

# Rita Zoey Chin Podcast

**Donna Ferris:** [00:00:00] Welcome to Bounce Back Stronger, the podcast that explores ways to find peace and purpose no matter what happens. Today's guest is memoir and fiction author Rita Zoey Chin.

A little bit about Zoey. Zoey is the acclaimed author of the widely praised memoir, *Let the Tornado Come*, described by the Huffington Post as a euphoric ode to the human spirit. The book details how she healed from the effects of a traumatic childhood, in part because of a spirited horse named Claret. Zoey also is the author of the novel, *The Strange Inheritance of Leah Fern*, called a work of literary excellence by the Southern Literary Review and an imaginative, debut by the New York Times.

Her writing has appeared in renowned publications such as The Boston Globe, Marie Claire, and in Norton's anthology, Flash Fiction America. Besides her literary accomplishments, Zoey lives in Massachusetts, where she teaches creative writing, [00:01:00] creates beautiful amulets in her metalsmithing studio, and pets all the dogs.

Welcome to Bounce Back Stronger, Zoey. I'm so happy to have you on the podcast.

**Rita Zoey Chin:** Thank you, Donna. I'm thrilled to be here. Thanks for having me.

**Donna Ferris:** So, I started off talking to Zoey with this book, and I showed her all the sticky notes. I just love this book so much.

**Rita Zoey Chin:** Thank you. Thank you.

**Donna Ferris:** And maybe, let's just start right off with the story. So it starts off about you running away, and maybe just take a moment to discuss why you started running away at age 11.

**Rita Zoey Chin:** Yeah, sure. So well, my parents were very troubled individuals. And I guess that's me being euphemistic. I don't know why I'm being that way. I lived in a very violent household. There, there was a lot of violence, a lot of police visits, a lot of drugs, and I was [00:02:00] often the victim of a lot of the violence. So I started running away.

**Donna Ferris:** And in some ways, you were the only one, right? Sometimes they made a decision to pick you rather than the others at times.

**Rita Zoey Chin:** Yeah, so I have a younger sister, and she was spared. My father never hit her. She almost died when she was 14 months old and was in the hospital for some time, and they didn't know if she would make it.

And there was something about that fragility or vulnerability that she had that I think I don't know. It was really it's kind of fascinating if you think about it, but he was able to refrain from ever harming her, not me. Which you know as a child you think, well, wow, I must really be defective if he only hits me

**Donna Ferris:** And there's a really touching part towards the end of the book where you show she's impacted too. She was kind of still there, right?[00:03:00]

**Rita Zoey Chin:** Absolutely. You know, I mean, survivor's guilt is, is real. And I think that because I ran away and, by the time I was 13, I never lived at home again. I was either on the streets or institutionalized. And so, for better or worse, I got away. She didn't have that.

So even though my father didn't physically abuse her, they were still the people that they were. And she was not spared other kinds of abuse. So, yeah, she had to live there, and she didn't have the escape. And I do think that running away, even though it was a pretty treacherous journey, I do think it saved my life.

**Donna Ferris:** Yeah, you ran to something. You believed there was something better out there for you.

**Rita Zoey Chin:** Yeah, I believe that I've been able to move toward healing, maybe more easily than I might have if, if I hadn't stayed there and internalized it more, but I [00:04:00] got away and that act of running, that act of saying, no, it's not me, it's you and rejecting it so that I didn't internalize it and, perpetuate the cycle. I think running away broke the cycle.

**Donna Ferris:** That's a really important point because, as victims of abuse, there's an opportunity to continue it, and it's hard not to do that.

**Rita Zoey Chin:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Donna Ferris:** So maybe talk a little bit about the panic attacks that showed up later in your life and maybe how did they start and how you thought about them.

And maybe just a little bit about that part of the journey, which is pretty fascinating.

**Rita Zoey Chin:** Yeah, sure. So, as we were just talking, about kind of healing or coming out of that and being, I guess, well adjusted, for lack of a better phrase, enough to, go eventually to college and then go to grad school [00:05:00] and I was able to make a life for myself. I started teaching; I met my then-husband, who was just a lovely man.

