. And do you find that sometimes trying to put those constraints too soon can actually squash the story?

KM: Absolutely.

GP: Because I've definitely had that experience.

KM: Yes. Yes, absolutely. I think that if we try to steer our stories to where we think the story should be, and that's a key word there, 'should' –'should' is a bad word for writers, I think we got to get rid of the idea of should, I'm not the first to say that.

But it, yeah, the kind of constraints-- And you know, sometimes I think even when I'm teaching on a workshop, I caution my students.

I say, "Look, you know, we're going to sit here and talk about each other's work. And if you are a writer listening to people talk about your work here, you've got to understand this is not a focus group, this is not a place for you to learn what an audience wants. It's a place for you to hear, try and hear back from people who've read and tried to read closely what's happening in your story so you can know what's there and what you're working with."

Not all the students are-- Students aren't always receptive to that, but that's the kind of approach I really try to foster because I think that's how we learn. And also, the risk you've talked about there. If you know, we do a writing workshop and we treat it as well, 'I'm going to try-- I'm going to use this to find out if my story is any good or not.'

Well, you know, what are we doing here? You know, the story is good when you write it fully. The workshop can be a stepping stone to learn what's going on, to help in the story, to help you learn how to write it fully.

GP: Definitely. And actually, that raises a really interesting question because, you know, the workshop, it's kind of the bread and butter of a lot of writing classes – both MFA programs and also just like writing, you know, different independent continuing studies kind of programs.

KM: Yes.

GP: And so, I was wondering like, what are your thoughts on the workshop? Is this like-- In terms of, as a teaching tool.

KM: I think they can be very good, but they require a certain amount of discipline from the leadership of the workshop and from the participants, sort of, call it a mutual level of commitment and trust.

One of the things, I think, you know, times I've seen workshops fall down and, you know, to me this typically happens sometimes, like in the community writing group or something like that, is when there's really, I guess, a different set of values come into the table between like, say the various participants or there's, kind of, a lack of leadership in terms of, you know, how things work or what the workshop is there to do.

You know, if you've been around workshops for any length of time, you've seen the person who comes in and who thinks that they're supposed to behave like someone who's like the literary critic for The Times.

You know? 'Well, looking at this 15-page type double-space manuscript, I'm left wondering what--' You know, that kind of stuff. And it's like, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah…okay, your voice is wonderful but you're not helping the writer here.' So, there's that problem.

Or there's the person who comes in who maybe has a lot to offer, but who's too shy to say anything, who doesn't think they have much voice here. And really, you know, the great value--

And you know, you know what credit for really teaching this stuff to me was Jackson Taylor, who was at The New School at the time. I think he's moved on to another program now.

And the whole idea of like, you know, our job in a workshop is to observe what's going on in a story. And when that's done, boy, can we learn a lot. And you know who gets to learn the most actually, isn't the writer whose work is being discussed; it's the reader who's taking the effort to sit down and really look at what's happening in a story and relate that back to the writer.

My gosh, can we all learn a lot about writing by doing that and taking that job seriously?

GP: Absolutely. I mean, I'm a firm believer that the person receiving critique is usually the one who gets the least out of the critique session. That usually the people who get the most benefit are the people who come in and really do take the time to give a strong critique.

You learn so much, not only about your, like, stuff that you can apply to your own work – but you can also learn a ton just about who you are as a reader, how you look at texts. It's really fascinating.

KM: Yeah, it is.

GP: The one thing, like I've definitely had a bit of a love-hate relationship with workshops. I think like you, I agree that they can work very well when they're done right.

But one thing that I've always been hesitant about is that the sort of reactive approach as opposed to proactive…in the sense that like if someone's presenting their work and then it gets critiqued, like they don't really get a chance to know what they're supposed to be – or not supposed to be, but like, they don't get to proactively craft the work, like if they haven't gotten any instruction on the craft, you know what I mean?

Like, it's all sort of in reaction to whatever feedback they get.

KM: Yeah.

