

Adrian Todd Zuniga
Founder and Host of Literary Death Match
Interview by Sue Staats

In spite of its name, no actual death happens in Literary Death Match — unless you count nearly dying of laughter! Yes, writers read serious work, and yes, judges pay careful attention to it. But the format is all fun. You could think of it as the love child of “The Gong Show” and “America’s Got Talent,” but nicer. Because the man who originated Literary Death Match 17 years ago, Adrian Todd Zuniga, believes that everyone’s a winner in this contest, particularly the audience. It’s no surprise that Literary Death Match has been officially designated by the *Los Angeles Times* as “The most entertaining reading series ever.”

We’re lucky to be bringing Literary Death Match to Sacramento, and I was even luckier to catch up with Adrian on Zoom at his home in Australia. He’s the founder of LDM, true, but he’s also a novelist, screenwriter, film director and podcaster (links to info about this and the LDM Sizzle Reel below). But I thought that maybe our audience might not be familiar with Literary Death Match and that’s what I wanted to talk with him about.

Edited for length and clarity.

Sue: Adrian, I know you're a writer and a performer and you excel in many creative fields, that Literary Death Match is only one of the hats you wear. Before we talk about how it works, how about giving our readers a few reasons why they should jump up right now and [buy a ticket](#).

Adrian: Basically, there's one core reason, which is: it's going to be the greatest night of everyone's life! For everybody in attendance, plus everybody participating — especially me — it's just really going to be extraordinary on an almost incomprehensible level.

But just to give some other reasons, this will be, I believe, our 72nd city, maybe our 73rd. And one of the cool things that happens when we get to a place like Sacramento is we gather local talent, bring them together. It's a showcase of how amazing Sacramento is. So beyond having your mind blown and, like, your elbow pads just ripping off your jacket sleeve, you'll also have the pride of thinking, wow, I live here, and these are amazing people.

I've never once been to Sacramento, but when we started talking about doing the show there and researching it, I was like, man, there's some amazing writers there. And then we were talking with Stories on Stage Sacramento and they told us about all the great theater people and comedians and we knew Sacramento would be great.

Sue: You're right, Sacramento is brimming with talent. Adrian, I'm curious about what inspired you to create Literary Death Match 17 years ago. Was it one too many boring bookstore readings?

Adrian: There are really three pillars. The first was my experience at literary readings. I was living in New York and I went to a lot of readings, that was my community. And there would always be a host who said, “We’ve got a seven-minute time limit, we’ve got these three writers, it’s gonna be great.” So the first reader takes seven minutes, the second reads for five minutes. And the third reader reads for 22 minutes and everybody’s just like, “Oh, my Lord, please stop, we would have bought the book at the fourth minute, even the 11th minute, but now we just want to never see you again.” And that is why we have a time of five minutes for each reading. Which means as an audience member, you can relax, because if you love it, you're like, I can't wait to hear more from this person. And if you don't like it, then, well, it's only five minutes. So that was the first thing.

The second thing goes back to what you said, which is readings can be boring. And we wanted to create a call-and-response kind of atmosphere, so we added judges, which means that even if you don't love the reading, or if you do love the reading, you're going to be entertained because you just want to hear what the judges have to say about it. The judges are generally there for comic effect, a sort of intelligent whimsy, so there's that entertainment value.

The first show we ever did, we had Moby the musician as a judge, which brought in people who wondered, why is he judging literature? So that became part of the fun. We've had an extraordinary array of judges from around the world.

And then the third thing was that we didn't want to hurt any writer's feelings. You know, writers are sensitive people and we get our butts kicked by all the rejection letters and we didn't want to add to that, so we created a game to end it all. So, if you didn't make the finals, you're grateful that you didn't have to be up there, you know, playing a crazy game, trying to guess the title of a famous book by its one-star Amazon review, or stumbling around blindfolded trying to pin the moustache on Hemingway. It makes it end in a fun way, you know. More of a show, kind of absurd. You get some intelligent stuff, you get some laughs.

Sue: What a great way to get people to pay attention to literature in a way that's really easy to take! And now I'm wondering about the origination of the name, Literary Death Match. I'm hoping there hasn't been any actual death involved — and because this about writing and writers, I'm including metaphoric death.

