

**INTRO:** This is part three of my interview with Zein El-Amine. If you have not yet listened to the first two parts of this interview, they were episode [#201](#) and [#202](#). And I highly recommend you go back and listen to those first because they provide some really important context for this episode. If you have already listened to the first two parts, then please enjoy the conclusion of my interview with Zein El-Amine.

**Matt Bowles:** Zein, I now want to transition a little bit to your writing and to your latest work. And I think just as sort of a preface to your work, I want to get a little sense of your writing style and your approach to writing. Before we talk about your most recent work that's coming out, let me just ask you a very basic question as a reader. When you're reading what for you makes a great piece of writing?

**Zein El-Amine:** Yeah, obviously it depends on the genre. So, for periods of my life, I read a lot of science fiction. And the kind of science fiction that I liked is the one that mystify you, that doesn't really give you all the answers, that intrigues you and mystifies you and leaves you coasting. Like the stuff that Arthur C. Clarke writes or the lyrical stuff that Ray Bradbury writes. In terms of short fiction, I love short fiction that is like Southern Gothic and like Flannery O'Connor in general. I like short fiction where you have a sense of dread, and you don't understand why the author creates a tension where nothing seems to be happening, but everything is happening. And I love that in short fiction.

In terms of novels, the range of the kind of novels that I like is very wide. But I would say that I love novels that are contain poetic descriptions and lyrical excursions. And I love novels where novelists can write great dialogue. I'm in awe of those kinds of novelists that get the true voice of their characters. Novels that are plot driven, I don't like at all, and I lose interest in them very quickly. It's the same with the shows that are abundant right now on streaming services that seem to try to string you along after having the first season with plot twists and such. I'm not into that. I'm into the works that leave you coasting, that don't have the Hollywood ending where the author doesn't wrap up everything for you.

And so you go, oh, thank you for wrapping that up. I'm going to go on to the next thing. But authors that leave you buzzing and thinking about what just happened, or I would like to live in this world a little bit more. Maybe I won't pick up another novel for a while, you know what I mean? So that's kind of a survey of the things I like.

**Matt Bowles:** What is your process as a writer for telling great stories? You've obviously had a lot of incredible life experiences that we have discussed on this podcast, and a lot of your even fictional stories relate to experiences that you have personally had. Can you talk about your process for telling great stories?

**Zein El-Amine:** Take, for example, the prison story that I just told you about Bahrain. I was teaching a creative writing class when I was doing my MFA in passing, I had a throwaway line because we were workshopping a poem, and the guy was writing about being in prison and I had this throwaway line. Like when I was in prison, this happened and I went on to the next topic and I looked up and the whole workshop, 15 students were looking at me. This woman, Jenna, that was sort of the mother hen of the class where everybody followed her lead. She says, excuse me, go back to the part where you were in prison. Okay, we're going to hear the story. I said, we're in the middle of the workshop. I can tell you the story later. And she turns to the class, and she says, hey, do you guys. There's anything more important for us as writers right now than to hear Zein's prison story? And everybody says, no. I said, okay. And she crossed her hands and looked at me and so I said, okay.

So, I told the story. And after I told the story, one of the students who's a great advocate, who's been amazingly supportive even decades after he was in my creative writing class. But he told me, have you written the story? I said, no, I've never written it. It's a great story. And I told him, yeah, it's a great story, but it's a prison story. And I never figured out how to distinguish it from other prison stories. And he says, you know, there's something funny about this story. And I said, what's funny about it? And he told me some scenes, and I think I described to you, like, the T-shirt thing. And it's not that it prompted me to write a comical take on that story. No, it just allowed me a hook to go into that story and highlight certain things, to have the story not be so dense, but be lighter and more accessible, but still be engaged, still be horrified, still be sad and cry, but also at some points, maybe laugh.

So, all this to say is that most of these stories are things that kind of. I have a few sentences that stick, and they keep revolving in my head, and at some point, I write them in my little field notes pocketbook, and I write them down and I put them in the back. And then one day, boom, the whole story starts evolving, and I find myself maybe writing an outline or just starting on the blank page.

And one book that I really love about creativity and art that explains all of this is *Catching the Big Fish*, which is this tiny book that David Lynch, the movie director, wrote about creativity. And he says, if you want to catch the big fish, you need to have a vast ocean, the big fish. By big fish, he means the big ideas, the good stories, the meaty stories, is you have to have big ocean and a deep one, and you have to send your hook really deep. And what he means, as a practitioner of transcendental meditation, for example, is that you have to live in the story for a long time. So, meditate on it and be deep in your knowledge of these characters and get acquainted and all that.

