

The Luis Ortega Survival Club Transcript

Welcome to Reading the Rainbow, brought to you by the Dauphin County Library System. For the book curious looking for their next good LGBTQ+ read. Listen in as queer library staff discuss the Own Voice stories they've been reading.



Dani: Hello, my name is Dani and I go by they/them.

Ann: Hi, my name is Ann and I'm she/her, they/them. Sonora Reyes is a queer second-generation immigrant who attended a Catholic high school. They write fiction full of queer and Latinx characters in a variety of genres. Sonora is also the creator and host of QPOC Cats, a monthly community-building Twitter chat for queer writers of color. They currently live in Arizona in a multi-generational family home with a small pack of dogs who run the place.

D: (synopsis) Ariana Ruiz wants to be noticed. But as an autistic girl who never talks, she goes largely ignored by her peers, despite her bold fashion choices. So when cute popular Luis starts to pay attention to her, Ari finally feels seen. Luis's attention soon starts to turn to something more, and they have sex at a party—while Ari didn't say no, she definitely didn't say yes. Before she has a chance to process what happened and decide if she even has a right to be mad at Luis, the rumor mill begins churning—thanks, she's sure, to Luis's ex-girlfriend, Shawni. Boys at school now see Ari as an easy target, someone who won't say no. Then Ari finds a mysterious note in her locker that eventually leads her to a group of students determined to expose Luis for the predator he is. To her surprise, she finds genuine friendship among the group, including her growing feelings for the very last girl she expected to fall for. But in order to take Luis down, she'll just have to come to terms with the truth of what he did to her that night—and risk everything to see justice done.

A: Yeah, just content warnings. There's sexual assault and gaslighting.

D: On to the main characters, besides Ari, who is the main character. Other main characters in the book are Shawni, Luis's ex-girlfriend, and Ari's former best friend, who's out as bisexual. Ari's mom, Ari's dad, Luis's friends, and the members of the Luis Ortega Survival Club, and Luis's many, many other victims.

A: Alright, so first impressions, what did you think?

D: Okay, so the cover is, like, really cute. I said this for, like, a whole bunch of other books, but, like, the cover is really cute, but, like, when you actually dive into it, it's, like, a really detailed book, but in a good way, like, it covers these topics without being too overwhelming.

A: I don't want to say it's a light read, but it's, like, a quick read when you get into it.

D: It's a coming-of-age book when you think about it, but, I mean, yeah, it just deals with harsher topics than your lighthearted coming-of-age books.

A: Well, there's a few books I've read with autistic main characters lately. I like that there's more of that, more kids who are, like, I'm autistic and here's what it's like, and I felt like it was very authentic and it helped to draw me in. I wonder if other people have that same reaction, but I'm, like, this person feels normal to me because they're neurodivergent. I'm, like, oh, that might not be everyone's normal, but it really drew me in. I'm, like, okay, I understand where you're coming from.

D: Yeah, I can't think of any other books right now at the top of my head with an autistic main character. I'm sure there's some out there, but, yeah, it's really nice to feel seen as somebody who's neurodivergent. With her being mute, you don't really see that that much.

A: I really liked it. I really got into her character, and it pretty much pulled me in almost from, like, page one, even though I had to read it off and on across several months.

D: So the main topic of the book with Luis, how do you feel that was portrayed compared to real life, like sexual assault in schools and how it plays out?

A: It was really, really rough, wasn't it? Because it felt very, very real. I could picture all of this actually happening, probably because I saw all of this happening. I felt like it was very realistic. What do you think?

D: Yeah, definitely it was. You see that happening in high school. I feel like it's more of an American thing, especially with toxic masculinity. People tend to always protect popular men and boys and don't actually listen to the victims. And I feel like he sought out people who were ostracized and didn't have friends. And that is very realistic.

A: I guess it made it hard to read because I don't want to give away anything about the ending. But you know, you want there to be a happy ending. But then you're like, but in real life, how often is there a happy ending to the story, you know? I feel like things are getting better, but we definitely have a long way to go in terms of believing the victims and not blaming people.

