

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Fiza Pathan in Conversation with Steve Goldsmith

On *Dear Dairy: A Neurodivergent Coming-of-Age Diary: The Story of Justin Case*

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Participants: Fiza Pathan (Interviewer/Host) and Steve Goldsmith (Author/Educator)

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Accessibility Note: This transcript has been editorially cleaned from a verbatim recording. A separate verbatim version is available for readers who require full fidelity to the original spoken text.

1. Introduction and Opening Remarks

FIZA: Welcome to Fiza Pathan's Teaching Portfolio for PGCITE. Today we are joined by Steve Goldsmith — known to many as "Ask Steve" — an author from Costa Rica who has already published several remarkable books, most of which I have read and reviewed on Goodreads, Amazon, and insaneowl.com. Today, we are focusing specifically on one book that touched my heart deeply: *Dear Dairy: The Story of Justin Case*, about a neurodivergent student of Steve's own. Steve, please tell us the story of *Dear Dairy*, how you went about writing it, and more about this very special student — Justin Case.

STEVE: Thank you so much for the invitation, and hello to everyone. I am Steve Goldsmith. I am 67 years old. I retired to Costa Rica from the United States approximately seven years ago. I did not start writing until I retired, and I did not originally intend to publish. But in October last year, I decided to publish. I have since created three full-length novels — *Dear Dairy* being the third — and two short story collections, with further projects in progress. Fiza has read almost everything I have written, and she always says wonderful things. I am not always sure I deserve them, but I appreciate every single word.

2. Steve Goldsmith's Background and Path to Writing

STEVE: I was a difficult child. I grew up in a military family, was something of a juvenile delinquent, and became a father at sixteen. I joined the military and spent ten years in service, earning a Bachelor's degree in Mathematics as an enlisted man and a Master's degree in Computer Science as an officer. I then moved to Silicon Valley, where I spent a decade, followed by ten years at Research Triangle Park in North Carolina, and roughly twelve years in Portland, Oregon, before retiring. In my forties, while running a successful consulting business, I decided to pursue a Master of Education degree from North Carolina State University. On completing that degree, I took a three-year teaching contract in the mountains of Virginia — a region of significant poverty, nutritional insecurity, and high special needs enrolment. My specialism was mathematics, and my teaching load was weighted heavily towards special education.

3. The Inspiration Behind *Dear Dairy*: Justin Case

STEVE: The special education students were the ones I fell entirely in love with. Every single one of them was remarkable. Special needs, as defined in the United States at the time, included students with ADHD, those on the autism spectrum (then termed Asperger's), and students with other conditions. I had one girl with spina bifida, confined to a wheelchair and unable to use her hands, who operated a graphing calculator with her one mobile foot. They all had one thing in common: they wanted to learn — regardless of what other teachers may have believed.

STEVE: I had one student I call "Justin Case" — because that amuses me. He was twelve years old, largely non-verbal, dyslexic, and on the lower end of the autism spectrum. He and I connected through books. In my mathematics class, he would bring novels and read during lessons. In his English class, he was sent to detention for the same behaviour. In my class, I simply began reading the same book alongside him. We established a channel of connection — wordless, but entirely real. He was reading the Game of Thrones series. I had not read it. One morning, I walked in, opened the same book to the same page, and said nothing. I saw his eyes flicker. He connected immediately.

STEVE: Over the following years, he became more verbal and eventually shared with me his dream diaries — a private parallel life that he had shared with nobody. In parent-teacher conferences, I coached his parents on how to reach him. By the end of the second year, he was sharing his diary entries with them regularly. I considered that a significant victory.

4. The Structure of Dear Dairy

FIZA: I noticed the dream sequences all carry Douglas Adams-inspired nonsense subtitles. I am a Douglas Adams reader myself and found that immediately. I highly recommend this book, especially for international schools in Asia.

STEVE: Yes — I love Douglas Adams, and you will find Easter eggs throughout the subtitles. The structure I built to capture Justin's voice is a 42-day diary — 42, naturally, because I am a Douglas Adams fan. The number makes me smile. Each day, from Justin's twelfth birthday onwards, he inscribes a short diary entry describing the previous day, and then sets down a 666-word dream in flash fiction form. The number 666 was chosen because it is provocative and presents a slight technical challenge. My minor was in theology, and I was also trying to discipline my own tendency towards wordiness. The first five or six dreams I wrote with considerable effort; the final thirty-five or so came in ten to twelve minutes each.

STEVE: Each dream is a self-contained story with a title, a subtitle containing Easter eggs, and a first word that forms part of a further hidden structure. At the end of the book, an 84-word poem is disclosed, assembled from the first word of each subtitle and the first word of each dream. That is purely for pleasure.

