



ALL NEW EPISODE



## Book Gang Podcast Transcript: What Jeff Zentner Brings to the Romance World (Colton Gentry's Third Act)

Jeff Zentner (00:00.11)

Hi, my name is Jeff Zentner. I'm an author. I live in Nashville, Tennessee. I've written four books for young adults, and I'm really excited to talk about my debut for the grown-up market. I always hesitate to say adult market because that makes it sound like something off the interstate. But my debut for the grown-up market called *Colton Gentry's Third Act*.

Amy Clark (00:30.638)

Hey, Book Gang! I'm so excited to celebrate one of my favorite writers and favorite romance tropes all in one fell swoop. Celebrated young adult novelist Jeff

Zentner returns to our space to discuss his transition from writing young adult books to his surprising new debut romance release called Colton Gentry's Third Act. We discuss the critical differences between writing for adults and young adults, the romantic book that inspired Jeff's plot, and the feedback.

Emily Henry provided to shape his romance scene. If you're new here, hi, I'm Amy Allen Clark and I'm the voice behind the Book Gang podcast. This podcast celebrates debuts, backlist books, and under -the -radar book gems. When we tackle a romance trope, I always like to set readers up for what to expect within the pages and to give you a good starter pack to deepen your connection to these books. The second chance romance is hands down my absolute favorite.

I know we have lots of listeners who are more new to romance and I remember being just a little bewildered by the sheer number of trope explorations that can happen in a single book. Tropes basically, offer familiar narrative elements that essentially give readers a shorthand way to tell whether a book is for you or to offer a book recommendation to someone else. If you say fake dating, for example, I know I'm in, but for some people, they may say "fake dating." Absolutely not.

So some examples that you could experience include that trope as well as enemies to lovers, forced proximity, forbidden love, and so much more.

But in second chance romance, the characters have a history together. Whether they're former lovers, their childhood sweethearts, or even estranged spouses, they're brought back together to rekindle their relationship after time apart or heal from past misunderstandings. Whether they're facing obstacles from the

past mistakes or external forces, the central theme is just overcoming challenges to find their happily ever after again.

To support today's show, I have a huge brand new book list of second-chance romances for your summer that includes some of my favorite new and upcoming releases, as well as some familiar second-chance romances that every girl should be reading. Is this my summer of Persuasion by Jane Austen, the OG of second chances? I think it really needs to be. Basically my idea behind doing these book lists, is that you can browse around while you're tuning into our show and create your own perfect stack that celebrates whatever theme we're talking about. As we work through our summer series authors, you're gonna be able to really immerse yourself in their books and hopefully just get in some early library loans by seeing what's upcoming in the months ahead.

Now commercial free conversations like these are only made possible because of my generous Patreon supporters. I'm so grateful for all that you do here, I would not exist in this space without you. I would love to still be here sharing these podcasts and book lists, but I am going to be honest, the internet is a little topsy-turvy. It's upside down right now. You may have seen it even in your search engines, in your social media, the ways that we are searching and receiving information has definitely changed. There are so many overhead costs to executing this. It's just been a lot for me, for my family. So if you would miss this podcast, if it was gone, I would just ask that you might consider joining our Patreon.

I keep it super affordable. It's only \$5 a month and that also gives you access to the book club. Don't forget that tonight is actually book club night too to discuss Vicious by V.E. Schwab at 8 p.m. Eastern time. But this is a great time to join because we're going to be starting a brand new book for next month.

**Amy Clark (04:17.774)**

**Colton Gentry's *Third Act* offers readers an emotional romance featuring Colton Gentry, a country music star who's been banished from the industry due to a controversial statement he drunkenly made on the microphone at a music festival. Returning home becomes fruitful though when he stumbles upon his high school sweetheart's farm-to-table restaurant. As Colton navigates sobriety and rejection, he finds a new life at the restaurant and a rekindled love affair with Luanne.**

**If *Friday Night Lights* meets *Normal People* sounds like the perfect match, this second-chance romance just might be for you.**

**Before becoming a writer, Jeff Centner was a musician who recorded with Iggy Pop, Nick Cave, and Debbie Harry. He is the author of *New York Times*' Notable books, *The Serpent King* and *In the Wild Light*, as well as *Goodbye Days*, *Rainy* and *Delilah's Midnight Matinee*, and a YA novel and verse that's upcoming in July, *I believe*, which is *Sunrise Nights*, co-authored with Brittany Cavallaro.**

**Among other honors, he has won the ALA's William C. Morris Award, the Amelia Elizabeth Walden Award twice, the Muriel Becker Award, the International Literacy Association Award, and he's been long listed twice for the Carnegie Medal. His books have been translated into 15 languages. If you want to dive into all of Jeff's backlist books, you can visit our author landing page where we've listed what to expect with every single novel. Don't forget if you love this show of very easy and free way to support my work is just to leave a review on iTunes, especially those written ones. It goes so far. I really, really appreciate it. Now let's get chatting. First of all, I don't feel like I need to do a lot of setup for Jeff Centner**

because you have quite the fan base in our community. That is no secret. I had shared with people that you were going to be on the show and everyone was ecstatic about it.