D: I feel like it's even more realistic because Luis's dad was a cop, or he was involved in the law somehow. And then those people tend to cover up things that their kids do.

A: I know, that was kind of terrifying.

D: Definitely. Pertaining to real life, unfortunately.

A: I know, especially when he was getting someone else in trouble for his actions. I mean, you know, and that makes people afraid to talk because if you talk, then you might wind up being in jail. Because you're the one person who talked.

D: Moving along with the topic of consent, how do you think consent played out in terms of just not Luis and Ari, but Ari and her parents, her friends, teachers?

A: Yeah, that was really interesting that the relationship dynamic between Ari and her mother, especially, that was pretty intense. Because you could feel her mom was really trying to make her almost like a sister or something. And at the same time being the mom, trying to take control of her. It was interesting that you put it that way, because I hadn't thought about it as a consent problem, so much as like a mother-daughter problem. But I think a lot of times, I think, again, it resonated with me with the autism, a lot of times when someone's autistic, people will do that. Like, I'm autistic. You know, and I noticed that sometimes people, because they know that you're just going to believe whatever that you tell them. That's why a lot of times we wind up being victims. And we don't even realize until years later, like, oh, wow, I was a victim, you know? And it was actually kind of interesting to think about it in terms of her mom, maybe trying to normalize her and being used to doing that. And when she realized that Ari was now being a teenager, a little bit maybe behind where she should have gone to that level, being like, no, you have to stay home, you can't leave the house. And Ari finally waking up and going, oh my gosh, just because you told me to do it doesn't mean I have to do it. And I feel like that was part of the whole coming of age, realizing that she has her own agency of the story that I think was part of what was really profound. What did you think about it? It was interesting that you brought up Ari and her parents.

D: I like how the book showed it because not only did it show Ari's struggle with autism and it relating to her parents, but it also showed her mom's struggle with her own mental illness and how that projected onto her daughter and to others. I think it's just not black and white. And I don't want to

say what her mom has, but obviously she has a mental illness. And when you're struggling with things from the past, obviously that's going to project on the people that you have relationships with. Like her dad, it wasn't just black and white, like she's cheating on him. There was like a hidden reason why she was cheating on him, as with like there was a hidden reason why she wanted to just smother her daughter. I know there was a part in the book where she said that she was seeing the signs that she saw in herself when she was younger. And I think that plays a part too.

A: I feel like I still need to sit with that relationship, especially with what you find out at the end that I can't say, you know, but when you find out at the end and you're like, oh wow, I need to go back and rethink that entire thing right now, you know? And I don't know. I mean, I feel like it's hard for a kid sometimes too, even if your parents going through something to accept that you're still a kid though and it's not your fault.

D: Yeah.

A: And yeah, I mean, that was interesting. I feel like at the end, you really love both her parents. I feel like at the end, you kind of really love both of them, but you're still like, but Ari, I'm with you, I'm on your side. I think you did everything that you could in that moment.

D: Throughout the book, you're like, oh, her mom is so annoying. Like she's not the best mom, but then when you get to the end and that part comes out, you're like, oh, I can understand why she acts like that.

A: Yeah. There was also a consent between Ari and her friends.

D: I really, really like how her friends asked to give her hugs and everything. When she didn't talk, they didn't pressure her or anything. It was just like, oh my God, she's talking when she did say something.

A: Yeah.

D: Not in a mean way.

A: Yeah, that was really sweet.

D: As somebody who doesn't like physical touch, I really appreciate it when people ask me if they can hug me or like even give me like a pat on the back or whatever.

A: Yeah, I don't mind like consensual hugs.

D: Yeah.

A: But when someone like comes up to you and they're like, hugging, pat on the back now, and you're like, this is not giving you the reaction that either one of us want right now. Yeah, ask first, you know? Yeah, that's it. That's a good point. I feel like there's a lot of things in our society that we're getting better at that kind of thing because even neurotypical people, I think, don't necessarily want someone to come up and hug them. It's okay to ask first. It's not weird. You can ask, you know, and the person can say no and still love you.

