

Script

(Artillery fire in the background)

Their city was under siege, so they hid in their house. Battles raged outside, so they kept inside. Even as the youngest son fell ill, the family realized it was far too dangerous to risk finding help. So they hid and waited...until...*knock knock knock* "We know you're in there! Open up!" *knock knock knock* *door kicked down* *footsteps* *whispered* "Let's go!" *running footsteps* "Oh, what do you do! They are killing me! Oh - they are killing me!"so they ran. Even as her husband was left behind, Beatrice Ziaty ran through the streets with her children. She went past guarded checkpoints throughout the streets and fields of her country, until she reached a refugee camp. With help, she reached America, but the terrors of her country still remained. She was obsessed with her children's safety and insisted they stay in the locked apartment whenever she was gone. She vowed that they would never find themselves in a dangerous again.

That is a true story, summarized and told by a reader of the novel 'Outcasts United' by Warren St. John. As a college student who is a part of a group that has studied this topic extensively, I'm here to provide some of the context, evidence and stories that illustrate the immigration and assimilation issues that St. John covers in his novel. We feel it is important to understand the interesting approach he provides to understanding the context to current immigration policy discussions. Thank you for joining us today on our podcast, 'Paper's Please.'

Cue Intro: Busy Airport Terminal and over the speakers, "Attention, Please have your papers ready."

Not only is 'Outcasts United' itself is a national bestseller, but its author, Warren St. John, is well known for having written for newspapers such as "the New York Observer", "The New Yorker", "Wired" and "Slate".

A unique and refreshing element of 'Outcasts United' is found in the way Warren St. John writes this particular novel in a narrative manner. This deviates from previous publications of his, but it makes himself a very explicit character in the story and makes for an interesting read because you actually feel like you're a part of the story, because he's actually a part of the story. He even moves all the way from New York to Atlanta to meet the characters of 'Outcasts United'. Some of these characters include a small soccer team known as 'The Fugees', their coach Luma, and other residents in the small town near Atlanta, Georgia.

The town was chosen as a resettlement location for refugees from other countries, not unlike other small towns across America. However, this particular town saw immigrants from all across the world. Not only were the immigrants forced to adapt to the American culture, but they had to compete and understand each other's cultures as well.

When Warren St. John moves to Clarkston, he builds friendships with many in the community. Not only is he close to the coach of 'The Fugees', but he gathers many other stories from members of Clarkston. His commentary on many different themes throughout the novel ranges from vague to explicit, especially as he finds himself more and more involved in the plot.

One of his major themes throughout the novel shows up in the way he discusses immigration and assimilation. He provides context, policy discussion and many different immigration stories.

Let's begin by seeing how immigration affects the main character of the story, a lady called Luma. Luma is the coach of 'The Fugees', a good friend of Warren St. John's and an immigrant herself. Her own assimilation to the United States was fairly smooth one, but because she was told never to return after she left her home country by her family, Luma was forced to adapt in her new homeland. She traveled around the country working odd jobs, and... just fit in with the environment she found herself in. But unlike so many of the other characters in the book, Luma wasn't forced from her home and maybe this difference in the reason for immigrating helped her assimilate quicker.

Like I mentioned earlier in the podcast, "Outcast United" *is* based on a true story. This means that the struggles with immigration that St. John describes, as well as the issues with immigration and assimilation policies that occur throughout the book, they are directly related to real-life policies that have affected immigrants in the past. There are many references to the "Immigration Reform Act of 2006", this is probably because this reform was one of the biggest reforms in recent history. It not only included many new countries but also expanded the definition of 'immigration' to one that included nations that were affected after September 11, 2001.

However, these immigration reforms may have not been for the best because the United States attempted to create them too quickly, and simply did not leave enough time for them to be set in place efficiently. This led to situations where refugees were just dumped into towns across the United States, and basically told, "Well, good luck!" Some of these changes were positive, but overall, they just weren't effective as they could've been, leading to some major problems in the immigration system.

So, what does this discussion about immigrants or refugees matter in 2015? Well, some people believe that the immigration policy reform in 2006 was one of the factors that caused the Syrian refugees' situation in America. There were two main problems addressed in the recent policies for the refugees. First was that the amount of war refugees was too incredible for any singular country to accept them, and the second focused on America's reaction toward the refugees.

Let's begin with what we know for sure. The immigration policy reform of 2006 limited the amount of refugees that could come into the United States. Its main purpose was to facilitate a reunion of family members who had previously immigrated, to bring in more skilled workers to the country, and to protect the refugees from their previous government.

Under these three pillars, the civil war in Syria gives refugees the "opportunity" to seek sanctuary, just as many of the immigrants in 'Outcasts United' did. Unfortunately, statistics show that during and throughout the war, about four million Syrians were displaced, and were registered as refugees in the countries that accepted them. Because so many were displaced, Europe found themselves in an "immigration" crisis. Why? Well, simply because Europeans were taking too many Syrians in.

