



Outcasts United: The Story of a Refugee Soccer Team That Changed a Town

Warren St. John (Adapted by)

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This young people's version of the adult bestseller, *Outcasts United: An American Town, a Refugee Team, and One Woman's Quest to Make a Difference*, is a complex and inspirational story about the Fugees, a youth soccer team made up of diverse refugees from around the world, and their formidable female coach, Luma Mufleh. Clarkston, Georgia, was a typical southern town until it became a refugee resettlement center. The author explores how the community changed with the influx of refugees and how the dedication of Luma Mufleh and the entire Fugees soccer team inspired an entire community.

Outcasts United: The Story of a Refugee Soccer Team That Changed a Town Details

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From Reader Review Outcasts United: The Story of a Refugee Soccer Team That Changed a Town for online ebook

Jennifer Jones says

Though an extremely original idea for a book, St. John does only a mediocre job of capturing the lives, trials, and tribulations of a group of young immigrant boys living in Clarkston, Georgia. Living near Clarkston myself, perhaps my opinion is tainted by the grim realities of Clarkston. But, I felt the book could have been extraordinary with better writing and stronger character development. Outcasts United is the story of struggling immigrants escaping brutalities, war, and persecution in their native countries. Looking for a better life in America, your heart will go out to the youths of the Fugees soccer team and their unlikely coach, Luma, herself an immigrant. There are no heros in this story, standing in a blaze of glory; just everyday people trying to help each other, and a dedicated woman who gives her time and energy to a rogue group of young boys. The movie rights to this story have already been sold, and if written and directed well, it will surely make a heart-warming film.

Kathy Scantle says

I loved this book, especially since I am familiar with the story. I met the main character, Luma, once and could tell right away she has a profound impact on the refugees she works with. Luma is from an aristocratic family in Jordan. She came to the USA for college. After she graduated from Smith college, she decided she wanted to stay. Her parents were very upset (her father disowned her) but later those wounds were healed. Fate brought Luma to Clarkston, Georgia, a small southern town outside of Atlanta which is home to many refugees. I taught at Clarkston High School so I know the character of the refugee children. They were always so polite, so studious, and so much more respectful of teachers than the American children. The kids were flown to Atlanta from war torn countries such as the Congo, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, the Sudan. etc. One young boy from Sudan who I knew came here when he was 10 years old and had never had formal education. (That was typical.) One of the teachers at Clarkston High School offered night classes to the refugee families where he taught things like -- how to use a refrigerator and what goes into a refrigerator. Luma was very taken by the refugee families and started a soccer team. This wasn't an ordinary soccer team - - Luma helped her team members adjust to their new country, taught them discipline, provided tutoring for their school work, and became involved with the families. This was her passion. She started a small school for the refugees and is currently involved in fundraising to expand the school.

I thought the author, (a reporter for the New York Times, who came to Clarkston to write an article and instead stayed a year and wrote this book), did a good job of explaining the past and present culture of the refugees . I thought he was particularly adept in explaining the motives behind so many people in the book, including Luma herself, Tracy, Clarkson's mayor, sheriff, and even the local grocer. A good read.

Richie Partington says

Richie's Picks: OUTCASTS UNITED: THE STORY OF A REFUGEE SOCCER TEAM THAT CHANGED A TOWN by Warren St. John, Delacorte, September 2012, 240p., ISBN: 978-0-385-74194-1

“There he was with his immigration face

Giving me a paper chase
But the sun was coming
Cos all at once he looked into my space
And stamped a number over my face
And he sent me running”
-- Graham Nash/David Crosby, “Immigration Man”

“Before tryouts began, the boys seemed puzzled. Where, they wondered, was the coach? Luma was right in front of them, but a woman soccer coach was a strange sight to young Africans, and to the young Muslim boys from Afghanistan and Iraq. During a shooting drill, Luma was teaching the boys how to strike the ball with the tops of their feet when she overheard a Sudanese boy talking to the others.

“‘She’s a girl,’ he said. ‘She doesn’t know what she’s talking about.’

