



YA Café Podcast

Episode 20: *Zen and Gone*

05 July 2018

- Danielle: [00:02](#) Welcome to the YA Cafe where we share conversations about books for teachers, readers, and caffeine addicts, everywhere. On today's episode we'll be talking about *Zen and Gone* by Emily France. Grab a mug of your favorite beverage, friends, and let's talk books.
- Ad: [00:17](#) This podcast is made possible by Nouvelle ELA Teaching Resources. Find Secondary ELA resources to engage and inspire, like Creative Reading Task Cards. N-o-u-v-e-l-l-e E-L-A, something new.
- Danielle: [00:32](#) Welcome, welcome, welcome. As always, our first segment will be spoiler free and so you can stick around even if you haven't checked out the new novel yet. I'm Danielle Hall, an 8th and 9th grade English teacher and I blog at [teachnouvelle.com](#). I'm joined by Samantha Leidig, a writer, reader and life blogger. Hi Samantha.
- Samantha: [00:32](#) Hi!
- Danielle: [00:52](#) We're so glad to have you here today.
- Samantha: [00:53](#) Thank you for having me.
- Danielle: [00:54](#) So Samantha, I actually got recommended to reach out to you by Courtney, who is in our *Children of Blood and Bone* episode and also Monday's *Not Coming*, and so I feel like we have a little podcast family now.
- Samantha: [01:09](#) We do. We certainly do.
- Danielle: [01:11](#) That's so great. So how do you know Courtney?
- Samantha: [01:13](#) Courtney and I went to college together at Cookman College, now University, and we've remained friends since then. She's the sweetest person ever.
- Danielle: [01:21](#) That is so awesome. We're glad that she gave us your info and we were able to connect. So one of the things that I found out about you after we connected is that you have this huge epic undertaking of a blog, that is so cool. And you blog at [Samleidigdwriter.com](#), and your blog is so honest and open. Where did you find the courage and confidence to share so much of yourself?
- Samantha: [01:46](#) I think my writing is where I'm the most honest. I think, you know, once I get going in writing, on paper or on the computer, I'm able to just kind of put it all out there. And I figured why hide things? Because we're all going through the same situations and if I'm hiding what I'm going through, then how can I help you potentially get through what you're going through? And sometimes it is a little, um, not embarrassing, but I'm looking at myself like, 'really'? Like, 'you, you're going to share all of that', but why not? Because I feel like if the greats

didn't kinda share what their struggles were then we wouldn't even be compelled to take part in literature, whether, you know from the reading side or the writing side,

- Danielle: [02:25](#) That's so awesome. Like, I've often heard creativity compared to an iceberg where you just see the tip of the iceberg, but your blog is like the rest of the iceberg.
- Samantha: [02:35](#) I love that. I'm going to use that . You know, I just got my MFA from Lindenwood University in Missouri, uh, (online totally, because I'm a full time mom) but some of my best work was like the most painful and honest work, and I was like, you know what, that's where I'm going to go with my writing, I'm just gonna like take it to the core. Also, uh, there's a book called Create Dangerously by Edwidge Danticat where she talks about that too. Like, you just have to, like, murder yourself as a writer in order for it to be authentic and good, and I agree with that.
- Danielle: [03:08](#) And you have a published book?
- Samantha: [03:09](#) I do have a published book, it is called Poor Mr Monday and it's a children's book. It focuses on the nuances of every single day, for example, Monday is a monster in the book and everyone strongly dislikes him, for no apparent reason. Just like we treat Monday every single day.
- Danielle: [03:09](#) Awww! Poor Monday.
- Samantha: [03:29](#) Yeah, poor Monday. It started off because when my son Levi was in the NICU I used to tell her about the days of the week, and one day I was like, "okay, today's Sunday, tomorrow's Monday. Everyone hates Monday and it's not Monday's fault. And I like, 'you know what? I have an opinion about that. I'm going to write about it'.
- Danielle: [03:29](#) That's a book. And what are you working on now?
- Samantha: [04:16](#) Oh my gosh, what aren't I working on now? *laughter* So right now I'm working on, I'm working on a book called Two Moms, and I'm kind of taking it from like an essay perspective, just, discussing like what is like to mother a boy with another woman. And a lot of people think that, 'oh that should be easy because you're both nurturing and all of those things', and it's not. Especially because of some of his medical struggles and things like that, just disagreements about breastfeeding and formula and those things, so it's, it's lighthearted but, but there's a lot of truth in it because I want other women to know when they decided to have kids that it's not going to be like this angelic thing just because you're doing it with another woman and you expect her to have the same feelings as you. I'm also working on something called There's No Such Thing As Fiction and it's basically about what some of us would be if we weren't worried about what other people thought. It's loosely autobiographical, very loosely, but it's just, it's about this woman who was in a bad relationship and the relationship is over and she has some friends that are connected in the

underworld, or the darker part of us, and she joins that world and leaves behind her love of literature and food.