GP: So, that's always been something that I've tried to sort of balance, like how much instruction does a teacher give upfront to give writers a framework so they can put their best foot forward – but then how much, you know, but then also give them the freedom to--

KM: Well, it is amazing. I mean, like, I like to teach any opportunity I can; and I like to work those into workshops. You know, it's funny, but it is quite easy to get a bunch of people in a classroom doing a workshop who haven't received a basic grounding in like, you know, very traditional basic storytelling stuff…you know, setting, character. You know?

GP: Yeah.

KM: And how those work or, you know, the differences between narrative and physical description, these kind of things, right?

GP: Exactly.

KM: So, I often look at workshops as opportunities. There's sort of founding points for also a lesson to work into a class. You know, in some ways, by workshops, we get we get to see the students. We, as teachers, get to see the kind of work students are doing; and it all, from that, almost directly flows.

Well, here, what are things that they could consider or they could learn about? I mean, I always ask the question when I first get a class, you know, as soon as somebody mentions point of view, I'll say, "Okay, does everybody know what she's talking about there when she says third-person limited?

And if I get some blank stares, I said, "Okay, I'm going to go-- Let's go over this." Spend five minutes right now and just do a very quick crash course on what the basic lingo of the workshop is. You know?

GP: Exactly.

KM: Yeah. What does it mean if somebody's writing in second a person? Because we can too often as teachers assume that, 'Well, anybody who's come to a writing workshop obviously is versed in this kind of stuff.' And that's a very dangerous assumption because a lot of this stuff isn't taught.

GP: It's true. And a lot of times, yeah, it's like you need to give writers the vocabulary to be able to talk about it. Like when I first learned about point of view and, you know, different elements of storytelling, like the react structure and all of those different things, it's not like--

I remember the experience quite distinctly. It was like, it wasn't like I was learning something new. It was like I was learning the words to identify things I already knew conceptually, I just didn't know what they were called yet.

KM: Excellent. Yes.

GP: And so, I think that's true for a lot of writers where like, they understand it because they've been reading books forever and ever. I mean, if a writer doesn't read, that's like a chef who doesn't like to eat, like you shouldn't be in the kitchen.

So, I feel like writers have to be readers, and so they've been exposed to this stuff – but a lot of times, we just don't know what to call it. And having that vocabulary is like the first step to really being able to understand.

KM: Yeah, a common shared language of discussion. I mean, I'll tell you one of the most abused phrases I see in workshops, you know, and it's a worthy phrase when used properly, but is so often not used properly; and that is, show don't tell.

GP: Ugh, that makes me crazy. Yes, speak about this.

KM: And you know, for our listeners, here's the simple thing; you know, like to me, the lesson boils down to this…if there's something your reader really needs to know about a character, you can't trust that they'll grasp that through narration. You have to show that in a scene. You have to write a scene that brings out this trait in that character and reveal it fully.

And don't count on just, you know, your narration telling them that. Now, that to me, that's the right way to look at it. However, I have seen quite often people who, it's like they have a rubber stamp that says "show don't tell" – and any time they see a narrative phrase, later that day "show don't tell". You want me to describe in great detail the passage of the sun, I got to keep this story moving, man.

GP: Exactly. Like, I'll often give this example, you know, that you need to show when you need to show, and tell when you need to tell. And these are both tools in the writer's tools box. And you need to respect them both.

Like a lot of times, show gets all the street cred, as it were; and tell gets the short end of the stick, but tell is still a very valuable tool. The same way that I firmly believe the passive voice is a valuable tool, if you know how to use it properly, but it gets like, you know, bad-mouthed in writing classes because people don't know how to use it.

But like with "show don't tell" if you, you know-- Let's suppose I, living in New York, were writing a story, and a character has to walk and take the subway…show would mean showing everything about that walk to the subway. Now, I've done that walk many, many times; this is part of my daily routine, and it's boring. So, like, why would I want to put that in my book?

Now, if the character happens to get assaulted on the walk to the Subway and it's an important moment in the story…then, of course, you're going to show that walk to the Subway. But otherwise, why not just say, "She walked and took the subway?" Like, done.

KM: Or just vault through space and time to the next point in the story.

GP: Exactly.

KM: That is a wonderful--

GP: The beautiful thing about being a writer, we get to play God. Like we can get to, you know, warp the space time continuum, and it's okay.

KM: That's right. 400 years past, I swear I want to use 400 years past in a story sometime.