“Luma ordered him to stand in goal. She took off her shoes as the boy waited beneath the crossbar, rocking back and forth and growing more anxious by the moment. She asked for a ball, which she placed on the grass. Then, barefoot, as the team looked on, she blasted a shot directly at the boy, who dove out of the way as the ball rocketed into the net. Luma turned toward her team. ‘Anybody else?’ she asked.”

Jordanian-born Luma Mufleh was educated at the elite American Community School in Amman before traveling to the United States for a higher education and graduating from Smith College. Believing that a permanent life in the U.S. offered her far more possibilities than the second-class citizenship provided to women in her native land – where the civil code is based on patriarchal Islamic law – Luma defied her parents and stayed in America. Having thus been disowned, Luma was living near Atlanta, struggling with a failing eatery, and coaching a girls’ soccer team when she happened upon nearby Clarkston, a town that has been transformed over two decades by an influx of refugees from war zones around the world.

Happening upon an international cast of young men playing soccer in an apartment complex there in Clarkston, Luma was inspired to start and coach a soccer program for them. In *OUTCASTS UNITED*, an adaptation of his adult book about the Fugee team “family,” New York Times reporter Warren St. John moves back and forth between the individual family stories of the young immigrants who make up the Fugees soccer teams (three different age groups), and the chronicling of their coming together under Coach Luma Mufleh.

“After the trauma of war and relocation, many refugee kids had severe problems. Luma had to keep this in mind. She had learned from experience that she needed about a third of her players to be well-adjusted kids from stable families. They would set an example for the others. Another third of the team would be boys who were for the most part dependable even if they had a few problems at school or with other kids. The last third would be kids with real problems and unstable families. These were the boys who would require most of Luma’s energy and who would most likely cause fighting on the teams. They were also the boys who needed the Fugees the most.”

As we learn from the harrowing true stories in *OUTCASTS UNITED*, there are still plenty of people coming to America for the same reasons that so many of our ancestors landed here during past generations. And, as we come to see, Luma Mufleh is a bona fide American hero for the work she has done in Clarkston to change these young lives for the better.

Richie Partington, MLIS

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Tony says

Since I tend to read most books about soccer that I happen to hear about, this much buzzed-about book eventually made it to the top of my pile. Even then I shied away from it for a while, since I'm leery of books that are described as "inspirational." Nonetheless, I eventually cracked the spine, and discovered that it's that rare breed of book that's both fascinating and frustrating. Fascinating because it actually is kind of inspirational and will open the reader's eye to the daunting financial and social issues faced by refugees in the United States. Frustrating because it is neither well constructed nor well written.

The book revolves around the determined efforts of a young Jordanian immigrant woman to build a youth soccer club in a small town about fifteen miles outside of Atlanta. The twist is that her club is comprised of kids (or rather, boys) from the town's large refugee population of Liberians, Albanians, Afghans, etc. This allows the author to explore the many financial and social problems refugees face in trying to resettle in the United States, as well as the interesting effects of such demographic change in some of the areas where aid agencies place them. St. John does a reasonably good journalistic job of tracing the woman's backstory and detailing her efforts to establish the club, and the various administrative and cultural roadblocks she had to overcome.

This story originally appeared as a series of articles in the New York Times, and I'm guessing it was actually better in that shorter format. Here, the clunky writing becomes glaringly obvious, as does his inability to write well about the game of soccer. The book has more redundancies and restatements of information than any I can recall reading in the last several years -- both in the general narrative, but especially when he tries to write about the boys' games. The overall effect is rather like a mediocre high school paper, in which the student is trying desperately to pad his material to meet a ten-page requirement by saying the same thing over and over with only minor variations in word choice.

Don't get me wrong, there's plenty of compelling material -- especially the struggle to find a field to play on, the various bureaucratic roadblocks thrown up by xenophobic "old-timers," and the fragile psyches of the boys themselves. Unfortunately, these are undermined by the book's significant narrative problems, as the author skips around quite a bit, diving in and out of the lives of his subjects, never settling long enough on any one to provide any focus. Even his ostensible protagonist, the coach, is left fairly unexplored and unchallenged. Overall, I guess it's worth checking out if you're interested in either refugee issues, immigration, or soccer -- just don't come to it with huge expectations.

