

Transcript for MiP Episode 66: Interview with Nicole Blades

Episode 66 Duration: 43:48

Jennifer: Hello, and welcome to the Minorities in Publishing podcast. This is Jenn. For new and returning listeners, you may know you can find the podcast at minoritiesinpublishing.tumblr.com, or on Twitter @MinoritiesInPub, as well as on iTunes, TuneIn, and Google Play.

And I'm very, very happy to add to this wonderful roster of women of color who are going to be dominating by the last quarter of the year with Nicole Blades, who is a co-host with her sister Nailah of the Hey Sis! podcast. She is the author of *The Thunder Beneath Us*, *Earth's Waters*, and the upcoming *Have You Met Nora?*, which we are gonna discuss today. And I'm very excited to discuss that. And we met briefly at the Well-Read Black Girl Festival, which was last month as of this recording.

Nicole: Yes [laughs], all of this is true.

Jennifer: Hashtag facts, as the kids say [laughs]. So, I didn't completely connect it when you introduced yourself and I was like, "Ah, yeah!" and then you mentioned Bridget and I was like, "Oh! Yes! You're that same person." [Laughs] It was amazing. It was like this Black female bonanza in New York City in Brooklyn.

Nicole: Oh yeah. It was so good. I was so honored and happy that I was able to take part in that. I've been friends with Glory for a couple years now—

Jennifer: Oh yeah?

Nicole: I met her because I was doing a story for *Marie Claire* about Well-Read Black Girl at the time, which had just started. So, I interviewed her and wrote a story about Well-Read Black Girl and her whole journey into that and we remained friends. And she is just an outstanding person, beyond supportive of Black women's stories and Black women, in general. And I was so proud and happy for her to see that this festival that she's dreamed up just landed so well, and so many people that were there just felt like it was this community and this meeting of like minds. It was really, really great.

Jennifer: Yeah, and it was so interesting 'cause it was just constant positivity. And I shouldn't say it was interesting. It was actually just kind of expected, in a way. But I think also, as you know, as a writer and as a writer of multiple books, the festival circus can be kind of weird. [laughs] I think "weird" is the best way to define it, in a way.

Nicole: Yeah.

Jennifer: You don't know what'll happen. It can be a mishmash, panels aren't always great, the discussions aren't always great. I'm not trying to trash festivals [laughs], I'm just saying—

Nicole: Oh no, you're just speaking the truth. [laughs]

Jennifer: Yeah, I'm speaking as to why *Well-Read Black Girl* stands out as much as it does because it was— and I like that it was small. I'm on the end of, I like things small and kind of concise so not too many choices, but, I mean, I'm obviously— they do wanna make it bigger, so I'm really happy to see it become bigger, too, obviously.

Good that you also mentioned the *Marie Claire* and Glory is amazing and I adore her and she's so hardworking, so I'm glad to hear that she had so many features. But that ties into you being a journalist.

Nicole: Yes.

Jennifer: It's interesting, I think I have had a couple journalists on. Usually, it's people who've always written in some form or someone who did kind of a complete 180, like they were in law or they were in medicine and then they came into publishing, which are always interesting to hear about. But journalism, especially now—that's probably gonna be tied into another question I have for you of now and then journalism—how did you start to pursue fiction as an outlet, and what kind of variations have you found in terms of one mode of storytelling aiding you in another mode of storytelling?

Nicole: I was asked this before about how different or the same it is to write journalism versus a novel, and I have said, over the years, I've noticed very much how journalism has helped me with my creative writing because the director— I always think about this. Director Ryan Coogler, who is behind *Creed* and, of course, *Black Panther*—

Jennifer: Which the trailer came out today as of this recording!

Nicole: It was so— I mean, my heart was beating faster just watching that new trailer. [laughs] And the movie poster came out, so it's kinda like, "Please! This is so good!" I can't wait for this. February 16th?

Jennifer: Sixteenth. That's where all the Black people are gonna be [laughter], so if you have no Black people in your office, in your school, anything, that's where the Black people are. They're at *Black Panther* on February 16th, 17th, and 18th. [laughs]

Nicole: You know what's up. Just to be clear. Know that's what's going on. But he said— I think it was in magazine article, interview. It was maybe *GQ* or *Esquire*. He said that everybody is a prisoner of their own perspective, and I was like, "Oh, that is so sharp." Because we are limited by our imaginations and we can only see the world through our own POV, that single lens, typically, most people. And so, that's where one of the biggest lessons or benefits of journalism has come into play for me with writing books because with journalism, like a well-reported-out story for a magazine or a newspaper or online publication, what it does essentially is it breaks down those limitations and it gives you an opportunity to ask somebody else those really smart questions and ask the right questions, and gives you an opportunity to walk in someone else's shoes and move through the world in their skin and get a better a sense of what

someone else's experience is. And I think that creates a deeper sense of empathy and compassion and an understanding for what another person's life even means.