So, I think that's the process that I usually go through where things are going on. And sometimes it's like a year before I go back to that one idea, to these three lines that started the whole story. And I carry that through. I once heard that one author wrote a classic story from. He just had this image of this girl sitting up on a tree, and the girl gets down from the tree and just walks away, and he didn't know where she was walking or whatever, but the whole scene was so infused with it. It was thick with atmosphere, so that he could build a whole world in it because it was a familiar setting and he could build a whole world.

And a lot of times that's how it starts. So, with that kind of idea, I call it a hook. Now when I find the hook, I have to write it down because hooks disappear very quickly and I can return to it. And whenever I want to write, I go back and read the hook from that blossoms all those ideas. Now there are things that just die. You return to them and they're dead-on arrival. But there's other ideas where you have some distance from you return to it. And once you read it, it just like inspires you. It's like reading good literature or something. And so, a lot of my morning routine is having breakfast and reading something rich and good. And at some point, I lose interest in what I'm reading because now I'm onto my brain is all jump started and I'm thinking about all these ideas and then that's how I start to look at my notes or whatever is like been turning and turning for days or months in my head and start with that.

**Matt Bowles:** And what about your process for writing poetry? And maybe just starting off with a very large-scale question about what poetry is and how is it different from prose? And what is your process for writing poetry?

**Zein El-Amine:** Yeah, you would think that even people who have done their MFA in poetry can tell you the difference, but not everybody. It's a very hard distinction to make. And that's why I make a point of it. When

I used to teach high school students that were getting college credit on creative writing. That's one of the first lessons is how to get them to distinguish between poetry and prose.

To give you an example, that always explains poetry and prose, and I came across it by accident, there was an award-winning artist that did performance art. He was visiting from Spain, and his translator knew me and said the artist wants to address the issue of gentrification. And you've been writing poetry about gentrification, and you've been active against gentrification. So, can he come and have tea with you and pick your brains about what installment he needs to do next? And he does things like he took a big yes, the word yes, huge yes, that's about 30ft high and maybe 20ft wide. And he had it on a rollers and he would put it in a certain spot or a no. And he would record what people are saying around it. But anyway, when this artist came, I said, can you show me some of your work? And he says, okay, I did this film. It was simply a film. It wasn't an installment. And so, I said, what's the film about? He says, I actually filmed two alcoholics and a beach somewhere in Spain. This couple, an older couple that were alcoholics, and their day is comprised of waking up in the morning. They live in a tent, and they wake up in the morning, they build a sandcastle. They make a little concave thing where people can drop the money in the sandcastle. So, they panhandle by building a sandcastle with a little pan in front of it, a sand pan, and people drop money in there. Then they go to the liquor store and buy liquor, and then they drink, and then they go fall asleep in the tent, and then they start all over again. So, I said, oh, okay, let's see the film. And it was a short film, obviously, but the short film wasn't this whole narrative that I just told you, Matt.

The short film was. It starts out with a silhouette of two heads within the tent. And those are the couple, right? And there's very slight movements in the tent. And then the next scene is basically zoomed in on these hands that are shaping the sandcastle. Then you see money being dropped on that flat part. And then you see rain come and dimple the sand, and it focuses on the holes that the rain is causing on the sandcastle. It spends a lot of time showing that the demolition of the sandcastle by the rain, the slow melting process, which is mesmerizing to watch. And then the next scene is basically the two silhouettes almost like wilting against each other and then disappearing from the screen. And I said, whoa, what was that? The story sounded really interesting. Why don't you just do a straight up narrative of that and tell the whole story? And he says, because I filmed it like a poet, not as a writer. A prose writer. You see what I mean? It's like spotlights on these ideas and imagery that was causing us to feel certain things. And that was poetry, and then the straight up narrative was prose.

**Matt Bowles:** You are a writer of fictional short stories, a writer of poetry. You are a novelist, and you also write completely nonfiction political essays. How are you inspired to decide in which format or in which style or in which approach you want to write in which medium? When inspiration strikes, since you have such a broad range of writing talents?

**Zein El-Amine:** I think of myself as primarily as a storyteller. I want to tell all these stories, but some of the stories just come out and are best told in poetry. Some are prose, and some stories just have to be told that have to be relayed because I'm trying to make an impact on some issue or another. Those are nonfiction. And a lot of nonfiction is actually solicited. Usually that's how I decide. There are points and it's not a met. It's not like an instantaneous process, as you might imagine, man, that sometimes I'm writing a poem and I realize that I put some distance between me and it, maybe some time, and I set it aside and then read it as a reader. And I realize this is not working as a poem. It doesn't have that tension or tightness or that imagery. It would be better told as prose. I'm not saying that poetry is superior to prose. I'm just saying that it's just a different form.