- Danielle: [05:00](#) Wow, those sound great! So like, a lot of different things that are happening.
- Samantha: [05:00](#) Yes, yes,
- Danielle: [05:05](#) But we will link to Poor Mr. Monday in the show notes so that our listeners can find that very adorable children's book.
- Samantha: [05:05](#) Thank you.
- Danielle: [05:12](#) Okay, so let's get to Zen and Gone. This was a great read and you picked it, so good job.
- Samantha: [05:12](#) Thank you.
- Danielle: [05:24](#) In Zen and Gone by Emily France we meet sisters, Essa and Puck, who live in boulder, Colorado. Essa's taking the bulk of raising Puck since their mom spends most of her time high. Puck is precocious, vivacious, and mischievous and Essa gets very little time to relax. Her only chance to be herself is her practice at the Zendo and her weekend trips to do orienteering. When a new guy, Oliver moves to town Essa tries to include him, despite what a city slicker he is. Puck stows away on the trip, though, and doesn't emerge until the group is well into the middle of nowhere. Suddenly tragedy strikes and it's a race against the clock for survival. And just a big thank you to Soho Teen who sent us our review copies. Okay, Samantha, what did you think?
- Samantha: [06:05](#) I absolutely adored this book for several reasons. I think that I learned a lot and that's kind of what I'm looking for every time I read a book. Obviously people read for many different reasons, but I'm always looking to find out something new and so whenever I can do that, I'm enthralled. Also. I think that through my years as a teacher, because of the way that schools are set up, sometimes we're introduced to books that are a little hokey. Thankfully it, YA, is going through a type of renaissance. I just read yesterday that YA is like, taking over the entire book market, which is great.
- Danielle: [06:05](#) Yeah!
- Samantha: [06:40](#) Right? Because we need the young people to be reading and I feel like books like Zen and Gone with all its different layers are perfect for those young kids who are, you know what it's like to be a teenager, just trying to figure out who you are. And I think with Essa she feels so saddled down by everything, it's like, 'okay, I have to be a mom of sorts because my mom isn't really playing her part', and then you know, she's navigating the whole love situation, so, it's a great book. I would recommend it to all teenagers and teachers.
- Danielle: [07:10](#) Yeah. I was a little apprehensive going into this book because I had the fear that comes with ignorance. I'm like, 'I don't really know anything about Zen, I don't know how this is going to be. Is the author just going to use this book to make

me know about Zen?' But it's really not that at all. I loved how organic this book was, how it felt like such a true to life story and it also happened to have Zen in it. I was just apprehensive, but needlessly so. This is a great book, and I enjoyed the characters, I enjoyed the setting. This book is set in Boulder, Colorado, which has legalized marijuana. So like you said, Samantha, the mother is high all the time and it's not like the fact that she's high that makes her a bad mother, it's the fact that she's a narcissist that makes her a bad mother