GP: Exactly. Wouldn't that be awesome?

KM: It's a goal. I don't have many, but I got that one.

GP: It's awesome. So, okay. So, you've been published in a lot before Eulogy, but this is your first novel. You've published, I'm guessing like stories, essays, articles and that sort of thing.

So, what was the process of going from writing and publishing shorter pieces to writing a book-length work? Were you, kind of, always writing novels and short stories and short form at the same time? Or was it, like, a clear transition? What was that like for you?

KM: That was difficult.

[laughter]

KM: That's the start of that description. I was always writer, you know, I'm in my mid-40s now, but I was always writing stories and making up stories and stuff. And the first time I tried to write a novel, I think I was 17 years old, and it was a high school assignment.

You know, one of my English teachers pulled me aside, said, "Hey man, look, you're doing good work. Why don't you just disappear for the third term and come back with something of substance?" So, I wrote the first third to a novel, right?

GP: Nice.

KM: Yeah, it was a great teacher.

GP: That's an awesome teacher, by the way.

KM: Yes. Yeah, he was an awesome teacher. And so, I was always writing and I went off to university, and then I got into a career which was, you know, entirely not writing. And along that time, what happened was, I just started almost as a hobbyist writing essays or freelance articles, when I saw fit.

And it would always be, I would be just thinking about something and I would work it out on paper. And it usually was-- I mean, it was surprisingly easy for me to find publishers for that stuff. I'm going back to the mid-90s here.

You know, like the very first essay I ever wrote for publication, it was in 1995; I had this idea on a Sunday morning…I spent two hours at a computer, I had a 700-word essay, I dropped it in a fax machine. There we go a time, you know, place the era. And sent it to The Globe and Mail on a whim. And two days later, they'd published it and sent me a check. I'm like, 'Wow, this is so easy.'

[laughter]

KM: How-- You know? So, that was the curse of early success. So yeah, you know, I was just writing that kind of stuff, but I really-- Going back to, you know, about 10, 11, 12 years ago, I really had a hankering to write fiction again. You know, and all the--

I really hadn't written much fiction since those high school days having, you know, put it aside to do other things. And probably wrongly doing that, I would say – but whatever, you can't say wrong looking back.

But there I was, you know, in my early 30s and wanting to write fiction and just really not having a clue how to make a fiction story work. Whereas, you know, if I was writing in, you know, with factual basis, it seemed I could put together an engaging and valuable story for a reader.

Fiction was very tricky for me. And so, the transition for me wasn't as hard to go to long form as it was to go from non-fiction to fiction; that was very difficult. And it's taken me a lot of time to gain some confidence in that.

And, you know, we talked about workshops earlier, workshops, courses, that kind of thing, which provided peer groups of other writers were really helpful to help me learn. And so, you know, my first real fiction publications came from doing, you know, Continuing Ed. courses at University of Toronto, you know, where I started to win a few awards there…and those stories would get published.

And those, in fact, were early excerpts from what became Eulogy. And this is like 2006, 2007. And then at the same time, you know, then I took that manuscript, and that was what I took to The New School…and I was doing my MFA, and my MFA thesis actually was a later version was one of the first complete versions of the manuscript that would become Eulogy.

Much, much different than the one that was published…like radically different than the one that was published. And all along the way, I was just learning, right? And I basically threw that manuscript out when I came back to Canada in 2009 and kind of started over again.

GP: What was that experience like? I mean, that's hard to throw out…like to spend a ton of time working on it and then just be like, 'All right, this isn't right, I need to start again from scratch.' Like, how did you do that?

KM: Well, there's some grief, you know, you mourn because every time-- You know, we've all had that experience. Anyone who's written has had that experience of looking at something they've done and going, 'Oh my goodness, it's perfect.' And then, you know, sometimes you got to look at it and say, "Okay, Papa lied…baby's not perfect here." You know? You got to look back, and there is grief in that.

I sometimes get mad when I realize I've fallen down, but I usually then accept the grief and there's the little bit of sadness that comes with that. And then really comes down to, it's like, 'Okay, what have I learned? What is the story here? How am I serving that story?'