And sometimes I've written prose. To give you an example, there's a haiku, and it was popular at some point when I first wrote it called Haiku for the Head locked. That started as a nonfiction commentary about how we're always accused of violence as Arabs. I was talking at length about it and then when I read it, I thought, oh, there's a lot of fillers in there. There's a lot going on and on about issues and it feels a little bit too preachy. And so, something like a two-page piece was condensed into a one-page poem. After I read it as a reader, I realized there was still a lot of extraneous stuff. Next thing I know, I'm writing haiku. And I wrote the haiku, I think, in maybe 20 different variations of the same words. And finally, it settled into one form. And then when I revisited it, it was very impactful. It went right to the point. Not that everything should go right to the point, it's just that what I was trying to relay had to be strong and right to the point and dense. And then it found its home as a haiku. I wish I had kept all the drafts for that because it would be a master class in revision.

**Matt Bowles:** So, as a creative writing professor, I want to ask your advice. I have a lot of listeners of this podcast that have a lot of incredible travel experiences that they have had in traveling the world and seeing incredible places and interacting with incredible people and having incredible experiences. What tips do you have for people that want to turn those lived experiences into great stories and great writing? Let's just talk about beginners, maybe people do a little bit of blogging or they kind of like documenting the experience a little bit. But for people that want to turn those experiences into a great piece of writing and tell a great story about it. What tips do you have?

**Zein El-Amine:** My tip is to keep a journal, and I'm sure you probably experienced this, Matt, but I remember I've kept a travel journal. I don't do it anymore much because I have so much raw things, novels and such, to write right now, that every time I find a chance to write, I would be working on these. But when I look back at my travel journals, whether it's going back home to Lebanon and hearing a story from my cousin or my neighbor about their grandmother or something or having an experience that I would write it that night. And those entries are so rich and to be mined. Not necessarily that you carry over that thing in its entirety into, like a piece. It's just that these things, these ruminations, I guess you can call them, formed the basis for inspiration to write novels and poems or whatever.

And the thing is that it's not about sitting at the page and being really scientific about it and saying, oh, this is a great entry. I'm going to take the segments of it and do it. It's just that in reading these entries over and over again, you internalize them. And then when you start with a blank page, they're there and they come out more naturally in a different form, but filled with substance, filled with details that if you haven't noted down those details in your entry, you wouldn't have remembered them as clearly, and it wouldn't have been as rich in detail as possible. So, the most basic thing I would say, keep a journal. And you have to be persistent with it. It has to be at the end of the day.

I remember some of the best entries was when I was in southern Lebanon. I go there every year. I would visit relatives; they would tell me stories. I would have experiences walking around events that happen, wars, fighting, bombing that day. Anyway, I would have experiences. And then when I get home, right before I go to bed, I would sit with my journal and write down everything. And later on, I started to type on my computer, keeping a diary on my computer. But the best thing for me, writing by hand, those entries, whereas, I don't know, is more engaging than just typing on the computer. Of course, eventually I internalized a lot of the stuff, and I typed it onto a story or created a poem out of it. Sometimes they just served as setting the atmosphere or setting my intention or setting the mood. So, you read an entry, and

you don't need to sit there and dictate stuff. You could just basically read an entry and be inspired, and the jump starts your writing.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I also want to ask you, keeping your professor hat on, to reflect on the impact that your teaching has had on your students. For example, these study abroad trips, when you think back about those students that got to go to Nawal Al Sadawi's house or get to sit around with you at the Jimi Hendrix Cafe in Morocco, or that got to walk in the footsteps of the fictional Leopold Bloom in Dublin and rejoice and have those experiences, what impact, first of all, just the travel in general has had on those students and being able to be there and have those local experiences instead of just reading the literature in a classroom or something like that.

**Zein El-Amine:** Take, for example, the Ireland trip I had one of the many great moments in my teaching career where here I am. I walked out with these students through a gauntlet of folks that say there's no way you're going to get undergraduates, especially that they weren't all English majors. In fact, English majors were in the minority. And they said, you're never going to get them to read Ulysses and they're going to fake it. I knew that if they're on the ground and if they're engaged with the people there and engaged in that environment, that they're going to do that. What seems to be mission impossible.