- Samantha: [07:10](#) Yes.
- Danielle: [08:04](#) but she's a narcissist who also likes being high all the time.
- Samantha: [08:09](#) She irked me perpetually through the entire book, and I wanted her to get better. Do you think she got better at the end?
- Danielle: [08:13](#) So I think that she definitely, like, had a wake up call that we can talk more about in the spoiler section, but I do think this is a really good opportunity to ask you, I guess ... Do you find, (because I am obviously a queer woman too) and I feel like I'm a lot harder on mothers, because when I'm a mother it will have been through a lot of effort and not every mother has to have had a lot of effort to be a mother. So I feel like sometimes they squander their opportunities and I'm like "No!".
- Samantha: [08:46](#) Yes. Being a queer woman, and a woman who has reproductive issues, like, just organically, I'm super hard on moms because I'm like 'there are some out here who are either extremely depressed and/or spending tons of money in order to have a baby' and so when you do, like you said, it's like this miraculous thing that you take super seriously because you know how hard it was. On the flip side, I know some people who are very cavalier about it, and I don't know who's doing it right, you know, but being cavalier about being a mom is not my way of doing it.
- Danielle: [09:18](#) Right. But we can also be honest about our biases as readers and I'm definitely biased in that way against moms in fiction.
- Samantha: [09:18](#) Yes.
- Danielle: [09:28](#) I tend to reel it in a lot better with real people, but if they're fictitious I give them all the judge, right? Like ...
- Samantha: [09:28](#) Yes.
- Danielle: [09:36](#) So this book is not a thriller, but it does open 'in media res' with Puck's disappearance from the camping trip. You know, we know from the blurb that eventually Puck will stowaway on this camping trip with them, and the very first chapter is about her disappearance. And so it sort of sets up this, like, 'What happened?', 'Who's guilty?', or 'Is anyone guilty?' or you know, 'The camping trip is going to go poorly', like, 'Be prepared'. What did you think of that structure, Samantha?

- Samantha: [10:11](#) Initially, it was irritating. I'm always looking out for people's sentences, right? And so I loved that first sentence, but then I was like, "Ugh, why would you do that to us?", like, "what happened?". Because the whole time I'm looking for, like, where things go wrong, right? Like, what happens to Puck. But I'm almost glad that it happened that way and I think it was a really good move by the author, because it kind of puts us back, you know, to like *The Odyssey* perhaps and the journey. Because this is a journey for everybody involved, and so just starting out in the middle like that allows us to go through the journey with all of them.
- Danielle: [10:42](#) Oh, it's like Zen.
- Samantha: [10:45](#) It's like Zen. And so I think with our starting 'in media res' like that, it really helps us understand that part because I think adolescence is a journey, obviously, you're learning so many things.
- Danielle: [10:55](#) Yeah, that's true. And this could be another like iceberg/tip of the iceberg situation, because it's almost like that first chapter is just the tip of the iceberg and then the rest of the book, like, shows you all the stuff that got there.
- Samantha: [10:55](#) Absolutely.
- Danielle: [11:11](#) So I did want to kind of circle back to the presence of Zen in this book. I really liked the portrayal of Zen in this book. I really didn't know much about Zen before this book, like, I had read, you know, some stuff in like world religions and things like that, but I feel like it's different reading about a religion versus reading from the perspective of someone who does practice. So I did want to share this quote and it's Essa, meditating, "Sitting Zazen, noticing her thoughts. Not with any sort of goal really, and not to control them, but just to notice them. To witness what a storm they were, what a chaotic swirl of likes and dislikes, judgments and approvals, memories and predictions, desires and disappointments. Trying to arrive in reality, in the moment, breath by breath." And I liked that. I feel that that was a really good window into her world and how she perceived it, and overall, yeah, I just really liked the depiction of Zen in this book.
- Samantha: [12:16](#) So did I. I studied Buddhism, like, a tiny bit when I first started teaching because I was a world history teacher and so I always did like a world religions unit, but this book - maybe because it was from the point of view of a younger person - I think had a great setup for what it actually is. And I love how the author, kind of made Puck the expert. So it's nice that just because she was a little sister, she wasn't like some squirt that didn't know anything.
- Danielle: [12:41](#) Right. She is very precocious and that comes into play later, and then I think that the other thing that we should really come back to before we leave the spoiler free section is Oliver, the dude that comes to town. What did you think of Oliver?
- Samantha: [12:56](#) Have so many mixed emotions and thoughts about Oliver. When he first came, I really liked him because he just seemed really innocent, and although he was

resistant to being in Boulder because it was so different from living in Chicago once he saw so he was receptive to the whole deal.