So, you don't get that typically just walking around day to day [laughs], you know what I mean? We're so focused on ourselves that you don't get to see what somebody else is seeing. And I think fiction takes that same concept and runs to the hills with it, because fiction writers can give readers a chance to do exactly that, so that you can see the other side something. You get to walk in someone else's shoes. You get to see a completely different angle on something that maybe you have no idea about or maybe you had judged differently before. And *that* gives you that deeper sense of understanding and compassion for human beings and, like, the human condition, in general.

So, I think that, for me, journalism, A, has helped me with deadlines because it's in my bones now. [laughs] I will meet a deadline. I don't care what's happening—I got to meet that deadline. But it also helped me with researching and looking at things from a sort of stepping back and looking at the larger picture. And it's also helped me with asking those questions that help you sort of root, dig into, dig up some of the stuff that's going on underneath, things that people are keeping a little bit hidden or a little bit at bay, a little bit buried.

With writing books, that whole compassion piece has come into play big time for me, anyway, because even with *The Thunder Beneath Us* and with the new one coming out October 31st, *Have You Met Nora?*, even with my debut novel, *Earth's Waters*, I wanted to investigate that. When I look at the books collectively, I realize that compassion keeps coming up as that flag or that sort of running thread through all of them. Because we have no idea what's rumbling beneath the surface of somebody else's life, no matter hashtag blessed, however fabulous and filtered someone's life may appear on Instagram or Twitter or social media, we have no idea what's really going on. I firmly believe that we all need to feel valued and heard and supported, and I think that's—I mean, we need it. It's not a new idea. [laughs] We need that. And it's crucial to understand, also—we need that to help us understand that, you know, we're allowed to make mistakes. We *can* completely wipe out. We *can* get back up.

And all of that stuff, I think it's vital for—especially these days, in these very trying, infuriating, heartbreaking times with the current administration, I think that love and acceptance and compassion is what's going to help us float. Otherwise, we're sunk because—[laughs] you know what I mean? Right now, it is tough out there and I think empathy, compassion, that's what's gonna keep us afloat. Journalism has helped me sort of like just understand the nuance of that and kind of turn the volume up on compassion. There's always been something that, me, personally, I'm trying to understand a little bit more, I'm trying to see the other side of something a little bit better, and that's where the story usually starts for me, is there's something that I'm like, "Hmm, that's interesting." Or, "I wonder if..." and, you know, I'm trying to answer a question. And I think that's kind of where a lot of my stories, that's the jumping off point for a lot of my stories.

So, I ended up pursuing journalism because it was a way of writing stories, but it was based in something real. Back then, that was my thinking. I really enjoyed it. I enjoyed it because, one, I'm nosy. [laughter] So, being a journalist, being a reporter, you get to ask a lot of questions. You get to nosy into people's lives, try to understand their perspectives. That was always fascinating to me, to try to understand why people made the choice they did, or why someone ended up where they are, or how they were able to, I don't know, become victorious or have a fall from grace or whatever it is. You know, asking the right question, you can launch somebody into a really fascinating story.

[00:10:07]

So, that's how I kind of made my way into journalism for this— it was my way of sort of feeding this desire to write but have it be dressed up in a career that was recognized as something that people understood, do you know what I mean? When you say "writer" sometimes, people are like, "Oh..." Even at cocktail parties, when they ask you that dreaded question, like, "What do you do?" you're like [laughs], "I'm a writer" and then it launches into, "Oh, what kind of writing? Anything that I've read? Oh—" Blah, blah, blah. All that stuff that makes you start questioning yourself and, you know, almost belittling what you've accomplished because, you know, that's just how we do. [laughs]

Jennifer: No, but it's true. From the outer— I remember going on a residency and coming back and this editor said, "Oh, so you write!" and I said yes, and she's like, "Have you ever been in *The New Yorker*?"

