



Read with Pride, Episode 8, From Here

Transcript:

00;00;09;06 - 00;01;22;11

Voiceover 1

[VOICEOVER 1] Do you have new or slightly used prom dresses in good condition? Or do you know someone who wants to give away your a dress? Starting January 2nd, the Ocean County Library invites you to donate your dresses during the 17th annual Prom Dress collection. Donated dresses will be collected at all of the Ocean County Library branches until February 28th, and will be available for free for students in eighth through 12th grade starting in March. At our prom dress giveaways. Before you donate, please ensure that your dresses meet the following criteria. Long or short styles from the last five years. Gently used and clean dresses ready for attending prom. Please don't donate dresses with rips, tears or stains. And please don't donate accessories like shoes or purses. For details, check out our website at theoceancountylibrary.org, visit your local branch, or call us at 732-349-6200. We thank you in advance for your donation.

00;01;22;13 - 00;01;33;02

Voiceover 2

[VOICEOVER 2] Hello and welcome to Read With Pride, a podcast focused on LGBTQIA+ literature brought to you by the Ocean County Library's Ocean Pride Committee.

00;01;33;04 - 00;01;39;02

Diane

[DAINE] Hi, I'm Diane, she/her, I work for the Ocean County Library and I'm a member of the Ocean Pride Committee.

00;01;39;04 - 00;01;45;09

Megan

[MEGAN] Hi, I'm Megan. My pronouns are also she/her and I also work for the Ocean County Library and am on the Ocean Pride Committee.

00;01;45;11 - 00;02;26;18

Diane

[DIANE] Today we're going to talk about the book *From Here*, a memoir by Luma Mufleh. With no word for gay in Arabic, Luma may not have known what to call the feelings she had growing up in Jordan during the 1980s, but she knew well enough to keep them secret. It was clear that not only would her

family have trouble accepting her, but trapped in a conservative religious society, she could have also been killed if anyone discovered her sexuality. This is her story. Okay, so let's start. Question one: so what was your overall impression of the book?

00;02;26;20 - 00;02;48;13

Megan

[MEGAN] I have to say, I enjoyed reading this book, even though, you know, at times it's stressful because you're reading about the struggles that she went through and her fear for her life. But seeing from where she started in Jordan to everything she went through to come to the United States to get asylum when that was very difficult to do as a gay person.

00;02;48;16 - 00;03;18;20

Diane

[DIANE] Yeah, I agree, I thought it was an eye opening book for me. The timeline is similar to my growing up. Luma is only a year younger than me, so I found it very interesting to see how somebody grew up on the other side of the world. There was sadness, but there was also hopefulness in it and, you know, eye opening. What we read in the intro that there was no word for gay in Arabic language. I never realized that. It was a good book, though I did think it was. It was a good book ultimately.

00;03;18;22 - 00;03;25;22

Megan

[MEGAN] Did you find any similarities between you and any of these characters, and which character did you find yourself relating to the most?

00;03;25;24 - 00;04;08;21

Diane

[DAINE] So we mainly talked about Luma, obviously was it was a memoir. So it was from her point of view. The similarities I found is that she's a Gen Xer. You know, I'm 50. She was 49 this year, I think I read so I found that similarity when she talked about when she was young, there was no internet. So that was one of the things that, like today's gay youth have that, you know, there are more places to find similar people to you. Whereas in the 1980s, you knew what was happening in your household, in your family, maybe a little bit more. So that's where I found similarity. I guess I related to her because she was the one writing the story, but I don't know in any specific way except our ages.

00;04;08;22 - 00;04;46;02

Megan

[MEGAN] Yeah, I agree that as the author, you're getting the most insight to her and what's happening in her mind, so you tend to relate to her the most. I have to say, I also related to her grandmother... who in the story is the only family member she's able to stay in contact with, and her grandmother seems to be very much like, I want to take care of other people person, you know, like I want to make the way easy for you. You know, she left her home country of Syria for her family to try to give them a better life. And then when Luma was leaving for college and she said, that girl is not coming back like her grandmother already knew.

