

## *Hijab Butch Blues* 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.



Madison: Hello, my name is Madison and I go by she/her pronouns.

Goldie: Hello, my name is Goldie and I go by she/her pronouns.

M: And this week we're going over *Hijab Butch Blues* by Lamya H. *Hijab Butch Blues* is a memoir that gives a clear and poignant look into the joys and struggles of a queer Muslim person as they navigate family, young adulthood and identity. Though many find queerness and religion to be incompatible, Lamya weaves them together by relating her life experiences to passages from the Quran and challenging widely accepted interpretations of its teachings.

G: So what is your overall analysis of this book? I personally found this heavy emotional material.

M: Yes, I found it heavy. I think that Lamya writes in a way where she talks about heavy subjects in a very clear and concise manner. So I think that it's a good book to act as, like, an entryway into concepts you might not be familiar with, especially if you're not queer or you're not Muslim, then I think it's a great starting point.

G: I think that her writing style was pretty amazing considering the heavy material. Personally, when I go to look for a book to read, I'm looking for something that involves magic and dragons, because I like to get away from the real world. But this book was very eye-opening for me, and I don't know that I would have been able to get through it if it hadn't been written in such a way that made it understandable. Lamya decides to publish under a pseudonym, a decision which becomes clear as you read. Though many queer people feel coming out is a rite of passage, it can lead to a lot of loss. Depending on other cultural values, coming out to everyone might not be the best option for all queer people.

M: Did you feel like you were at arm's length from Lamya at any point during the book?

G: I really felt like I was invisible sitting there with her experiencing it, and then I felt for her, and that's a pretty neat thing to be able to do.

M: Yeah, I agree. I think it felt a lot like we were reading a journal entry, or even her stream of consciousness, which I thought was really cool. Lamya also challenges commonly accepted interpretations of the Quran, like God being a man and Abraham being tested by God. Lamya isn't afraid of thinking about religion in a more expansive way. Some queer people long for religious connection but don't feel welcome in those spaces or ideologies, so it's interesting to think of ways they could approach religion that works for them and not against. I think that readers interested in a memoir where the queer person continues in their faith might find what they're looking for in this book.

G: Yeah, it's really something how Lamya is expected to conform to distinct gender roles, and how Lamya is pressured to come out by queer friends who even went as far as saying she wasn't gay enough until she did, and the strange questions that she encountered, like the doctor asking, "what kind of gay are you?"

M: Yeah. Yeah, I think not coming out can often mean relationships never go past a certain level, but I think it's unfortunate that the burden is on queer people not to sacrifice their family when their

family should be held equally responsible for not abandoning them. And at the same time, I think Western society often touts individuality more than other cultures, so prioritizing maintaining familial relations may be a higher priority for some people, and I don't think that makes them less queer, or that you owe people an explanation of your queerness for it to be just as whole as their queerness.

G: Right, I mean, everybody should just do their own thing. And, being religious and queer are often seen as mutually exclusive, conflicting identities, but in this book, Lamya H. challenges this idea, seeing queerness as a miracle. And I find it pretty amazing how Lamya was heavily invested in finding her queer friends that she could share the identity with, even going to activities to meet people, and then while doing so, even finding some queer people that are so far, even queer activists, that were extremely racist to the Muslim identity.

M: Yeah, Lamya speaks to a lot of experiences with racism in this book, which can be quite heavy. It's something that I didn't expect to see from the queer community being targeted towards her, because it feels as though if you know what it feels like to be put down by other people or oppressed, you wouldn't turn around and do that to somebody else, but it's clear that it is still a prevalent issue. And I think that it's, especially at this time, a very important story that people need to be reading and listening to.

G: Can we just talk for one second about that horrific humiliation that she dealt with by—well, let's just not give away the story, but there is a very unpleasant moment for Lamya, in what was supposed to be a moment she had been very excited for. And it was just ridiculous to think about how far people can overstep their bounds when it comes to being someone who has to have their documents and whatnot to be in this country. And I found that to be one of the most upsetting parts in there. Obviously not the *most* upsetting, but one of them. Someone who was really looking forward to going somewhere, and then when they get there to be treated the way that Lamya was treated is just outrageous.