D: Yeah, it was such a wholesome friendship.

A: I know.

D: It's like, here's how friendships should work.

A: Did you like how Sonora Reyes expressed Ari's selective mutism imprints?

D: I think it was really well done. So I do like seeing a different character who does also do that.

A: Yeah, I like how she used a capital letter or bolding or something to say when Ari was typing and not speaking.

D: Yeah, that was good. I also liked how she typed everything out. Yes.

A: Yeah, it was like really cute. I don't know, it gave me this feeling like I had this reaction at first, like, oh, this is weird. What are people going to say? And then when her friends were like, oh, that's how she talks, and they just accepted it.

D: Yeah, I think that shows how easy it is to talk to people who just have different talking methods. Like when you think of deaf people, some people just don't want to learn sign language, unfortunately. And this could relate back to that and show how easy it is to actually communicate with people.

A: Do you know sign language?

D: No, personally, I don't. I want to learn. Isn't there a sign language class here at the library?

A: Yeah, there is. Yeah, yeah. Oh, now we're giving a shout out.

D: Do you think Ari's autism made it harder to know who her friends and enemies were?

A: I don't know. I wonder about that sometimes. Like, I wonder like when I was reading her character, part of me wanted to scream at her. Again, no spoilers, but there was somebody who turned out was her friend the whole time that she thought was her enemy for like half the book. And I was like, I figured it out by page five. I'm like, no, this person is not trying to do what you think they're trying to do. They're trying to do the opposite. Maybe because I knew what it was about or something. And then I kind of took a step back from my own life. I think it is part of autism that you'll be sitting there. You're like, this is the normal social response that people give in this particular situation. My instincts tell me they're being mean. However, I want to think they're being nice. And then the vice versa too. This someone, I want to believe that this person's being nice. However, this person is probably being mean right now. And then sometimes you get it totally wrong. But I think that can happen with anybody. I think maybe the sensory overload might be part of it, that she just didn't want to hear what this person had to say until she kind of tuned them out. And that's why she didn't find out that they were friends for longer. I just kind of went to scream at Ari, like, Ari just sit down and listen to this person for like 10 minutes, I have a feeling if you would just let them finish the sentence, you would find out that they're on your side. What do you think?

D: Yeah, I feel like it definitely made it harder. I can relate to some things that Ari went through, but being neurodivergent, you experience things way differently than neurotypical people. You experience friendships differently, you experience enemies differently, and you experience hardships like this differently. And you get into a loop of if that person is being mean to you or if they're being nice to you, if they're being your friend. And something as hard as this, there was a part in the book where she was wondering if Luis was mad at her and if she still loved him or not. It's way harder for somebody who is neurodivergent. Somebody who's neurotypical, they're just like, oh yeah, that person is definitely taking advantage of you. But seeing it from a different point of view, it's not just black and white. You go through all those emotions.

A: I think so. And that's probably why people like that take advantage of someone like Ari because they're like, I'm going to check every box and I'm going to be her quote-unquote boyfriend and therefore I can get away with stuff.

D: That's a typical standard manipulator.

A: The second half of the question though, because now I need to be more upbeat. Do you think that her neurodivergence though ultimately helped her to expose Luis and speak her truth?

D: I think in a way it did because he didn't expect her to speak up at all.

A: I think so. And I think people believed her too. Because they're like, no matter what she may be, she's not a liar.

D: Yeah, definitely.

A: Yeah, I think it's one of those Catch-22 situations. I forget who it was, but somebody told me one time, and I think they were talking about me and people like me, that there are certain kinds of people who think they can take advantage of you because they're really nice. And they're going to be genuinely shocked when you report them to the suitable authority and then they get in trouble. And you can be like, why were you surprised that this happened? Because I'm always nice doesn't mean I'm going to let you walk all over me. And I feel like it's one of those weird things that it's because you're in their eye divergent and so you tend to be more frank, that people are going to be like, whatever I think, I don't think she's making this up. I want to think it helped because I want to find some good and positive.