So, on my first trip, to give you an example, I had no idea how well they're progressing. They seem to be engaged but also intimidated by work. But I don't know how much their progress in terms of reading, even though we're unpacking a chapter a day, and on the last day when they were supposed to read the last chapter, which was Molly's Soliloquy, if you remember it, Matt, which is 50 pages without punctuation. So, on the last day, that was the last thing we didn't discuss. We were supposed to discuss it the next day before we go out and about on Bloomsday and to celebrate Bloomsday with the Dubliners. So, I was walking out of the hotel and the manager had become friends with the students and with me at the restaurant. So, I walk out and up to that time the students were all well behaved and they weren't the ugly Americans, so to speak, like loud tourists or whatever in any setting we went to. But that day when I walked out, I could hear them in the lobby arguing. And I thought, oh man, they were so good until now.

So, I avoided the entrance to the lobby, and I turned to walk out of the back door to avoid the whole scene. And I was just too tired and hungry to deal with it. And the manager, the Irish managers, he follows me because he was in the lobby with them. He was standing and he saw me change direction. And he says, Zein, where are you going? And he knows we've been studying Ulysses. And he was in awe that these. All these American students were doing that and all that because most of his family hasn't read it. And he says, where are you going? I said, I'm leaving. They're being loud and obnoxious and I'm sorry about that. He says, yeah, but did you hear what they're talking about? And I said, no. He says, come on. So, we pull up, we're like hidden behind the wall, but we can hear what they're saying just around the corner. And there were four women, and they were having a debate about Molly's soliloquy because they had finished the whole book and two of them had decided that Molly is the devil. And the two others have decided that Molly is God.

In fact, one of them on the side was really frustrated because he says, all along we were tricked to hear one story for like 500 pages. We read one story and now Molly tells us about a completely different take on the thing. And that's really up, you know, I like it. And so, there is no more solid evidence that I could have gained that they actually read the whole thing. And David turns to me, he says, you must be proud. I said, I can't tell you how proud I am. And I went to an Italian restaurant, and I ordered a whole bottle of wine with my dinner. Which you would have been proud of, Matt.

**Matt Bowles:** Indeed. Yes. That's amazing. What impact have you seen in terms of your teaching of Orientalism?

**Zein El-Amine:** Oh, yes.

**Matt Bowles:** And you're teaching about anti-Arab racism and you're teaching about the Palestinian struggle and all of those things. What impact have you seen of that on the students over the years?

**Zein El-Amine:** I taught a course at the University of Maryland that was my dream course. I felt it was made for me. It was called Global Literature and Social Change. And I applied for it, and they gave it to me for three years. I taught it the way I created my own syllabus. I ignored all the other ones. And I assigned different novels that had been dealt with, one novel was *The Yacoubian Building*, one dealt with Egypt, one novel dealt with Brazil *Heliopolis*, one novel dealt with India *White Tiger*, one novel dealt with Morocco for bread alone, you know, and so on, so forth. And every year I would change the novels a little bit with That I talked about the social conditions. We had the opportunity to talk about the social conditions through the novels that exist through those countries. And we paired them up with movies.

For example, *Heliopolis* takes place in the favelas of Brazil. And we contrasted that with *City of God*, the famous movie about the favelas. And we said, who's telling the truth year? And are the favelas as violent as they're being depicted in popular cinema? And so on, so forth. And when I taught about, for example, the Olympics in Brazil paired with *Heliopolis* and *City of God*, I brought in someone that was fighting displacement in the favelas. Displacement of people for the Brazilian government was displacing people for the sake of the Olympics.

And so, what happened is that I noticed that for the years after the students left, they would write to me about what they're doing that was actually guided by those classes. And everything that was doing was spectacular. And that's pretty good for a very reactionary university, University of Maryland, which is very much cybersecurity based, and military based, and State Department based, except for the things like the English department, which is, I think, is a great department there. So, the impact was felt for years to this day, from 2008 till now, I still get students that I talk to in 2009 or something like that, that still write to me about what they're doing and how they were impacted by that course. Most recently at American University, teaching Arab World Studies, I've never seen such a transformation in a classroom than I witness with Arab World Studies. And Arab World Studies, what it does, it deals with both politics and culture, and it deals with topics like gender and sexuality.