M: Yeah, that was a really intense experience, and it opened my eyes to the fact that people are existing in public just as themselves in a museum in this experience, and being questioned and having suspicions targeted towards them, and just seeing how the cop completely saw past her humanity and invaded her privacy in a way that had nothing to even do with the original suspicions was very intense. And I think it's a great book to read to open your eyes to those experiences that other people are having that you might have had the privilege of never experiencing yourself.

G: Right. I personally would have never experienced anything like that. And if I personally had experienced something like that, I would have probably been outraged, but not in Lamya's situation. As a matter of fact, she couldn't even express her feelings.

M: Mm-hmm, yeah. One thing I really admire about Lamya is how despite being in this new country, she made it a point to get out into her community and find new friends.

G: I think that was really brave as well. I personally have never traveled even in an airplane, so I cannot imagine the trips that she has taken back and forth and the hours that she spent on a plane just trying to get proper documents.

M: Yeah, she would have to travel back and forth between her home country and the United States to just go to the U.S. embassy in her country just to get her papers finalized every couple of years so that she could continue on her student visa. Seems like a huge sacrifice. And the fact that she was continually doubted and targeted for racial profiling, it's a very intense experience.

G: All the paperwork that she was required to carry, I was not even aware of that. Seems almost like people of authority can just randomly ask for that, and they have to provide it. And honestly, for the first time of working at the library, and I've worked there for a year or so, I have noticed people coming in with passports and documents and making copies.

M: Right.

G: As a matter of fact, while I was reading this book, we had a little incident in our library, which is the children's books get hidden. And I used to think, you know, that it was just the LGBTQ books that they went after. But actually, while I was reading this book, there was a board book that was hidden that was just about the Quran.

M: Wow. Yeah, it's clear that xenophobia is rampant, and it's important to look out for members of our community who might be vulnerable to these things that we have the privilege of never even thinking of until we read it in a book.

G: Right. I mean, I, for one, am very thankful that Lamia did write this book and that I was able to read it and be educated. So speaking of xenophobia, that was actually one of the words I had to look up when I was reading this book. Being that I really did not know about the Quran, there was a lot of words I actually just researched so that I would understand what Lamia was talking about. One of them was *taqwa*, which means God-conscious, fear of Allah, and *shalwar kameez*, which is a type of suit.

M: One that really stood out to me was *tafsir*, which refers to the interpretation, explanation and commentary of the Quran. I thought it was really interesting how Lamya did her own take on interpreting the Quran and its stories and not accepting widely accepted interpretations just because they were widely accepted. But seeing how religion could fit in with her queerness, I really admired that.

G: It actually made the Quran sound beautiful to me.

M: Yeah. One thing that struck me was how similar the Quran is to the Bible. There were a lot of stories in there that I recognized from my own upbringing, same people and ideas. That's something I had no idea even was a thing. I didn't realize that they were so similar. I think it goes to show that we develop opinions on each other that really have no basis. If we tried, we could see that we have a lot of commonalities between different religions and underlying values.

G: So, another spot in the book I'd like to talk about is when Lamia is pressured to come out by one of her close friends because his parents think that they're a couple. As you find out reading the book, Lamya is gay. So, what she does is actually comes out to the parents just so that they're going to stop harassing her buddy because they know they won't get together. It was very disheartening to find out that his parents, after Lamya told them, came to their own conclusions anyway. How do you feel about that?

M: Yeah. I think that that is a very common experience in the queer community where you tell people who you are and your identities and then they continue to form their own conclusions anyway or decide that you're different from what you say you are and think that they know better than you do who you are. I think that it's unfortunate that so many people in the queer community can relate to it, but I think it comes from these pressures from different religious communities and societal expectations of who you should be and a place of denial. It's unfortunate that we continually have to speak up for ourselves and reinforce our identities over and over again. That's something that I experienced when I came out. I thought it would just be a one-and-done type thing, but it turns out you have to come out over and over again throughout the course of your life. It's clear that just because you state what you are, there may be people who will never accept it or see you for who you are. You have to come to a place of acceptance about that as well, even if it's not fair.