I mean, when I say I threw out that manuscript, I mean, that's not entirely true. There are scenes and portions and characters from that manuscript that exist in this final story. But let's put it this way, the novel that's been published is about one-third shorter than that manuscript. That was my MFA thesis.

And it also has much more in it; you know, it takes this character to the adult world. It introduces the idea of how would he respond to grief of, you know, his parents' death. These are all things that I just never considered early on.

So, the transition, once you realize that there's so much more story that comes from collapsing and starting over again, collapsing the story and starting over again, then the excitement builds again. And then you forget the grief and you move on, right? So, that was-- In the end, it was all right. Made for a better book.

GP: Well, I think it's important though, for, you know, the DIY MFA Radio listeners; they're mostly writers. And a lot of times-- I talk about this a lot with my students and with other writers that we live in this world where what we see on the shelf is vastly different from all of the stuff that led up to it.

But we only see that perfect, finished, polished version unless the author has provided some sort of, you know, deleted scenes or some sort of back material from the previous drafts.

KM: Yes.

GP: So, we live in this illusion where the writing is, you know, mostly perfect, but that's-- And we don't see the process.

KM: Yeah. We are all up against this; you know, I'm up against this, you are up against this, all of my students are up against this. And what it comes down to is this, we all, as you've said, we all are or should be readers.

And what happens if someone's going to write, typically they are a reader; and they've probably read some pretty good books. They probably have some books that are their favorites, and they probably may even know those opening passages by heart.

And that same person who has their own story to tell sits down at a blank page and makes a mark on the page; you know, puts a word down or puts a phrase down. And the instinct is to compare that first word or that first phrase against the opening of the very best book you've ever read, disregarding all the work that went into that, and all the opening lines that were thrown out.

And so, what I would call the 'comparing self-critic', is a voice that just has to be, you know, take it out back and silence it…get rid of it, it serves no good.

I mean, we do need to be our own critics at a certain point, once our stories have gotten to a point where they need to be…where we've written them long enough to know them, and now we need to kind of herd them and sculpt them to be able to render them to a reader.

That critical voice is really useful at those times. Terrible, terrible voice on the drafting phase, though… when we're drafting stories, we got to be free. Just let it roll, and see what happens.

GP: Absolutely. And you know, I often compare the writing process to other sort of artistic, other arts…say, like sculpting where, you know, sculptors, they're chipping away at a piece of stone or clay or whatever piece of wood, they have the raw material.

And other than going out and finding the right piece of stone or the right piece of wood in which to carve the art, it's already there. That raw material is there. When writers start writing, the raw material does not exist. It is air, it's vapor. We have to actually put all of that junk on the page so that then we can chip and sculpt and shape, and do the art, the artful stuff.

KM: Yeah. I sometimes use the mining analogy, you know, a lot of ore and then there's a lot of smelting. How many tons of rock have to come up in order to get an ounce of something good?

GP: Exactly.

KM: And you know, and that actually touches on another aspect of teaching that I think sometimes gets short shrift. And I try to give it a lot of attention that is how to revise.

GP: Mm-hmm.

KM: You know, what are actual, like, practical strategies for revising your work? Because this whole thing, you know, you go away from, 'Well, you probably should revise this or look at that or explore this.' Okay, well, what do I do next? Like, when I sit down tonight or tomorrow at my desk, what am I doing?

I always like to work in exercises about that idea. Like, you know, how do you listen to your work? How do you-- How do you-- Those ideas of chipping away at something or digging, digging deeper into the work, how do you do it? You know, what are steps and exercises we can do?

GP: Absolutely.

KM: Practical nuts and bolts of it all.

GP: And definitely, I mean, at DIY MFA, we have a whole sort of revision philosophy. I see revision as being similar to-- You know, I have a background in Psychology, so I envision revision as a hierarchy.

The way Maslow talks about the Hierarchy of Needs, where the most fundamental needs that humans try to meet are at the bottom of the pyramid. And then the sort of higher order needs like creativity or self-actualization and things like that, as opposed to say, food, water, shelter…those, you know, higher order things are at the higher end of the pyramid.

And, you know, one of the things that I always like to stress is sort of focusing on those really basic needs of your story first. Because if a lot of times people will kind of jump to the top of the pyramid and then like you spend all this time crafting that perfect sentence only to throw away the entire chapter that the sentence is in.

