



# AN EDUCATOR'S GUIDE TO

A MEMOIR  
**LUMA MUFLEH**

It's hard to say goodbye  
when you don't want to go.

# FROM

# HERE





# A NOTE TO TEACHERS

*From Here*, at the heart of it, is a nuanced memoir about family, home, and finding oneself. The story asks that readers explore, alongside author Luma Mufleh, challenging yet necessary topics of sexuality, spirituality, tradition, gender, resistance, and global relationships. There are moments of devastating grief along the journey to leave all that one knows—and loves—for the opportunity to be free. Though Mufleh's story is one of a queer Arab, it is universal in its humanity, emotionality, and necessity; it urges young people to tell their stories and find their people.

Because *From Here* is set both in the Middle East and the United States, and because there are unique challenges to navigating sexuality within religion, it is imperative that educators gain foundational knowledge about the region and Muslim religion before teaching the text. There are links at the bottom of this section to get you started.

In a time of increased censorship and erasure of peoples and cultures from our school curricula and libraries, Mufleh's *From Here* is a beautiful testament to queerness, family, borders, and fluidity. Discussion of authoritative regimes and family structures bound by tradition and anti-queer rhetoric is explicitly tackled. Shame, history, oppression; fleeing, seeking refugee status, and building anew: All of these are explored with honesty and authenticity by Mufleh, in an effort at universally sharing with young people their ability to buck systemic oppression toward finding themselves, too.



**Before reading, please review the following links to further grow your understanding:**

## **Resources from the National Coalition Against Censorship**

[Book Censorship Action Kit](#)

[DEFEND LGBTQ STORIES: A Resource Guide](#)

[Responding to Book Challenges: A Handbook for Educators](#)

## **Resources from the National Council of Teachers of English**

[Position Statements: Guidelines for Dealing with Censorship of Instructional Materials](#)

[Book Rationale Database](#)

[Teaching LGBTQ History and Activism with \*Like a Love Story\*](#)

## **Resources on Jordan and Islam**

[Jordan - from the Encyclopedia Britannica](#)

[Syria - from the Encyclopedia Britannica](#)

[Islam - from the History Channel](#)

## **ABOUT THE WRITER OF THIS GUIDE**

Nawal Qarooni is an Arab and Iranian American educator and writer who supports a holistic approach to literacy instruction education spaces across the country. Drawing on her work as an inquiry-based leader and as a mother, Nawal's pedagogy is centered in the rich and authentic learning all families gift their children every day. She is also the author of *Nourishing Caregiver Collaborations: Exalting Home Experiences and Classroom Practices for Collective Care*. You can learn more about her work at [NQCLiteracy.org](http://NQCLiteracy.org).

## BOOK OVERVIEW

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’ve also been killed if anyone discovered her sexuality. Luma spent her teenage years increasingly desperate to find a way out, and finally found one when she was accepted into college in the United States. Once there, Luma begins the agonizing process of applying for political asylum, which ensures her safety—but causes her family to break ties with her.

Becoming a refugee in America is a rude awakening, and Luma must rely on the grace of friends and strangers alike as she builds a new life and finally embraces her full self. Slowly, she’s able to forge a new path forward with both her biological and chosen families, eventually founding Fugees Family, a nonprofit dedicated to the education and support of refugee children in the United States.

As hopeful as it is heartrending, *From Here* is a coming-of-age memoir about one young woman’s search for belonging and the many meanings of home for those who must leave theirs.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Luma Mufleh is a Syrian/Jordanian entrepreneur, coach, and thought leader in refugee and English Language Learner education. The daughter and granddaughter of Syrian refugees, Luma grew up in Amman, Jordan, where she was one of the only Arab students in her class at an American school, and one of the only girls who played on her soccer team. As a young adult in a country where being gay was considered a crime, Luma came out to her parents and was disowned. In 1993, she came to the United States to attend Smith College and graduated with a B.A. in Anthropology in 1997. Granted asylum in the US, Luma navigated the broken immigration system to build a life for herself—opening a coffee shop and coaching soccer. In 2006, she founded Fugees Family, the only network of schools in the US dedicated to refugee and immigrant education. Luma is empowering refugee children to use their voices to reclaim and tell their own stories—shifting the narrative around refugees away from the current fearmongering frame to one of courage, resilience, and creative potential. Luma completed the Executive Program in Social Entrepreneurship at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. In 2019, Luma was named an Emerson Collective Dial Fellow and a Manhattan Institute Civil Society Fellow.