G: Yeah, it really is not fair. I'm just a big believer that people, if they love you, they should just love you for who you are.

M: Yeah, me too.

G: Alright, this was actually a little question thing at the back of the book when we finished it. Let's say you had the chance to invite Lamya to your book club. What kind of questions would you ask them? What would you like to learn most about their life now?

M: Well, first of all, I would love to know if they're still together with their partner and how they're doing. One thing that, once I finished the book, that I was really interested in was just finding more of Lamya's writing. I would probably ask them when they're going to write their next book. And I would love to read some more of their essays. I know that they had published some in years past, but they haven't in recent years. So I would just love to be able to read more of their writing.

G: Yeah, I would probably ask where they go to eat. Just because Lamya seems to really like snacking as much as I do. So as we discussed earlier, I knew almost nothing about the Quran, and I have not read Islam's holy book. But *Hijab Butch Blues* opened my eyes to how similar chapters and characters are to *the Bible*. I mean, some of them, some of the characters she talked about reminded me of characters like Moses, for one. Characters like Noah. Characters like Jonah and the whale. You know, characters that this book has reminded me of when Lamya tells her stories of the Quran. What about you?

M: Yeah, I agree. I really loved the passage towards the end of the book where she's going on a camping trip with her friends, and they're walking through the forest at the end of the trip. And she talks about how she doesn't like the story of Jonah and the whale because she felt like Jonah was giving up. And then her friend gives her a new perspective on it, saying Jonah took some time to recover before coming back stronger, basically. I loved that passage because I think that it speaks to our humanity. And I appreciated that message that real love is authentic, and it means letting yourself and others make mistakes and still loving them anyway. That it means opening up and sacrificing things, even when it's uncomfortable. I think that's a journey that Lamya goes on. And in finding a partner as well, not feeling like she could be vulnerable around people, but finally allowing that to be let go and opening up herself to that. I loved that part.

G: Yeah, that was really good. I have a favorite quote from the book, which I'm not exactly sure who said it, but it was actually very early when she was asking someone about Allah. And they had said, "Allah is not a man or a woman. Allah is Allah." And I don't know if I'm saying it right, but still, I have always thought of that myself, that Allah is, or God is God, Allah is Allah. I love how Lamya stays loyal to her religion. She researches her beliefs, and I respect that so much. And again, I've often thought of God or the Holy One, et cetera, to be non-binary. I was once a member of a church, a Christian church in America, who adopted a queer pastor. And they changed the way they preached the sermon to call God they or even her. And that's just unheard of around here, it seems. I thought it was such an evolutionary attitude to have, but then members of the church started leaving because they did not like this change. And for me, that was a little disheartening to see because I was and am still friends with some of those people. We just don't have the same religious views as, of course, religion. And religion can be a tough subject to talk about. And again, I'm still so impressed with how Lamya goes about it and makes it sound so beautiful.

M: Yeah. Yeah, I've had similar experiences growing up Christian as well. And I think that the world would be a much better place if people just opened up their minds a little bit to other people's interpretations of things. And I think that the exact kind of people that should pick up this book are also the people that might not want to.

G: Yeah.

M: And to just think about how the people that we disagree with, they might be more human than we give them credit for and even more likable than we give them credit for or have ideas that we at first

glance disagree with but actually make sense when you get into it. And I think that that's really important.

G: And I would also just reiterate that I recommend this book for anyone. Even if you don't think you want to read it, you are going to be surprised at the stories within the pages.



This has been Reading the Rainbow, a Dauphin County Library System podcast for books by and about the LGBTQ+ community. If you enjoyed this podcast, please follow us for new book discussions. And if you're interested in this episode's selection, consider borrowing from your local library. Thanks for listening!