So, like, there's a lot of time that's wasted with kind of wordsmithing before it even gets to that point of wordsmithing.

KM: Yeah. You know, I had to set a rule for myself that when I'm writing a story, if I'm in the middle of drafting that story, I'm only allowed to re-read and sort of revise on the fly whatever I wrote yesterday.

GP: That's really good.

KM: Like, you know, if I've got a story and I'm trying to get it down, and I don't, you know, I don't have enough time in a single day to draft it – rarely does that ever happen that we do. Instead of like opening it up and going right to that first sentence and playing around with it again and looking through the whole thing and then tacking something on…it's like, 'Okay, look, here are the 400 words you wrote yesterday, you're allowed to read those and then you must pick up and go on because you're not done yet, and go on.

And, that strategy is proved very useful because eventually you do get to the end and you don't spend too much time over-polishing and overthinking the beginning.

But then you do end up with a story in whole that you can then start working in whole, and give as much attention to the passages in the middle as the passages in the opening…and how it ends and, you know, what is revealed to the characters.

And then always, out pops the, 'Oh look, here's this little thing you'd never even explored.' And you're like, well--

GP: I think--

KM: That too. So yeah, but I think that, yeah, we can obsess too much on our openings, particularly in those early stages.

GP: Absolutely. And, you know, I like this idea of reading, you know, just like a short passage. I often challenge my students to do the same thing. Usually, I'll challenge them to just take like – and I do this myself – take like the last, you know, paragraph that was written the day before or whatever, stick that at the top of a blank document and then just start. Because otherwise, you could drive yourself crazy.

But there's something else really important in what you said, and it's this idea of the story not really being ready to revise until it's whole. Like, you need to understand the whole story.

And I think that's something that's not, it's not emphasized enough, I think, in many writing classes that, you know, people will come in with part of a novel and they'll leave – especially, if it's only like a semester long – and they'll leave with maybe a little more of that novel, but not the whole thing. And it's very hard to really understand the story if you don't have the whole thing and you--

KM: I think so. I think that's one of the-- You know, there is value to say bringing novel excerpts into a workshop, but I think everyone needs to understand the limitations that happen when you bring novel excerpts into a workshop is you can learn what's going on in the scenes you present.

You can learn what kind of implicit questions are sewn in your reader's mind by the scenes that you present. You know, but a workshop is not the force that's going to bring that novel to its conclusion.

Gabriela Pereira: Exactly.

KM: A short story possibly can be, you might be able to use a workshop as a force that will make you bring, you know, a draft of a short story to conclusion. But yeah. So, there are limitations.

But that said, you know, you can use a workshop and if you understand it's limitations, then it becomes valuable because, you know, you don't get hung up on too many red herrings along the way. You keep yourself moving forward.

GP: Exactly. I think it's like-- The key isn't to, you know, we're not trying to badmouth workshops here, people. You know, the idea isn't so much to say that because workshops are incredibly valuable, but it's the idea of people going into them with the right expectations.

KM: Yes.

GP: That if you go into them and you have your eyes wide open and you know what to expect and you know what you can get out of it, then I think it can be incredibly useful. The places I think where problems can come up is when people expect one thing, but they're really getting another and they don't realize that they're not getting what they thought they were getting.

KM: Yeah. Yeah. And you know what? There's nothing-- I think there's nothing that saddens me more than someone coming in very excited about a novel they're writing that they haven't finished. And they bring it in and they get overwhelmed with like, all kinds of comments from people; and it sucks their energy out of wanting to finish writing it, that just makes me sad.

GP: Yes.

KM: You know, that's one of the things I've always want to focus on is make sure any workshop I'm in is an energizing experience for the writer; that's what they need.

GP: Exactly.

KM: You know, we work alone. So, you know, when we can all get together, anything we can do to sort of pump up that energy and push things along is valuable. I mean, not at the expense of giving solid advice or pointing out deficiencies. Like, you know, 'Hey, this character's name is changing several times here,' you know?

GP: Exactly.

KM: Yeah. Yeah.