#### TRANSITION MUSIC TO WELCOME JEFF ZENTNER

So you don't have to pitch yourself too hard here. Most of the listeners are familiar with your great young adult work. I have to say thank you because you visited my daughter's school. She was the editor of the school paper and you got to come to South Bend, Indiana and hang out. And we were so excited that you were visiting our school. I know you've been on a big, big school tour. How has that been? What have you learned about Gen Z that we should know about?

Jeff Zentner (06:36.078)

And well, it's been a lot of fun. I think the most surprising thing I've learned about Gen Z is their taste in television, which is not at all what I would expect. Something I do frequently is I'll have a lunch with the students and I'll just sit down around the table with like 15, 20 students. And that's always kind of my opportunity to pick their brains. So they asked me questions about being a writer and I asked them questions about growing up in the year 2024 in a very different world than I grew up in. And so I'll ask them, you know, you've got access to all this media, all this television. I'll ask them, you know, what TV shows you watching?

They'll be like, well, Grey's Anatomy, Suits, Law and Order, Friends. And I'm like, there was just there was there was this really funny one in New Jersey. And this kid was just like rattling off all my parents favorite shows. I was like,

Brother, you and my parents need to get together and watch some TV together. You would have a great time. My mom would pop you some popcorn. Y'all would just sit on the couch together and you guys have the exact same favorite shows. So that was that was very surprising to me. It has been very surprising to me to see their tastes in media.

Amy Allen Clark

Yeah, my daughter and I have been on a Grey's Anatomy kick. I think we're in season four and she did Gilmore Girls as well.

And I would say speaking to Gen Z is that they had such a disruptive time during the pandemic that I think they just crave that cozy sitcom vibe the way that I was craving like cozy romances. Like I just want everything to work out, right? And even if it doesn't work out, they're like, there'll be another episode and I can come back to it. But I never acknowledged that a lot of romance tropes happened in Grey's Anatomy. And I think now that I'm reading them,

I can see like, oh, there's the love triangle and like all these different things are happening. And I'm like, I get it now. I get why this is so cozy and comforting to her. And we talk a lot about sitcoms and we're always looking for our next show and it is those older shows. So I love it. That's some insight that you can give us into Gen Z. Oh, absolutely. Well, I also want to talk about your schooling. I feel like we have to acknowledge that you got a degree.

Amy Clark (08:52.366)

I have been barely functioning in my daily life and somehow you're cranking out books, doing tours for schools, also got a master's degree. How did you do this? How are you balancing your time? What are we doing wrong in our daily life?

Jeff Zentner

Well, I don't know that you're doing anything wrong. I did get a master's degree in information science. I work a day job for the state of Tennessee. So I work for Tennessee State Parks and I train state park rangers and I read contracts for them. I'm an attorney for the state.

system. And so I get free schooling through the University of Tennessee system. And I'm not one to leave free things on the table. I'll take a free t -shirt. I'll take free pizza. And I will take a free master's degree. I'm not going to walk away from a \$25 ,000 benefit just because it'll entail a little work. So I only did one class a semester. And I really kind of took it easy. I gave myself permission not to spend too much time on homework.

But I just, you know, I do homework in front of the television and I'd multitask and yeah, really, I don't know how I found the time. I have an amazing wife who helps me out with things. We just have one kid who's really easy and low maintenance. So that certainly helped. And we've just tried to keep our life simple and say no to things that are time consuming and that don't make us happy. So I think that's part of the secret. And a lot of it is just really, taking advantage of every minute. So if I know I'm gonna be folding laundry or putting dishes away, I pop in the headphones and I'll listen to 15 minutes of an audiobook at 2 .2 speed. So that's bam, 30 minutes of reading I've just cranked out while I was doing household tasks. And that's 30 minutes I then have to spend working on a

manuscript or working on homework for a master's degree. Yeah, and if you haven't been following Jeff Centner's journey,

some of the books were written on a transit commute on your phone. And that speaks to the way that your brain works, right? That you are thinking about how you can make the most of every minute of the day. Some people are just sitting zoning out or watching, you know, social media and you use that opportunity even on a commute to get a book out into the world. So I love how your brain works. I want to talk about this next book. You floored me.

Amy Clark (11:17.198)

First of all, I just want to say when I got the book, I did not know it was a romance. This shocked me. The idea that you were writing for adults, I was really excited about, but I didn't know it was a romance. So I want people to hear a little bit if you could give us an elevator pitch about what this book is all about for readers.

Jeff Zentner

Okay, well, so this book, all of my books kind of correspond to pop cultural properties that I love. And I conceived of this book as... Friday Night Lights meets Normal People, which are two pop cultural properties, book, TV, you know, that I absolutely loved and that just really got under my skin and I couldn't stop thinking of them. So I wanted to do my own take on those stories.

