



# Season 5, Episode 40: ALA President Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada

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## **Kaytee Cobb 00:10**

Hi readers. Welcome to the Currently Reading podcast. We are bookish best friends who spend time every week talking about the books that we read recently. As you already know, we don't shy away from having strong opinions. So be ready. We light on the chitchat heavy on the book talk and our descriptions will always be spoiler free. Today we'll discuss our current reads, a bookish deep dive, and then we'll visit the fountain. I'm Kaytee Cobb, a homeschooling mom of four living in New Mexico, and the library is my happy place. Today I'm joined by Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada. She is the president of the American Library Association and adult services assistant manager at the Palos Verdes library district and will be taking questions from me and the bookish friends about all things library. This is episode number 40 of season five. And we are so glad you're here. Lessa, welcome to Currently Reading.

## **Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada 01:00**

Thank you so much for having me, Kaytee. I'm so excited to be here.

## **Kaytee Cobb 01:04**

I am so excited to have you here. And I did give our bookish friends the heads up that I was going to be chatting with you today. And they are also very excited to have you here.

## **Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada 01:13**

I love the excitement.

## **Kaytee Cobb 01:15**

Perfect. All right, so how about let's spend a second here at the top of the show. Can you tell us a little more about yourself?

## **Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada 01:23**

Sure. So I've been in the library world since about 2008. I started off as a library page, I have been a library clerk, a children's librarian, teen librarian, Adult Services Librarian. I've worked a number of jobs, all public libraries. But I've been a book lover since pretty much birth. I'm very lucky to have parents who let me read anything and everything that I wanted. The library was the first place that I was allowed to go to by myself in the fourth grade. I could ride my bike there after school, hang out, read whatever I wanted, and then go home when it was time. I'm also I live in a bookish house. I am married to an English professor and poet Christian HanszLozada, who writes about being a mixed race Filipino. His father moved from the Philippines and married a daughter of the Confederacy from Tennessee and he

was born and raised in Long Beach, Southern California. So we share this mixed race background. I'm mixed race native Hawaiian born and raised in California outside of Hawaii. That's a little bit about us. We live in San Pedro, California, we've got two dogs, one cat five chickens and a 50 plus year old tortoise also,

**Kaytee Cobb 02:31**

oh my goodness, that is a new pet that I've never had introduced on the podcast before.

**Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada 02:36**

We inherited him from my grandfather, actually, after he passed. He'd been in the family for a very long time may have actually been obtained, not in the most legal of ways knowing my grandfather, and it's this desert tortoise, but thanks to California laws because we inherited him, we are now his caretaker and we're very proud of it. He hibernates in the winter, he just started waking up the last couple of weeks. So we're excited to see him running around again.

**Kaytee Cobb 03:01**

Okay, this is not at all bookish, but I need to know like, what kind of size are we talking about here? It's got like a dinner plate? Is he like a Galapagos? Like, how big are we talking?

**Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada 03:11**

He's about a dinner plate size. Okay, I would say Yeah, but he is fast. Also, I mean, we leave our back door open, he'll be halfway down the street if we're not careful.

**Kaytee Cobb 03:20**

Oh, my gosh, an escaping tortoise. This is like the whole setup for a novel right here. I hope somebody is listening that can turn this into something. I love it. Okay, so just to let everybody know, right at the top here, I am very excited to be talking to Lessa today. And she's going to talk to us about the American Library Association. Answer some questions. That's going to be our deep dive today. But we're gonna stick with our regular format and segments, which means less so we get to get started with our bookish moments of the week. What is yours?

**Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada 03:50**

Yes, so this month is Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month. And as the first Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander president of the American Library Association, and also of the Asian Pacific American Librarians Association. I'm a past president of them. I am often called upon to do bookish things on behalf of my people. And so this week, I got to do a spot on Good Morning America about Native Hawaiian books, which was very exciting. So I got to share some of my favorite titles there. And there'll be an article coming out in the 19th about some of my favorite titles for adults. The Good Morning America one was a children's focused one. So that was pretty exciting for me this week.

