

A New Author's Voice: L.D. Zane

By Michael Foster

“When you’re up to your ass in alligators, it’s hard for you to remember that your initial attempt was to drain the swamp.” While serving on a submarine during the Vietnam War, L.D. Zane took these words from his captain to mean that one should know every contingency; proper perspective does not exist in the moment. Decades later, far removed from the submarine, Zane recalls these words while reflecting on his past. He thinks of events that, although he did not know it at the time, would end up changing the course of his life. It is these memories that make up much of Zane’s debut book, *It’s Always My Fault & Other Short Stories*, published by Pretzel City Press.

This collection of short stories, many of which were published in various literary magazines and journals, reads like a photo album of Zane’s life brought to the page. The story “Kintsugi,” for example, is Zane’s loving tribute to his father, to whom the anthology is dedicated. He describes his father as “a man of quiet intellect,” epitomized by his ability to complete *The New York Times* Sunday crossword puzzle within an hour, without any outside assistance, despite his lack of a college education. Like most of Zane’s stories, “Kintsugi” embodies his captain’s words by applying sincere reflection to long-past events. While Zane now credits his father with saving him from a ruined life by setting a good example, he was not able to recognize that at the time.

Not every story in *It’s Always My Fault & Other Stories* is an anecdote from Zane’s life. “I Thought Death Would Be Fun” is told from the point of view of a deceased dog. However,

Zane follows the principle “write what you know” and tries to apply elements of his life to everything he writes. He says, “Even when you write a fictional story, if you write about something you don’t know about, people are going to be able to tell.” Zane believes these elements of reality make his stories relatable and, therefore, more interesting.

By making his stories relatable, Zane is casting a wide net in the hopes of landing a large audience. Zane has most certainly been successful at this endeavor so far. A native of southeastern Pennsylvania, Zane’s work has made its way to publications far beyond his backyard. The title story “It’s Always My Fault” was originally printed in the Indian literary magazine *Indian Review*. The publication’s editor noted to Zane that, while aspects of his story were alien to Indian readers, he believed Zane’s writing was relatable enough to cross cultural barriers and speak to their reader base.

A truly unique way Zane uses to more deeply connect to his readers is through the beverage recommendation section that precedes the stories themselves. Described by Zane as “a tongue-in-cheek list of imbibing suggestions for readers,” the beverage list pairs each short story with a drink that Zane feels best suits the story’s mood. For example, the book’s second story, “Driving Lessons,” a tale where the protagonist’s awkward encounter with his mother is interspersed with nostalgia for his father, is paired with Harvey Wallbanger, a cocktail that mixes hard vodka with orange juice and Galliano. Zane asserts that most beverages were personally tested for quality assurance.

“Driving Lessons” is immediately preceded by the title story, in which the protagonist is accosted by police officers over a local arson, and followed by “It Happened Over Coffee...and a Bagel,” about an American Jewish man’s budding friendship with a young Palestinian student. The disparity is intentional. Ordering the stories in the anthology so that a lighter, more upbeat

story follows two difficult ones, was done so that readers would find that the book has a flow that is more readable. Zane and his editor wanted to maximize engagement in the anthology by making it like a playlist. “You can have classical up against hard rock...but it has to flow,” says Zane.

The drink pairings weren't the only aspects of the book that Zane tested: the stories themselves were repeatedly worked on before Zane decided they were ready for publishing. To this end, Zane meets with the Bold Writers Group in the West Reading café that shared its name. Zane felt that it was vital to speak with other writers for critique and feedback. The contrasting personalities of various members of the group allow Zane to better understand what his stories need in order to reach the type of wide audience he desires.

Zane's focused wish for an audience to engage with his work and find it relatable reflects his approach to writing in general. To Zane, finding an audience is a vital part of writing, as he compares writing without getting one's work published to Picasso “leaving his paintings in the basement.” Where does this desire for an audience come from? To Zane, the reason he writes with the aim of connecting with an audience and maximizing its engagement is simple. While he ultimately writes for his own enjoyment, he is also “hoping that people get something out of it.”