

UNC World View  
Connecting Conversations: A World View Podcast

Episode 7 – Sam and Dan Angus Morrison – *Backpacks and Baguettes*

January 2021

Interview by Charlé LaMonica, Director of UNC World View

**Charlé LaMonica:** Welcome to *Connecting Conversations*. I'm Charlé LaMonica, Director of UNC World View and we're so glad you joined us today. This day, Monday, December 7 2020, I'm in Chapel Hill at the University of North Carolina and joined on Zoom by Sam Morrison and his father, Dan Angus Morrison. What's different about this podcast—and we're really excited about—is that it's a conversation with a young student, a middle-schooler. Sam, as a 13 year old boy now living with his family in Washington D.C., just published a book entitled *Backpacks and Baguettes*, which chronicles his many travels with his family when they lived abroad. It was written before COVID-19 and records a time when people could easily travel and children from different countries could easily meet face-to-face, which we hope will happen again before too long. In the book, one thing that really struck me was that Sam writes, “Every place has people who work and play and laugh and cry and every place can be the best and the worst at the same time, and every place has children.” Sam, I'd like to welcome you so much to World View.”

**Sam Morrison:** Thank you.

CL: And, Dan, thank you so much for joining us today with your son. Really appreciate this opportunity to talk to both of you.

**Dan Morrison:** We're delighted to be with you.

CL: Well, as we begin, I was wondering if you two would provide us with a little background. Can you tell us where you lived and how long you lived outside the United States? And then why you decided to write this book and how you go about writing the book? How did you make time to write it?

SM: So I was born in Georgetown Hospital, which is not too far from my school now. I moved to Paris when I was three years old. I lived there for six and a half years and I moved back to D.C. three years ago. So when I was about 10 years old. And we wanted to make this book because we felt that I particularly have gone to a lot of places around the globe and we wanted to put it in one [place]. So the way we came up with the idea is we were driving an elderly man, a neighbor of ours called John. He had to get chemotherapy because he had cancer. So we would drive him several mornings in the week. And one day I said something and something in my dad's brain just clicked and we—the funny thing is we can't remember what I said—but he kind of said to himself, “you know, if we don't capture what's in the mind of a 12-year-old (because that's the age I was then), then we might never be able to catch it ever.” So, I think it was interesting because we—we can't remember what I said—I can't remember what I said, but that's how we came up with the idea of the book.

CL: Oh, that's terrific. And I'm sure that your friend John really enjoyed hearing your stories.

SM: Yeah, he did. He actually passed away a few months ago, but he was an interesting person. He would explain some things to me. He was a Quaker. So, at that time, I didn't really know what a Quaker was, but he explained to me what a Quaker is. I learned a lot of lessons from him.

DM: I think we learned from each other because it was three generations of men in a car together riding around telling stories. John was in his 80s, Sam was 12 at the time, I'm in the middle. And sometimes Sam would hold court, sometimes John would hold court; sometimes I would. It was an interesting way to exchange ideas, trapped in a car together, and I'm so pleased that it happened. It's too bad John's no longer with us, but it was really nice to be able to have those conversations in and get these stories out of Sam.

CL: That's a wonderful way to start our conversation today, to really have that setting of the power of story and how sharing stories with each other can make life so much more interesting and give to people. So you mentioned in your book, Sam, that kids are the same worldwide. I especially liked hearing about different languages that you heard, but also the commonalities, you saw with sports and you told me you play soccer, but tell me about some of the common things that you saw in your travels with school, family time together, sports.

SM: Well, to answer your question about how kids are the same and different. I think that they're the same because I feel all kids want the same things and have the same attitude towards things. And there's a lot of things that are different about them: language, how they see the world, how they were raised, what schools they go to and there's just a lot of differences, but the main similarity is probably their actions and what they do. And what they think.

CL: Well, that's great. When you were traveling and met up with other kids your age, did you ever play any kind of games together or anything like that?

SM: Well I don't have any friends that I know that I met in the places that I went now. But I certainly did meet a lot of kids. I was just at that age where it was hard to keep in touch with them because I didn't have a phone. Any kind of way to get in contact with them. We went quite a lot of kids, the most places where you met kids were probably Vietnam, Thailand and Mauritius. I certainly did play with a lot of kids, but over our holidays I tended to hang out with my family, more than the people around me. So I still observed everything, it's just I wanted to keep to who I know so my family.