And very, very sweet and yeah, safe, I think. We made a life. We got married, we moved here from Maryland to Massachusetts, and I suddenly had this life that I had always dreamed about. I had a house and two dogs. Let's not forget.

**Donna Ferris:** No, don't forget the dogs.

**Rita Zoey Chin:** Most importantly, two dogs. And yeah, and it was a great life. So I was stunned when one day I was sitting at my desk and this, like, strange feeling, like, came over me. I immediately panicked.

I didn't know that's what was happening at the time, but I panicked. But I didn't know I was panicking, and my heart started pounding, and I was like, why is my heart beating this fast? Like, I'm having a heart attack, and I grabbed the phone and I called 911, and they came, and I said, there's something wrong with my heart, definitely.

They examined me, they checked my pulse, they're like, [00:06:00] yeah, it's fast, but you don't have any arrhythmia or anything weird like that, and then they like casually mentioned panic. I was like, oh, no, no, it's definitely not that. And it was that. And that just set off a chain of panic attacks that just continued to build in intensity and ultimately became pretty immobilizing.

**Donna Ferris:** And it's so relevant because I work a bit in mental health and it's such a big thing now - panic attacks in general and anxiety in particular. It's just grown since the pandemic in particular. And one of the things I really loved you said is, "What can panic teach me?"

What was the panic trying to teach you, you think?

**Rita Zoey Chin:** Oh, that's a great question. Well, it's interesting. My answer will probably always change. Right.

**Donna Ferris:** Cause it doesn't really go away.

**Rita Zoey Chin:** Well, it's also, I think too that the more distance you have from things, a lot of times, the more clarity you get. Or the more you [00:07:00] examine yourself, or engage with that.

I think you just, yeah, you can see, oh, so that wasn't actually the first panic attack I had. I had other panic attacks but didn't know they were panic attacks. I thought, "Oh, I had low blood sugar." So I think what did it teach me? I think that, at the time, it was an opportunity to heal some really deep trauma.

I didn't know. I just thought, oh, well, I ran away and yeah, all these terrible things happened to me, but look, I have a great life and I thought that I could just, escape it, I guess. I didn't really think a lot about it. And what panic kind of forced me to do was to look at it to say hang on a second.

You have a lot of trauma. And when I was diagnosed with complex PTSD, I was like, oh, and my therapist at the time, and he was the last therapist I was going to try. I was about to give up. I had had so many bad experiences. I tried CBT, and it made everything worse. And he said, yeah, for, [00:08:00] for somebody who has complex trauma, that is sometimes really not the right, because

He said, what you need is heart. That's what you need. And compassion, self-compassion. So, I think the first thing that it taught me was to start to have compassion for myself. And then we did start doing EMDR. I'm not sure if you, yeah. You know, of course, so to just process a little bit of what had happened, and I got to go back and kind of rescued young me, and it helped.

It helped a lot.

**Donna Ferris:** And he even injected some heart into that, right? He kind of went back and forth between EMDR and then another therapy. I can't remember the name of it off the top of my head, it was like a positive type of injection. I mean, that was pretty brilliant, I thought.

**Rita Zoey Chin:** Yeah, exactly. So we used the EMDR platform, which I don't like, the eye movement or the hearing. I like the tactile, so I would hold these little buzzers and close my eyes. But instead of processing trauma, he said, you know, there's just too much trauma. We can't, we [00:09:00] can't.

So, instead of doing that, we processed very few select memories that were really problematic. Then we went back and reinforced positive states, states

when I felt strong states when I was driving across the Bay Bridge in a convertible and not being afraid to get on the highway.

And we, we kind of went back and reinforced those memories to try it can bring me back to another part of me that was not afraid of so many things.

**Donna Ferris:** Yeah. Yeah. And I think one of the things I found really fascinating was that you had been through so many things, you had been so strong through so many situations, and then it's when everything's kind of calm.

It was so outside of maybe your homeostasis. Does that resonate at all?

**Rita Zoey Chin:** So much. And I'll even add to that, Donna. You're absolutely right. And this isn't even in the book, but at the time we had [00:10:00] just moved here and he had taken a position as, as chair of a neurosurgery department in Boston.