Adrian: So, let's see, the name. We were just sitting around eating sushi and my girlfriend at the time — a really good friend who's a comedian and a comedic writer — said, "It's like a literary death match." And we said, you know, we'll take a couple days, think of a better title. But after three or four days, we realized it worked because it gives a volume to the show. It'd be like *we're gonna kill people*, which people love until they're glad we don't.

Nobody's ever actually died. There was one show where something extraordinarily beautiful and sad happened. At a show in LA, [Sarah Thyre](#) was reading a beautiful piece about [David Rakoff](#), who had been struggling with cancer. She read just this very moving piece about how he had fought and fought and how it was okay for him to go, that he had been so good to people. And at the intermission, she came up to me in tears and said, "He just died, I have to go." She made the finals and wasn't there and Jill Solloway's son competed for her and I'm pretty sure he won the show. It was so devastating and also so beautiful.

Sue: What an amazing, heartbreaking story. I'm kind of embarrassed that I was expecting something funny, but that's a real-life thing. Thanks for telling it. So, there will be a camera crew at the Sacramento event. What's going on with that? Do you always shoot video of the show or is this unusual?

Adrian: I have a friend who's a documentarian and he's done, like, some shorter-form stuff. He's worked with the show for years, producing and stage managing, and he called me and said, "Why don't we do a tour documentary? Nobody knows what it's like behind the scenes, the work that you do and how you're going all over the world. You're not getting rich off this and it's crazy, the bootstrap element of it."

Mostly it'll just be a tour documentary following me and I said, okay, that seems ridiculous and kind of fun. We can't shoot all the shows because our budget is, like, \$72, but he's coming to San Antonio with me on the 13th and 14th of April and then I'm going to fly to Sacramento, where my friend Nate the

cinematographer is. We'll spend the night and shoot the Sacramento show and then in October we're gonna do four shows. LA, New York, Boston and San Francisco is the plan and then we'll cobble together the footage into something sane.

There's so much history — we've been doing this for 17 years, over 525 times. We've got all kinds of little stories, like why I always say "Call your mother, she misses you" at the end of the show. That, plus the talent level we've had and the funny things that have happened. It'll be nice to record it.

Sue: I know that Literary Death Match is supposed to be fun, but is there a serious underbelly?

Adrian: Absolutely. The title is a total trick to make people say, "I'll try that, it sounds fun and wacky." And by the end of it, they're hooked. I've had people come up and tell me how their friend dragged them to the show and it sounded stupid and annoying, like you're trying to make books fun. And then they tell me they can't wait to read two of the authors and they thought one of the judges was so funny!

I love gathering people. One of my skill sets is getting brilliant and funny and weird people together and having people say, "Wow, I didn't know that person existed and now I'm in love with him."

It's an alternative to the person who feels like they're watching too much TV. They need to go to the bookstore, they need to start reading, so they go to the bookstore and buy *Ulysses* or something and after two pages they say, "I'm going back to watching 'Breaking Bad.'" Because *Ulysses* is a great book but it's really hard. It's like teaching someone geometry when they haven't learned to add yet. People often think literature is all about Hemingway and Fitzgerald, but we introduce contemporary writing from people who write things that are meaningful to us in our lives — stories that matter, immigrant stories, Mom and Dad stories, funny stories about ordinary life. We package it like, *don't worry about the literature, you're gonna have fun*. And then we hit them with four different authors and they're just like, Wow, that's great!

Sue: Can writers and judges participate more than once?

Adrian: Yes! Often, we meet new people, like in the Sacramento show. But these people will be at book festivals and we'll say to them that we'll be there too and have them be part of the show. So, we definitely recycle people because it's always a new audience. Sometimes readers will graduate to judging if they're hilarious or super smart — which of course they all are!

Sue: So, at the end, someone's crowned the winner. Is there a real crown? Does the winner get anything more than bragging rights?

Adrian: Well, no, there's no official crown. That's just the language we use to celebrate the win. But the winner does get a medal that is valued at \$7 and it's engraved on the back with their name and *Literary Death Match, Sacramento Champion*.