# BEFORE YOU READ

*From Here* by Luma Mufleh reveals, above everything, the importance of building your community and choosing to be free. The journey is not without pain and agony, but Mufleh shares her journey in how she was able to break off and eventually rebuild. The story's structure is bookended by conversations with her daughter, Leila, with connections to Mufleh's parents. Through this powerful structure, readers learn of the positive ending—and the healing that happens—as a result of Mufleh's honest way forward. Parts of the book are set in Jordan, and Mufleh's mother is Syrian. Before you read, be sure to locate Jordan and Syria on a map.

## Suggested Pre-Reading Activity: Telling the Stories of Our Foods

Food stories are human stories. In this text, food and food stories are important. As you begin, consider asking students to reflect upon and tell the stories of the foods in their family: traditional, celebratory, mundane. There are many online resources to support your analysis of food stories with students, but you might ground this activity in three specific questions in connection to *From Here*:

1. What are the stories behind your family's most eaten foods?
2. What history do these recipes carry?
3. What foods provide comfort for you and why?

Consider layering in additional stories about foods in the form of picture books and spoken word. You can immerse your students in stories about the power of food stories using this [compilation](#). This activity serves as a springboard for student exploration and sharing of their own histories, cultural backgrounds, and experiences, further validating the universality of Mufleh's story.

## Suggested Pre-Reading Activity: Creating a Physical Space for Curiosities

Because student-led curiosity strengthens the understanding and absorption of learning, create a space—either physically with a chart or online with a collaborative conversation tool (like Jamboard or Padlet)—to gather student curiosities.

*From Here* is rich with cultural references, words in Arabic, and vocabulary that may spark student questions. As an educator, you will have your own. Add your curiosities publicly and purposefully in front of your students so that everyone contributes to the learning process, and the community's inquiry grows the trajectory of discussion. Use the parking lot of curiosities to craft discussion.

## Content Warnings and Considerations

This book contains discussions of government and familial violence against citizens and family members; policing; racism; prejudice; homophobia; immigration; suicidal thoughts; and grief. We highly suggest teachers make space for students to take care of their socioemotional needs while engaging with this book. Co-constructing community norms alongside your students and upholding them through discussion will support their discussion health throughout the reading.

## Resources:

- [Handling Planned or Unexpected Class Discussions Involving Sensitive Topics](#) (Stanford University)
- [Let's Talk Guide: Facilitating Critical Conversations with Students](#) (Learning for Justice)
- [Concentric Circles \(Moving Beyond Ice Breakers\)](#)

This book also includes implications of consensual intimacy between queer youth. No different than the scenes of intimacy in older "classics" we've taught before, these very real moments are necessary to share with young people. Preview these sections, teach them with a focus on relationships and consent, and prepare resources should students, parents, or administrators have questions about its inclusion in your curriculum.



# READING AND TEACHING FROM HERE

## Exploring Structure and Author's Craft

The memoir begins with a question from Mufleh's daughter

"Is your dad dead?"

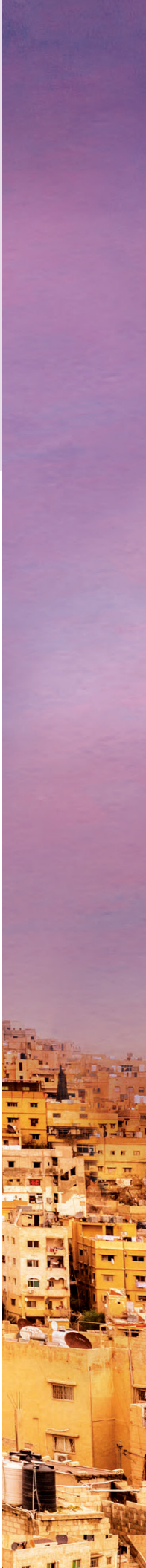
But then Mufleh tells her story as a flashback, from her childhood in the 1980s up to the events of the present day.

- Why do you think Mufleh chose to structure the story in connection to her daughter?
- How do Mufleh's parents feel separate or connected to her new life and children?
- In what ways does the book begin in hope?