DM: You had some linguistic differences as well. That didn't allow you to communicate, maybe, as well as you'd like. I have one memory of you kind of playing soccer with some kids in Vietnam. That was interesting. And then in Thailand. Some kids there—it sounds

cliché, but I mean, kids regardless of language, learn how to play with each other pretty quickly.

CL: Absolutely. So, when you were traveling through all these different countries and there are many that you have in your publication. And you also have some ways that students that have this book can color—you have really interesting pages of drawings that students can color. I'm curious about what kind of decisions did you make in picking those particular images in the book for coloring book that are tied in with the stories. How did you put those images in there?

SM: So for every chapter, we tried to find a graffiti image for every place, but we couldn't find one for everything. So for some chapters we included different pictures. The way we picked them out was we have a lot of picture books upstairs that have—each book is dedicated to a place that we went and we kind of brought them all down and said, you know, we picked what pictures, we are going to do. We picked which ones we thought were the best. We definitely did struggle with trying to pick the pictures because there's just so many for every place, but in the end, we did it. And I think the picture books were a big part of writing this book.

CL: I'm really curious if you can tell a little bit about how you—the process, how you wrote the book, how the two of you write it together.

Dan Morrison: Well, that was that was part of it—looking at photographs to reimagine where we had been, of course, and the reason we chose graffiti is Sam and I think both felt that it's so much better than a postcard to really understand a place. There's an actual person who lives there who's drawing that street art or the mural on the side of a house or a building, or the graffiti. That's what prompted us to do that. And then we started writing, if I remember, and we realized we need a formula, we can't just do stream of consciousness with this. We wanted each chapter to be sort of the same formula. And that was really instructive and helped us efficiently write our thoughts down on paper. So each chapter is in threes. It's Sam's impressions of a place; second, food; and third, children. What's going on lives of children and how is that different or similar than what was going on in his life, and that helped us a lot I think.

CL: I can just imagine having photograph books around picking out favorite photos and then organizing it. How did you determine which places that you wanted to focus on and write about since you've been to so many different ones?

SM: Well, we only didn't include three or four places that we've been to. We included quite a lot of them. I think the hardest part was how much we could write because we can't just write you know 10 pages on one chapter because it's just too much. So we had to kind of level it down. I think the two main places or the main place that we didn't include was North Carolina. I don't know why we didn't include it, but to me, I think it's because it feels like a second home. And when I go there, it's only one place that I go to. I'm not exploring the entirety of the state.

CL: Well, we're glad you feel as though North Carolina is your second home. That's a good thing. That's a good thing. So as you as you were writing this, and you have this formula. Did you set aside a certain amount of time every week or every day, or how much time did it take you to put this together? I'm just thinking of future writers sitting in classrooms and what they'd like to know how you did it.

SM: We put in around 30 minutes every day and occasionally, some days we didn't do it because we had something going on, but mostly every day we worked on it. Sometimes longer than 30 minutes sometimes shorter than 30 minutes. I think some advice I would give to somebody who's starting to write a book is you have to work on it as much as you can, whenever you have time. Because if you don't, it's not going to get it done. And it's one thing writing a book, but actually like carrying on with it and getting it published is I think the hardest part. So you just need to keep working on it or it won't get done.

CL: Sounds great. So as you have gone through this process working on this, the two of you together as a father son, and just reliving those memories of your travels. And I'm just curious about what you learned about yourself in reflection at the travel? What did you learn about yourself thinking about—you were quite young and you started writing when you were 11 or 12?

SM: Eleven, I finished it when I was 12.

CL: Okay, so what did you think about in terms of a reflection of your experiences?

SM: Well, you're right. It certainly does date back to a long time ago. Since when I was three years old. I think I've learned that I love to travel, certainly, and that I love exploring outside where I live. So other countries. And I think the main thing I've learned about myself is that I'm a very outgoing person. I like to do things that are outside my comfort zone. So, you know, some of the places that I went to were a little scary because they're so far away. So when I went to Africa, I was about, you know, eight years old, nine years old. I was a little scared because you know from Paris to South Africa, that's a long way away. So I didn't know what to expect, or anything like that, and certainly with every place I was kind of like that. But as I got older and older, I kind of recognized the pattern and I got used to it.