But the Immigration Policy Reform Act of 2006 isn't the only piece of legislature in recent history to affect immigration and assimilation in the United States. American politics is all about Democrats vs. Republicans and recent articles have claimed that the Republican Party is the main opposition to taking at least 10,000 Syrian refugees. The argument is that Obama is actually risking the security of the United States by leaving us open to terrorists under the guise of a refugee from the same area. However, it seems ironic that the United States is only even offering around 10,000 refugees, when countries like Venezuela, who already have enough to deal with, are accepting 20,000 or more. There was a video about the presentation given by Josh Earnest, the White House press secretary. He said that the reason United States decided to give 10,000 available spots for refugees was to persuade other nations to take in refugees as well. This is again, ironic, because the "other" nations the US tried to "influence" have already taken in more than the United States. Much like the immigration reform of 2006, it didn't fully solve the issue at hand and is actually reflected in "Outcast United". Too many of the kids in the book are not successful at school and are on the brink of failing. Why? Well, because they can't understand what their teachers are saying. And they're essentially on their own when it comes to learning English, which reflects back to how real-life policy really didn't do a whole lot in terms of support and helping immigrants of all ages.

After all of these discussions of these different policies for immigration and assimilation in "Outcasts United" and then how that's reflected in our world today. There still seems a question to me, can anything be fixed? I would say the answer is yes.

Here's an example - there's an article called "5 Major Immigration Laws that the House Passed in an Election Year". In summary, all five laws had the same concept, which was to extend some sort of benefits to illegal immigrants and their family that are currently residing in the United States.

So, would you say that the government is actually helping the immigration process? Sort of. All of these policies basically do the same thing, they all provide extended benefits and living to undocumented immigrants. But they don't really help all immigrants nor do they fully solve the issue.

Also, the time gaps between these bills are rather large, like 5 to 10 years between passing the first one before another one is brought up. Shouldn't the government be able to implement these new reforms in a quicker fashion? And in this respect, shouldn't they focus on not only extending help to those who are here illegally but also to those who are here lawfully?

In Outcasts United, we see many immigrants who would benefit from assistance and benefits of the United States. Many parents struggle to adapt to the new environment because it's so drastically different than the one they grew up in.

And for some immigrant children, it's difficult to grow up in a culture that is so drastically different from the one their parents grew up in. Not only are many frustrated and confused as they learned the English language, but the social opportunities also seemed to contradict what their previous culture has encouraged.

"It was hard for us to assimilate when our parents were saying, 'no, no, no.'"

Brenda Calderon, an immigrant from Guatemala, was only seven when her family came to live in North Carolina. Her father had been working in Texas since she before she was born, but she remembers being afraid of him when he came back on breaks.

"[E]very time he would go home for Christmas, I remember me and my sister would hide under the bed ... scared to talk to him. So my mom was like, 'Either he comes home or we go with him, because we want to be a family again.' "

Brenda remembers the adjustment as a very difficult time in her life, especially because they settled in an area that had very few other Latinos. She didn't know English at first, but remembers that it got a little easier as time went on. The only thing that still made it difficult was that her parents were still very strict on her and her sister. It took them much longer to become comfortable in the new land, and they were torn between two cultures and that came out in their parenting.

In terms of government assistance it's not just a few politicians who are aware of the issues, because President Obama released a statement from the White House website, about a year ago, he stated that immigration process needs to fixed, saying it's just not good enough anymore. And as a result, the government has put out some effort in changing the whole process. According to an article by the New

York Times, President Obama announced new legislation for immigration reform that would extend certain benefits and such to different categories of illegal immigrants.

Well, this shows promise, right? I mean when you have the President himself making a change, you know something's gotta get done, or people are gonna try.

Another article titled "Assimilation Today" that showed that there is indeed some changes in immigration and assimilation process, but more on the assimilation part. It presented facts that showed how newly immigrated children are completing things like high school in record numbers, more than half of those accepted into the country are now fluent English speakers. Like this for example, an interview done on "STL TV Live" hosted by Sarah Bernard with guests Ms. Maureen DePriest and Sr. Rosemary Russell of the English Tutoring Project. They're helping children of all ages from immigrant families learn English. This is what they said:

"Welcome back to STL TV Live, I'm Sarah Bernard and my first guests work with the children of refugees and immigrants to help them acquire English language skills. Here to talk about the English Tutoring Project are Maureen DePriest and Sister Rosemary Russell. Welcome to STL TV.

(In unison) Thank you.

And you know here, right here in St. Louis it's so amazing and interesting that we have such an immigrant population that we need tutors to go in and teach the children English. So how long have you all been around?"

Ms. DePriest: "Well the English Tutoring Project was formed 15 years ago, and it was really formed through the leadership conference of 'Women Religious', the sisters saw a need, we had an influx of immigrants, in particularly in South City. And they saw a need that the children needed a step up on their education, so they formed this tutoring program."

Sarah Bernard: "So it started, here right here in St.Louis?" (Interjection from Ms. DePriest): "Yes it did." And it's specific to St. Louis. And has the program over the last 15 years grown Sister Rosemary?"