In the Arab world, of course, we start off with Orientalism. We talk about art and resistance in the Arab world. We talk about the Palestinian question by reading Gruda Graphic novel Joe Sacco's *Palestine*. We deal with communities or people that are on the margin in the Arab world, whether it's Arab Jews, like Iraqi Jews, that were displaced many times, or we talk about the people of the Western Sahara, the Sahrawis in Morocco, that nobody talks about. And you know, we talk about music and art and graffiti and all that. All of that is tools to kind of disorient the Arab world, demystify. And what I get is unbelievable. Their final papers, I just read them, and I shake my head with approval is unbelievable. What's coming out of these things? I save a lot of the papers because the way they present their arguments and what they gained from that class is tremendous.

This is what compels those students at the same time, because they trust what I'm doing in class. And I depend a lot on also multimedia to make the point. But when we had the labor dispute at American

University, most recently, students in the Arab World Studies and in another class that I teach, which is Modern Arab history through Arab novels, those students came out to the rallies and supported me and the adjuncts that were rallying. And it's because they also had been transformed there. And when it comes to the Palestinian question, that's where I see the biggest change.

First of all, I've seen a change in general for the better how the youth of this generation perceive the Palestinian question. And secondly, I have to say that as opposed to the reactionary administration at AU that pretends to be progressive, the student body at American University is incredible in terms of the students that I get at my Arab World Studies and Morocco class and the Arab novels one, they are so open to debate and discussion. They're so open to demolishing what their parents have told them; what the media has told them. Look at this generation's view of sexuality and how they view it in such a fluid way. They've managed to kind of destroy. There seems to be an evolutionary leap that has happened in terms of that, and the same thing is happening. And when you present this material to them that you've homed in, they are totally open to it. They're not beyond argument, but the way they argue about these things is because they want to get the truth. It's not because they're ossified in some ideology.

**Matt Bowles:** That's so amazing. Well, I want to talk about your latest book, which I have just pre-ordered and I'm super excited about getting it. It's called *is this how you eat a watermelon?* And I want to read one of the many blurbs and accolades that you've gotten so far. This is from the back of the book. It says: *“Proficient and empathetic, these seven short stories span war torn Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and the United States to tell stories of transit and survival with commitment to the vulnerability of the human experience and a fierce loyalty to the characters bearing the trauma of war. Zein El-Amine’s collection is joyful and devastating, daring the reader to look away”.*

Can you talk a little bit about this latest collection and maybe just start with the fact that it won the Megaphone Prize? So, can you talk about what the Megaphone Prize is, who is publishing this book and why you chose them?

**Zein El-Amine:** Sure. Yeah, so Radix Media is a worker owned publisher that I believe started in Portland and moved to New York when the Occupy movement started in New York. And they helped obviously with providing printing services and all that to that movement. So, when I was looking to place to find a home to submit to Radix Media it was obvious to me. So, they've been running these contests for poetry and the previous winner was Ghinwa Jawhari, who's an amazing poet, also a Lebanese that had one for her book *Bint*, which means girl in Arabic, which is tremendous, which is now it's on second edition, highly recommended.

But anyway, they decided to run their first contest for short fiction, for short stories, and they named it the Megaphone Prize. So, I'm the first recipient of the Megaphone Prize, which is fitting because as you know, Matt, I had a megaphone strapped to my side for 20 years. So, when I was granted a residency at the Blue Mountain center in upstate New York, I went and took seven short stories. Some of them were on their second or third draft, some of them were halfway finished. And for a month I just had to think about writing because they fed me and exercised me and did everything and all I had to do was write and revise. And so, I finished these seven stories, and I only submitted it. You know how they tell you publishing is a numbers game? And believe me, I've been playing that numbers game with my poetry manuscript for a long time. Even though like a lot of those poems have been published individually, the manuscript has not been published yet, but I submitted it only to Radix Media and I felt a great affinity to it and I hoped against hope that they'll recognize it.

And sure enough, I was coming back from vacation in New Mexico, and I was on one of those big mobile lounges in Dulles being transported between the midfield terminal to the main terminal, the midfield terminal, which I had built, I was the quality engineer for. And midway through a message pop up on my email saying, congratulations, you just won the Megaphone Prize. I didn't know anybody in the mobile lounge was with me. I was kind of yelling with joy on the inside. And that's how I got the Megaphone Prize. It was judged also by the writer Deesha Philyaw, who wrote the Secret Lives of Church Ladies, which is a very whimsical collection of short stories. So, the fact that this African American writer that I respected picked it is a tremendous honor for me. By the way, the Secret Lives of Church Ladies is about to be turned into an HBO special. So, look out for it. That's the megaphone prize.

**Matt Bowles:** Amazing. Well, I would love for you to read an excerpt from the book. And before you do that, if you want to share any additional context on either the background of the collection in general or the specific piece that you're going to read from.