00;04;46;04 - 00;05;01;09

Diane

[DIANE] That's good insight because I do think since it was a memoir, right, we had all so much information from Luma. But to take that, yeah, the grandmother was the only one that stayed in touch with her in the beginning. What was your favorite part of the book?

00;05;01;12 - 00;05;37;19

Megan

[MEGAN] Really, I have to say, but one of my favorite part of the book was in the very beginning, when her daughter is asking her, how come we don't talk to the grandfather, you know, is he dead? And he's like, "No, but some stuff happened" and... her daughter is like, "No, I want to talk to him, get him on the phone." And then it happened and he was happy to meet his granddaughter and hopefully this opens like a whole big door, but getting that in the beginning and having, like, the progression to see that even people living with extreme beliefs or in extreme societies can come around.

00;05;37;22 - 00;06;05;00

Diane

[DIANE] Right. Yeah. I thought that that gave it the hopefulness of the story, you know, the way to start it that way, it was more like hopeful. And actually, that would have been one of our questions later is how did we like the story in a flashback? Because that's how it was told. And I agree of seeing that in the beginning it was like, oh, I think it also because this is a YA book, so it gives the readers like, oh, it's there's going to be hard stuff in the book. But you know at this point Luma made it through.

00;06;05;00 - 00;06;07;18

Megan

[MEGAN] Yeah, we're on the other side. You know.

00;06;07;21 - 00;06;17;03

Diane

[DIANE] My favorite part of the book was when she saw her family at the end. That was when she finally was able to connect with her biological family at the end.

00;06;17;06 - 00;06;19;10

Megan

[MEGAN] What was your least favorite part of the book?

00;06;19;12 - 00;06;50;02

Diane

[DIANE] My least favorite was when they took a pilgrimage to Mecca. Then we went with her family, which was supposed to be a beautiful experience, and I'm sure it is. But there was that part where she was just trying to pray away her gay, you know, like she was actually, yeah, she was actually saying, like, "Oh, please forgive me. Please change me." Like that's what she was saying as a mantra to Allah. Like, please forgive me, please change me. Like and so yeah, heartbreaking. So that was my least favorite I mean, important for it to be in there, but I just felt for Luma.

00;06;50;02 - 00;07;34;25

Megan

[MEGAN] Yes, definitely. I think my least favorite part was the part where she and the older woman were at the park and then got held at gunpoint by the police for several reasons. One, being held at gunpoint is going to be terrifying at any time, but she's a minor. She's with this older woman who's taking advantage of her. And she knows what they were doing is not something they can get caught doing. And it seems like ultimately, what saved her, you know, was her family name since they were a prominent family and that the woman that she was with clearly had no concern about what was going to happen to Luma, knowing that as a foreigner, an American, I believe,

00;07;35;01 - 00;07;36;01

Diane

[DIANE] I think she was an American.

00;07;36;01 - 00;07;45;10

Megan

[MEGAN] That the worst thing that's going to happen to her is maybe she's going to get sent out of the country, and that you've dragged this young girl into such a dangerous situation when you know how dangerous it is.

00;07;45;10 - 00;08;01;15

Diane

[DIANE] Right, that's true. That was horrible. And I think Luma put that in also, I mean, to show what as a young gay woman was going through, but also like she knew that it was her name that saved her, like, if it was any other gay person, they would have probably been...

00;08;01;18 - 00;08;02;01

Megan

[MEGAN] Who knows?

00;08;02;01 - 00;08;16;21

Diane

[DIANE] Who knows? Exactly. So there were many feasts that were celebrated, and we saw how these meals were important to her family. What are special meals in your family and why? You know, we're coming into the season of eat, I like to call it. But, so...