D: Even once she started to speak up, you could see that Luis kept on coming back and trying to manipulate her still.

A: I know. It was actually kind of funny too after a while because they're like, dude, figure it out. Yeah.

D: That makes it even more believable because manipulators and people like that, they're not just going to do one thing and then be done. They're going to keep trying over and over, tries to manipulate people over and over again, based on how many people he manipulated in the past. There was a part where Ari went around to different people and asked them, spoiler, to tell their stories.

A: And that's powerful. Just being able to tell your story.

D: How do you think— Ari telling her story, do you think it was believable? Because she had to stop several times, and talk herself out of that mindset that it was her fault.

A: This is really hard for me. I just have to disclose. And I mean, this is just personal, but I'm an abuse survivor. When I was a small kid, it was a kindergarten teacher who had me believe that I deserve whatever was being done to me. And so whenever I hear stories like this, and literally a psychologist probably could look into this more thoroughly, but my first reaction is always to be like, I don't know if you're telling the truth. And then I have to try to re-analyze it and be like, okay, here are the facts that happened. And there's this part of me though, that's always like, I need to go talk to someone else right now. Do you believe this person? Because I literally, it's like, I have a really hard time like reading a story like this. And so I'm gonna be totally honest with you. Part of me is like, Ari, come on. That was not very believable. I don't believe you. You know what I mean? And I'm like, I believe you because I'm reading the book. But if I were one of those people, I wouldn't believe you. And then I have to go ask somebody else, like, what do you think, Dani? Do you think her story was believable?

D: Yeah, I think it was believable.

A: That is a really hard question for me. It's really painful too, because I'm sitting there and I'm like, I wanna get like a poll. Actually, you know what I want? I want him to be in front of a jury and I want all 12 people.

D: Well, I mean, wasn't he eventually in front of a jury? Spoilers.

A: I hope so, Dani. And then behind bars for a very long time. I mean, I don't know. I kept wanting to scream at her all throughout the story, but I felt like it was in a healing way. It was a healing way where you're like, it's like retraining your brain, I think. To think, no, when someone like that tells you their story, listen to them and take that seriously. Because the truth is that people rarely false report rape. I mean, that's what they call it. The guys are always like, oh, she's just making it up to get attention. And it's like, here are the statistics that doesn't actually happen. I mean, it happens rarely. I feel like part of the whole overcoming the rape culture, which is part of what Sonora Reyes is doing here is having people say it over and over again. And have you be like, this is a real person. Here's their story, and they were raped. It was definitely a rape. I'm going to say, I don't want to talk about rape, but let's just keep talking about it. And so you accept the fact that this actually does happen. And then eventually when the next time a guy comes up to you and it's like, oh, she pretty much wanted it. Look the way she was dressed. You can be like, yeah, she was dressed beautifully, but not for you. And I feel like it is part of that thing where I want to believe somebody, but I can't. And maybe that's not the worst place to be, because that's what we're working through right now. Because I do believe her. I mean, and I believe other people. It's just my brain is like..

D: Yeah, you like have that inner dialogue once you go through something like that. And like, it's once again, not black and white, my favorite term. But when you go through something like that, you can't just come out and say it. You go through these emotions of, am I being overdramatic? Did that actually happen? And that's why it takes so long for some people to just come out and say it. Like you see in the news, like different cases of people coming out 20 years later and saying what happened to them and people saying, oh, why didn't you just say it then? But it's not always that easy. And I think that this book portrays it in a good light without being too depressing.

A: Yeah. I think it was one of the most interesting things that at first she describes it as (and I don't think this is a spoiler, this happens pretty early on) she basically describes it as: I had sex and I didn't really like it, and it was very fast. And you're like, hmm, that's interesting. You know? And then the more of it comes out, the more you're like, wait a minute. That was non-consensual sex. Wait a minute, that was— I think it was part of really her journey even into understanding what actually happened.

That wraps up our discussion of *the Louis Ortega Survival Club* by Sonora Reyes. Join us this winter for our next season.



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