**Zein El-Amine:** Right. So, there's one story, the opening story. I've had the pleasure of reading it in New York and in D.C. seeing several times or reading excerpts from it. It's a crowd pleaser. It's about a 70-year-old woman that runs out of cigarettes during the 2006 war in Lebanon and basically detains a platoon of Hezbollah to try to convince them for half an hour while drones are flying overhead to try to convince them to buy her cigarettes from the general store because she ran out of and she's been smoking them for 40 years. So, the whole thing is the exchange between them that the audience has found very funny.

So, there's another story that's simply about a cleric building a snow woman while his wife watches during the first snow in south Lebanon. It's a simple atmospheric story where hopefully the reader lives in that lyrical moment. There's another story that takes place in Saudi Arabia about a couple who come across a monkey that had been abused by its owner. And through caring for the monkey or through their encounter with the monkey, they unearth their own trauma. The title story is this how you eat a watermelon. It's about a guy who's basically in Beirut, is basically eating and drinking himself to death. And it is sort of a standing in for the city of Beirut that has been dying by degrees recently. There's another story, of course. It's the story of my imprisonment in Bahrain.

And there's another story about the story I told you when we were trapped in boarding school for 43 days during the civil war, and the birthplace of the civil war, on the birth date of the civil war. So, it's loosely based on that story. There's a story that I've had the most edits. I recently finished the 15 edits because it's in a genre that I've never written before, which is a ghost story, but it's called Killdeer, which is a type of a bird that fakes its injuries. And it takes place in southern Maryland about a writer that finds himself laboring with trauma that's triggered by this bird and finally gives birth to a poem at the end of the story.

**Matt Bowles:** Amazing. So, which of those stories would you like to read from?

**Zein El-Amine:** I'm going to read from the title story. This is the first time I'm actually reading from the title story. And I mentioned to you I'm going to read you the racy part of that story, and I'll give you a little background because I'm going to read a part in the middle of it. But as I mentioned, this how you eat a watermelon? The title story is about this guy Hassan, who's basically eating and drinking himself to death in Beirut. And he won't listen to his family and specifically his brother, who's the minister of labor, to try to lead a healthier lifestyle or scale back on your drinking and so on. And at this point, Ghassan is a married man and he's been hanging out in all the spots, some of them you might know, like T-Marbouta, which is actually my brother's cafe.

**Matt Bowles:** I have been there with your brother, in fact, in Beirut, and it's amazing.

**Zein El-Amine:** Yeah. So, he meets this Palestinian woman who lives in a refugee camp who's part of the Dabke group. I know Matt knows what Dabke is, but for the listeners, Dabke is like a folkloric Palestinian dance where you stomp your feet. I always explained it to people who've never seen it before. It's like the Greek dance, but with harder stomps. And she's part of the Dabke group that he had met, and he has been enamored with. And this is a scene that takes place at T-Marbouta, the bar where she finally kind of warms up to him because she finds him very pompous and arrogant. But eventually he pursues her, not aggressively, but does a lot of work on pursuing her. And finally, she's warming up to him.