## DISCUSSING TEXT THEMES, CHARACTERS, AND PLOT

### Identity Development

- The book begins with the sacrifice of an animal on Eid Al-Adha, and through the scene, we learn about Mufleh's relationship with her siblings and spirituality. What does the feast of mansaf represent for Mufleh (p. 16)? What meals are special in your family and why?
- Learning the ways you're tied to your elders and their dreams for you is profoundly important in Arab culture. Why is the scene on page 22 important, when Mufleh "sucks the marrow straight from the bone"?
- Middle Eastern countries have been locked in religious conflict for many decades. How does Mufleh's family relationship to war and place shape her understanding of safety (pp. 30–32)?
- Mufleh's grandparents are very different. One side gifts extravagantly, while the other shares simplicity. What lessons are taught in those moments of difference? (p.33)
- Why does Taytay, Mufleh's grandmother, want to talk about the "hard parts"? What "hard parts" might your family talk about or avoid?
- More and more, Mufleh feels she cannot follow the Arab cultural and societal norms for girls growing into women. Though she wants to please her mother, she has an "aversion to feminine activities." When she gets her period, her family shares a rite of passage of sorts—the removal of hair through waxing. How does the scene on page 69 make Mufleh feel? How are societal expectations of gender norms imposed on young people where you live today?



# DISCUSSING TEXT THEMES, CHARACTERS, AND PLOT (CONTINUED)

## Community and Belonging

- Mufleh writes, “The Middle Eastern family is so interconnected that often mothers call their children Mama, uncles call their nieces Uncle, putting into words the unity that forms the basis of everything—loyalty, love, honor” (p. 43). How does this shape Mufleh’s sense of belonging?
- Mufleh learns to straddle several spaces as a result of the school she first attends. What are some dichotomies she was faced with because of her family’s travels and her classmates’ backgrounds that allowed her to feel a sense of community (p. 45)?
- Mufleh begins to realize that how she feels on the inside is not how she is expressing her thoughts on the outside. She says, “I began to realize that I was different. The feeling I had in ballet—that my skin was on backward—I started feeling it all the time. Like what people saw on the outside was not who I was on the inside. Like I had been given a dark secret to hold on to, and if people knew, they would hate me (p. 52).” All of us have felt this way, at times—like we didn’t fit in. Like we were truly different than those around us. Pause and reflect. Where have you felt the most comfortable, and where have you felt the most discomfort? Why?
- What does Mufleh mean when she writes, “Instead, I was like a stone stuck in the middle of a rushing current (p.63)?
- Dichotomies and nuance are incredibly powerful, and the intersection of our identities is profound. Why does Mufleh write “the very happiest moments of your life are also the very saddest” (p. 234)?
- [Watch the video](#) with Luma discussing her hopes for the book. Reflect on the book’s title. Why do you think it’s called *From Here*?

## Love and Relationships

- There are so many different kinds of love. How does Mufleh draw on the strength of her love for Leana, as she watches her make rhubarb pie (p. 208)?
- Mufleh extends understanding and grace to her family’s initial refusal to accept her true identity. When she’s applying for asylum, she writes, “My parents weren’t bad or evil people. They weren’t cruel. They were trapped in and products of a cruel culture, a faith that had been manipulated by the men in power. It wasn’t the lion I was afraid of; it was the lion’s cage” (p. 218). What does she mean?
- There are many ways to show love. Love languages come in many forms. On page 284 Mufleh writes, “This is how Arabs show their love, not by saying ‘I love you’ over and over again, but by being physically present, by showing up.” How do you and your family show love?
- Mufleh’s relationship with her parents and family eventually heals, after many years of separation. How did healing happen? (p. 298) What lessons might we glean from Mufleh’s experience?





# DISCUSSING TEXT THEMES, CHARACTERS, AND PLOT (CONTINUED)

## Government and People

- How does Mufleh feel as she observes her country, Jordan, erupt in riots over the rise of bread prices? (p.82) How is her own understanding of self shaping at the same time?
- How are girls and boys treated differently in Jordanian society in the 1980s (p. 88)?
- What does it mean to bring dishonor to your family (p. 90)? What is Mufleh afraid of?
- When the country begins to devolve closer to war, Mufleh writes, “Why would we pretend everything was normal when it was not?” (p. 105). What are the ways in which people tried to proceed with their lives normally despite the growing stresses around them?
- The Jordanian government censored American media. But Mufleh noticed. How did her learning of Navratilova’s homosexuality strike her (p. 112)?
- Explore pages 164 to 165, when Mufleh writes about the value of free thinking. How were her British and American school experiences valuable for her learning and growth?