And I always say there are two types of winners — the people who wear the medal all night and the people who take it off immediately. I'm totally biased towards people who wear it all night because I just think it's hilarious to walk around with a medal on your neck that says Literary Death Match. It just cracks me up.

Sue: So, what about holding a Literary Death Match All-Star competition?

Adrian: We've thought about it. We've thought about doing a state battle, but it's hard because how do select the contestants when the winner is decided by a game? Or do you just pick the best? Like, what

does that even *mean*? We think everybody's the best. And if we did just winners, we've got 530 of them now. So, which ones?

I will tell you, we've been optioned for TV. We've got a producer and a strategy and we're pushing it along slowly. I guess that would be our All-Star event because we'd be bringing the very best.

Sue: Of the 500-plus shows you've done, is there one that's your favorite — a most memorable event?

Adrian: Yes, absolutely: Los Angeles Episode 42. It was the closest we've ever come to the perfect show. But the most memorable judging was by [Stephen Tobolowsky](#), a character actor you might remember as the Ned Ryerson noodlehead from "Groundhog Day." He was our intangibles judge and he was hilarious with our first three readers. But the fourth reader read one funny poem and then one that was very quiet and moving. Everyone expected Stephen to be funny but he really understood the moment and talked about how beautiful and moving the poem was and everyone thought, Yes, that's how we feel. It was just a very cool way to reflect on the tenderness and the sweetness of that moment. That's happened several times over the course of the show. When a judge is really good, they realize when they shouldn't be funny. I always love when that happens.

Sue: Has Literary Death Match changed over time?

Adrian: The biggest thing that's changed is the time limit for reading. We started at 10 minutes, now five minutes is the standard. And that's just to keep the show just, like, really, really tight, within the range of an hour or an hour and five or ten minutes.

Another change for me is that at the beginning, it was just going up on stage to host and be funny and entertaining and introducing the readers. And then there was the realization that, oh, this is a show about literature. Every joke that I say in the beginning should be literary, like, it should have a tie to a book or an author. So now, I try and find tidbits and facts and things that are really interesting that I can turn into a joke.

I used to do a thing on TikTok, a stupid literary fact of the day. Literally, one fact, just for fun. I stopped doing it to finish my novel and thought everyone would quit following me but my follower count has tripled or quadrupled. I guess they're still out there!

Sue: One of the things I love most is that the champion is determined not by literary or performance excellence but by winning a silly game. Who makes up those games and have you ever had a writer refuse to participate because they felt it was, oh, possibly undignified?

Adrian: We have. It was in Dallas and we had two or three finalists and two winners. And I gave them footballs because of the Dallas Cowboys. I thought it would be funny. They had to hit three targets at three different distances and one of the authors said, before the show started, "I don't want to participate. I'm going to try and lose so I don't make the finale." But after the show, she came up to me and said, "I wanted it so bad! I was trying so hard. I couldn't believe it — I was thinking, who am I?" It was really funny.

But there's an energy that comes with the finales. The crowd gets into it and I make it fun and then all of a sudden, people are doing ridiculous things.

Sue: Who comes up with the silly games?

Adrian: It's pretty much me at this point. My fiancée helps me, just listening to jokes and helping with finales. Nowadays when we make a new one, a lot of thought goes into it. Like this new one, where I just list off a series of award-winning authors and the finalists have to repeat the names back to me. It's a memory game and I go back and forth between the finalists. It took a while to make that dramatic enough and faster. It's funny because I will say a name and the finalist will forget it immediately, sort of like those man-on-the-street interviews where someone is asked who the president is and they say Abraham Lincoln. It's funny and kind of embarrassing — but not too embarrassing. We all forget when we're put on the spot!

Sue: I know that you encourage audience participation and encourage the writers to bring a cheering section. So, since it is a death match, have there ever been fights between factions, like you might see at a soccer match? People getting really excited when they cheer on their person?