The department was a mess, and there was a lot going on, which was kind of scary at that time. And I had to kind of rise and help him get through that. I won't go into the details, but it was the day when I knew that he was okay, that we had come through it, and everything was going to be okay.

That's the the day I had the panic attack that really bad one. And looking back now, it's like the minute I let my guard down. I was in fight flight, right. And then the minute I knew I didn't have to fight anymore, I kind of just crumpled.

**Donna Ferris:** Yeah, it's like we're good at the fight or flight piece. Put a person with anxiety in the deep dark, and we rise to the occasion every time. It's the anticipation of it.

**Rita Zoey Chin:** [00:11:00] Right? Exactly. It's like, Oh, nothing's wrong. Well, *that* feels weird.

**Donna Ferris:** Yeah.

**Rita Zoey Chin:** So yeah, that's when we brace. So it's just that scanning for danger, danger. And yeah,

**Donna Ferris:** Yeah, definitely. How did you find the horse element then? I think there are multiple times that you kind of go with horses, and you almost feel like you're at home immediately with them.

Tell me a little bit about that.

**Rita Zoey Chin:** Yeah, well, when I was a kid, I had a friend who rode horses, and she kind of had the opposite life of mine. She had great parents, and they were supportive, and she got to follow her dreams, and as a kid, you know, I was jealous.

It pains me to admit this now. As someone who tries not to ever feel that way. You know, jealousy is just a feeling I'm not really interested in [00:12:00] having. But as a kid, it was really hard to see somebody having everything that I wanted and couldn't have and that I kind of had the opposite.

And so I just had this kind of quiet passion for horses. And then I remember coming upon the field, and these horses were running, and it was at that moment that it was just completely like my circumstances. My situation as a teen runaway, dealing with everything I was dealing with.

It all fell away, and it was just the horses, and it was such a beautiful moment to be there with them. And then, so, later now I'm having panic attacks and trying to just get out the door to get to therapy, and I drove by a horse stable and pulled over and walked in and was like, do you give lessons?

It was like, [00:13:00] who is this? Who am I? I don't even know what's happening. I was doing these things and observing myself from a distance. And they put me on a horse named Applesauce, and we were probably moving like maybe a hundredth of a mile an hour. Like we were barely moving. Like I was just mostly sitting on top of this animal, but I was like, I ride horses now!

**Donna Ferris:** I love that.

**Rita Zoey Chin:** But it did definitely light the spark. And there's something about, I guess, because they're, they're flight animals

I was like, oh, I know you.

So could relate to that.

**Donna Ferris:** And there's also a persona of being a horse rider too, right? To become involved in dressage? To be a part of that, there's a whole thing there that it felt like it kind of led you further and further to face more and more things that you might have been afraid of,

**Rita Zoey Chin:** That was kind of an accident. I never thought, “Oh, I want to do dressage.” Dressage really teaches you how to listen to the [00:14:00] horse.

So the horse is communicating in all these subtle ways and you're communicating with it. Before I started to learn, I would just look at people on horses and just be like, oh, great. That person's riding a horse. And I had no idea what that actually meant. I thought you just get on the horse carries you.

I had no idea that just by squeezing the reins a little bit, the horse can feel that and respond. Or just the slight shift of your seat in the saddle makes all the difference in the world.

And so it was a very intimate relationship. It taught me a lot about balance, but the main thing about it is that the horse I fell in love with, Claret, was very, very spooky, and he had a trauma history of his own. And it didn't matter; I loved him. I just loved him.

From the moment I met him, I was like, yep, this is the guy. He was huge and probably not the best choice for a novice rider, because I had only been taking lessons for six months and but he was my guy. And I would see him, so afraid. And in [00:15:00] helping him face his fears, it kind of knocked me out of my own.

Teaching him to be brave, taught me to be brave, if that makes sense.

**Donna Ferris:** It totally makes sense. I think the joy of the story is watching that happen. And one of the things you end up saying, “Simply we change by trying to change. We heal by trying to heal. We are strong when we stay faithful to those few words, “I know what I need.”

**Rita Zoey Chin:** Yes. Maybe it's just a part of our culture, but that when we are feeling unwell, in whatever way we're feeling unwell, we just want the cure.