GP: But giving people-- Yeah, giving people that energy because-- You know, a friend of mine, actually, a writer friend, she often refers to us writers as the biggest group of masochists on the planet because we basically pour our hearts and souls onto the page only to hand them over to someone else and get them, you know, slaughtered. I think it's important, especially--

KM: Actually, no, the character in my novel is the biggest masochist on the planet. [laughs] Anyway, he's got--

GP: So, maybe writers are the second biggest – but even so, we are fighting an uphill battle to a certain extent. So, I think it's important, especially as a teacher to honor that and, you know, recognize like the bravery that goes into bringing work to a workshop and getting that feedback – and then being able to get back on the horse and start again tomorrow.

KM: Yeah. And serve that story. Just serve it, just let it-- You know, let it find itself, and let it grow and, you know, build it up and acquire skills to help be a better writer along the way. Yeah.

GP: Exactly. So, one of the things I love doing is just geeking out with other writers and talking like process. Like, what does a day in your writing life look like?

KM: Well, an ideal day is I get to my desk as soon as I can before anything else happens, if I can, and spend a couple hours there and kind of have it as an undistracted time to work on whatever it is I'm working on at that time.

And, you know, I've gone so far as, you know, there's a small room next in my house, next to my bedroom that I've put a table in there and I will sometimes go to bed with like the laptop there, open and set on airplane mode, and the only file open is whatever I'm working on.

And, you know, my hand notes are with me as well. You know, my scribbling notebook is either there or, you know, comes to the bedside with me. And, you know, that sounds kind of hokey – but the result is that I can wake, sit down and even in half consciousness, become aware of what it is I'm supposed to do that day and what I'm working on and to not--

You know, and another key factor is the phone is turned off. I call it-- I call this the airplane room, laptops and airplane mode and the phone is turned off…and, you know, the focus is whatever needs to be done and whatever that story is.

And I find that if I can get the day started by spending some time in there, getting a few words down on the page – becoming aware, again, in my conscious mind of what I'm working on, then it's quite easy to get back to that again.

Like, I can-- I don't have to sit there and slog for three hours, but I can-- Once that's established, yeah, I can go get my coffee…I can have a bit of breakfast…I can, you know, tend to whatever tasks might need to be done. And they're done hurriedly because I'm hurrying to get back to that room because I want to be there and working.

And so, I think that's the ideal day is that, you know, hopefully, there's two hours, maybe as many as three or four. I think beyond three or four hours in any given day…what happens is you blow your jets out, and it's hard to get up and work again for a day or two.

So, I try to-- I try to sort of manage it that, you know, those eight- or nine-hour days are for those special occasions like deadlines – and that the rest of the time when it's, you know, the actual creative writing time that it doesn't exceed that those three, four hours.

The amazing thing that happens is once I've had a good writing session or, you know, got down on the page some new material that I'm pleased with or maybe I'm not entirely pleased with, but I'm at least pleased that it's there, it seems that the day suddenly has so much more time in it.

And the practical example I can give to you is this, that if I wake up in the morning and I've got a to-do list that looks like it's the length of my forearm for that day, if I ignore that to-do list and go and write for a few hours, I can come back and it'll have shrunk to what seems like, you know, the length of my thumb.

It seems like there's more time, like all of a sudden, these things are less stressful; they're not getting in the way of the things I want to do. And so, that's just straight practical advice from experience that I've had is that the sooner it can--

You know, for me, writing's really the thing I most love to do and that seems to give me the most satisfaction. So, it stands to reason that when I'm writing, because I'm not always writing, but I'm writing most of the time, that when I'm writing I get to it as quickly as I can…and on any given day.

And that makes me a better writer. It also probably makes me a better person to be around because I can get a little angry if I'm kept away from my work.

GP: You know, it's funny, that's something that I talk about with my students all the time that like, you know you're a writer if you are…you become your best self when you are doing your work.

And I think it's something very particular to writing because, you know, it's not like you hear like neurosurgeons suddenly say something like, 'Yeah, I haven't given someone a lobotomy today, and I feel like a little part of me died inside.' Like, you don't hear that – but like writers, you definitely hear writers say like, "I don't feel right, I haven't written today" or "I haven't written for a week". It's interesting.