STEVE: The dreams fall into three categories. First, Future Justin: throughout the 42 dreams, Justin envisions future developments in his life — winning a spelling bee, earning a Master's degree in mathematics — and those visions inform his daily reality. Second, Storybook and Film Dreams: these help Justin process the stimulation he receives from books and films. There is a retelling of Old Yeller from the dog's perspective, a Jungle Book dream, and a blend of Cinderella and Charlotte's Web. Third, Sensory Dreams: these are designed to show how a neurodivergent child processes overwhelming sensory input — bombarding himself with sensation and working through his reactions — without shutting down.

5. Inclusive Pedagogy and Classroom Practice

FIZA: You have written about this so beautifully, which is precisely why I recommend Dear Dairy for inclusion efforts in Indian IGCSE and IB schools, where inclusion remains a pressing concern. How did Justin's school handle inclusion in practice?

STEVE: Practical inclusion is extraordinarily difficult. It demands time, money, and energy in equal measure. In my public school, regular classes were capped at thirty-two students; special needs classes were capped at eighteen, with at least two teachers. In writing the book, I was determined to avoid what I call 'adult ventriloquism' — imposing an adult sensibility on a child's voice. I did extensive read-alouds and journaling exercises to authentically inhabit an adolescent, neurodivergent interiority. I also chose first-person narration specifically to avoid 'diagnostic flattening' — the tendency to reduce a person to a simplified diagnosis rather than engaging with their full, individual humanity.

FIZA: Could you explain 'diagnostic flattening' further?

STEVE: Certainly. Diagnostic flattening occurs when a practitioner, burdened with preconceptions about a condition, simplifies the diagnosis to produce something more manageable to treat. To say that Justin was autistic, without also acknowledging his dyslexia, his humour, his literary imagination, is to flatten him — to reduce a complex human being to a single label. The whole project of the book is to resist that.

Making the Initial Connection

FIZA: How did you first make that connection with Justin?

STEVE: He was always reading Game of Thrones, even when being sent out of his English class for it. I simply walked in one morning, sat nearby, opened the same book to the same page, and said nothing. I saw his eyes flicker and we connected immediately, without a word. Making real connections with students requires individuation. With a student who was an athlete and an amputee, I made the initial connection with a well-timed joke about his prosthetic. With my cheerleaders, I taught them a mathematics cheer. You find what reaches each individual.

Active and Kinaesthetic Learning

FIZA: This kind of tactile, kinaesthetic learning is brilliant and greatly needed in India. What other methods did you use?

STEVE: I took students out to the school bus park — a large, open tarmac space — to teach number lines and coordinate planes physically. If the first number in an addition problem was positive, you faced right and took that many steps. Negative meant facing left. The result was your answer, which you could verify on your fingers. Simple, embodied, and effective.

STEVE: Using a grant, I built an outdoor classroom in the woods adjoining the school. Students learned statistics by estimating the number of leaves on a branch or blades of grass in a square metre. I assigned extra credit where students mapped the school and tracked their daily steps using pedometers I provided — an exercise I think of as 'mass individuation': every student completes the same assignment, but each does so in a way that reflects their own capacities and perspective. I also collected hands-on statistical data through water balloon tosses and balloon rockets, measuring distances and plotting results. On one occasion, I attempted to have students measure the distances they slid on an icy car park. The principal intervened rather promptly.

STEVE: I made all daily homework optional, converting it entirely to extra credit. Counterintuitively, this produced higher completion rates, and also gave parents a constructive reason to encourage their children at home.

The Forma Project

STEVE: On the first day of every new unit, before any teaching had occurred, I administered the end-of-unit examination. Any student who achieved an A was excused from the unit's lessons entirely. They were installed in a comfortable corner of the classroom with a little tea service and given full autonomy to pursue advanced self-directed study. I was not going to make a student sit through weeks of instruction in something they had already mastered. This was inspired directly by my own military experience, where I earned my Bachelor's degree in Mathematics by sitting proctored final examinations without attending a single lecture.

Classroom Animals and the Sensory Environment

STEVE: I always kept an iguana or a snake in the classroom. Always. The student who achieved the highest score on any given examination earned the privilege of sitting quietly in the classroom's living corner with the animal for the full subsequent period, rather than attending lessons. It was a remarkable motivator.

Classroom Management: The Underpants Principle

FIZA: How did you manage sensory overload and classroom disruption with a challenging group?

STEVE: I used a command voice carried over from my military training, but I always warned sensory-sensitive students in advance so that it would not cause them to shut down. As for instant attention from a class of seventh and eighth graders — I discovered by accident that the single word 'Underpants', spoken in a sing-song voice, immediately arrests every conversation in the room. Middle school students are constitutionally incapable of ignoring it. The Captain Underpants books, I suspect, are responsible. It sounds absurd, and it works absolutely.

The Reproduction Room

FIZA: Middle school sounds particularly demanding, especially within a rigid institutional system.