00;08;16;24 - 00;08;38;11

Megan

[MEGAN] I would say Christmas breakfast, Christmas morning is the meal. You know, anything else is somewhat negotiable. You can eat whatever you know, change up the menu. But Christmas breakfast there is French toast, there is summer sausage. You know, if you don't have those, it's not Christmas breakfast.

00;08;38;13 - 00;09;11;08

Diane

[DIANE] Oh that's interesting. Christmas breakfast specifically. It's so funny when you say Christmas breakfast, I'm sitting here thinking like, oh, are you like, I saw a family once that it was Christmas and I was in Dunkin Donuts and they were all there in their Christmas pajamas and it was like a cute tradition for them. And I'm like, oh yeah, that's neat. And I would say, like, my family, we are Italian. So we are - many of our things revolve around food. So Thanksgiving's coming up. That's important. And then Christmas Eve is, you know, in the Italian culture, more important. However, I don't eat fish.

00;09;11;08 - 00;09;12;20

Megan

[MEGAN] Oh, so you don't do the seven fishes?

00;09;12;27 - 00;09;58;25

Diane

[DIANE] I mean, my family that my mom loves the fishes and my older sister, but a lot of us don't. And so it's interesting how a few years ago we got like a platter of sushi and not only a raw sushi, but my mom was like, "I don't know if this counts as fish." And I'm like, "Why not? You know, there's fish in here." And then Easter is important to our family, but it all coincides with the food, just like in these very big festivals and the family. I think one of the things Loomis said was, one of the quotes was "Family is not just an important thing, it was the only thing. Family members are not spokes on the bicycle wheel. They are the wheel itself." So that was interesting for her to say that and then have to find a new bicycle, kind of, you know, like if you think about it. But, meals are important and family is important in my household.

00;09;58;26 - 00;10;00;09

Megan

[MEGAN] The meal brings you together.

00;10;00;11 - 00;10;01;15

Diane

[DIANE] For sure. Yeah.

00;10;01;17 - 00;10;09;24

Megan

[MEGAN] So our next question we touched on a little bit, but the story is told in flashback format. Did you find that it made this more hopeful to read?

00;10;09;26 - 00;10;29;23

Diane

[DIANE] Yeah I mean and I think I said earlier yes I think it was definitely a more hopeful read because as you said in the beginning of the book, we see Luma and her child and we see that they talk to her dad, who, as the book goes through, you see that the dad is really not even, you know, they weren't talking or anything like that.

00;10;29;24 - 00;10;30;26

Megan

[MEGAN] For quite some time.

00;10;30;27 - 00;10;39;29

Diane

[DIANE] Yeah. So I think to know that Luma has a family and a wife and children that keeps it hopeful. That's what I felt. What do you think?

00;10;40;04 - 00;11;18;15

Megan

[MEGAN] I agree, and at the point of the story where you start getting really worried, like when she was held at gunpoint, you know you can be like, "It's going to be okay. I know she's going to wind up on the other side of this somehow." You know, you don't know how yet but you know it's coming. And that was really helpful for me because I'm terrible with death in books, people, dogs, cats. I have to look it up. I have to know ahead of time going into it. So I'm, like, so I'm ready. So for that, like to have it right up in the front to be like, "I know she's going to be okay" was very helpful because probably many things have happened to people in Jordan where they haven't been okay, and didn't get to tell their story.

00;11;18;15 - 00;11;35;20

Diane

[DIANE] Well, and I think knowing that it's a memoir written by her that is also like hopeful. But yeah, I think definitely knowing oh, well, she made it out of the situation somehow and it was impactful story to see what she had to go through. What was the significance of the title? What do you think was the significance of the title?

00;11;35;22 - 00;12;28;14

Megan

Okay, so I have kind of like two thoughts here. You know, two title is From Here. One of them is in Jordan. She's from here, from Jordan, from there. A prominent family. And ultimately, because she was gay, none of that mattered. She had to leave somewhere that she didn't want to leave because she talks about that it wasn't like she was raring to go to leave Jordan. You know, she left her country and she left her family, but she knew that, you know, she couldn't have a life there. And then... coming to America and being here for the 9/11 attacks. And she talks about how she was already fluent in English. She has lighter skin and was able to pass as a non-Arab. And in America also you hear bigoted people say, you know, "Go back to where you came from." And being able to blend in to look like she was from here was a protection on this end.