So, this is how this scene in the middle of the story starts. "They drank arak and snacked on mixed nuts. He kept his ego in check. She tempered her acidic critiques, and they were connecting for the first time. At a pause in the conversation, she looked at him in silence, closed her eyes for a second, and looked down at her drink and up at him again. She asked him for a cigarette. They stepped out in the courtyard, which was under renovation at the time, and into the blaring horns of Beirut. She went through the cigarette so fast that Hassan had a hard time keeping up with her. She dropped the butt on the ground and stepped on it with the force of a Dabke e stomp. He followed suit, assuming she wanted to go back inside. But when he looked up from putting out his cigarette, her face was inches away from his. She cradled his head with both hands and kissed him. What stayed with him from that night is not so much the kiss itself but the way she held his head. She stepped away as violently as she had surged at him. A strand of sweat swept hair across her brow, her V-neck linen shirt askew, olive skin twinkling in the streetlights. She told him that she was in the mood for the village, for the rural south. It was past midnight on a weeknight, so he assumed that she was hinting at a weekend trip and offered to take her on one during the coming weekend. She fixed him with a serious look and said, no, I mean now. I'm in the mood for the village now. It took him a minute to understand what she was proposing, but when he did, he put down his drink, took away hers, and headed for the door. She was behind him, pretending that she was not following, stepping on people's feet while apologizing left and right. They drove on the coastal road with the Mediterranean on their right, the flash of the moon panning the ocean. Riveted by their reverie, they went through, sidened and skirted Tyre in a record hour and headed southeast. From there the car hugged the hills, the valley close enough to make one dizzy. No guardrails, no markers, no lights. The sea breeze cooled by the limestone cradles in the foothills, moved through the car. They drove through the villages of Joeya and D'Artifa until there was nothing, but the narrow ribbon of road laid across rolling hills. As they rounded an arid stone pocked hill, a moonlit cornfield opened up in yellow glory. Even before the car came to a full stop, Rana bolted out and ran into the field. Rasan ran after her. She kept disappearing and reappearing in his path, black hair moving among the blond silk tufted cobs. Then the clothes started coming off. Hassan lost sight of her but followed a trail of garments. A tossed white linen shirt rendered fluorescent in the moonlight, a bra snagged on a stalk, a shed shoe almost nailed him in the head, and a pair of deflated jeans served at the last marker on her trail. Hassan started stripping too, tripping over himself with every item, shedding clothes that he had bought the same week, pointing to cowboy boots from Red Shoe, a Pierre Cardin linen shirt, and a charcoal guest jean from GS store. He found himself naked and disoriented for a moment, the stealth rustle of her flight gone. Then he heard her singing a lullaby. *Tick tick tick yam Miss Layman. Tick tick tick zojic.* One can he moved towards the source of the song and then stopped as the singing stopped. Then it started again. *Tik tik tikkan bilha'li am ya zurman.* He almost tripped over her, laying in the fold of the field, parted corn stalks like an open book on both sides of her. Her skin shimmered with sweat, hips wider than imagine, breast gently jiggling as she labored with her breath through laughter. They were voracious in their

lovmaking, and they were at home with it. Nothing orderly about it, nothing graceful, comfortable in its clumsiness, but well punctuated with the synchronicity of its completion. He laughed as she wailed the combination of nonsensical curses that involved God the Prophet on a sacrifice, Mother. No one was left untainted. Desecration all around. They lay in their flattened clearing and looked up at the sky in silence. Rasan crawled on all fours looking for his pants, disappeared into the thicket, located the cigarettes, crawled back into the clearing and juttied his head between her bent knees. Two lit cigarettes in his mouth. She laughed and he sat cross legged like a pudgy little Buddha, the cigarettes sticking out at the angles from his puffing lips, waiting for her to stop so he could give her one.”

**Matt Bowles:** Amazing. Wow, I am so excited to get this book. As I said, I have already pre-ordered it. Zein, for other people, listeners, yes, that would like to pre order a copy of the book. How can they do that?

**Zein El-Amine:** Yeah, just go to Radix Media which is spelled R-A-D-I-X and media, as in media and they go to their site, and it's prominently displayed there for the pre order. And the pre-orders are really important because it won't be actually launched until November 8th. But pre orders, I'm learning are very critical. So hopefully people will pre-order. But the launch will be in New York at the center for Fiction in Brooklyn and there will be well known writers like Halal Yan that are going to be in conversation with me. There will be a book launch at my favorite bookstore in maybe the whole world at City Lights bookstore in San Francisco. That's where Ginsburg and Kerouac and all of those got their start.

And City Lights was kind enough to agree to have the book launch there in Jack Kerouac alley next to the bookstore. There will be a debut in Washington D.C. on November 12th at the Eaton Hotel, which is a posh progressive hotel that has given us some lovely space to do the launch there next to Speakeasy that's hidden in the library next to the venue within the hotel. There's also going to be stops in Baltimore at Red Emma's Philly, hopefully at Uncle Bobby's Bookstore, which is owned by Mark Lamont, who you know, Matt. But mainly the main thing you can do is go to Radix Media website right now and just go to the pre order link that they have their front and center.

**Matt Bowles:** We are going to link that up to [the show notes](#) so folks can just go to [themaverickshow.com](http://themaverickshow.com) and just go to [the show notes](#) for this episode. We're going to have the link right there for you. You can just click on it and buy pre-order Zein's book.

Zein, I think this is a great place to end the main portion of this interview. And at this point are you ready to move into the Lightning round?

**Zein El-Amine:** Sure. Yeah. The Lightning round.

**Matt Bowles:** Yeah, let's do it. The Lightning round. All right. I normally ask people to recommend one book but since you are a writer I want to ask you for your top three recommendations of books that have significantly impacted you had meaning for you other than your own work. What are three books you would recommend that people read?