- Danielle: [12:56](#) It was insta-love.
- Samantha: [13:16](#) Insta-love, which is the cutest. And so I came to like him. I didn't like everything he had to say about his sister and her experiences, but I think it just was a good contrast for how like, Essa is so mature is so mature, Puck is so mature, and Oliver? No, Oliver was not mature. And I think it was a good reminder that even though as you are becoming a young adult, you still, are not an adult and you have some thoughts that aren't adult like, and that was refreshing because I think sometimes we go a little too fast with these kids and we have to remember they're still kids.
- Danielle: [13:50](#) Right, I agree. He, uh, he was an interesting perspective to add to the mix and especially because she was so prematurely grown up in having to care for her sister and Oliver very much still had people caring for him. And with that we'll take our first break and when we come back we'll share about things. We like a Latte, then we'll return to our discussion of Zen and Gone and dig a little deeper.
- Ad: [14:31](#) Hello listeners. Are you sitting there thinking, 'Gee, this is a great podcast and I want to help them be a podcast for forever'? I know me too. Here's how you can do it. You can go and you can preorder our book for next week, which is I'm Not Missing by Carrie Fountain. Your preorder not only helps the author by contributing to their first week of sales, we always want those to be amazing, but if you order with our Amazon affiliate link in the show notes, we get a small kick back. It doesn't affect your price at all and everybody wins. So if you liked this podcast, please preorder. I'm Not Missing by Carrie Fountain in stores July 10th and on our podcast next week. Happy reading.
- Danielle: [15:18](#) Welcome back, y'all. It's time for the Things We Like a Latte. Samantha, what's your brew of choice this week?
- Samantha: [15:21](#) This week I am into Dunkin Donuts, cinnamon roll coffee. But, uh, my son was born 14 weeks early and so I have been doing everything I can to make sure that he is developmentally sound. Any is. Um, but one of the main things that I do is find toys that focus on brain building and right now we are in a time where everything has to be STEM related. And so one of the Things I Like Latte is all the new STEM toys that have come out, whether it's wooden blocks with magnets or just magnet shapes that he can use to build different things. That's really cool. I have to get me some kid toys. And how about you Danielle?
- Danielle: [16:02](#) Well Samantha, after reading this book Zen and Gone I realized that I too could benefit from some meditation in my life. So I downloaded an APP, it's called Stop, Breathe and Think. And it's really cool. It has very short kind of meditative exercises. Anyone can make five minutes happen, right? And they have a push notification that you can ask to have go off everyday at a certain time. And I just love the push notification because it's like, 'Hey, here's the reminder you asked for!' and it's not like 'meditate, nerd, meditate'. It's like (*imitates soft voice*),

you know, if you want to, like we're here for you. And I really like it. We're going to take a quick break and when we come back we'll return to our discussion of Zen and Gone. The rest of the show may contain spoilers, so if you're leaving us here, keep in touch on Instagram and Twitter @yacafepodcast. We'll be back.

- Danielle: [17:17](#) Welcome back to the YA Cafe. We're continuing our discussion on Zen and Gone by Emily friends. If you haven't read this yet, we want to warn you again that this segment will contain spoilers. Alright, I'm ready to talk about my main conundrum. It's not really a gripe. I don't know where I come down on it, but my main big question mark after reading this book is about Oliver and his sister.
- Samantha: [17:44](#) Yes. I, I share the same views as you, especially because it took so long to get to what the actual problem with.
- Danielle: [17:53](#) Right. So we do discover, you know, Oliver has come to Boulder under a cloud of mystery and won't tell us why and if my wife were here, she would be like, 'I hate characters that keep secrets from the readers!', but that's Oliver. He's keeping a secret from us and all the first big secret, his big peril in his life, is that his sister, not him - His sister has schizophrenia,
- Samantha: [18:21](#) but bigger than that, more annoying and the fact that he was like, oh woe is me, because his sister with schizophrenia is that he said those mean things to her, made her hurt herself.
- Danielle: [18:33](#) Okay. Let's take a couple of these things apart. So here is Oliver's perspective on his sister. (book quote) "Schizophrenia. It would be better sometimes and then it would be worse and it would tumble over and over itself like that. Most likely for the rest of her life. It was a thing to be managed to be suffered to be endured. There would be bright spots. There would be life for her, but it would never be constant. It would never stand still." And I think Oliver has empathy for his sister or maybe he will when he matures a little bit.
- Samantha: [19:08](#) Yeah, I think he has empathy for her. I think he just, it's like he sees her, her illness as something that spills over onto him, which is an interesting parallel between like Essa in her mother's, you know, excessive weed, smoking and narcissism tumbling down on her. So the point where she doesn't even want to date, like a normal teenage girl.
- Danielle: [19:29](#) That's a good point. I think that makes a lot of sense. The point that I like stopped was, well, I don't need to read another main character who is affected by mental illness. What I really need is like a main character who is dealing with mental illness firsthand so that I could, you know, push myself even further in empathizing and understanding mental illness versus empathizing and understanding someone who is learning to empathize and understand mental illness. Right? Yes. But I mean I'm glad that we have this representation. I just wish it were even closer to us. I agree. And one of the things that this leads nicely into is that after Puck disappears, which we know is going to happen from the jump as it gets this really valuable lesson in self care. Yes. And what did you think about that? How Essa is like dealing with Puck's disappearance?