00;12;28;14 - 00;13;11;17

Diane

[DIANE] That's true. I didn't think about that piece of it. You're right. Is there more or that is...? No that's good... She did say she was able to pass. Yeah, and I felt like, yes, From Here is where she started from. You know like from here. And she said there was a part where she was saying, like in the beginning,

she's saying she's writing this to her daughter, you know, and I think that's the thing, like where she's going, like, this is where she started. And you move from here. There's a quote that I love. It's "keep moving forward." She had to do that through her life. She had to start and move from there. Anybody. And we all have struggles. But I think she had some really severe struggles she had to go through. And she's moving from here and she wants it to be documented.

00;13;11;20 - 00;13;22;13

Diane

What she went through not only for her child, but for many people. It gives them hope.

00;13;22;15 - 00;13;53;18

Voiceover 1

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00;13;53;20 - 00;13;56;27

Megan

[MEGAN] Have you or would you want to read another book by this author?

00;13;56;28 - 00;14;10;19

Diane

[DIANE] I would, yes, I did look up her books. There's two other books, so one is Learning America: One Woman's Fight for Educational Justice for Refugee Children. That was put out, let's see, did you read this one?

00;14;10;23 - 00;14;19;06

Megan

[MEGAN] No, I just took it out actually, on Friday, so I haven't got a chance to start reading it yet, but it's currently at the top of my list. It's jumped a whole bunch of others.

00;14;19;07 - 00;14;26;08

Diane

[DIANE] Oh yeah, it's from 2021, because at the end of her book, she talks about starting the refugee camp.

00;14;26;11 - 00;14;41;02

Megan

[MEGAN] Yeah, she meets the kids are playing like she goes and plays a pickup game of soccer with them and then finds out that they're refugees as well. And then she starts a school specifically for refugee children in America. And she also does a TED talk about it.

00;14;41;02 - 00;14;43;19

Diane

[DIANE] Oh, I didn't see the TED talk. Did you look it up?

00;14;43;23 - 00;14;48;10

Megan

[MEGAN] Yes. It's about 14, 15 minutes, you know, where she talks about that as well.

00;14;48;16 - 00;15;05;21

Diane

[DIANE] And there's definitely another book that she has out. But it's more, I think, towards children. I'm looking. I don't have it written, but there's definitely another book she has about the refugee camp or refugee soccer camp she's doing. Interesting. So you would. You've got it on the top of your list. You're going to read it?

00;15;05;21 - 00;15;06;10

Megan

[MEGAN] Moved it right up.

00;15;06;13 - 00;15;16;20

Diane

[DIANE] All right. Very good. Is there anything else? Because we went through the questions fast. Was there anything else you would want to say? I mean, we're not done yet. We've got our five quick thoughts. But before that.

00;15;16;26 - 00;16;42;25

Megan

[MEGAN] Another part of the book that I thought was really interesting was after, you know, she's going to college in America. You know, and going home for breaks and having to deal with putting yourself back inside this box, her family, when she graduates college right up until the last minute, think she's going to come back and live in Jordan and get married and do all the things that they expect her to do, and she calls them the day before, the day of her flight back to say like, "Hey, I'm not coming back, like, I'm gay. I can't, you know, live the way that I'd be expected to live there," and basically has to go on the run because her family gets the FBI to try to find her, you know, told them that she was kidnaped. And, you know, I feel like that's also like a reflection on the fact that her family was a very prominent family to be able to get that to happen, you know, so quickly. And that also she was able to do that. She talks about knowing how to not attract attention, like when you need to not attract attention. And using, you know, she got all the cash out of her account and just taking busses not to anywhere, just a bus to a bus, to a bus, to a bus. And while she had friends in America, how alone she was in that time before she could get back in contact with people that then helped her and gave her a place to stay and helped to find a job and everything, but that her family was willing to do that, to try to make her come back.