Nicole: Oh, jeez! [laughs]

Jennifer: I said, "Wow, that's your only barometer for what's legitimized and what's not." So, I totally understand just not even wanting to broach that conversation. No saying, "Oh, I work for this paper" and then people are like, "Oh—"

Nicole: Or, I write for myself or I'm working on a book or I'm doing poetry. People start to be like, "Oh, okay. You're not really working," and you have to start feeling like you have to justify or qualify. So, journalism was my way of staying attached to something I was very passionate about, writing, but being able to put it on a leaf of lettuce that was palatable, something that could make sense, someone could digest that. With journalism, like I said, I had always continued to write for myself. I ended up doing a lot of different things. So, my first sort of job in media was I was working PR for a talk show called the Sally Jessy Raphael show—

Jennifer: [Gasp] Oh my gosh! [Laughter] The spectacles, the red spectacles!

Nicole: Yes. Yes, yes, yes.

Jennifer: Oh my God! We watched that show!

Nicole: And "spectacle," both definitions, because this was the heyday of the talk show, sort of like muddy talk show, gross—

Jennifer: Yeah, with Geraldo and all that stuff, yeah.

Nicole: Yes, yes, yes. But I was working PR, which was it's on sort of horrible [laughs] thing. During that time, it was very much ratings and who could be the most salacious and outrageous on those shows, so you'd see people's live kinda come apart, where you'd have like a producer have one— it was a family, they were gonna be on the show and they'd have the husband in one room, sort of pumping up him up like, "You know, when she—" And then have the wife in the other and they'd be like, "You know, when she says this, you don't let her finish. You cut her off and you tell her—" And they'd be like almost a wrestler [laughs], opposite sides of the ring, and you're pumping them up and trying to get them riled, and then they just, like, set them off on stage and just watch— sometimes, families kinda completely melt [laughs] and get destroyed, and there was no "after care" for that. And it was like, "Okay, go out there and make a spectacle of yourself and get us those ratings. Mush!" You know? [laughs] I mean, it was not cool.

That was not the best place to do PR and I was like, "Oh, I don't like this," so I was actually talking to the makeup artist, Sally's makeup artist, and we were having this conversation and she asked me— I think she asked me at the right time where I was willing to sort of speak up on it, and she said, "You know, what do you really wanna do?" [Laughs] Because we were sort of, like, going over, "How crazy is this?" and she said, "What do you really wanna do?" and I was like, "I want to write. I want to write." And so, she told me about an opening at *Essence* magazine, of all places. I was like, "What?" I went for an interview and I got hired. I was the editorial assistant at *Essence* magazine for the Fashion & Beauty department, which was *the* best department to work for. This was under Harriette Cole and Mikki Taylor, and these are legendary women in women's magazines and I learned so much from them. And just from being in that environment, being around someone like a Susan Taylor, being around Linda Villarosa— top of the game, doing excellent work, and providing a space that Black women could be Black women, and in an excellent way, too, you know, and not in some sort of, "Oh, we're gonna try to—" Not in that Sally Jessy way, you know? [laughter]

So, it was great because I'm still friends, very good friends, with a lot of the people that I worked with at that department. I mean, they're still very close to me. And it was a real fantastic introduction to media, magazines. And, of course, this was before social media and all this stuff, so it was a different time writing back then and being in magazines back then. And then I ended up continuing along that thread, and so I ended up working at *Women's Health* magazine, I was working at ESPN.com. And so I continued on the editor's track.

While I was working on staff somewhere as an editor, I would also be contributing elsewhere—at non-competitive titles [laughs]—as a freelance writer. So, I was still writing and editing and doing that whole magazine thing, but still, for myself, writing my creative writing, my little fiction pieces, and had been working for over a few years on this one story that was set in modern day Barbados. It was a coming of age story. I called it "This Young Woman Who Was Slowly Drowning in Paradise." And that book

turned into *Earth's Waters*. What's great about that was, I mean, I had been working on it for years and there was no time clock attached to it. You know, there was no one sort of saying like, "Hey, when's the book coming?" kind of thing and I was sort of just writing it to tell this story, and when the story was done, then I would be done with that project. And a friend of mine, I had been sending him pages over the years and he'd been reading it. He's a published author, Robert Edison Sandiford, and he said to me at one point toward the end, he was like, "This is pretty good. Do you mind if I—" [Laughs/scoffs] "Do you mind?" "Do you mind if I share this with my publisher?" And I was like, "...yeah, go right ahead!" He's, "You know, there are no guarantees. They could look at it and pass. But I think it's in good shape. So, do you mind if I pass it along?" I said, "Certainly." It was just, you know, hoping that something comes through but not putting all my eggs in that basket. *But* I was really fortunate because they offered me a contract. They wanted to publish the book.