Adrian: Nope, no real violence. But once in Chicago, where I crowned [Major Jackson](#) the winner because he spelled Dostoyevsky correctly and [Roxane Gay](#) missed it, I was putting the medal on him when someone from the audience yelled, "There's an alternate spelling for the name, depending on the Russian or the English!" And I said, "Oh, my God, you're right." So I stripped him of the metal, we continued the game and then Roxane ended up winning. And it was quite hilarious and just ridiculous. But people were actually up in arms about the spelling because I said, "Well, it's too late." And people were yelling, "No, it's not fair!" It was quite a dramatic moment.

Sue: You had to switch to online during the pandemic lockdown. How hard was it for you to pivot to that? Like everyone, Stories on Stage had to go on Zoom and it was quite a different show. How did it affect Literary Death Match?

Adrian: In a word, I hated it. Because in a live performance, there's something intimate and wonderful for the people participating. Particularly in LA, we had these extraordinary people participating, famous actors, wonderful authors. For an author to tell an actor how much they like their work and for the actor to tell the author the same thing is incredible, and all of them hanging out before the show, everyone getting comfortable and laughing, is such a nice moment.

And so when we would do it on Zoom, you know, there are eight windows open. And if you spoke at the wrong time, you were speaking over somebody and everyone just thought, Okay, well, then I'm just not going to speak. It lacked community. So I'm really glad to be doing live shows again.

I think we only did three virtual shows. We should have done way more — there was opportunity — but I was thinking how much the pandemic sucks for everybody and I thought I'd just take a step back. In a way, the choices were overwhelming. I mean, we go to Northern California, we pick from authors and judges there. But on Zoom, we know 3,000 authors, who do we pick? There wasn't any grounding for our author or judge selection.

Sue: Adrian, you're at every LDM event as the emcee. Is it still fun for you? And can you see a time in the future when you won't do it anymore?

Adrian: Well, there was a time when I thought the tread might be off the tires and that was before the pandemic, actually, maybe a couple months before. I was feeling like it was more work than pleasure, I wasn't getting the good feeling after the show that I used to get. We were planning to take a step back and re-frame and re-work the show and just take some time. But there was something about the mental impact of the pandemic and realizing the preciousness of what we have in our lives — it just totally reinvigorated me. And I saw the purpose of the show. I love the purpose of the show.

So now I'm 100% enthusiasm again. And that's really cool because I was definitely under 20% enthusiasm, thinking, "This is so much work and I don't know if anybody cares." But now, it feels great and people love it.

I do see a world where this could change, if we get the TV show. At some point, if we get funding, I'd like to do fewer shows on a bigger scale. But I'm really bad at getting funding or angel investors or whatever gets us across the finish line!

Sue: That would definitely open new doors and change things for you. Last question: since this is a celebrity interview, I'll give you the red carpet question: What are you wearing to the Sacramento event? According to a posting I read online, you're known for your stage wardrobe. So, Adrian, spill: Which outfit will it be?

Adrian: Great question. I'm considering a baby blue-ish velvet tuxedo, but then, there's this purple suit that I've got. It's a reddish purple. I got that one because my mom's favorite color was purple. So I like wearing it when I do shows for the first time. But then, there's also this glittery blue tuxedo jacket — I need to bring that out. I'll know within a couple of days because I've got the Melbourne show. I'm trying to figure out what I'm going to wear on Friday for that. But yeah, it's fun. I do need to get back into getting crazy things made. Because some of the stuff that you would think would look so terrible or so gauche ends up being the stuff that works. It's pretty wild to have discovered that.

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Sue: It's a week after this conversation and I know you're all hanging by your fingernails wondering where Adrian's sartorial muse led him. Well, according to a tweet last week, he wore ... the purple suit!

"Y'know how Queen Elizabeth wore brooches imbued with meaning? It's a bit the same with what suits I wear to Literary Death Match. Tonight for the Melbourne debut, I'll be wearing my purple suit, black tie, checkered mauve pocket square, 'coordinates' cufflinks."

So now all that's left is, what's he wearing in Sacramento? We'll be watching Twitter closely ... Meanwhile, here are some other links. Enjoy!

[Literary Death Match Sizzle Reel](#)

[Adrian's website](#)

[LDM Podcast](#)

[Review of "Hold Me Don't Touch Me" film](#)