CL: That is a great thing to learn about yourself, because I think adults struggle with being uncomfortable in new situations. And so that's just a that's a life lesson if you realize that about yourself in terms of "it's okay to get outside your comfort zone." I'm really struck by the fact that you went to these different places, you really loved learning and you're curious about it and then you had this idea—the two of you with your Dad's insight—to record it, to write it down. So I'd really like to talk to you again, a few years from now to see other publications that you might write or places that you've gone, would be kind of fun. So why did you want to share your story with young people? I mean, you could have—the story—you could have written it, and kept it just within your family as a family story. What made you want to share it with other young people, because it is, you know,

it's a coloring aspect. Really all ages can start very young looking at the book. So I'm curious why you wanted that audience.

SM: I think the book's meant for everybody, but I think the main age would be from seven to 12. I hope that it maybe inspires other young writers to maybe do something like this, not necessarily about travel but just write about something that you like and I also hope it inspires people to travel because I think that everybody should be able to travel and everybody should be able to explore and I know some people and kids can't because they don't have the money, which is sad because I think I'm lucky to have gone to all these places. I've always said this, that I think traveling is one of the most important things about life. I feel like it's on top of a lot of other things. So I just hope it inspires people to write something of their own and to travel.

CL: Thank you so much.

DM: If I could add to that. I think one of the things that we've learned through this process of the writing and in deciding what's in the book and then getting to the point of publishing was, you kind of have to go with the flow and that's similar to what happens when you when you travel. So for example, in our case, the book was due to be published in the spring or June of this year, but of course with the pandemic things changed and distribution channels like Amazon, for example, moved a lot of new release books later to the year so that they could deal with more urgent items that they sell for example. So publisher came to us and we were initially disappointed by that, but it's actually been extremely interesting to see the reactions that we're getting from people around the world about the book saying one of the things that they like about it is it's helping them remember what it was like to live in the world before the pandemic. And what it was like to smell the world and see the world and touch the world in a way that we, of course, can't do now surrounded by our four walls. So that was actually a blessing in a strange way and laterally that's one thing that I really appreciate about us doing this book is everybody's stuck at home or stuck somewhere. And this is allowing them kids or otherwise to imagine the world outside their walls.

CL: But that is so true. And we will get back. We will travel again and you we all want to stay hopeful and know that that will happen but this is a wonderful opportunity for others to read and recall those times. I love the way you embrace the differences and your curiosity, Sam. And, Dan, I really appreciate you joining in and sharing out how the two of you did this together and also encouraging your son to right. I think that's another wonderful aspect of the two of you together. So I've no doubt that there'll be some more family travels in the future. I think it's both in both of your DNA. But I also want to close with something that you recently sent me, which is a musical piece that you wrote, and I thought it would be fun to end this podcast with that music. But before we begin it, can you tell us a little bit about this "Han River Breeze" that you wrote and how we can end the story this time, together with music.

SM: So it's called "Han River Breeze" because it reminded both of us of the time when we rented a motorcycle in Vietnam, and we went riding around Vietnam. We went to market.

We went to churches, we went through forests. We went by a lot of things. And one thing that I noticed about it was very—it was loud and it sounded adventurous and ongoing for me. It wasn't really one of those musics [sic] where it was calm and relaxing. And certainly when I was on the bike ride, I felt excited and a kind of adrenaline. And then the song was actually for a school project that to me—my dad helped me a little bit with it, but we didn't really expect it to be something good. We didn't really expect it to be, you know, like actually somewhat decent. So it was kind of a mistake that we made it. So, what do you think?

DM: Yeah, but it was a good mistake. I'm glad we did in the end. And it's something that you and I've talked about maybe continuing as we continue to do a book tour around this book is maybe add music that reminds us of the places that we were lucky to visit and the emotions that came out. Not just what you saw and felt and smell, but sounds as well. And when I listened to this, it sends me right back to Vietnam for sure. I don't know about you.

SM: No, it certainly does to me. And also, it does remind me of—it reminds me of Thailand in South Africa too, but mostly Vietnam. Vietnam is the center of it.

CL: Sam Morrison, Dan Morrison thank you so much for joining today. We really appreciate this. And we're going to end with this mistake—the happy mistake that really helps us think about the world that that will be able to visit again, traveling all through the world through your book, other books, other music and so for right now I want to thank you again for joining us. And thank you for sharing your memories. And I look forward to seeing where your travels, taking the future. So, in closing, this is UNC World View *Connecting Conversations*. Goodbye. Until next time, thank you very much.