## Queer Representation and Identity

- There is no word for “gay” in Arabic, so when Mufleh learns that the tennis player Navratilova is openly gay, she writes: “I wasn’t the only one. There were others. Allah hadn’t forgotten to install a piece of me on his assembly line of people; the doctor who delivered me hadn’t screwed up” (p. 114)? Why was she feeling so alienated and how did this discovery make her feel? Why did getting to America give Mufleh hope?
- Consider the texts you have encountered—novels, movies, TV shows, music, art, fan fiction, video games, etc. How are LGBTQ+ characters represented? What are their common storylines and conflicts? How do these representations align with or diverge from Mufleh’s experience in Jordan?
- How do Susan’s and Mufleh’s identities and privileges differ, and how are they similar? How does this compare to Mufleh’s later relationships with women and friendships with other queer people?
- Holding both identities—being gay and being Muslim—is something that Mufleh eventually learns to do expertly. She writes that she “was collecting contradictions like a bouquet of flowers,” and “it was hard to hold them all at once” (p. 180). What are some of the contradictions she faces? Though she meets Muslim students in the United States who can’t understand how she can be both, she is “presented with a familiar calculation. Change their minds or change myself” (pp. 182–185). How does Mufleh reconcile both these parts of her identity?



# EXTENDING ENGAGEMENT

## Extension Activity: Telling Your Own Story with Daily Journaling

One of the [author's main hopes](#) for this book is for others to be able to record their stories, so we may all bear witness and learn from each other's journey's. She writes, "But now I know that it's the untold stories that hurt the most. In the open, in the light, the stories of our suffering connect us to one another and create opportunities for us to heal. Maybe this story will help other kids who feel alone and are struggling with their identity. Maybe it will help parents whose children didn't turn out like they planned. Maybe it can even help the millions of people who have had to leave their homes, to remind them that there is something strong and resilient inside of them, no matter how far they are forced to run" (pp. 300–301).

- Keep a journal. Begin writing memories—times you felt sad, mad, alone, angry. Times you felt elated, excited, thrilled, curious.
- Fold over the pages you do not want to share. Some writing is meant to be recorded for yourself.
- Revisit writing from a previous day. Extend it by adding two or three more details from your memory.
- Find another person in the room who you might want to share one writing excerpt with. Partner A can read a bit aloud. Name commonalities or differences. Partner B can just listen.

## Extension Activity: Cultivating Constellations of Care

*From Here* is very much about recognizing our constellations of care—the people who are closest to us, who understand, support, and buoy us. Our constellations of care will change over time, just like it does for Mufleh in the book. Start talking about constellations of care early with your students, laying the foundation for continued conversations around caring for people we love by listening earnestly, asking questions, and bearing witness to their emotions.

You might ask students to represent their constellations of care visually. Questions to guide mapping the stars in our constellations:

- Who is there for you?
- With whom do you feel you can completely be yourself, without being compartmentalized?
- How has your constellation changed over time?
- What are the characteristics of the stars in your constellation that make them shine bright?
- How does Mufleh's constellation of care change throughout the text?

## Contextualized Learning about Middle Eastern Food, Culture, and History

You can use the table below to continue adding information you want to learn about alongside students.

FOOD	HISTORY/CONTEXT	LANGUAGE/ EXPRESSIONS
Mansaf p. 16	<a href="#">Luma Mufleh TED talk: Don't Feel Sorry For Refugees—Believe in Them</a>	Kharoof - sheep <i>Yilan abouki I curse your father</i> p. 70 <i>Haram alayna</i> p. 82 <i>Bismillah al-rahman al-raheem In the name of Allah, the most compassionate, the most merciful</i> p. 185



# PRAISE FOR *FROM HERE*

★ “This is a must-add to any high school biography/memoir section. Mufleh’s story is one of strength and courage, and shines light on the injustices in our world . . . You need to put this one on your high school shelf now, but it won’t stay there long.”

—*SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL*,  
STARRED REVIEW

★ “This affecting memoir by refugee advocate Mufleh chronicles her internal struggle to reconcile her identity as a gay Arab Muslim woman. Via clear-eyed prose . . . Mufleh is both loving and critical in her portrayal of her family and culture . . . [T]his poignant reflection on choice, family, and living one’s truth provides insight into Mufleh’s relationship with her heritage, and how these experiences helped shape her identity and advocacy work.” —*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY*, STARRED REVIEW

★ “A powerful, honest account of an activist’s experiences of being gay in a culture she loves but in which it’s hard to see a place for herself . . . Mufleh’s raw descriptions of finding her place in the world are relatable: Questions of choosing between living your truth or your family’s will speak to readers of many backgrounds . . . Mufleh’s journey shows that acceptance and reconciliation are possible and that those we love can grow and learn . . . A poignant glimpse into human imperfections and the struggle to find one’s place in the world.” —*KIRKUS REVIEWS*, STARRED REVIEW