- Samantha: [20:30](#) I was shocked and I don't know why because at some point, obviously they had to leave the area where they were when everything happened, but I was a little shocked that they all left there and kind of started living life. But I was also happy about that because she was totally down by her role, the role she played in her family, which I can identify with. Um, I remember like not taking the appropriate bus homes that I can go hang out with my friends instead of going home to take care of my little sister because I was kind of tired of that. And I think, um, even though Essa was really hurt by everything, once they learn that, oh, she's dead because a mountain lion ripped up her clothes. Like she kind of decided, hey, you know what, that is what it is and I have to accept that and I'm going to do for myself now and focus on myself instead of trying to like be someone's mom. And so that was an interesting lesson. Especially, I feel like in today's world where anytime you turn the TV on, it's like, oh, this person is dead. Oh, the kids are missing and they're not going to be reunited with their families. Those types of issues I believe whether we want to accept it or not find their way into our psyches and can hurt us and so self care is essential and so learns that the hard way.
- Danielle: [21:42](#) Yeah, and we talked about self care and our episode on How I Resist and just like how self care has to come first and so it gets that lesson obviously through this firsthand experience of her sister being gone and then thinking that her sister is dead and she goes to the Zen priest and he says, (book quote) "a teacher of mine used to say that sitting was the only way to truly calm your heart in times of trouble. Even if your crop fails, sit. Even if you are ill, sit. Even if a child is ill or gone, sit." And I think that that idea of sitting as self care is really truly powerful. And then of course we have the ending where Puck isn't dead - thoughts?
- Samantha: [22:32](#) Okay. Well I have a question for you. Did you know Puck wasn't dead? because I feel like I knew she wasn't dead
- Danielle: [22:38](#) so that's a tough one because we have read other books with missing children and they don't end happily. So I was like emotionally steeling myself for this not to end happily. So I guess in that sense I was prepared for her to actually be dead. But you didn't think she was so like why not?
- Samantha: [22:59](#) I feel like I knew wasn't dead based on her role in this story. I feel like it's, her role would have been a little smaller than. It would've been easier to believe that the author was just going to do away with her. But I believe since she was a source of so much power and knowledge, just kind of the catalyst for other characters behavior that why would we just kill her off as what I thought. And also she was so smart. Like I knew she had to figure it out. So one of the other things I want to highlight that I really enjoyed and appreciated from the author was like a sort of girl power kind of narrative. Like you have Puck who's this tiny little genius, you've got Essa who is determined to like make sure that she takes care of her family even though the woman who has that job is not taking it that seriously. And she even goes so far as to say, you know, what, like I don't date because I don't want to take away time from my little sister because I want to give her the best. Whereas most times, like in these YA novels, the girls are all boy crazy or girl crazy and you know, they're not really focused on their studies

or their jobs or even themselves. It's just like who can I date, who can I hook up with? And so this is such a refreshing perspective and I love it.]

- Danielle: [24:11](#) I really liked that too. And I guess I'm being hard on the stuff that tripped me up. But overall I really liked this book. I had been reading it, I learned some stuff and I got a new meditation APP.
- Samantha: [24:23](#) Yeah. As you said, there was a lot of room here for that organic learning experience about Zen and just going into it, if you, you know, like you said, you had the idea and maybe this was a book about Zen. I just kind of started with other things. It was the other way around. It was a natural story. Everything about Buddhism and Zen was just Kinda, you know, tucked in in a way that was easy for the reader to take in an enjoyable.
- Danielle: [24:47](#) Yeah, completely agree. Definitely recommend it. That's our show for today. Friends. Thank you so much for joining me, Samantha.
- Samantha: [24:55](#) Thank you for having me. I loved this. This was really fun.
- Danielle: [24:58](#) You can find Samantha and Instagram @samleidigwriter or at her blog at samleidigwriter.com. You can find us on Instagram and Twitter @yacafepodcast. We'd love to hear from you and if you're enjoying the show, why not leave us a review in iTunes? Happy reading!