And as The Bear. The show The Bear came out after, you know, I had basically finished the manuscript, but I throw that in there too now because I absolutely love that show as well.



So all of those things kind of combined to make me want to write this adult love story that involves kind of coming home, that involves redemption, that involves new beginnings late in life. I mean, you know, there were many times when I was getting my master's degree, when I was going, you are 45 years old and you're doing homework on a Saturday night.

What on Earth is going on in your head? I even named one of my, I had to do a blog for one of my homework assignments and I named it, "45 and still doing homework," which my professor, by the way, most of my professors were younger than me, got a real kick out of. And I hope I'm answering the question. Sometimes I get talking and I forget the original question. I'm like, oh no, where am I now?

Amy Allen Clark

I'm here, I'm with you. Go wherever you go. So it's a second chance romance for our listeners. And it's about coming home and coming back to your small town, which I know resonates with a lot of our readers. I want to hear a little bit about the process of writing for adults versus young adults. Obviously, language. I'm imagining you have a little bit more freedom with the language that you use. There is some spice, although I would say that this is not like door hanging off the bedroom kind of spice, but there is spice in it, which I would imagine takes a different kind of skill set. So how did you approach this differently than your young adult writing?

Jeff Zentner

Well, first of all, from the standpoint of trying to bring as much sophistication and emotional intelligence and intelligence of every kind to the page as I possibly could, I didn't do anything different. When I write for teenagers, I go all out, pedal to the metal.

I am not capable of writing a book that is too sophisticated in any way for a teenager. Emotionally, you know, in terms of my sentence choice, my word choice, I do not have a special vocabulary that I reserve for adults that I keep in a little velvet lined box and pull out for adults. So from that standpoint, no difference whatsoever. The only difference is the age of the protagonist, the age of the main characters, the viewpoint and how it is marketed by my publishers. So really nothing different. Even in terms of language, there is not significantly more or even more profanity in my adult book than there is in my YA books. In fact, there may even be less in Colton Gentry.

In terms of spice, yeah, that is true. I am not a spicy YA writer. Part of that is because I write all of my YA's deal with Southern kids. Three of them deal with rural Southern kids. And I want rural Southern kids to have access to my books. And even before the book-banning craze kind of became very prominent and nationwide, it's always been going on in the South. And I wanted kids in the South to have access to my books. And so I very carefully chose the hills that I would die on. And one of the hills that I decided not to die on is having very much sex at all in my YA books. I mean, there's essentially none. There's no drug use, no, none of that. Those are not the heels I wanted to die on in YA. In adult, I had a little, little more freedom in that regard, but you know, I still recognized that, uh, that, that I've got a core audience from YA. And so I didn't want to make it too spicy in terms of, in terms of writing the spice. I definitely got basically all of my best friends who are writers are women. And so I got them to read that.

Emily Henry was one of my readers. Stephanie Perkins is one of my readers. So I'm kind of friends with the queen of adult rom -coms and the queen of YA rom -coms. I'm going to use those resources. And so I got them to read it and tell me,

hey, does this read like it was written by a dude, by a creepy dude? And they would, you know help me out to get that right. So that was how that worked.

Amy Allen Clark

Yeah, Emily Henry must be sprinkling around a lot of fairy dust because I just got done recording with Kennedy Ryan and she was the first person to let Kennedy Ryan know she was on the New York Times bestseller list for her romance. So she is definitely helping a lot of people out and she talked about that being one of her favorite memories. I like that you have that kind of circle that you can tap into because not every writer has that and that really enhances the story when you have someone else reading it for you.

I want to talk about your opening of your book because this starts the whole process of him starting over.

So why did you choose that and how did you want to embed some of your musical background into the storyline of this book?

Jeff Zentner

So of course, when we begin the story, Colton Gentry is a somewhat successful country musician. His career has had peaks and valleys as many country stars do. For example, Luke Bryan is huge now, but he started getting big like 20 years ago and kind of had a little bit of a bump, but then kind of went away for a while and then got big again. And that's something that will happen in country music in a way that doesn't happen really in other genres of music. You can be in your late 30s and 40s and have just been getting big in country music in a way you can't in pop music, like Jelly Roll, big country musician on the airwaves. I think he had his big hit when he was 38. So to me, that's a really interesting space to be almost at

the cusp of middle age and just starting to experience some artistic success, which mirrors my own journey, where I left music to start writing books. And then here I am at age 45, having way more artistic success than I had as a 25 year old, which is a really strange inversion in a lot of ways.

So we begin the book with Colton as a country musician. He is having a resurgence. All right. He is he a few years before he got married to Maisie Martin, this fictional kind of big country artist. She's on the cusp of moving over to pop music, making sort of a Taylor Swift, Maren Morris sort of move. She's an amalgamation of a lot of different country artist.