00;16;42;27 - 00;16;48;14

Diane

[DIANE] Right, yeah, and I think had they done it, had they accomplished what kind of life...

00;16;48;18 - 00;16;52;12

Megan

[MEGAN] Yeah. Because it, you know, it couldn't have gone well when she got right home.

00;16;52;12 - 00;17;09;17

Diane

[DIANE] Yeah for sure. Yeah. That's really interesting. And like when you think about it, okay, again, so she's my age, so she's probably graduating college around '96, '97 and no cell phones. I mean there are cell phones but it's not so... it probably would have been harder to be sort of off the grid now because...

00;17;09;17 - 00;17;10;17

Megan

[MEGAN] Everything's so connected.

00;17;10;17 - 00;17;43;12

Diane

[DIANE] Yeah. Things are so connected. Yeah. So that's interesting. I think the read was a small book, but it was a quick read. But because it's YA, but it was really a good - there were so many - I wrote like lots of quotes down. And that's when I know that I'm really absorbing it differently, when I'm writing quotes down. And again, one of them, and we read in the beginning, is "There's no word for gay in Arabic." She said there was no gay characters on TV or in books. She talks about trying to commit suicide, which was very sad and...

00;17;43;14 - 00;17;44;08

Megan

[MEGAN] And so young.

00;17;44;09 - 00;17;54;24

Diane

[DIANE] Yes. But it was inspirational too. Like at the end I'm like, oh wow, like, if she could go through that. So let's go to our five quick thoughts. One, would you recommend this book to someone on the street?

00;17;54;24 - 00;17;56;13

Megan

[MEGAN] Absolutely, yeah, I would.

00;17;56;16 - 00;18;00;18

Diane

[DIANE] I do I, I would say books just need the right, you need the right person, right?

00;18;00;19 - 00;18;01;02

Megan

[MEGAN] Yes.

00;18;01;02 - 00;18;07;11

Diane

[DIANE] And this one is - I think many people would enjoy it. So if you could give the book a different title, what would it be?

00;18;07;17 - 00;18;22;04

Megan

[MEGAN] This is hard because I feel like I really like the title of this book, and I feel like it's kind of like a cliché, but like *Becoming Luma*, because there's the Luma that she had to make herself appear to be. And like the Luma that she is.

00;18;22;05 - 00;18;38;14

Diane

[DIANE] Yeah. That's true. Oh, I just had to, like, have it, like, il-Luma-nate it. No, I don't know. But I went with the like also cliché like *It Gets Better*, you know? Like she really was a testament to like it gets better. What emotions did you feel when reading this book?

00;18;38;14 - 00;19;16;24

Megan

[MEGAN] Oh my God, I feel all the emotions reading this book, you know, because you're happy when she gets asylum. When she's able to do that and that she has friends here and that they're able to help her and being able to express herself. And then how sad she was to be cut off from her family, who she loved and wanted to be with, and having to come to this other country halfway across the world, basically. You know, and then there was so many fun things in the book as well, like when she talks about how her grandmother sent her as the chaperone for her older aunt on dates.

00;19;16;24 - 00;19;18;00

Diane

[DIANE] Oh, yes. Yes, that's right.

00;19;18;00 - 00;19;58;27

Megan

[MEGAN] And they would go to the American restaurant and get like hamburgers and milkshakes. You know, and so many things that were fun and nice and good family stories. Or when she saves Tom the sheep from being slaughtered. You know, and tells her very wealthy grandfather that he has to keep the sheep in the house now. And I feel like that's part of one of the reasons I really like this. You know, it's not like a one notebook. You really get a good range. You see why she loved Jordan. It wasn't - it's not just, you know, a black and white place. Like, there's many things that are wonderful and that she loved and her family and the connections and things like that. And then the other side of the coin.