So, that was my first novel; that came out in 2007, ages ago now. But I didn't have an agent and I was able to get my baby out [laughs] into the world, which was its own sort of small victory for me. And I had continued journalism, writing for magazines, all during this time, but when that book was about to be published, I was at a stage in my career in magazines where I was like, "Uh, I'm not feeling the pull. I'm not feeling the drive as much anymore," and I wanted to truly jump into creative writing in a real way and I wanted to devote this—it was my vocation and I wanted to take it very seriously. And so, when I got the good news that the book was going to be published, I left my job—[laughs]

Jennifer: Oh wow.

Nicole: —at ESPN. I left my job and I said I was gonna just freelance because I wanted to be my own boss. I wanted to be able to devote the time I needed to whatever I was working on, whether it's a freelance piece for a magazine or this book that I was trying to work on the edits for. I had to really bet on myself because a lot of people—I mean, I was fortunate that I was... it wasn't one of those situations where, like, I had to stay with this job for the benefits and the money and all that stuff. I was fortunate that I set myself up where I could still make money through freelancing and also devote the time to the book. But I essentially, at that stage, wanted to be my own boss, and I have not looked back since. I mean, I have continued to be my own boss, whether I work for a magazine on a contract basis, I still very much, "Okay, I'm controlling my time. I'm gonna work these four days and—" That was really important to me, that I can put my writing energy and time and focus into what I was interested in and not what some top editor or magazine's new direction was trying to tell me to do.

Jennifer: I went to college '99 to 2003 for my undergrad, so it was a different time. It was pre-social media, it was pre-blogging, you know [laughs], LiveJournals, diaries. So, there was such a reliance on taking time, it felt like. Not to say that that journalism isn't fast in a way, but the rate at which material was available was much different than it is now.

Nicole: Oh yeah.

Jennifer: And for you having kind of come up during the time before that, do you see the major difference, especially in what's being published? I mean, I've spoken to some people, especially journalists about it. There seems to be a more... I don't know how to say it. I don't wanna say "tragedy porn," per se, but kind of like these diary entries or these kind of confessional writing is a big thing online, and all these op-eds that are, "I'm a Black woman dating a White man," or, "I'm this doing this," or "I'm this doing that," and "I'm a dude who loves this." [Laughs] You know? It's so— I was like, okay, I was a teenager before, but I kind of remember not seeing this abundance [laughs] of these kinds of op-eds in the '90s.

Nicole: Yeah. There's a lot of that. There's a lot of that "It Happened to Me" stuff that, I think, in the beginning, it was intriguing and interesting because it was, "Oh, I can step out of the shadows of whatever it is that I was dealing with because here's somebody who is going through a similar experience and they're talking about it in an eloquent way." But I think it started to become a bit much, just like how a lot of listicles started to become—

[00:20:11]

Jennifer: Oh yeah, oh yeah.

Nicole: —like, okay, everything's a listicle now [laughs], you know? So, I think that's what kinda happens. I think magazines are sort of, "Okay, this is working. Let's run with this. Let's all do this!" So, everybody goes to that end of the ship and then it starts to tip over, you know? It's like, "Oh, wait! Go to the bow now! That's what you need!" [Laughter] You know what I mean? And it becomes this thing where it's like—

Jennifer: It's a see-saw.

Nicole: Yeah, the see-saw, a complete see-saw, where people are, "This is working right now! Let's all do that!" and then it's like, "Okay, now we're all doing that. Too many of us doing that. Let's do this!" And I think that's very much happening.

So, that's why things, other magazines and other publications that are sort of stepping out and doing their own thing really... they might have like a niche sort of following, but they definitely shine a bit more because they are not doing what everybody else is doing. They stand out a bit more and they are, you know, sort of like taking chances a bit more so than a lot of other places. I think one of the main reasons I got out of working consistently for women's service magazines is because I started to feel like—this is maybe five, six years ago I started to see like, "Okay, these are the same stories [laughs]. We keep bring up the same story." And I think magazines have their evergreen stories like all publications do, but it started to become, "Okay, we've just sort of moved cover line around on the cover of the magazine, but every April, you're having the same story about this—" and it started to feel like where's the fresh— and even editors, when they would be giving you an assignment or you're going to them for an assignment, this

whole, like, “But maybe a fresh angle,” or, “What’s surprising?” That was the word. That was a key word that was like, “Oh my gosh, if I have another person asking me for something surprising, I’m gonna scream.”

