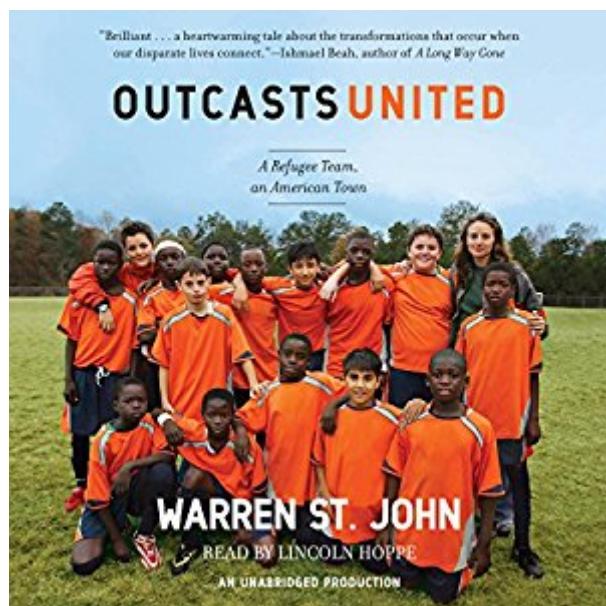


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# Outcasts United



## Synopsis

The extraordinary tale of a refugee youth soccer team and the transformation of a small American town Clarkston, Georgia, was a typical Southern town until it was designated a refugee settlement center in the 1990s, becoming the first American home for scores of families in flight from the world's war zones "from Liberia and Sudan to Iraq and Afghanistan. Suddenly Clarkston's streets were filled with women wearing the hijab, the smells of cumin and curry, and kids of all colors playing soccer in any open space they could find. The town also became home to Luma Mufleh, an American-educated Jordanian woman who founded a youth soccer team to unify Clarkston's refugee children and keep them off the streets. These kids named themselves the Fugees. Set against the backdrop of an American town that without its consent had become a vast social experiment, *Outcasts United* follows a pivotal season in the life of the Fugees and their charismatic coach. Warren St. John documents the lives of a diverse group of young people as they miraculously coalesce into a band of brothers, while also drawing a fascinating portrait of a fading American town struggling to accommodate its new arrivals. At the center of the story is fiery Coach Luma, who relentlessly drives her players to success on the soccer field while holding together their lives "and the lives of their families" in the face of a series of daunting challenges. This fast-paced chronicle of a single season is a complex and inspiring tale of a small town becoming a global community "and an account of the ingenious and complicated ways we create a home in a changing world. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

As someone who once worked for a company where I had colleagues who were refugees of war-torn countries, this book was personally relevant. Just as in the book, I was told the most astounding and frightening tales of what people did to survive on a day-to-day basis and how they were ultimately forced to flee their homes for fear of their own lives and those of their families. It really made me think of how lucky I have always been to have never had to face anything remotely like what they'd gone through. I had the same feeling when I read this book and St. John delved into the stories of the Fugees players and what they had gone through before reaching the U.S. Perhaps the saddest part of this book is the reality that greets these people when they reach the U.S. It was sobering to read about how they were settled in apartment complexes where they lived next door to drug dealers and gang members. It was sad to think that these people had escaped the devastation of their homes only to end up in a totally foreign culture in which they'd face a lot of the same dangers. It was also disturbing to read about their treatment at the hands of the police and the long-time residents of the town. I don't think St. John was trying to paint these people out to be evil. Rather, he showed how human fears of that which is different and misunderstood can really tear at the fabric of a society. These people struggle with trying to find a way to deal with the influx of refugees into their town. Sometimes their solutions are brilliant, such as the story of the local grocery store, and sometimes they are just wrong, such as the Fugees inability to find a decent soccer field near their homes. I was really struck by Luma, their coach, and how much she sacrificed in order to run her three soccer teams. The dedication of people like her and some of the other volunteers described in the book is really something to contemplate. She gave a lot of herself not only to get the team running but also to do what she could to ensure that her boys stayed in school and out of trouble. Her teams pretty much became her entire life rather than just a pastime. It's hard not to marvel at how heroic someone like this is because it makes the reader question if s/he would be as dedicated. This book is a really important read. The face of the U.S. is definitely in a state of transition. This is and has always been a nation of immigrants but this book is timely when placed in the context of the arguments about illegal immigration that took place during the Bush administration. The big question, really, seems to be about immigration in general, both legal and illegal. In order to really make our country work, we have to find a way to live with our neighbors and to respect their customs. Even if you're not a fan of soccer (as in my case), this is still a book that will fascinate, amaze, and horrify you. What's more, you'll walk away with it with some new and valuable ways of looking at the U.S.

How does a soccer coach find a practice field for her team? Google Earth. But why, in a town that's not short of parks, is she looking for a field on Google Earth? Because the mayor keeps issuing what seem like illegal orders to deny her team access to any of the lush local fields. And why would he do that? Because this is Clarkston, Georgia, a town of 7,200 a dozen miles from Atlanta. And the members of the soccer team are not only boys of color, they are foreigners --- Africans, mostly --- who have come to Clarkston as part of a wave of immigrants. 'Outcasts United: A Refugee Team, an American Town' is set in the feel-bad reality of a small town that never wanted to be the dumping ground for people fleeing conflict zones. It's a story of bumbling villains --- the mayor is a decent soul who's way over his head; the bad cop is the sort of jerk you can find anywhere --- and unlikely heroes. The first heroes are, of course, the Fugees, who overcome terrible memories, language barriers and unthinking prejudice to become --- against great odds --- a team. But at the top of the list is the team's coach: Luma Mufleh, who is, in her own way, also a refugee. The boys are really the lesser story, because without the commitment and self-sacrifice of this exceptional coach, their team would never have lasted a year. So weep for their pasts. Cheer for their success. Worry about their futures. But reserve the standing ovation for Luma Mufleh. Born into privilege in Jordan, she graduated from Smith College and decided to stay in the United States. Her father's response was to cut her off. "No more money, no more phone calls. He was finished with his daughter." So the Smith graduate got work cleaning toilets and washing dishes. She moved to Georgia for the weather. One day she drove to Clarkston and saw refugee kids playing a style of soccer she knew and liked. She went to the YMCA, discovered a coaching job was available, and was hired to run a girls' team. Just one accident after another.....Mufleh did not coddle her players. She expected discipline and compliance, and when she didn't get it, the kids paid the price. Her girls ran a lot --- but if they were late, they ran extra laps. And woe be to the player who complained to her parents. The boys were even more challenging, if only because they represented more of a threat to the town. They weren't. They were just poor, often hungry, not really ready to assimilate. Mufleh worked 60 hours a week coaching them, helping their families, making sure they got their school work done. Exhausting? "You start off on your own," she says, "and you suddenly have a family of a hundred and twenty." St. John draws the boys as well as he can, but their stories do merge. You think nothing that happens to them in Clarkston can be half as dramatic as the events that brought them to America --- imagine being a kid in Liberia and running out of your house as your father is being killed inside. Well, imagine, in America, seeing your coach arrested, handcuffed, and carted off to jail --- as you're going to a game! [Mufleh's crime? A burned-out tail light.] The soccer style of the Fugees is exciting, and St. John's descriptions of their games are crisp and tense. But their

victories on the field are small compared to what their coach accomplished in practice and in her pre-game talks. Luma Mufleh deserved the front page Times story. She earned --- many times over --- the money that flows to the team from the sale of the film rights. And she's more than worthy of this 300-page Valentine.

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