Sister Rosemary: "Yes, we started out with like about 55 student, 55 or 60. Then we took in more schools and so the enrollment went up and then some schools merged or consolidated and we down a

little bit, and now we're back up to 105 students last year. (SB): "105 in four different...?" In four different Catholic elementary schools. (Chuckles all around)

SB: "Yeah that's great so, now, do you find that... are the students coming in at all grade levels?" (Sister Rosemary: Yes. We have children from kindergarten through 8th grade.) Kindergarten through eighth grade, and Maureen are you finding that the students sometimes are coming with absolutely no English?"

Ms. DePriest: "Absolutely, the level of language proficiency differs per child. So we have to take special care- each particular child, to really assess them and figure out where their needs are."

SB: "So what's that like, Sister Rosemary, you're one of the instructors? (Interjection by Sister Rosemary: "There are five of us, two of them are part time, so it's like 3.5 full time.") Yeah right, so is it challenging and do you teach the students at the most beginning level together and then as they progress through the years, you're seeing them less and less, how does that work?"

Sister Rosemary: "Well, we take children either individually or in small groups depending upon their needs. Kindergarten students are almost always about the same, and almost always need or like new English learners. So, we work with them in various different groupings and each of the different schools."

SB: "Yeah, and Maureen, I know you have a long history as an educator, do you find that the teachers and the principals, at the schools, are identifying the students or are there-how do you uhm?"

Ms. DePriest: "It's a very collaborative effort between the principals, the tutors, and the educators. Everyone comes together to make sure that we have targeted the children that need the services. We all work together both quantitatively and qualitatively getting the data together to make sure that the children are identified and that we put them in, programmatically, to suit their learning needs."

SB: "Okay, yeah, so that makes sense. And Sister Rosemary are there-what are some of the challenges that you have found working with these students for 15 years?"

Sister Rosemary: "Well some of the challenges are, we have students from 10 different countries, and on average each year. And we only speak English with them. (SB: "You do, yeah!") Sometimes they only know Vietnamese or Spanish or whatever, and so that is a challenge. But we like it that way. (SB: "Yeah") Because we want them to speak English and so uhm... (SB: "And that's a good way for them to learn I would think") That's the only way! (SB: "And that's what they're hearing in their other classes as well.") Right, full English in their other classrooms so.

SB: "So what about speaking with their families? Is that difficult because in a lot of cases probably their parents also don't speak much English is that correct?"

Sister Rosemary: "That's true, we find that usually maybe the father speaks some English, because of his workplace, and often times the mothers do not have much English. We see ourselves as working partners with the school and with the teachers. So our direct line is usually with the teachers, and then maybe with the teachers we meet with parents, and a lot of times that does involve translators. But it works.

SB: "Yeah, it just so, it's really great, and it's amazing. 10 different countries, 100 plus students that you're directly helping every single year and it's really enriching for our community to have this as well.

Back to recorder's voice

Organizations like these show that there is indeed support to help immigrants become more easily assimilated into the U.S. without having to rely on fellow immigrants who have come before.

This is also apparent in "Outcast United", as we see that immigrant children find their own ways to assimilate. Kids who are around the age of 16 generally drive to soccer practice. And some even take on American hairstyles, like the character Prince. Prince is an incredibly talented Liberian player who grows long braids akin to those of Allen Iverson. But he was kicked off the team, in the book, because his hair was against Luma's rules of play. Some other players even talk back to Luma on the field, and their parents at home. Some might say these traits are explicit parts of American culture, and whether or not you agree with that, questioning authoritative figures generally is perceived as a rather Western thing.

Even if these immigrant children have found others ways to assimilate, I believe that one of the most difficult problems keeping them from perfect assimilation is the language barrier. Sure, there are probably some things that national and local governments could do to help with this, like adding multi-language documents or signs. But really what we need to do is give fellow Americans an incentive to help immigrants. Like imagine if the government financed a national English learning program like the one on "St. Louis Live" that Americans could actually help other immigrants learn English.

But for sure, culture is probably the biggest block in the road. And there could be better ways of dealing with this issue. In following in the footsteps of President Obama, according to an article in USA Today, one way we could integrate and assimilate more immigrants is provide better opportunities with military service. An immigrant can already gain citizenship through military service, but through extending benefits to different roles in the military, they could help their family assimilate better.

In the same manner, since our military is composed of American citizens, they could help support those who wish to be citizens through service, by explaining our culture and helping them understand American traditions. This would make transitions easier for people who want to become Americans through alternative methods, like joining the military.

In both real life and in the novel, people take similar stances on how to fix both immigration and assimilation. Such as getting kids and adults use to the English language and teaching them how to actually be “American”. In ‘Outcasts United’, the soccer team even goes to tutoring classes before their actual practices. This fits perfectly with part of the “mmhm...what can be done to fix immigration and assimilation?” Because Luma offers her students the opportunity to grow in her language and develop their education.

When assisted, it appears that assimilation into American culture can work just fine. However, though some immigrants take on our culture fast, others still struggle. Fixing the public’s view of immigration and assimilation, and helping immigrants assimilate into the population is doable, it just seems like a lost cause at first. But there is proof all around us; politicians just need to work together to make immigration reform a more realistic reality.

Outro Music