I have an infection. I take antibiotics and it makes it go away. And that's the end of it. And I think a lot of times that's what we want. We want to just know, okay, what do I have to do to get rid of these, these panic attacks? They are not cool. They're ruining my life. Just what do I need to do?

And then I tried to do the things I was told to do. You know, I tried the CBT, I tried the other types of therapy. And when it [00:16:00] didn't work, I thought, okay, now what? And so it forced me to reconnect with myself because part of what I think had happened right before I started having the panic attacks is that

we moved, and I was in a place where I knew no one. I had no support, and I was so busy taking care of my then-husband, my dogs, and this new life that I forgot myself in the process. But I always had a very strong intuition and a strong sense of what I needed. And so that's what I was kind of forced me to say okay, none of this is working.

And so just getting quiet and pulling over when I want to pull over and going and riding a horse. I don't know anyone who would have prescribed that for me at the time. But trusting that was the right thing to do. Although, you know, there is equine therapy. So maybe somebody would have prescribed that.

I don't know. But in any case, it was that sense of like, this is what I need to do.

**Donna Ferris:** Yeah, and you just knew it. It's an interesting idea, like your body kind [00:17:00] of took you out of that car and, almost, into that building. It was instinctive. What's interesting about the horse is you picked an animal that has a similar state, right? And, as always, looking, sussing things out. It's just fascinating, really, how that worked.

**Rita Zoey Chin:** Yeah, yeah. He's just an incredible teacher, and still, you know, he's an old man now, so we're all getting old.

**Donna Ferris:** We're all getting older.

**Rita Zoey Chin:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Donna Ferris:** So one area I do want to hit is your description of the mother relationship that you had. I don't think I've ever said it here, but I say it a lot that I think a lot of times memoirs are mother stories. We all have these kind of central stories sometimes around our mothers.

Can you talk a little bit about the part where you were always looking for the mother you deserved, and then the decision maybe post that.

**Rita Zoey Chin:** One therapist I went to once said, you have a contaminated feminine river

I was like, I beg your [00:18:00] pardon? And whoa. Yeah, he is throwing a little Jung at me there. And I was like, okay. He said, you know, basically, my mother had all but ruined me.

I'm like, what are you doing? The water's polluted. Like, how do you live? You know? I think that when I was panicking, it was something I very much wanted.

I felt so helpless. And so alone. And I had always kind of craved the idea of mother. You know, the mother you see on TV, the Brady Bunch, whatever, I gleaned from my friends. It was just this composite of what mother was, and I just wanted that. I wanted that love.

I wanted to be taken care of. I'm the kind of person who's usually taking care of everybody else. And so, in that moment, I was just. It's so flat out. I just really needed care in it. I was literally looking for a mother. Like I would go to the grocery store and like, look in the produce section.

She looks like she could be a good mother. I was so regressed at that time that when I was almost back to my childhood fantasy when I would run away, I would always run away hoping [00:19:00] that I would find a mom. Like, somebody would be like, oh, you were just the daughter I've always wanted.

And, instead what I found was a lot of men trying to take advantage of teenage girls on the run, but I never lost that. And so it kind of came back full strength while it was panicking. But as I started to face the panic and learn the lessons it had to teach me.

I started to realize that, actually, now it's too late. And I don't want a mother. I don't want that mother. I don't want a mother to come and make my bed. I didn't want to be infantilized. I didn't want that anymore. What I needed to do was to step up and be. Not a mother to myself, but a friend and to be with myself, to take care of myself, and I needed to, to grieve.

I think that that's one of the opportunities that panic brought into my life was okay, now you're in a safe enough place in your life where you can actually grieve the parents you never had and never will have. And that's okay because there's an empty [00:20:00] place there, but you can put other things in those spaces. It doesn't have to be, only that.

**Donna Ferris:** You did such a great job of talking about that journey, and it's so healthy to, after all of that, decide I'm good. I'm good. I'm gonna go forward now.

Because it's hard. A lot of people can relate to that desire for that mother that you don't get.

**Rita Zoey Chin:** Yeah, and just accepting it and, I think that, was, I guess, the moment where I pushed myself into, into new territory and, and grew.