KM: Yeah. Yeah. We do. And you know, it's funny, there was a time where I would've said, "Well, why is that? What's with me that that happens?" And now, I don't care anymore. I'm like, 'I just accept this, this is what-- This is what I do.'

GP: Exactly.

KM: I don't think about it. That kind of introspection just doesn't really serve anything that I do, so I just go with it.

GP: Exactly. Like it is what it is; and we don't really need to analyze it to just accept that, 'Hey, it's working,' right? So, why not? So, what's next on deck for you? What kind of projects do you have coming up?

KM: Well, I'm doing some work to promote this book, of course, takes up some time. But I am writing something new. I actually have two things; one of which I'll talk about, there seems to be another novel.

GP: Cool.

KM: And as much as I know of it is this, it seems to be set a little closer to home than Eulogy was. Eulogy, in many ways, invented a whole new town. I mean, it's partly set in Toronto and partly in

northern Ontario – but it's largely set in a town that doesn't even exist. But I'm writing something now that feels it has a much wider time span, and it's set a little closer to home.

And you know, I'm still kind of like how I was all those years ago with that, that scene we were talking about in the amusement park with the father and son? I'm still kind of discovering it, but I'm pretty excited about it.

And I think that one of the exciting things that just happened-- There's about three or four times over the last four years I thought I was starting a new novel, and these were all distinct different stories. And I had this weird moment about a month ago where I looked at them and says, "Holy crap, they're all the same story."

GP: That's so cool.

KM: That's the same story, it's my job to connect them. And that's been very energizing, and so I'm working away on that.

GP: You know, it's interesting because hearing you describe that, it sounds like Eulogy kind of started the same way, if I'm not mistaken.

KM: Yes, it did. Yes, it did. And I think that's probably, you know, why when I'm teaching my students when they're asking, "How should I write this?" I'm like, 'Write it.'

GP: Uh-huh.

KM: 'Get the material down, you'll figure out how it goes together.'

GP: But it's just so cool too, hearing you talk about it because it sounds like, you know, just the act of writing Eulogy has also helped you sort of hone your process, so now you're connecting those dots as well. And so, it's kind of cool like--

KM: Yes. I think so. Well, we'd hope we'd learn something by doing all this.

GP: Exactly.

[laughter]

KM: It's like, next novel, 'Oh, I didn't learn a thing.' 'But yeah, that first one, I got a lot out of it.'

[laughter]

GP: Although sometimes I do feel like writing a novel is sort of like-- You know, writing a second project is kind of like having a second kid because I have two kids; and it's like sometimes I'm just astounded at how different one is from the other.

And like, it feels like everything you thought you understood just goes right out the window. So, there is a little bit of that, but hopefully, we learn from the process, right?

KM: Yeah, yeah. Well, we can only hope, got to be open.

GP: So, I always like to end every interview with the same question, what is your number one tip for writers?

KM: Get started. Get started, and be open to whatever comes out of your pen.

GP: I love it.

KM: Yeah, you just have to; that's what we got to do.

GP: There you go. All right, word nerds. Thank you guys so much for listening. But I also want to extend a huge thank you to Ken Murray for being on the show today. Thank you, Ken.

KM: Oh, you're welcome. It was my pleasure. Hey I just, I thought of something too. You know, I am doing a reading in New York City in a few weeks.

GP: Awesome.

KM: Can we mention that?

GP: I'm sorry?

KM: Should we mention-- Should we be mentioning that?

GP: We can certainly mention it, but our listeners are all over the place--

KM: Oh, okay.

GP: But we may have some listeners in New York, so if you have-- If you are in the New York area, Ken, why don't you give us some details about it

KM: It'll be on the evening of Thursday, November 19th as part of the HIP Lit series out in Brooklyn. And now, I don't have a venue or exact time confirmed yet – but if you-- Actually, you know what? Just if you go to my Facebook page, if you go to facebook.com, kenmurraywriter – all one word, all lowercase – and follow that page, then you'll see the details when they come out.

GP: Awesome. And we'll make sure to put the links on the show notes page for this episode as well.

KM: Cool.

GP: So, awesome. Well, thank you so much, Ken, for being on the show.

KM: Oh, my pleasure, Gabriela.

GP: Thank you so much for listening, word nerds. Keep writing and keep being awesome.