Jennifer: [Laughs] We all have our buzzword, our buzz trigger words. Like, “Ah, I can’t deal with that word.”

Nicole: Yeah. [laughs] So, yes, “surprising.” Because I think, if we were all being honest, it’s because we are doing the same stories over and over, especially in women’s magazines, and it was starting to be things that weren’t useful anymore, like the whole “Drop two jean sizes.” Who cares? Like, “The flat belly diet.” All of that stuff starts to feel, “Oh my gosh. Okay.” Or, basically, all were boiling down to “How to keep a man” kind of thing and I was like, “We are more than that. Can we just start delving into the other parts of our identities?”

So, yeah, several years ago, I said, “I think I’m gonna move away from sort of pitching and being involved in this particular circle.” And no disrespect to people who are continuing to freelance and thrive in women’s magazines, women’s service pieces. I totally get it. But for me, I want something that is moving me closer toward living that better life. And I want something that’s fueling me and that’s teaching me something, or delving into something completely new and different, that’s maybe scaring me a little bit but I’m learning to pad my way around. And I wasn’t feeling that with a lot of the same stories that I was getting [laughs] assigned and feeling, and I now there’s a certain level of— I don’t want it to sound snooty, like, oh, I’m above that. I don’t feel like I’m above those stories, I just wasn’t interested in it anymore and I feel like life is too short to invest time and energy in things that you’re not interested in. Why? [laughs]

Jennifer: Yeah, I agree, I agree.

Nicole: So, with me, it was, “Okay, I want to do things that I feel passionate about or I’m fascinated by. Those are the stories that I wanna tell and delve into and report.” And those are the kinds of things that you’re gonna feel more motivated to actually, like, dig into and find all the fresh angles and all the surprising facts because you’re so interested, you’re so intrigued.

Jennifer: I think something else is that everyone’s trying to get their foot in the door, right, as a freelancer. Unfortunately, there are layoffs. Not just people leaving to pursue it, but there’re layoffs, especially in the media realm of, well, specifically magazines—this is a kind of trigger word for some people—“pivot.” The pivot—

Nicole: Mm. [laughs]

Jennifer: —to this [laughs]— you know. “We’re pivoting to visual over the textual,” and blah, blah, blah, blah. But, you know, how do you suggest people go about trying to get notice and attention? Is it really about having those clips and then utilizing those clips or really kind of— not cold calling. We don’t cold call anymore, but you do just like email people out of the blue and pitch, pitch, pitch, pitch. Or—

Nicole: It's tough, I'll be honest with you. I think it's really tough right now and there's definitely been a line in the sand of, "This was then and this is now" kind of thing. And I feel like now, there is a lot of, not shooting darts in the dark [laughs], but there is a certain sense of media companies struggling and not sure what's really working and what's going to keep them viable and afloat. And I think a lot of people are doing the pivot toward— like you said, they're doing more digital stuff, more video, and moving away from, you know, like long-reads and stuff like that because they feel like people don't read long stories and all of that.

So, I think it's a little bit more challenging to get into that freelance journalism field. Also, people aren't paying properly—

Jennifer: Yeah, digital pays horribly. So, people, they're all competing for print.

Nicole: They're competing for print. So, it's just really tough, too, because a lot of print places, budgets are shifting and so they are doing a lot of stuff in-house and they're not looking for the freelancers like they used to. They might have a couple that they, you know, continue to work with. They have a good rapport and they've been vetted and they've been working with them for years, but a lot of times, it's, "Hmm, do we wanna take on a new freelancer, or do we wanna just get so-and-so, [laughs] Jenn Baker down the hall, to write this because she knows this," you know what I mean? "And we're already paying her because she's on staff, so she could do it and we don't have to pay anything else out."

So, I feel like it's a struggle. There is always a way in, oftentimes through networking and... people need to stop doing that "pick your brain" stuff [laughs] because people never like to hear that. Getting mentors, publishing stuff on your own if you have a blog. I've gotta tell you, I don't even know if people are still reading blogs like they used to. So, things keep shifting on us. I think sometimes it's like networking in groups, like Binders. I mean, can we say Binders now? Is it out now?

Jennifer: Mm-hmm [affirmative], yeah. Pretty much.

Nicole: All these Binders have so many different subgroups that are all about sharing information, whether it's, you know, freelancers seeking opportunities or it's editors looking for freelancers. It's a lot about sort of connecting with other people who are on your level. You're not looking up, your kind of looking side to side and saying like, "Hey guys, we're all in this together. Let's help each other out and sort of [laughs] fortify ourselves that way." There's safety or there's power in numbers.