STEVE: It is. For instance, my school assigned its most experienced teacher to the gifted students, leaving the special needs classes to me — a first-year teacher — as though expertise mattered less there. It turned out the head of gifted education was engaged in an affair with the principal; they were discovered emerging from the photocopying room, which the students — with the organic wit of thirteen-year-olds — immediately rechristened 'the reproduction room'. Despite the institutional absurdity, I found ways to empower my students. I allowed my dyslexic students to compete against me in the school talent show: a race to write the Gettysburg Address backwards. They were extraordinary.

6. The Memoir: Elma Kramer

STEVE: I should mention my memoir, Elma Kramer — which you will notice is 'remarkable' written backwards. As someone who is dyslexic, that appeals to me. I wrote it using the pen name El Kramer, to give myself sufficient distance from the material to actually write honestly. It was the first book I attempted. I had published a short story years ago, and when my mother read it, she did not speak to me again for twenty-five years — and then she died. She was so deeply offended by that story that I had to wait until after her passing before I had the courage to write the full memoir.

7. The Reception of Dear Dairy

FIZA: Let us talk about how the book has been received.

STEVE: We have had approximately 216 sales for Dear Dairy since October, and roughly 850 sales across all my titles. I have received moving messages from parents of children on the spectrum and from educators. Advisors tell me I should commit to a single genre, but I have no interest in that. I simply want to write the individual stories that exist in my head. My ambition is not to race to a finishing line. Here in Costa Rica, we do things paso a paso — step by step.

8. Community Work: The Vida Sostenible Nuevo Arenal Foundation

FIZA: Please tell us about your projects in Costa Rica.

STEVE: I live in a town called Nuevo Arenal, and I founded a foundation called Vida Sostenible Nuevo Arenal — Sustainable Living, Nuevo Arenal. It operates across six benefit streams.

STEVE: Casa Mascotas is our dog rescue programme. We currently have seven street dogs in the facility. We have a small emergency veterinary clinic, and we swim with the dogs every Saturday. Neonatos supports mothers and newborns. Our volunteers are networked into the local community; when a woman enters her third trimester, a volunteer makes a home visit and delivers a package of newborn supplies worth approximately two hundred dollars, including vitamins, food, and baby equipment.

STEVE: Escuelas conducts quarterly craft projects with local schools. We build faroles — small lanterns — so that children from lower-income families can participate in the Independence Day celebrations, rather than being priced out of them. That is participatory charity, not charity that creates dependency. Emprendedores supports micro-business entrepreneurship, providing small boosts to individuals who need a little momentum to start something. Senderos undertakes infrastructure repairs — pavement and public building improvements in the town.

STEVE: Lectores is our newest stream, focused on literacy. In Costa Rica, reading aloud to very young children is not a widespread practice. Our mission is to establish reading as a habit from birth. We are producing and distributing age-appropriate books to families across the full childhood lifecycle. To fund all six streams, I opened El Jardín de Nuevo Arenal — a free botanical garden and butterfly house with a gift shop and a donation box. The principle is straightforward: if visitors have a genuinely wonderful experience without having been made to feel exploited, they give generously. A Gringo mindset in the best possible sense.

9. Closing Reflections: Empathy, Muses, and the Power of One Teacher

STEVE: I want to tell you about the power of one teacher, through the story of Lester Seal. Lester was an eighth-grade special education student with ADHD. One day he played me a song on his guitar in my classroom. I pushed him into the school talent show, and he won. Years later, I was in a hotel on Costa Rica's Caribbean coast, and the featured entertainer was Lester Seal. He was making his entire living from that guitar. I had simply opened a small window. That is what teachers do.

STEVE: My real-life Justin died in the summer following my second year of teaching him — a brain aneurysm. I felt I had to honour that in the book to some extent. A promise I made at his interment was that one day I would find a way to reintroduce him to the world. Dear Dairy is the fulfilment of that promise.

STEVE: I believe literature can expand empathy. That is what I am attempting with this book. And to everyone listening who is still in school — Justin was my muse. He was a hero

to me for his perseverance, and he was precious to me because he chose to open up. I urge you: look for your muse.

FIZA: That is a beautiful way to end. You have a quality, Steve, that is at once lucid and lyrical, clear-cut and deeply humane. I will be making a Braille version of this transcript available for visually impaired readers. This book belongs on AS & A Level, IGCSE, and IB syllabuses. Thank you for one of the finest interviews we have conducted on this platform.

STEVE: Thank you so much. When I was feeling despair five months into publishing, your review lifted me up. I am deeply honoured.

END OF TRANSCRIPT

This transcript was prepared for Fiza Pathan's Teaching Portfolio for PGCITE, published at fizapathansteachingportfolioforpgcite.com. A full verbatim record is separately available. For accessibility enquiries, please visit the website.