**Donna Ferris:** I think you're right. I think you grow your way out of it.

One more thing I'm gonna take from the book, which is one that I totally related to, is:

“You're laughing, and I'm sorry. I didn't mean to laugh. It's not funny what you said,” and then in spite of myself I laugh again.

“It's okay,” he reassures. “That was a nervous laugh and just below the laughter. my friend are the tears.”

**Rita Zoey Chin:** Buckwhere. Yeah. That was [00:21:00] when I was 15 and in the last of I guess eight institutions that I that I lived in Yeah, he was right

**Donna Ferris:** I've never heard that.

It's such a great piece of wisdom right there. Because I think that's really true.

**Rita Zoey Chin:** It is; we have all these different mechanisms to protect ourselves, to cover up the pain, and sometimes people who, like, in a moment like that, he had actually confided something pretty painful and surprising to me, and I was young and maybe not fully equipped to handle what he told me.

So I laughed, but when he said that, I, you know, obviously, I never forgot it because here it is all these years later, it really stuck with me, and more than that, I think what stuck with me is just being in a place where adults were safe, and I could have conversations like that. That was the first time in my life that I had any consistency.[00:22:00]

**Donna Ferris:** Yeah, and it seems like such a gift that even when you went back to your mom after that, you were able to leave, and then that was kind of it. You were able to go on a path to college and all of that, which was a hard path no matter what.

It's a wonderful memoir, folks if you haven't already been able to tell that I loved it. But maybe let's take a moment to talk about your other book, which, as I mentioned to Zoey beforehand I already bought because I was so excited about the memoir. So tell me a little bit about that book.

**Rita Zoey Chin:** Well, it's about a young woman who on her 21st birthday has decided to end her life. She was abandoned by her mother. Oh no, is every book a mother's? Oh, wait a minute. Hold on. It's not just memoirs. Hold on.

I don't think the novel I'm writing now is a mother's story. Thanks. But yeah, she was abandoned by her mother when she was six years [00:23:00] old and had been waiting for her return because she said, I'll, I'll be back and never came back. And she ended up living in a small town and being an outcast and just being really dreadfully alone.

She was born in a carnival. And so she was exposed to a lot of darkness as a young child. So death to her, isn't necessarily an terrible, scary thing. And she was like, yeah, I guess I'm going to do that.

But somebody else had other plans for her. And so she gets a package delivered to her door, and it is the ashes of her neighbor, the remains of her neighbor, who she barely knew, a kind of curmudgeonly woman, photographer. But there's a letter with the remains, and basically, I knew your mother, and I will tell you what I know.

If you scatter my ashes at these nine very specific places across the U. S. and Canada. Yeah, so we know that she goes on a [00:24:00] journey because, obviously, the book would be over on the first couple of pages.

**Donna Ferris:** Yeah on page five.

**Rita Zoey Chin:** Yeah, well, maybe not. Maybe she would go on it in some other way, but Essie throws down the gauntlet, and Leah rises to the occasion, and so she goes on this, essentially this treasure hunt, finding out what happened to her mother and finding out kind of who she is in the process. I

**Donna Ferris:** Can't wait to read it. You've got a treasure hunt and a road trip, which are two of my favorites.

**Rita Zoey Chin:** That's awesome.

**Donna Ferris:** I can't wait.

So, what did I miss? What should I have asked? Or what would you like to share with listeners before we go?

**Rita Zoey Chin:** Great question. If I had to just say anything to someone listening, if it's someone who is struggling with panic or anxiety, I just want to say that you are stronger than, you know, in this moment.

And we all have within us the strength to move through our fears. I [00:25:00] still look at it as an opportunity, and I would not trade my panic attacks for anything.

**Donna Ferris:** Well said. Thank you so, so much for writing your story and publishing it, which is not an easy feat, and for being here with us, with me today. I think it will be of great benefit.

**Rita Zoey Chin:** Thank you, Donna. I appreciate it. It was great to chat with you.

**Donna Ferris:** That's all for today. If you want to learn more about Zoey and her books, those links will be in the show notes. I hope this episode was helpful. If it was, please subscribe, drop a review, or share it with your friends and family.

That's the best way to get it in the hands of those who may benefit. And if my daughters Sienna and Sylvie are listening, I just want you to know how proud I am of you. And I love you so much. Bye now.