She's kind of Carrie Underwood meets Taylor Swift meets Maren Morris kind of character. So she's way bigger than Colton and she's been able to use her connections to get him on this big tour opening for this huge fictional country artist named Brant Lucas. And a few weeks before where our story begins, Colton's best friend Dwayne is killed in a mass shooting at a country music festival which unfortunately we know happens in our country.

And so Colton went on Fox News and made some comments about, you know, hey, we need to have a conversation about guns in this country. He didn't call for a gun ban or anything, but it was enough to get hecklers starting to show up at his shows to heckle his performances. So we begin the book with some hecklers heckling him as he's on stage and he is drunk. He's an alcoholic and he's been using alcohol to try to overcome his grief over his friend's death and his wife is in the tabloids with rumors of infidelity. And so he tells off some hecklers in a fairly profane way that immediately gets him canceled from country music. I mean, it's like Dixie Chicks times 20. I mean, he's just done, gone.

And the problem is, because he was so clearly drunk, when he went off on this rant, he's not really being held up as a hero either pop culturally because he's too unreliable a hero. So he really has no place to go. And so with his life in shambles, his career gone, you know, going broke, he moves back home. So as far as my musical journey, I really kind of began from the premise of what a rare and delicate thing it is to be just on the cusp of success as a 38-year-old musician because I know how difficult and rare that would be and so I knew what a precarious position I was placing Colton in right at the outset of the book.

Amy Allen Clark

Yeah, and it really worked and speaking to the element with, you know, the gun rights aspect for book clubs, I would say that that isn't throughout the whole book, right? This is not a theme that you're going to encounter throughout the whole book, even though this is how the book starts. It starts with a bang. And then it develops into a lot of different ways that book clubs can really open up a thoughtful conversation around how that impacted him personally, how that changed the trajectory of his life.

You really wanted to create, which I think what you do so well when it comes to both young adult stories and this story is that it's a way to begin conversations in a loving and warm environment.

Jeff Zentner

Yeah, it is not a preachy book. It is not a didactic book. You know, I am a gun owner. I'm a southern man. I train Tennessee State Park Rangers. You know, I'm personally a gun owner. Colton is canonically in the book.

not only a gun owner, but a hunter. We see that hunting, duck hunting with Dwayne was one of the ways he bonded with his friend. So there is certainly some nuance in there.

And there are conversations about it at one point in the book where I really tried to look at people's humanity, look at the complexity of the issue and really take a fair-minded approach to it, take a fair-minded look at the issue, but I would not call it an issue book.

In fact, I've seen some early reviewers disappointed that it turned out not to be an issue book. They were like, oh, I wanted him to talk more about the whole guns thing. It's just not really about that. It is about rebuilding. It is about redemption. It is about can you start again? Are there second acts in life? Are there third acts in life? That's what the book is really about. But I thought it would be interesting to show that in the context of a precipitous fall from grace for an artist. And unfortunately, a lot of the ways that artists precipitously fall from grace are in kind of gross ways, you know, me too sort of ways. And I was not going to, you know, try to ask the reader to sympathize with somebody who loses his career for that reason. But I thought I could get away with asking a reader to sympathize with the character who loses his career in the way that Colton does.

Amy Allen Clark (23:09.262)

What was important to capture regarding the sobriety journey for Colton? Because part of the reason why he gets in this trouble, right, is that he has been drinking and he's unfiltered on the microphone. Was there any inspiration that you had for that journey and how did you want to capture it with also, again, with warmth and care for people who are navigating addiction and recovery?

**Jeff Zentner**

**Yeah, so this is not a journey that, that, thank God I have been on personally. I have seen this journey though. I used to work for a county substance abuse services agency. So one of my jobs was to inform the public about the disease of addiction, the science of addiction, treatment options available to people who are struggling with addiction. So I really got to see this from the outside and I wanted to show it as a very human journey. People are more than their addiction, right?**

**I didn't want that to be the defining characteristic of his personality, but at the same time, it is omnipresent and it does require constant vigilance and constant work. And it requires a loving and supporting community. And I needed to show all of those things in the book, I thought, to depict it fairly and accurately.**

**Amy Allen Clark**

**I thought you did a great job with that element and I really loved the food scene that you were trying to create. I feel like maybe this was a passion project. My husband might call it my hyperfixation. I could tell that you genuinely were feeling immersed by it. You had so many Southern profiles like with flavor and like trying to do dish pairings with drinks and the food boards that had to go up for the restaurant and the restaurant scene itself.**

**And I definitely felt enveloped in that scene. So I'd love to hear, first of all, are you someone who cooks at home? I'm going to assume yes. And what was it about the Southern food scene that attracted you to it and what you wanted to capture in those scenes?**

**Jeff Zentner**

So first of all, I love cooking. I'm a big fan of cooking. In fact, there was a hot minute there where as I was looking at transitioning out of music because I was a musician for kind of all my 20s into my mid 30s before I finally grasped that it was not going to happen. There was a hot minute there where I thought my next creative move would be into cooking. This was right around the, you know, kind of the 2007 to 2014. The Food Network was having an ascendancy. You had all these shows like Chopped and things like that foodie culture was really kind of booming. So I was thinking a lot about food.