**Kaytee Cobb 04:30**

That is pretty exciting. That's big national coverage, and what a great crowd to wear, to get to like speak to all these different backgrounds and races and communities. I love that. So my bookish moment this week, I had a few experiences this past week that showed me the fun ways that people choose their

next reads. So first, my friend Candace asked me to choose five random numbers between one and 173 and those were the numbered books on her TBR. I picked five and that gave her five titles to choose from as her next read. So what that did for her is it eliminated some of the overwhelm, but still gave her some agency so she wasn't like choose my actual next read, she still got to make the choice. But it wasn't like, oh, I have this entire wall of books which one should I pick up next, which we all get that overwhelmed right second in our bookish friends group. As the month changes, we get a lot of monthly wrap up posts where people share collages list of the books they read in a month and what they thought about them. One of our friends, Melissa is reading books off her TBR based on spine color, and last name. So she said In April, she was focused on books with black spines, and author last names between A and J. This blew my mind. This also though, had the same effect, it reduces the number to choose from and makes it easier to pick the one that next feels right for her. Of course, there are also readers who just use like a ouija board or a magic eight ball to pick their next read based on moods, or how the cover feels in their hands or the deckled edges. And that's great. Also, it's really fun for me to get to see the different ways that people choose their TBR. Alyssa, how do you pick your next book? Are you a Ouija board?

**Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada** 06:09

Yes, absolutely. Ouija board, you know, really. But I'm sitting here taking notes because I really love those creative approaches. You know, one of the hardest things for me as a librarian, is actually when people ask me, What should I read next? Because my head just explodes. Because what do you like? Because what I like is not usually what other people like I like very depressing fiction, especially if we're talking about the adult see, but I usually pick my next read, I look at my wall of books because my TBR pile is also a whole wall and just kind of let the mana or you know, like the energy guide me. And I'll pick maybe two or three and just read the first couple pages, see what works, and then probably read none of them and go to the library and pick something off of the new book, though.

**Kaytee Cobb** 06:54

At least you're honest with yourself. I like that my co host Meredith, she does that. And she calls it a book flight when she kind of dips into each of them like a wine flight where you're taking a little taste of each one before you decide which glass you want to order so that you're kind of doing that book flight idea there too. I like that. Exactly. Very fun. Okay, let's get into current reads. I'm very excited to hear about all these sad, depressing books that you've been reading lately. What is your first book?

**Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada** 07:21

So my first book is not sad or depressing at all. And it's even kind of out of character for me, I will say. It is called Wash Day Diaries by Jamila Rowser and Robyn Smith. Have you read that one?

**Kaytee Cobb** 07:34

No, but I picked it up at the bookstore last weekend and kind of flipped through it. This is a graphic novel, right?

**Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada** 07:39

It is it is. So it's an adult graphic novel and Wash Day Diaries follows four besties and interweaves chapters in the book with the events in their lives during a day in the Bronx. It covers a wide range of

issues and all of our lives and the short comics within the graphic novel touch on love and lust and the complications that come with both mental health and depression, family issues and acceptance of who you are, and giving yourself to your passions as a creative outlet. I felt like the art in each of these women's stories reflected their personality and the vibe of each of them. And the artistic details and soft lines with the sweeping colors across the page really allow the reader to feel intimately connected with these women no matter how long or short. We've known them on the page. Publishers Weekly said about it, "This is a subtle but heartwarming homage to friendship feminism and reconciliation sings". And I think that quote encapsulates what it felt like reading it right. Like, especially as we work to remake connections after being isolated, I find it just remarkable the power of friendship, to allow us to be who we are, but also forced us to grow into our best selves. And another thing that I also loved about Wash Day Diaries was how important that every day was to the base of the story, right? We have these huge events that happen in our lives. But each panel had a conflict to tell the story, you know, with the art. But to me the real power was in what some might call the mundane right, washing their hair, braiding their hair, both as an act of self love and also an act of intimate love between friends and family to demonstrate how you can take care of each other and how you show up for one another which they really did throughout the entire graphic novel. And one panel that I really loved and I promise it I won't spoil it. I'm probably gonna say that with each one I promise this isn't a spoiler. No spoiling but is a scene where the women they're dancing, they're getting ready to go out but one of them isn't. She's just kind of sitting on the side. So taking notice her bestie changes the music to 90s Dance Hall and they can't help but get that energy and get everything flowing. So just kind of those little details that make our lives and our relationships so important to us, I found it to be a quick read. But when you can revisit over and over again and get something different out of it every time, I love to watch the diaries for any of the day of the week, and I know readers are looking for a heartwarming homage to friends will too.