So, I think it's about networking, getting into certain groups, and also writing. You can't say you want to be a writer. Whether it's journalism or fiction or creative nonfiction, you can't be a writer without writing. That is the key component. That, and reading. You have to do it. So, whether it's you're writing stuff for yourself or you see a story that's interesting that no one else is doing, you write it up. And you *can* cold call someone. I mean, editors are always looking for the good story and if you can craft together a really good pitch and approach the right editor— that's the other thing.

Jennifer: Yes, yes.

Nicole: [Laughs] Don't just send it to everybody.

Jennifer: And the right publication. Please, for all that is holy, the right publication. [laughs]

Nicole: Yes, do your research! Do the work that's involved. Putting your pitch together but then also doing the research that's involved with finding where to send it and where it needs to lands, being very concise, being really professional, and being really polished, saying, "Okay, here's this idea." And sometimes, it can be just in the subject line of your email—

Jennifer: Just like pitch— yeah, make sure to put the word "pitch" in there, for one [laughs].

Nicole: Yes, "pitch." And then saying what it is. And stick to business. Let's say you found a fresh way, a really fresh angle, on how to beat holiday travel traffic jams or something, or, "The Holiday Travel Plan: How to Take the Boredom Out of It," or whatever it is. And you found a fresh angle through your own experience or something that you saw and you're like, "Hey, that's an interesting trend." Whatever it is, put it together in a really good pitch, get your supporting evidence, do your research, and send that pitch off that's really fine-tuned and crafted for that publication instead of just having this sort of general pitch that you're sending out to everybody... that's the other thing. A lot of times, a lot of these editors— it's a small world, very small world [laughs], and a lot of editors know each other. So, if you're sending out the same, exact pitch, you're just changing the "Dear So-and-So" at the top, that's not good, either. That shows a little laziness on your part.

So, just really be specific with your motivations and in your intention and say, "Okay, I've been reading *Good Housekeeping* for the last year," or, "I've been flipping through nine months of issues on this magazine and I see their voice, I get it, I can write this way, and I have a really interesting story for them. Put it together, do the research, and pitch it. I mean, there are ways to get in there. Mind you, like I said before, it's a little bit more difficult when it comes to the budgets and paying. I feel like online, like you said, does not [laughs]—

Jennifer: [Drawn out] No.

Nicole: —pay well, so they'll be like, "Oh, can you do this 800-word piece for \$100?" or something, and you're kind of like, "Well, wait a minute [laughs]! Do I wanna break that down per word what am I getting paid here?"

Jennifer: And that even sounds like the high-end to me. [laughs]

Nicole: You said it [laughs]. It's crazy.

[00:29:59]

Jennifer: Imagine you write the literary stuff and it's just like you just, "I get \$25, wow, for this essay? Wow!" [laughs]

Nicole: I know. But that said, sometimes— and I know that there's a whole, like, people are really sort of giving side-eye to exposure and eyeballs and all that stuff, getting paid in exposure, but there is something to be said for the altitude or the level of that publication. So, let's suppose you do get something small but something sharp and smart in *The New Yorker* or *The New York Times* online or something. That is a clip that will pay for itself. So, let's suppose you get paid, I don't know, \$50 for something that you worked really hard, but the fact that it is in *The New Yorker* or *The New York Times* or *Esquire* or whatever the magazine is that has a certain clout, a certain level of people regard it a certain way, I think that is also valuable, too. So, don't always dismiss, "Oh, they're only paying me 25 bucks for this." But it's like, oh, but it's *The New Yorker*, so... not saying that *The New Yorker* pays that little, but I'm saying weigh that out. Where is this going and what's the reach of this, and is it worth my time? Will I be able to sort of use this clip to get other clips, to get other stories, get other assignments? And sometimes, that is worth it for you to take the low pay but it pays off for itself on the other end.