Becky says

I did not know what to expect from Outcasts United. On the one hand, I do not like sports--watching sports or reading about sports. On the other hand, I do like compelling personal accounts, people working, struggling, hoping, believing. The hero of Outcasts United is Luma Mufleh, a woman soccer coach. Mufleh was born and raised in Jordan; she came to the United States for college and decided that this is where she wanted to live. Staying in the U.S. meant breaking apart the family, and angering her family. But she'd had a taste of freedom, and wanted more. She knew it would be work, work, work. She knew it would not be easy, but she knew this would be her best chance. This isn't her story alone, it is the story of lives touching and connecting--immigrant stories. Readers learn a handful of stories about boys mainly, these are those Luma came to know in her role as coach. She wasn't just teaching soccer, she was also teaching discipline, self-control, responsibility, and respect.

Mufleh's three teams are mentioned: her under 17, her under 15, and her under 13 teams. But for the most part, it is the two younger teams that are the focus of the book. The book highlights specific players from

specific seasons of the game.

This one has a definite sports emphasis. It is a book dedicated to the sport of soccer. If you have zero interest in that subject, you may or may not get enough satisfaction from the other stories. I liked some chapters better than others.

Leigh Collazo says

Hundreds more reviews at Mrs. ReaderPants.

REVIEW: Well wasn't this a nice little surprise? I really did not expect to enjoy this book as much as I did. I only read it because it's on our Battle of the Books list, and I signed up to write the questions for this book. I signed up back in September and have been putting it off ever since. Now, it's February, and I know someone will come calling for the questions any day now. Time to get started!

Outcasts United is written so that it's easy to get into. It's kind of a documentary-style book, where you have profiles of the students, their families, the town, and the coach that brought them all together. They encounter prejudice and fear from long-time residents, resistance from the city council, violence, and gangs. The boys on the team speak different languages and come from different countries and situations. Life in America isn't all rainbows and sunshine; many of the parents are single parents whose spouses are imprisoned in their home country or have been killed. They work low-paying factory jobs and constantly struggle to make ends meet.

My one criticism is the switch from first person in the introduction to third person for most of the rest of the book. I'm assuming this first person narrating the story is a reporter or journalist, but it is disjointed with the rest of the book. There's even a part in the middle where it switches back to first person briefly, then back to third person again. I didn't like that.

I know many schools and universities are using this book as a school-wide "one book" or as part of required reading lists. I'm really not a fan of forcing students to read specific titles, but if you are going to do that, this is a great choice for middle and high school students.

THEMES: refugees, soccer, overcoming challenges, perseverance

THE BOTTOM LINE: A must for any middle or high school library.

STATUS IN MY LIBRARY: We have two copies, and because it's a Battle of the Books title, they are frequently checked out.

RATING BREAKDOWN:

Overall: 4/5

Creativity: 4/5

Characters: 4/5

Engrossing: 4/5

Writing: 3/5

Appeal to teens: 4/5

Appropriate length to tell the story: 5/5

CONTENT:

Language: none

Sexuality: none

Violence: medium--a father is beaten to death, a woman is mugged, a boy is shot in the face, gang violence, war violence

Drugs/Alcohol: none

Marie says

"Regardless if you love soccer (or even really understand the game fully) you will enjoy this book. The book follows a youth soccer league made up of resettled refugees in Georgia, but it's really not that simple. Yes, you will learn a lot about soccer -- but you become aware of much more than that. How a small white, Southern town deals with an influx of refugees from conflict zones from around the world. What life was like in the war zones, refugee camps and other places people traveled through before resettlement. You also come to understand that once they arrive in the United States, refugees face a whole new group of challenges. [return]This book as much about the people themselves rather than the game they play. Your eyes and your heart will be opened having read this book."

Eleanor says

I am not a fan of soccer, but I picked this book up based solely on my fondness for Warren St. John (author of Rammer Jammer Yellow Hammer). This story of Luma Mufleh, a native of Jordan, and the Fugees, her soccer teams comprised of boys whose families fled to the United States from across the war-tattered globe, transcends any sport that might have served as the catalyst for their coming together.