I was getting into food. I discovered a talent for cooking. I started collecting vintage cast iron, cooking implements, skillets and such. It actually created one of the funniest stories with my son. He would have been three years old. And my wife said to me, no more vintage cast iron, because it's hard to store vintage cast iron. You can't just...pile it up in a drawer, you gotta be careful with it. She said, I love you, but no more vintage cast iron. I said, okay. So that night we had that conversation. I took my son to go walk around the mall. We liked to go on walks together and it was kind of a cold rainy night and he liked to get little pretzels from the Aunt Annie's. And so we're walking around this mall and I dip into the Williams Sonoma and I'm looking at the Lake Crusay pans and skillets.

And my son goes, Daddy, you can't buy a new pan, I promise. So he had been listening to me getting in trouble over the cast. And I said, you know what, kiddo, you're right. I can't buy a new pan. Thank you for saving my life.

But I was reading a lot of chef memoirs. I was reading Kitchen Confidential, Blood, Bones and Butter. I read the book Sweetbitter, which I really love. And all of that was just really getting me interested in food, interested in cooking. I started I subscribed to Garden & Gunn Magazine. I started watching this really



lovely show on PBS called A Chef's Life with Vivian Howard. So just all of that, I was so interested in food and cooking. And then I got into writing and I discovered that I kind of had a knack for that. And so that kind of made the cooking go by the wayside. That is one of the things I had to sacrifice was I don't get to cook as much now as I would like to. However, I said, you know what, maybe I can incorporate a little cooking into the books.

So in *In the Wild Light*, I incorporated a minor character, but a chef character. So she is canonically a James Beard nominee. She had a restaurant. She's doing this amazing menu for a Thanksgiving feast in *In the Wild Light*. And as sometimes happens in my books, I will get to touch on a topic, but I won't get to get my fill of it. I want to go back to the buffet for another plate. And I said, you know what? This is an opportunity to go back to the buffet and really write a chef character and really create my own restaurant and really create menus and and and all that fun stuff and really make people hungry.

You know, I joke that you are you are free to hate this book. You are free to not like this book. But do not tell me that the food in this book sounds bad because it doesn't. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. The food in this book sounds delicious. I don't care who you are.

Hate the book, do not hate on the food in this book. I implore you.

Amy Allen Clark

I love that. Well, first of all, whenever I do these shows, I always find the most random thing I have in common with people. And today's random thing that Jeff and I share is that I treated cast iron like I was like, it's like how people go to animal shelters and they seek out animals to care for and like rehab. I did that.

goodwill, I would bring home vintage cast iron. It would be the rustiest, most disgusting cast iron skillet. I have one that is vintage that I restored. There is a process. It is an oiling. It is a baking. It is a restoring it back and getting it back to shiny new. That was such a thing for me. I also was a food addict. I started in food blogging and Rachel Ray, her show was like, really big back then. And she is how I learned how to cook. I am so grateful to Food Network for making that a thing because I had no idea how to cook and I would just watch and be a sponge for Food Network. But the fact that you and I share a rehab capacity for cast iron is the most random thing that I can latch onto right now.

Jeff Zentner

It's so beautiful. And the thing is you can restore it so well.

I mean, the two cast my two main cast iron skillets, one is from the 1940s and one is from the 1950s. And they are pristine because they're so indestructible. And you can just chew off that that layer of rust. You can you can scour that all off and you will be left with with this gray cast iron skillet that looks like it rolled off the assembly line last week in some American factory. And then you get that thing seasoned up where it looks like a black mirror. Oh, it's BEAUTIFUL. There's nothing better. There's nothing better.

It's funny that you mentioned shelter animals, though, because I do have to say there is a shelter dog in this book. And when Colton gets him, Colton's in pretty bad shape in his life. And so he goes into the shelter and he asks for the dog that is in the worst shape of the whole shelter, the one that is, you know, nobody wants. And so they give him this dog that nobody wants. And because.

of my history writing books and my readers know what to expect from me. There are two footnotes in the book assuring my readers that that dog will not die in the book. Cause that'd be a real easy way to go to make Colton's life even worse is kill that dog. But no, that dog does not die in that book. And in case you don't believe me, there are two footnotes to that effect.

Amy Allen Clark

And I will say people will one star your book if you kill your animal. I have seen it happen. It is actually a very smart marketing move to let everyone know in the footnotes, but this is not going to go awry. I think people expect that sometimes, especially when you have that kind of scenario coming into it. And I am someone who also picks the neediest animal. And we're still working on our exact anxiety issues, which I'm like, of course we pick the animal with the bed over her head scared, all her hair falling out.