Jennifer: Yeah, I agree. I totally agree. I wanna make sure we talk about your book, *Have You Met Nora?*, which I gobbled up in a day [laughter]. I don't always wanna put this, "What is the deeper meaning of your story when you wrote this book—" you know, sometimes it's just entertainment, it's just telling a story. There doesn't have to be this kind of tiered ideology behind it. But, with the core of where this came from, especially it discusses or presents assault, passing, colorism, and these are aspects we deal with as women of color and in POC/indigenous life, what kept coming to me [laughs] was how Nora did all these things and she kept being forgiven. Like, she kept having [laughter]—things just seemed to work out. Like, she had these moments of high anxiety and, you know, it seems like, "Oh, okay, da-da-da-da-da, da-da-da-da-da," and she kept being forgiven. And I don't wanna do spoilers in this instance so I hope I'm doing that. Just leading up to things of where you're going, I was wondering if those interactions and just the life she leaves, and not to say she's not a hard worker—she's worked hard to present herself in a very specific way—but I also did wonder, was there an intention of commentary on the POC versus the white existence, especially for women? And especially after this weekend. Again, let me emphasize, after this weekend with the Weinstein and the going off Twitter, boycotting Twitter, and that was a White woman call. That was a call to protect a White woman because people were outraged when a White woman— and I made a comment, too, as many of us did, of, "Well, why did it take a White woman for this to call a boycott when women of color, trans women, Native women have been harassed online? Y'all didn't start boycotting." So, you know, it kinda brought it back to Nora. If this is Nora's existence, it makes sense why she wants to protect it, but it's also like what is that like to write as a woman of color [laughs]?

Nicole: [Laughs] Well, for me—

Jennifer: There's a lot of questions in there because there's a lot to unpack with this book! [laughs] There's a lot to unpack there!

Nicole: [00:33:45] I think with Nora— okay, so the story— I get asked this a lot. Without any spoilers— it's not a spoiler to say that Nora Mackenzie is a young woman who is very light-skinned, mixed race woman who has been passing for white and privileged and affluent for a long time, for 14 years. And how this particular deception started is its story that I don't wanna get into because, then, we would get into some spoilers, but the way that the idea came to me, because [laughs] I've said this a couple times and people are like, "I think I know who you're talking about!" Okay, so there's an actor in Hollywood. She is mixed race, but very light-skinned, and if you didn't know who her parents were, you could assume that she is a White woman.

Jennifer: I think I know who you're talking about. [laughter] I think—

Nicole: Yeah, and how she's been styled, it seems as though that could be— and I can't speak to know what her intentions are. It seems as though that was what she was going for. Again, I started thinking, if we didn't know who her parents were, if she was just a cashier or a woman working at the Gap out in Chicago and you crossed your path and you're out for drinks with some group and she came— would you just see her and say like, "Oh, another white lady?" And, "She's beautiful" and whatever, just keep it moving. And then I started thinking what would happen if it was a liable mission— someone assumed something about this character and the character never corrected them? They just went with it. They ran with it because they realized, through their own sort of hardships of dealing with never feeling white enough or black enough, always feeling on the outside, which is this character's situation, always feeling like an "other," never feeling like she has the right to claim any identity. And so what would happen if that person is— someone assumes something about this person and they decide to go with it because they realize, for them, "Being white is easier than what I've just been through. I'm going with *that*."

So, I wanted to investigate what lengths a person would go to to kind of create this ideal self, and then what lengths would they go to to protect it. And so how much of the lie do you have to keep fueling? How much do you have to keep putting into the lie to keep it going? Does it ever run out of gas? I think that's where the story came from for me, just thinking about passing and colorism because we are still, still, still, still in this horrible zone of, "Closer to white is better." As much as we are coming out of that in a lot of ways and there is a movement that has taken hold and we are definitely a lot wiser and a little bit more intelligent and aware of colorism and the effects of it— okay, look at the natural hair movement, for example. I have natural hair, a lot of women I know have natural hair, and in the ads and stuff that you see or the YouTube videos and a lot of the sort of natural hair care ads, it's almost always a particular lighter-skinned woman with a certain kind of curl pattern that is being put out as the face of natural hair. And it just feels like we still haven't gotten *all* the way over the hump when it comes to colorism. We still have not—

Jennifer: Oh no.

Nicole: There's still so many people of different generations that are still very much like, "Wavy hair, light-skinned girls, that's where it's at!" Whether you're mixed race or just light skin because of what's gone on in your family, genetics, it's still an issue and it still burns. It still stings a lot of people. We're not past it yet, not at all.

And so I wanted to sort of look into that, as well. How is someone who is walking around as something else treated versus if they were to come out as their true selves, how would that change? How they be viewed? What position would they be demoted to, in general? It was very much a fascination thing for me, just wondering that, if given an opportunity to take the easier road, what that looks like, someone that says, "Yeah, I'm going that way. Even though it's wrong, it's complicated [laughs] and not truthful, I'm going the easy road." So, that's where that came from.

