

# Stand Still in the Moment

## A Chat with Author Paul Acampora

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“A lot of it was informed by being locked in the house for a year and watching the world suffer and watching young people look around going, this isn’t fair,” author Paul Acampora tells me when we pick up the phone to chat about his newest book, *In Honor of Broken Things* (Penguin 2022).

In a moving tale of friendship in spite of tough circumstances, Acampora weaves three eighth graders together through the power of clay. Yes, clay, as in, pottery.

Oscar, Riley, and Noah, three middle schoolers going through three different adjustments, meet in an Introduction to Clay class that brings them together just when they need each other most and challenges their assumptions about brokenness and art.

Oscar, a star football player who just lost his younger sister to cancer, struggles with a new injury. New schools are tough for everyone, especially Riley, whose middle school angst is exacerbated by her mother’s decision to move them back



to her hometown after a robbery at her workplace. The trio is completed by Noah, a homeschooled kid experiencing public school for the first time while dealing with the emotional debris of his parent’s separation. Pulled together even when one of them tries to pull away, these friends find that together—through art, communication, and sometimes with the help of a priest—they can make it through the tough stuff that life throws at them.

The book, which started as a comedy, quickly became a chance for Acampora’s characters to “stand still in the moment” they are in and experience their feelings and their grief and their emotions.

The use of three points of views in this novel provides a unique opportunity for the reader to explore three very different



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experiences—something Acampora said he had to be persuaded to try by his editor. After agreeing to write his first draft from multiple points of view, each character became a voice that he could no longer relegate to the sidelines.

“It started as a story about a kid who has to take art and then finds out that he’s good at it and what that means in his circle of friends. It’s not cool,” says Acampora. So, he looked for the pain in this character, and the side characters he used in this multi point-of-view novel, but then the pandemic happened.

“The world changed very quickly, and I thought all right, well, I don’t really have to hurt anybody, the whole world is kind of hurting right now. So how do you address that? I think the way to address that is number one, you surround yourself with people who care, but then your reaction to that typically is get away from me, you weirdo. And so how do you force people to stay together?” The school story provides a prime setting.

By the end, as so many of us discovered during the pandemic, Oscar needed the people around him who cared more than ever. Art became an outlet for each of the three protagonists, and ultimately the thing that bonded them, but their friendship existed beyond the kiln.

“Go make something,” Acampora says, thinking about how his characters and his readers can step away from the pain and the grief and the stress of the day. “Go play a musical instrument, go do art, write, make a snowman. There’s a song about that! Go make something and get your head out of that place. Art is that thing for so many people.”

The excellent teacher featured in this book was, like so many great teachers in books, inspired by a teacher Acampora knew, who taught pottery and told him about a student who found himself taking to the medium quite swimmingly, surprising himself. That, Acampora reiterated, makes the story feel authentic, but also reminds us of the dangers of the arts being cut in school.

When schools went remote, arts instruction was often dropped entirely, and arts programs are often the first cut at schools when the budget gets tight. Where then, is the chance

## Bibliography of Books by Paul Acampora

*In Honor of Broken Things.*  
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(And Maybe Last?) Date.*  
Dial, 2020. 224p.

*Confusion Is Nothing*  
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Scholastic, 2016. 208p.

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*Rachel Spinelli Punched Me in the Face.* Square Fish,  
2013. 192p.



for students to express themselves and try new forms of art if not in music class and art class and around the pottery wheel?

The pandemic will impact literature for years and years to come, and it will not always be so clear as a book about shutdowns and masks and toilet paper shortages. It will also appear subtly in books about the ways that we cope with loss and change around us, and how we “stand still in the moment” and experience the world around us.

“Those tools that we give ourselves and our children to be better really matter in this past year,” Acampora said. “I thought it was really important for me personally to think about how do we get better, and the answer, sometimes is we don’t. That scar will always be there, so how do you deal with that and as it works out, I think the answer is much the same as in this story—surround yourself with people who love you and care about you and pick you up, and then make something.” &