Clarkston, Georgia is one of several US cities in which refugees are relocated, and Outcasts United is as much about the difficulties faced by these communities as they are forced into assimilation of disparate cultures as it is about the Fugees, but the heart and soul of the book lies in the transformation not only of the boys from vastly different places but of Luma Mufleh as well.

This is a big, complicated world, but in Clarkston, Georgia, Mufleh and her Fugees have found a way to build relationship between and around every possible cultural difference: politics, religion, and race. The answer is so simple: changes don't come through policies, they come through people working together, playing together.

Since this was an advance reading copy, a promised epilogue is not included, and I will be waiting anxiously for the completed book to come to market to have answers to the heartbreaking turn of events at the end.

I share with you this link to a youtube video about this remarkable woman, and her inspirational Fugees.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lslOsU...>

Alena says

I truly only chose this because it was one of the summer reading options for our high school and this is what my sons both chose. The theme for this year is the immigrant experience, a topic about which I've read a ton, but not much non-fiction.

This is an inspiring and unusual story because it covers a small American town with a huge influx of refugees from all over the world. They share no common language or culture, just trauma and displacement. The issues facing both the immigrants and the townspeople are complex and the author does a great job of maintaining some journalistic distance in order to let readers sort out our own opinions.

But his admiration for the Fugees Soccer team shines through and it's those human interest stories that give this book its heart. These young men, their love of soccer and their determination to find some joy in their lives kept me turning pages.

This book was a reminder that no act of kindness is too small to make a difference in someone's life, a reminder that we can't define people by one characteristic, and a reminder that everyone has a story.

A quick, easy and inspiring read.

Bill Kerwin says

Perhaps I rate this book too low. It is a heartwarming sports story about a rag-tag group of misfits, facing extraordinary obstacles, who are molded by a stern but loving misfit coach into a disciplined and successful organization. Since my favorite forms of literature are Jacobean revenge plays, dark fantasy, and Edwardian ghost stories, this is not exactly the ideal book for me.

The high school where I work made me read it. The administration—along with the administrations of over 40 colleges and universities—chose it for our summer reading book. Left to my own devices, I would have probably read Mervyn Peak's "Titus Alone" instead.

Still, it kept my interest. The transformation of the sleepy little town of Clarkston, Georgia—first swallowed by Atlanta's urban sprawl, then filled with large numbers of immigrants from disparate refugee communities—is fascinating in itself. Furthermore, the stories of the various families of refugees—most from war-torn Muslim countries—are both moving and historically informative. Finally, the account of the soccer coach Luma Mufleh—a young woman disowned by her wealthy Jordanian family because of her decision to remain in the United States—and how she transforms these uprooted, traumatized boys into disciplined members of unified soccer teams is not only interesting, but also an object lesson in leadership.

Author Warren St. John deserves a great deal of credit, for he refuses to do what many journalist would do in such a place: make this story more inspiring and "cinematic" than the facts themselves actually warrant. Instead, he describes the team and its struggles straightforwardly, and declines to sensationalize his material.

My major problem with the book perhaps arises from Mr. St. John's admirable restraint. Ms. Mufleh is a very private person, and I suspect not a particularly reflective one. Consequently, this account of her great achievement is something always viewed from the outside, something that remains public, artistically incomplete.

Patti from Charlotte says

Having lived in Clarkston, Georgia, the setting of the book, for several years in the early 1980's and having been a 'soccer mom' for the better part of the last ten years as well, this book 'spoke' to me on many natural levels. However, the depth of the story extended far, far beyond those simple parameters and to the many backstories of Luma Mufleh and the refugee families that she encountered during her own exodus from her native land. Never again will I sit on the sidelines of a soccer game in my collapsable chair under my umbrella, Diet Coke in hand, without thinking of the small army of lives touched by her hand on other soccer fields of the Southeast. The hardships that the Fugee teams encountered to play this "Beautiful Game" stretched much further than the simple creature comforts seemingly important to my suburban world. In documenting her story and those other stories of her journey, Warren St. John quoted her friend and assistant (an understatement!) Tracy Ediger aptly, "No one person can do everything, but we can all do something." This book is a challenge to do just that, from adjusting our attitudes to opening our eyes to the real games of the modern world.