We were like, she's so cute. And now she's got major anxiety problems. And we're like, we knew, we knew there was going to be problems. It's like, I needed something like that. It's kind of a little bit like my cast iron skill. Like what is the worst like rusty cast iron skillet? I think that I have the capabilities to bring it back to life again. So I get it.

Well, you know, I know that this is for adults, but part of the story is obviously their young adult relationship. Did it feel familiar then for half of your book to be writing in that space? Did it help that hurdle as you move into adult writing?

Jeff Zentner

It really did. It's funny because in my debut, *Young Adult*, I wrote a story about a musician. And so I kind of had my foot in the music scene a little bit as I made

this transition into writing. And then I did it again with this book where I kept a little foot in Young Adult while I wrote this story. So the story moves in in alternating timelines where.

You see 2015 where the present action is taking place. And then you see 1995 and 1996, which is kind of where the first phase of our relationship happens. And that happens to be exactly, you know, when I was around Colton's age and when I was experiencing love for the first time and those sorts of things. Now, I will say it was intimidating writing my own childhood because I didn't trust my memories of it. I'd be texting other author friends who grew up around the same time as me and I'll be like, Hey, did we used to say posted up like I was posted up at this party? We used to say that. Did you used to say like a mug at stuff? Did you say, you know, he was chilling like a mug at the, you know, whatever. I could not remember. I was like, so mistrustful of my memories of 1995 and 1996.

Amy Allen Clark

Yeah, I would be the same way. I married my high school sweetheart, so we have similar memories. And it's funny because some of them are not the same memories. Or like, I remember things in a very different way. And so I would absolutely have to do the same thing, like bounce those ideas off. I have in my storage, I've been thinking about getting it out my Lisa Frank scrapbook from high school, I think it would be highly informative to kind of browse through. I kept every letter, every correspondence, everyone's photo.

I kept the most random things and they're all stored in this. And I feel like I need to go back there and like revisit my old self and see like, is it the way I imagined or is it a completely different version of myself?

**Jeff Zentner**

**Absolutely. And the biggest jeans you can find from when you were a high schooler to give to your kids, the biggest pants. Yes, totally. It's all coming back, guys. It's all coming back. I know.**

**Amy Allen Clark**

**Well, I want to speak to you because I did talk with Kennedy Ryan about her fandom and you have a fandom. Part of that has to do with tattoos and people getting tattoos and people honoring your work. What has surprised you about the ways that people are finding different aspects of your story embedded into their own lives, whether that is getting inked with something from your book or -other ways that they celebrate your books, especially with your young adult readers. I think it's really interesting when people have fandoms and how that all plays out for them.**

**Jeff Zentner**

**Well, it's funny you mentioned that specific example, because I believe if all goes according to schedule, I believe there's somebody right at this moment getting a quote from the Serpent King inked on their arm. She posted a picture of it yesterday. She said, I have the tattoo appointment today. So she got her tattoo appointment. There is somebody getting a line from one of my books tattooed on their arm right this minute.**

**I've always written misfits, you know, the outcasts. And what was funny with Colton, Colton is not a misfit for much of his life. He is high school football star, quarterback, big man on campus, popular, prom king, homecoming king, all of that stuff. And then a football injury ends his football career, but he goes from that to country music where he becomes at least a minor country music star. So**

this is a guy who is he is charming. He's handsome. He fits in actually pretty well in the kitchen because he is one of those guys that everybody likes. He is a leader, but he also becomes an outcast relative to country music because of that issue. So I write a lot of outcasts. I write a lot of misfits. My heart is with the misfits and the outcast.

And I find that a lot of my readership responds really powerfully to that. Maybe they were misfits, maybe they were outcasts, or maybe just their heart is with the misfits and the outcasts fundamentally. And that's fine too. And so that's where I think they really connect with it. I like to write about heartbreaking things because I think that's a way of inoculating ourselves against real heartbreak is if we can experience them in the safe place of art.

So I think people who are drawn to that. So when I was a musician, I was a blues musician, right? And blues is about people experiencing and processing heartbreak in a healthy way and from a safe place, right? So I think that's what my readers are responding to. And I try to write sentences that people would want to get tattooed on them, honestly. I love beautiful writing. I love writing that hits you like a gut punch.

I love poetry because poetry is all that. Poetry is just gut punch after gut punch after gut punch. I mean, it is so intimidating to me to write poetry. When I used to write music, I used to write songs, and there you've got the performance to fill in any cracks, right? You've got your guitar and your voice, and you can fill in the cracks there with the poetry. With novel writing, you've got 350 pages to get lost in and to build your ideas and to create emotional impact. With a poem, you just have a short little space in which to make emotional impact. And so I strive for

the emotional impact of poetry in my novel writing. And I think that there are people who respond to that as well.

Because that's what I respond to as a reader. I love, love beautiful writing. I mean, give me beautiful writing. I'll just eat it up.