Jennifer: Yeah. Yeah, and it makes sense, too, because just the anxiety, it's so much work. [laughs] That's why I don't wear makeup, because I said that's work. So, I can't imagine pretending if I had the capacity to pretend to be white. Because I'd say, "Oh, that sounds like so much. I can't... I'll just deal with racism. It's fine." [laughs]

Nicole: Right. [Laughs] That's funny. "I'll take the racism!"

Jennifer: Take the racism so I can sleep for another two hours.

Nicole: Whenever I talk about this book amongst people of color, there're all stories that come out of present-day situations. A friend of mine, she said her mother is Creole and so on her mother's side of the family, I believe there are some cousins who their father was a White man. And so, you know, yada, yada, yada, they're passing as white in 2017 in Illinois. So, it's like, oh, this is not some sort of made-up thing—

Jennifer: Not at all.

Nicole: —yesteryear thing. There are people out there... Rachel Dolezal and her foolishness aside, who are actually actively passing.

[00:39:59]

In the last month and a half, there have been so many stories, like a good three different stories came out. One was in *Rolling Stone*; it was the singer Halsey. She said that she's been essentially passing for years because she looks white. She presents as a White woman. You wouldn't know unless she told you what was going on. So, there was that story. So, she talked about everything that was involved in that. I think it's her father who is an African-American man.

And then there was another story, I wanna say it was *The New York Times*, but I might be wrong. It may have been in *The Root*. And it was about this woman whose mother had been passing and the grandmother before her, I believe, had been passing. But the mother was passing, the woman found out the mother's secret, but the mother said,

“You have to swear to me that you will never tell anybody until I’ve died.” So, this story comes out after the mother passes away, unfortunately. I think she died of breast cancer. This woman was so— what’s the word? Not even “petrified.” That’s not the right word. But she was so, “I cannot live with this truth being out there that I am not what I present to be. I’m not a White woman.” So, this daughter had to carry the burden of this secret around for the rest of the mother’s life and then finally was able to sort of reveal— and I was like, oh my gosh.

So, this is still happening. There are several stories that have yet to be told of people who are passing for something they are not at all— and, I mean, it goes very deep, and, I mean, specifically with the black-white passing and the black-white-biracial-mixed equation. There’s just so many layers to that. It gets very, very deep.

Jennifer: Yeah. I mean, yeah [laughter], there’s a lot. So, October 31 [laughs], *Have You Met Nora?* with Kensington. And then y’all’s need to have book clubs ‘cause—

Nicole: Oh gosh, yes.

Jennifer: —there’s so much to say. [laughs]

Nicole: Yeah! I had, like, a whole— listen, I had discussion questions—

Jennifer: There are. There are discussion questions at the back.

Nicole: Yeah, at the back. So, I have discussion questions that I’m gonna post— once the book is out and it’s been out for a little bit, I’m gonna post them on my website, as well, so that other groups that wanna sort of like get some pointers on, “How can we unpack this?” [Laughs] Here’s some questions. Oh, so I’m available for book clubs. I will Skype in, FaceTime, Google Hangout— I’m there.

Jennifer: Well, tell him how to get in contact with you. How can you reach out to Nicole Blades?

Nicole: You can reach out to me by— my website is nicoleblades.com and there’s a contact form on there. You can also find me on Twitter—@NicoleBlades—and on Instagram, which is my favorite— @nicole_blades. And also on Facebook. My author page is Writer Nicole Blades. And I’m active and out there and I’m talking and I’m trying to, you know, get some buzz going on this book and I’m hoping that there’ll be some really good discussions about race, identity, and who gets to say who they are— all of that stuff. I’m looking forward to having a lot of conversations about that.

Jennifer: Yes. And by the time this episode airs, the book will be out. So, there’s no reason to be all, “Oh, I have to wait.” No, you don’t! [Laughter] Because by the time this episode is out, it will be available in stores. So there.

Nicole: [Laughs] Take that. Thank you so much for having me on here! This has been fun.

Jennifer: Thank you! And, once again, for listeners, this has been the Minorities in Publishing podcast, which you can find at @MinoritiesInPub, minoritiesinpublishing.tumblr.com, and on TuneIn, iTunes, and Google Play. And, again, you can get *Have You Met Nora?* from Kensington Books, in your bookstore, Amazon.com, B&N.com, via Kensington Books, via Nicole's website, all that good stuff, or request it at your indie bookstores.