Dindy says

Working with clients has been a 20-year challenge during which I created an analogy comparing a soccer team to a public relations team, a device for clients to comprehend that it takes both sides to achieve a goal. I had little interest in soccer until Frank Reiss, owner of A Cappella Books, suggested I obtain a review copy of a book about the Fugees, a soccer team just outside of Atlanta.

In "Outcasts United: A Refugee Team, an American Town," Warren St. John, a New York Times reporter (on sale April 21) tells the poignant story of refugees joining a team to reach their goal – a new life in the United States. A front-page article in the New York Times, in January 2007, began St. John's reporting on the Fugees and he followed up with two articles inspiring him to write his book.

St. John brings together the refugee's desire for community in the Diaspora, education as a means to success, discipline and fun. The author will appear in Atlanta with Coach Luma Mufleh at The Carter Center, presented by A Cappella Books, at 7:00 p.m. on April 22. Tickets are \$10 or free with the purchase of the book. St. John returns to Atlanta on May 20 for an appearance at Borders. For a full schedule and information visit the publisher's website at www.randomhouse.com and click on author events.

Refugees and immigrants are at opposite ends of the spectrum. A refugee is a person in exile, one fleeing, no matter the cost, from persecution. The immigrant is one who has opted to settle in a new country. According to the Homeland Security Office Department of Immigration Statistics, 166,392 persons were admitted to the United States as refugees during 2008 (the latest statistics available).

According to the Georgia Department of Human Resources (last statistics available from July 2007), Georgia ranks among the nation's top ten state programs in resettling new citizens. Currently refugees from 41 countries have settled in 40 of Georgia's 159 counties with the highest concentration in Fulton and DeKalb (where Clarkston is located) counties. In 2006, approximately 2,000 refugees resettled in Georgia.

Clarkston, Georgia (13 miles from Atlanta) is home to the Fugees soccer team, comprised of refugees from Sudan, the Congo, Kosovo, Liberia, Iraq and Afghanistan. St. John's compelling prose tells of the obstacles that the team has faced – lack of equipment and a permanent playing field and the most egregious of all, Clarkston's Mayor Swaney, who declared it illegal for the Fugees to practice on public athletic fields. An article about the soccer team ran in the Atlanta Journal Constitution on April 6, 2005 and a few months later another article in the same newspaper highlighted the dispute between the team and the local government.

The Mayor of Doraville, a nearby Georgia town echoed Swaney's stance according to St. John, complaining of seeing "immigrants playing soccer in a town cemetery."

Setting the stage for the book, St. John focuses on Luma Mufleh, the coach of the Fugees. Mufleh left Amman, Jordan and her well-to-do family in search of freedom from the constraints of the Middle East. She had attended the American Community School in Jordan where she first tasted the liberty from Muslim expectations of women through sports – playing soccer, basketball, volleyball and baseball. In St. John's book her coach, Rhonda Brown (an African American) says, Luma was "keen to learn, dedicated and the kind of player a team could be built around."

St. John writes tenderly of Luma's relationship with her grandmother, the only one, "among the family that seemed to understand the implications of Luma attending college in the United States." Her grandmother knew that once there, Luma would never return to Jordan. Her departure created a vast rift in the family and the silence fueled Luma's desire to create a new family in the United States. Today, Luma has reconciled with her family who have visited her in Clarkston and assisted the Fugees through sponsorship of school and athletic supplies.

As much as the author tells Luma's story, he also provides insight into the soccer players and their families. The stories behind the relocations of Luma and members of the Fugees to the United States and what happened to family members left behind are the most intriguing parts of the book. While I have not had the refugee experience, I have lived in Mexico and various cities in the United States, far from my native New York in culture, language and opportunity. I have found my way by creating new friends and through volunteering. Writing about culture and people and through the eyes of authors such as Warren St. John, I have adapted and come to love my new surroundings and the adventure each move brings. To assist the refugee community visit the website of the Refugee Resettlement & Immigration Services of Atlanta (rrisa.org), a non-profit agency that provides services to transition into American culture for hundreds of refugees annually.