00;19;58;28 - 00;20;48;19

Diane

[DIANE] Right. Well, and I think that, right, there's so many emotions. And you're right, she showed, Luma showed that like it was a beautiful like she had a wonderful growing up. You know like I think that's hard. Like you see how much like you said, she loved it, but then she just knew she couldn't live there. And even, like the wedding she was, that was one thing she talked about the feast of like, oh, how when she was a kid, she loved going to the weddings, and then when she got older, she realized like, oh, the whole thing of like showing the sheet and oh, yeah, she was a virgin, the woman. And Luma's, like, "How am I ever going to even go through that?" And then how like there was honor killing. So she talked about really the good things and then the really bad things. So I felt my emotions, I wrote were like sad but hopeful. Like I was hopeful through the book because we knew at the beginning she did do the flashback. So what format did you consume the book? Print? Digital? Audio?

00;20;48;23 - 00;21;08;03

Megan

[MEGAN] My original plan was to listen to the book audio and then read it again in print. And then I did not do that in a timely fashion. So my audio book returned itself online. That happens. So then I had the print book out. So I went through that, which was also nice, because then I can put like little sticky notes on the pages.

00;21;08;03 - 00;21;30;17

Diane

[DIANE] Yes. Especially when you know you're going to talk about it. I did it in audio because that's what I do. But we do have it in all formats, you know, we have it in audio. I think I listened to it on Libby. We have it in print, and I believe we also have it in e-book on Libby or Hoopla. Okay, last question. If you could pick a theme song for this book, what would it be?

00;21;30;20 - 00;22;36;20

Megan

[MEGAN] Okay. I picked two songs. One is this song called "Younger Me" by a band called The Brothers Osborne. One of the brothers came out late like as an adult, as gay and wrote this song basically like to his younger self saying, "Younger me, you got me where I am today. You got a few things right along the way. You'll see. Just wait." You know, and that when she's younger, she's like, what am I going to do? You know, the suicide attempts. And then if there was a way to talk to your past self, to say "it does get better. Where you are right now is not always where you're going to be." And the other song is by Sia. It's called "Bird Set Free." And in the beginning it talks about I had a voice, but I could not sing. And then when you get to the end of the song, all those lines "I sing for love, I sing for me, I shout it out like a bird set free." And I liked that as well, because there's no word for gay in Arabic. Like there's things you can't even say. And then to come to somewhere where you're like, now I can say anything. Yeah. So those are my two songs.

00;22;36;20 - 00;23;10;04

Diane

[DIANE] Those are very good songs. I was trying to go into my Gen X brain, and I went to Boys II Men "It's So Hard to Say Goodbye to Yesterday," and I think because it's, you know, it was hard for her. It was

hard for her to leave that. And as much as she wanted the asylum, she really didn't want to be stuck in America, you know, like, it was good that she had it, but she didn't want to leave her roots, and she didn't leave her roots. But to have to do that, it was hard for her. So that's what I went with. And I was like, yeah, Gen X, you know? So is there anything else you...?

00;23;10;04 - 00;23;13;29

Megan

[MEGAN] No, but, you know, if you're interested, I think you should check out this book.

00;23;14;01 - 00;23;19;21

Diane

[DIANE] For sure. Yeah. I think it's a quick read too. You know so yeah. Excellent. Great. Well thank you, Megan.

00;23;19;25 - 00;23;20;10

Megan

[MEGAN] Thank you.

00;23;20;10 - 00;23;24;02

Diane

[DIANE] All right.

00;23;24;04 - 00;23;43;18

Voiceover 2

[VOICEOVER 2] Thank you for joining us today. Be sure to visit the Ocean County Library's website for more podcasts and events. All the titles mentioned in today's episode can be found throughout the Ocean County Library. Free with your library card. Until next time, happy reading!

00;23;43;20 - 00;24;16;21

Voiceover 2

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