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Pretzel City Press Celebrates the Official Launch of L.D. Zane's Short Story Collection, "It's Always My Fault & Other Short Stories"

By Dylan Sokolovich

Perhaps it was the atmosphere of the historic Jimmie Kramer's Peanut Bar in Reading, Pennsylvania, that set the tone for the evening on the official launch of L.D. Zane's "It's Always My Fault & Other Short Stories," a collection that explores the hidden pressures, private struggles and unspoken conflicts beneath everyday life. Between the peanut-shell-strewn floor, the steady hum of conversation, and the tight clustering of tables that made the room feel both crowded and familiar, the setting itself seemed to echo the world inside Zane's stories.

Hosted by Pretzel City Press, the event drew readers, local supporters, and longtime residents into a space where literary conversation unfolded in an unusually grounded setting. At times the talk in the room drifted far from books altogether, touching—unexpectedly, and humorously—on the KGB, the CIA, and "the secret world," but it all somehow fit the evening's atmosphere, where ordinary life and hidden narratives seemed to overlap.

Zane's reading anchored the night. He moved through selections from his collection with a steady, unembellished delivery that matched the tone of his work: dialogue-driven, direct, and often edged with a dry, observational humor. The room quieted noticeably during his readings, shifting from social noise to focused attention as familiar bar sounds gave way to listening, yet Zane's delivery of jokes often led to bursts of laughter.

A small, once industrious city, Reading, like many others across the United States, has faced significant economic decline over the decades. The stories, set mostly in the 1960s and 70s, not only use this period as a backdrop but also as an influence for the changing perspective of characters.

Zane's narratives move between family homes, city streets, and, at times, the jungles of Vietnam. During the reading, those shifts in setting felt less like plot movement and more like shifts in memory with each one carrying its own emotional weight. The dialogue, especially when read aloud, revealed the rhythm of confrontation and survival that runs through the collection.

That tension came through most clearly in the title story "It's Always My Fault," which Zane read with a measured pace that let the dialogue carry its own weight. As the protagonist, Albert Jackson Heller, is confronted by Officer Bolton and Detective Robinson, what begins as a straightforward exchange gradually unfolds into layered deflection, each line circling responsibility without ever fully accepting it.

In Zane's hands, the dialogue becomes less about resolution than exposure, each line revealing another layer of defensiveness, resentment, and survival instinct.

At one point, Heller's frustration surfaces directly: "'Yeah,' I said and sighed, 'it's always my fault.' *When will this shit end?*" What lingers is not just the accusation itself, but the weariness behind it: a sense of repetition, of a life defined by cycles that refuse to resolve.

In hearing several of the exchanges read aloud, the characters found in "It's Always My Fault" are clearly separate from the reader. They are inherently antagonistic, verbally sparring with little sense of hope or happiness. Yet, by the end of each story, the reader recognizes something familiar in them: a shared experience of love, loss, and the struggle to reconcile with a world that feels increasingly uncertain.

Many of the stories in "It's Always My Fault & Other Short Stories" return to this same emotional terrain. Blame becomes routine, and characters navigate strained relationships shaped by frustration, circumstance, and consequence.

Zane, a U.S. Navy veteran who served seven years including a combat tour in Vietnam on river patrol boats, brings that experience into the emotional framework of the stories. The choice offered to Heller indicates a character shaped by literal and emotional confinement, Zane's military service functioning less as a subject matter than as influence.

Another selection, "Reflections at the Paradise Grill," from Zane's forthcoming short story collection, offered a quieter counterpoint during the reading. Set in a diner-like space, the story leans into interior reflection and understated interaction, focusing on how people navigate grief, dignity, and connection in small, ordinary moments. In performance, it carried a slower rhythm, prompting attentive silence from the audience.

Throughout the evening, the audience response shifted alongside the tone of the readings. Some moments drew quiet laughter, others reflection, and several passages prompted stillness in a setting otherwise known for the cracking of peanut shells beneath one's feet. By the end of the event, conversations resumed more freely, though the energy in the room remained subdued compared to the beginning of the night.

As a collection, "It's Always My Fault & Other Short Stories" offers a portrait of not just Reading, but of a broader American experience shaped by decline, resilience, and quiet endurance. Zane does not romanticize his characters or their circumstances;

instead, like any good creative nonfiction writer, he pulls from the real world, presenting characters with an unflinching honesty that defines their relationships. They are difficult, often abrasive, yet undeniably human.

What stays is not a single plot point, but the emotional residue of these lives. Each story, in its own way, explores the tension between isolation and connection, between responsibility and circumstance, and between memory and the present. Zane creates worlds that feel lived in, not constructed.

What lingers most after the event is not a single reading or moment, but the atmosphere itself, the way the stories seemed to blend into the space around them. In the Peanut Bar hangs a *Reading Eagle* news article noting that when people from different parts of town share the same bar, “there always seems to be a channel of communication between these people.” That observation feels like a fitting lens for the night. Zane’s stories, like the long room they were read in, bring together lives that might otherwise remain separate, letting them clash, speak, and occasionally understand one another.

NOTE: *It’s Always My Fault & Other Short Stories* is available through Pretzel City Press LLC at www.pretzelcitypress.com or on Amazon. A second collection of Zane’s short stories is scheduled for release this fall.