Amy Allen Clark

I'm with you. I love an angsty book too. Like, like make me feel something. I need that gut punch. I like to cry a lot through my books. It is so therapeutic. So as a teenager, that is primarily the kind of books that I was seeking in my book stack. So it doesn't surprise me that this would resonate with young adult readers. So were you a misfit or were you a Colton growing up?

Jeff Zentner (39:20.27)

Which version? Misfit for sure. Misfit for sure. Yeah. I would not go back to high school for all the money in the world. I mean, it's hard to write about high school because of that. I was talking with a bookseller friend the other day who has never read any of my YA books. I said, you know, you might like my YA books. She's like, I didn't like being a teenager. And so why do I want to read about it? I'm like, all right, well, that's fair enough. I mean, I can't argue with that reasoning.

Amy Allen Clark

I'm with you, I would not go back. And yet, like my spouse, that is like their favorite years, some of their favorite years. So it's really funny because of that contrast in our house. Like I'm like, no, I was so glad when high school was over. I didn't feel like that was where I was at. I feel.

safest and most secure where I'm at now. And like that was like the glory years, you know, like my, my husband was a track star. Like he had a lot going for him. He was probably a little bit of a Colton in a small sense. It has worked out really well for both of us. We're really happy with where we've landed, but it is funny because I do enjoy reading about high school years, but. I wouldn't want to go back either. So I can understand that completely.

Jeff Zentner

Yeah. And that reference I made, by the way, Luanne, that is the love interest in the book. She's she is she is bookish. She's artistic. And she ends up with this with this popular jock. It's it's very much a Connell and Marianne situation from from Normal People, which is the the the dynamic that I responded to so powerfully and Normal People. I absolutely love that aspect.

Amy Allen Clark

Yeah, they have been siloing our high school students now into like you go to the school that fits you best. So like your skill set. So if you're really into like health services or health, you know, like you want to be a nurse, you can go to this school. And my husband and I were very different paths. So we say we would have never met if they would have had that high school setup because I was a theater nerd. I was playing the violin and choir show choir, all the artsy stuff, that kind of thing. And he was like into sports and academics and we were so different. And so we had the opportunity to be together, but now, you know, those kinds of setups where we're kind of positioned to be with our groups of people, which probably would have enhanced my academics. Honestly, if I could have just done what I was super into, we would all been benefiting from that. My parents would probably not be lecturing me about my grades if I was getting to do the thing I really love. So I see the beauty in that as well.



**Jeff Zentner**

**Your superintendent of schools needs to read more rom-coms because they are dropping the ball in terms of creating rom-com premises among your students. It is so true.**

**Amy Allen Clark**

**Well, I want to ask you as we are starting to close out, do you have any second chance romances that you have loved since we are putting you on a book list for second chance romance for this special book?**

**Jeff Zentner**

**For sure. Well, I mean, I got to shout out my buddy, Emily Henry. Emily and I have been friends for as long as I've been friends with any authors. We became friends before either of us had a book deal on Twitter. So this would have been probably 2013. I still remember DMing Emily on Twitter when I got my book deal and when she got hers. So we've been friends for a long time. We started in the YA space together. She's moved over to adult. Just absolutely doing amazing gangbusters. So I got a shout out her book, Happy Place which is just a wonderful, wonderful second chance romance. And that is the one that I know fits into the category of second chance romance.**

**I get nervous talking about romances and love stories because I know that there are rules for these things and you break the rules. Man, you better watch out. So the other two I'm going to name, I don't know if I can call them a second chance romance, but they do have what I respond to in second chance romance stories, which is this idea that there is just somebody and you can't shake them. Like they keep popping back up in your life and there is that spark there and it will not be denied. And so normal people, which I've mentioned several times, I got to**

recommend. And on that one, I really recommend- I love the book, but the TV series is so well done. The Hulu adaptation is just incredible. I find it so moving. I have rewatched it completely five times. That's how much I love it. I just absolutely respond to it. It's so moving. The music is amazing. Cinematography is amazing. Everything's amazing.

And then I just discovered another new favorite book TV combination, which is *One Day* by David Nicholls. So this one comes out and I post about how I love the adaptation on Netflix. And then like nine of my best writer friends are messaging me like, oh, that's my favorite book, by the way. I'm like, what? What is happening here? You all had this favorite book. You knew I love *Normal People*. How dare you not make me read this book? You have failed me in your duty as a friend. Shame on you for not forcing me to read this book. I'm just kidding. But really, I absolutely love that story. Love the book. I love the TV adaptation. Again, I don't know. Certainly not *Normal People* does not fit under the strict category of second chance romance, but I would call it second chancey romancey, right? Yeah. And I would call *one day* second chancey romancey too. So don't get mad at me if those violate the rules for second-chance romance, but I find them to be very romantic.