In the course of writing his book, St. John asked Luma to put her philosophy into words to "provide a framework for others who hoped to replicate the kind of program she created." According to the author, he learned that there was "no great secret to what made the Fugees work. "They were powered by simple but enduring ideas: a sense of fairness, love, forgiveness and most of all, a willingness to work – to engage in the process of turning these simple notions into actions that could affect others."

Writing of the developments since he turned in his manuscript, St. John says that, "Relations between the city of Clarkston and the Fugees, for the most part, have improved." The reporting that Mayor Swaney's term ends this year and that he will not seek reelection tumbles off the page in a matter of fact manner but left this reader believing that what goes around comes around.

Pages in newspapers and news websites recount impersonal refugee stories. Warren St. John has made the larger story personal and emotional. The non-fiction telling of the Fugees' success is a lesson for all citizens as well those who have adopted the United States as their home. Crossing cultures the book shows that community, hard work and dedication create a future worth living.

###

Elena Mills says

Not something that I would sit down and read for a long time without a motive (b.o.b.) but I enjoyed it. I loved the story over all, Luma was such an inspiring figure, and I grew attached to many of the characters and loved learning their stories.

Jacob Clark says

The book was ok it wasn't the greatest but not the worst. Luma had many difficult challenges in her life she came over here for school. Her family was in Jordan living there lifestyle she never left Clarkston because of soccer and her hometown. She worked really hard to get where she is today by opening a ice cream parlor, being a waitress, and being a soccer coach. Trying to live her life multitasking

Matt says

If Disney got its hands on this would, the script would look a lot like a true-story *Bad News Bears* or *Mighty Ducks* or *Major League*. *Rag-tag Bunch of Misfit Kids Ruffle the Establishment and Win the Championship*. Fortunately, that's not actually what this book is about. And fortunately (as far as I know) Disney doesn't yet have its hands on this one.

What makes the book engaging is that it presents several good narratives. The author is at his best in presenting the social turmoil brought about in the small Atlanta suburb, where the good-natured but xenophobic mayor and the ideologue police chief are cartoonishly unprepared for the new settlers. Some people and institutions in Clarkston embrace change, while others retreat from the community or resist outright. But the transformation story of Clarkston, Georgia, resulting from the dramatic influx of resettled refugees from every imaginable contemporary conflict, is topic enough for a book. These stories are captured wonderfully.

The bigger challenge for the writer, a white American (and a grown man), is capturing the lives of the refugees themselves, and the kids in particular. This is still done as well as one might be able to hope. Many of these children find the soccer team to be critically important for them. They learn to take responsibility for their own actions and play together. But more importantly, the team and its unlikely coach give them structure and friendship, an outlet for youthful aggression, and a role model. The author particularly focuses on the growth of the under-13 soccer team, since those kids work together, grow, and best embody the hope and spirit of their coach.

But the most compelling storyline centers on the under-15 team. These kids endure chaos in the form of a perfect storm. Many are from single parent families whose head-of-household has to work long hours to keep the family afloat. Many arrived in the country at an age advanced enough to make the language and cultural transitions particularly difficult. And to top it off, they are at an age that proves to be awkward even for the most well-adjusted of our species. Some of the kids cope well, but many others do not. As a result, the team fares poorly.

Each year, San Diego's public library and public radio team up to choose a contemporary book to promote as the city's book for the year in a program called "One Book, One San Diego", and this is the chosen volume for 2010. (And this is why I read the book at all.)

Cynically, I was disappointed when I first saw their choice this year. For the fourth year in a row, it's nonfiction, and I was afraid I'd get too much of a dose of that feared Disney pic. But this book really was much more fun than I'd feared. And given that San Diego is every bit as common a destination for refugees as Atlanta, it's a very relevant choice.