**Zein El-Amine:** So, three books. I'm going to focus on short story collections because I'm about to release one. So, one would be [Interpreter of Maladies by Jhumpa Lahiri](#), the Indian writer who by the way is now writing in Italian. The second one would be [Walk the Blue Fields by Claire Keegan](#), which you have to get, Matt. This is an Irish writer that wrote one of the most underrated collections of short stories I think even though she has prominence in Ireland. It's called *Walk the Blue Fields*. And the third collection of short stories is the classic [A Good Man Is Hard to Find by Flannery O'Connor](#).

**Matt Bowles:** All right, Zein, if you could have dinner with any one person that's currently alive today that you've never met, just you and that person for an evening of dinner and conversation, who would you choose?

**Zein El-Amine:** I would choose Roger Waters of Pink Floyd who I just saw recently, just a few days ago at the arena here. Since I was 16, I have loved Pink Floyd and Pink Floyd were part of my political radicalization and understand it's Pink Floyd under Roger Waters leadership, not the Pink Floyd that split from him later. I would love to have dinner with Roger Waters.

**Matt Bowles:** All right, knowing everything that you know now, if you could go back in time and give one piece of advice to your 18-year-old self, what would you say to 18-year-old Zein?

**Zein El-Amine:** I would just tell him that he is better than he thinks he is. Because the angst that you feel or most people feel at 18 and looking back at the friends I had when I was 18 and looking back at the relationships that I formed and the kind of life that I had when I was 18 before going to that damn college was really a good space. But also looking at the same time, seeing that that person wasn't really aware of the wealth that he had at the time.

**Matt Bowles:** All right, of all the places that you have now traveled to in the world, what are your top three favorite destinations you would most recommend? People should definitely visit.

**Zein El-Amine:** I would recommend, of course, Dublin, Ireland. And secondly, I would recommend what to me was the most beautiful place that I've ever visited and I can't imagine any other place, frankly, more beautiful than New Zealand and New Zealand anywhere. North and South Island, especially the South Island. I spent three weeks in New Zealand, traveling throughout and it was remarkable. And lastly, of course, I would recommend not this year, not next year, maybe in the years to come for people to travel to Lebanon. It's a stunning country. It's an amazing place. It's the size of Rhode Island but encompasses worlds and different terrains and different peoples and traditions and even cuisines. Dozens of cuisines within that small country.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I had such an unbelievable time when I was in Beirut hanging out with your brother and with Rayan's family and with our mutual friend Rania Masri who showed us around as well. And just a magical place. I tell people it is the culinary Mecca of the entire region. I mean, the food is absolutely insane. The nightlife is incredible. The history of the city. I mean, the wine I'm drinking right now at the moment is unbelievable. I can reaffirm that at the moment. And my only regret, the last trip, is that it was too short because Rayan offered to take me to the south and offered to take me to your family's land there. And I had to leave, and my trip was too short, and I wasn't able to visit the south. So, Beirut, I've been telling everybody is incredible. And the next time I go back, definitely going to make sure that I am able to go to the south and experience more of the El-Amine heritage in the south, man, but what an incredible country and incredible people. So really, really strongly endorse that.

All right, Zein, I want you to let folks know how they can find you, how they can follow you on social media, learn more about you, your political activism and certainly you're writing. And then if people want to contact you, maybe they want to offer you an interview somewhere about the book or are interested in helping to promote it or something like that. How can people come into your world?

**Zein El-Amine:** The main thing is supporters have been creating stuff for me. So, for one the go to place is my website which is basically my full name *zeinelamine* without any dashes or spaces obviously. So

[www.zeinelamine.com](http://www.zeinelamine.com) the other place that I'm on [Instagram](#) is at *zelamine* which is basically my first initial and my last name without spaces and dashes. My [twitter page](#) is it's at *zeinelamine* without the spaces and the dashes.

**Matt Bowles:** We are going to link all of that up in [the show notes](#) folks, so you can just go to one place. Just go to [themaverickshow.com](http://themaverickshow.com) go to the show notes for this episode. There you're going to find all of Zein's social media handles so you can follow him and direct message him. You're going to find the link to order his book and all of the other things that we mentioned in this episode. Zein's book recommendations and everything else are all going to be there in [the show notes](#). Just go to [themaverickshow.com](http://themaverickshow.com) and go to the show notes for this episode.

Zein, this was an incredibly epic conversation, my friend. Thank you so much for coming on the show man. This was great.

**Zein El-Amine:** I knew it would be great with you man. Thank you for putting so much thought into those questions that were so engaging, and I love the way you formatted the whole thing.

**Matt Bowles:** I appreciate you so much brother. Thank you for coming to the show and thank you everybody for listening. Good night.

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