Amy Allen Clark

It is so tricky because, you know, for example, *The Idea of You* is one of my favorites, I would call "romance books," but people said because it doesn't have their traditional romance ending, that it doesn't qualify as a romance.

And I just think it's really tricky because I'm like, but it's a great love story, right? So these are great love stories with second chance, like romance in them, but may not follow the happily ever after ending that people, you know, expect or

desire within romance books. But it's tricky. It's tricky. There's lots of rules. I'm learning about the rules, sometimes embarrassingly learning that I do not have things written right or I have not done things correctly on my side. I am still new to this, but I am trying to be mindful that when romance readers are going into something, they have a different kind of expectation. There's also like speaking to your footnote or things like that.

Amy Clark (46:08.846)

I really appreciate how they set readers up. It's something that I don't see a lot of in other genres where they will tell you, hey, this is what you're gonna expect, right? This theme is gonna be here. Abby Jimenez is so great at that. She will like specifically point to like, "here are the big plot points," which in some ways are kind of spoilery, right? But they're also really good for people who need to protect their heart where they wanna go into a story knowing what to expect.

Jeff Zentner

And yeah, and I'm about the journey, not the destination, which means that I really I love romances. I love those stories because I love seeing the journey. I love prequels because I know how it turns out, but it's fun to see how it turns out. It's fun to go on that journey. When I get spoilers for my favorite TV shows, I don't mind. I'm like, OK, now I'm watching it as a prequel. I'm still going to enjoy the journey of getting there. So it's just fundamentally different approaches to reading. I'm not a good thriller or mystery reader because I don't figure stuff out. Like I'm bad at figuring it out. I'm always, maybe that makes me a good thriller reader. Cause I'm always just like -

Amy Allen Clark

You're actually the target audience. They want to get you like that.

Jeff Zenter

Oh yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Amy Allen Clark

Well, do you see this as a new beginning then for your career? Do you see yourself continuing to write adult books? How do you see things playing out for you moving forward?

Jeff Zentner

Yeah, absolutely. With this foot in the door in the adult space, I certainly have more adult ideas I'm working on. I'm working on one right now, as a matter of fact. But I am not leaving behind the youth lit space.

In July, I have another romance coming out, but a YA romance written in verse that I co-wrote with Brittany Cavallaro, who is an astounding YA writer. She's amazing. She was one of the people who helped me read Colton Gentry. She co-wrote a book with Emily Henry. So we've kind of got our little circle of buds.

But that one is very much influenced by the Before Sunrise trilogy with Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy, Richard Linklater, just those beautiful movies. And we explicitly acknowledge it in the book.

We don't pretend like we came up with the idea. But that one's coming out and we're working on a second one of those verse novels. So I'm getting to do poetry. I'm getting to do more romance, more love stories, which is really very exciting and fun. But, you know, maybe it'll get to be a thing where one year I put out a YA, next year is adult, next year YA, next year adult, who knows?

Amy Allen Clark

I'm excited. I'm excited to see where all of this goes. I love how you surprised me. Totally did not expect that. Everything about this book surprised me in all the best ways. I think everyone is going to be so thrilled to get their hands on this book. And we're excited to feature it as not only a second chance romance, but just your adult debut. I remember our very first interview for the Serpent King and I have almost interviewed you every single book.

So it feels like coming back to something really special because I've gotten to see how your writing has developed over the years. In the Wild Light was a book club book for our Book Gang book club. And it's just been so wonderful to follow you and then to have your life intercept in the ways that it has like my daughter getting to hear you speak and all of the different things that you do I'm just so impressed with how you are able to keep all of these things going and how you show up for community. And it says a lot about regarding your fan base when someone is so committed to something that they're willing to permanently tattoo their body to keep your words like on their heart. I just I love that so much.

Jeff Zenter

Well, and I have to thank you for for the help you've given me in my career and for introducing me to such a high quality readership. I mean, the people who the people who follow you and who are in this community that you've created are a really high quality reader. I mean, they are smart. They're exactly the kind of reader that I would absolutely hope for. So if you're listening to this, know that I think very highly of you.

Amy Allen Clark

I would agree. (Jeff and Amy laugh)

And I'm not saying that to toot my own horn. I really believe that we have one of the warmest, kindest communities and they are so good about promotion for other authors and the ways that they show up for people like you and all the other authors that we've shared in the space. It is astounding to me.

Like it's partially my job, but it is not necessarily their job to do that and to be so in love with your writing. I'm glad that they found it either through the space or, you know, being adjacent to the space, but I agree. I think they're the best people on the internet and I'm so glad that we've been able to help, you know, continue and will continue to help you.

I can't wait to support the next book, the next project. And we have a landing space on the site just for Jeff with all of his books. We'll update it with this player, but we have tried to keep that book list consistent. So as he comes out with new work, we are following along on the journey and you can always check that book list. It's for your library day. So you can go to the library or go to your indie bookshop and support Jeff on this next adventure.

Jeff Zentner

Thanks, everyone.

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