**Kaytee Cobb** 08:05

awesome, we've been reading a lot and talking a lot about friendship lately with nonfiction books about friendship, and stories that really like capture that essential friendship like nugget at the center. So this sounds like it would be a great flight with some of the other ones we've talked about lately, Platonic by Marisa G. Franco, The Life Counsel by Laura Tremaine, some of those really like, impactful investigations of the way that our friends play into our lives, right?

**Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada** 10:43

Yes, exactly. Where would we be without them? So that was Wash Day Diaries by Jamila Rowser and Robyn Smith,

**Kaytee Cobb** 10:49

perfect. Okay, my first book this week is a relatively new release. It's called Solomon's Crown by Natasha Siegel. This is historical romance. Do you read much historical romance Lessa?

**Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada** 11:01

I don't but now I'm intrigued. Tell me more.

**Kaytee Cobb** 11:05

Interesting. Okay, so this one is a historical romance, which often we'll see like Regency Elizabethan era for historical writing. This one takes us all the way back to 12th century Europe, where we meet some prominent historical figures that have some questions about how they actually related to one another. In the historical record, Natasha Siegel tells her readers at the beginning, that she took a lot of liberties with the story, basing it on the real historical figures of King Philip of France, and Richard, the Duke of Aquitaine, an heir to the throne of England. Philip is his father's only son, and he's crowned king as a very young man. He takes a young bride and has to assume the crown, fighting against the legacy of selfish madness that his father left behind. When Henry the King of England threatens his reign, he makes an alliance with Richard, the Duke of Aquitaine and Henry's son, tragedy strikes the English royal family and Richard is pushed into position as heir to the throne. But with that He longs to overthrow his father whom he's always despised. All he needs is Phillip and his armies on his side. All of this is further complicated by the way that Phillip and Richard are personally drawn to each other, and find it hard to walk the line between politics and passion. I briefly read a publisher email about this one before I decided to download the galley, but I wasn't really sure what to expect. What we find in here is an intimate look at the machinations behind the throne of England during a really pivotal time in history. Richard the Lionhearted, son of Eleanor of Aquitaine, leader of the Crusades, right. He's a broody man of action. He wants to be on the battlefield. He's like, tall, dark and handsome. He lives passionately grabbing life by the throat, fill up, the King of France is calm and cool and selfish. He cares about his own kingdom, His people, and will do whatever it takes to keep them safe. This is romance. And if I had to pick a trope, I'd call it opposites attract. And while there's quite a bit of tension building between Phillip and Richard, this is not what we would call open door romance. There's kissing on the page. But beds are only referenced in passing and no body parts are being described here. The story is not the hot and bothered kind. It's a romance for the history books, a way of looking at letters and relationships in a totally different way. This is Natasha's debut, and her author's notes at both the beginning and the end of the story really add to the narrative. They made it feel fully realized to me like she was captured by these two men that we know about as royalty and pivotal leaders in the history of Europe. But she wanted to twist their story just the slightest bit to give it a different life. It's beautifully written. And I found myself highlighting lines on my Kindle that made my heart go pitter patter and a classically beautiful, almost Shakespearean kind of way. She spins the story to focus it on joy. And for that reason, I really liked it. So this is Solomon's Crown by Natasha Siegel.

**Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada** 14:02

I love it. So I am new to the romance genre. I just started reading it kind of in the last year or so. But also when I was a kid, I used to do the Renaissance pleasure faire. My parents are super into it. So this sounds like a beautiful marrying of my past and my my bookish future I will say definitely I've been looking for for some romances that are not as hot and heavy and to kind of the bed scene. So I'm really excited to try this out.

**Kaytee Cobb** 14:29

Yeah, it sounds like it would be a really good fit for you. I love that. All right, what's your second book?

**Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada 14:34**

All right, so my second book is Kapaemahu by Hinalaimoana Wong-Kalu, Dean Hamer and Joe Wilson and illustrated by Daniel Sousa. This is actually a picture book for elementary school readers because I have to bring my children's librarian self into everywhere I go, but it's a picture book for elementary school readers that blends native Hawaiian legend and present day. So this legend is about four Mahu who are dual male and female spirits who travel from Tahiti to Hawaii bringing science and healing to Waikiki. Their gifts include spiritual power, being all seeing healing from afar and their leader Kapaemahu heals by laying on hands. These gifts were shared with the people of the Hawaiian Islands and as a gift, the Hawaiian people honored these amazing voyagers with four stones. Before leaving Hawaii, the Mahu add healing power to the stones so that they may be used and called upon when needed. Over time though the story of the stones and even the stones are forgotten as Hawaii is colonized and developed into the tourist capital it is today, erasing essentially the healing power of the stones and even the story of the Mahu at one point, and this is actually true, the stones were literally buried underneath a bowling alley, but were rediscovered and brought back out. So they can be now seen and Waikiki and the power of the stones and those who brought them are now being restored. And so again, while that may sound like a spoiler, I promise that since its legend, many know the story, but also that the story within the book is so much more powerful than what I could even convey here. So the book is written in English and Olelo Niihau which is a form of Hawaiian spoken by fewer than 100 native Hawaiian residents on the island of Niihau so the power or the mana of the story comes, I think from marrying together also our ancestral tongue with our colonized tongue, just as the story marries both our ancestors with our present day. And I also think because you know, picture books are not just for kids, there's so much in them for adults. And for me also, the illustrations are especially amazing and reflect what was also an academy animated short, that this book is based off of, and that short premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival was screened at over 160 film festivals and 200 theaters worldwide, when multiple Oscar qualifying jury awards was shortlisted for Best Animated Short Film, also at the 93rd Academy Awards. So the short is also narrated in Olelo Niihau with English subtitles, and the illustrations are derived from that film, and so the soothing tones that they use in the colors, but also just how they their use of lines, I think really emphasize the healing nature of the story, and the for healers as well drawing the reader into the story and allowing the reader to understand it without words. I totally think this could be used as a wordless picture book for any age, honestly, which is always I think, one of the strengths, of course of a well illustrated title. So I think that this glimpse into Hawaiian legend and modern day allow folks who are seeking to understand a world rooted and healing, I think they're gonna love Kapaemahu by by Hinalaimoana Wong-Kalu, Dean Hamer and Joe Wilson, illustrated by Daniel Sousa. And if I may add, just like a personal kind of cap there. This won the Stonewall Honor book at the Youth Media Awards back in January. And as a president, I got to announce that award. And so you get the script the night before and I'm just reading through I'm like, Okay, this is exciting. This is wonderful practicing my name pronunciations, because of course, we don't want to mess any of this up. And I turned the page, and I see this in my script, and I just started crying, like literal tears. And my sister was with me, she's like, we're not supposed to, you know, tell what's in our scripts, because it's a secret. We're not supposed to spoil it. But I couldn't help it. I told her and she just started crying. And we were so excited. I think this was the first Hawaiian book to win an award on that stage. So it's just so beautiful and meaningful, and I read it as much as I can.

**Kaytee Cobb 18:45**

Oh, this sounds excellent. And I'm definitely going to have to find a copy for my many children at this house because it sounds like they would love it. I have to say the stones are making me think of Moana and Taka and all the mythology surrounding that Polynesian fairy tale that we get to see on the screen as well.

**Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada 19:05**

Absolutely love me some Moana.

**Kaytee Cobb 19:08**

All right. My next one may have a little bit of tie in here. It's Sea Change by Gina Chung. So we have an Asian American author, we have an ocean centered story. And hello, as you all know, my name is Kaytee, and I'm obsessed with octopuses. It's a problem. This book, I don't even think people read the setup before they sent it to my DMs and email. And that's okay with me, because if it had come out, and I had never heard of it, I would have been mad at the whole internet wondering why it had failed me so miserably. This one is a beautiful bright teal cover with a vividly drawn pink and peach and purple octopus taking center stage. This octopus is named Dolores, and she's a Giant Pacific Octopus, which we read about and other books before. But this book is a little bit of CLI fi alternate future trope. So the world is a little bit different. The seas have drastically changed in temperature. And so Dolores is truly giant. She is sometimes described as being 20 or more feet long. Where I can find record breaking Giant Pacific Octopus is that are documented as being that size, they are more usually maxing out at eight to 10 feet long so she is truly massive. And she's in captivity. Dolores was discovered and brought home to the aquarium where Ro works. She was delivered more than 15 years ago by Ro's dad, who was a marine biologist, and has since been lost at sea. At the point we meet her and the story of the aquarium is bleeding cash and selling off the bigger pieces of its collection in order to keep its doors open. And Dolores is possibly facing a relocation. In the meantime, Ro's boyfriend recently left to join a mission to Mars, which he told her about only after he'd been accepted to the program. Knowing that between travel time, training time and living there, it would mean the end of their relationship. Basically, Ro is adrift. Her dad is missing. Her boyfriend is on his way to another planet. And her childhood best friend Dolores is maybe being sold out from under her. Everything she thought she could hold tight who in her life seems to be pulling away. And that's it. That's the whole story. I read this book, hoping for a big plot point. Like maybe Dolores escapes from her enclosure and finds her way back to the sea. But this is much more literary fiction than I usually read. So instead, we're mostly focused on Ro and her internal thought life far more than the books that I typically gravitate toward. This was literary enough that I felt like nothing really happened during the entire book. And that is fantastic for so many readers. We know plenty of readers who love to curl up with a book and just be in that world like that day to day life of Wash Day Diaries that lesson was talking about earlier. If you love a slower character driven novel that has interesting things going on in the background, but mostly focuses on the daily life of a 30 something, this is going to be the perfect book for you. If you're looking for a daring octopus escape in a near future dystopia, this is not it. It doesn't stop the cover from being absolutely stunning. This was a Sea Change by Gina Chung.

**Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada 22:16**

I love how cover art draws us in sometimes and it's a completely farce to what the book actually is like what happened here. Yeah, but that's great marketing. Those publishers know what we're looking for. I have to say,

**Kaytee Cobb 22:31**

yeah, about it certainly worked on me. And everybody who knows me. They were like, you know who needs who needs this book. It's Kaytee Cobb, she needs it. Alright, what's your third book lesson?

**Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada 22:41**

So my third but I think your book leads right into my third book, which is Lucy by the Sea by Elizabeth Strout. So a New York Times bestseller I'm sure many of you out there have read it also fits into my kind of normal genre of kind of sadder, more downer kinds of books. This fourth book in Elizabeth Strout's Amgash series is the first one I've actually read and my first Elizabeth Strout book. So I was excited to be introduced to this author, especially as a librarian who buys all the best sellers for her library. So I see her name very frequently and spend a lot of money on her books. I was like, It's time what drew me in was the cover. I was like, Oh, this looks like kind of a sad book. Let's see what's let's see what's inside. And the page count also was right where I needed to be. I was kind of in a space where I wasn't really reading because I just I couldn't find anything that drew me in that kind of caught my attention span. Just nothing was working. And so this one drew me in and follows New York City fixture and author Lucy Barton, as she decides to leave the city at the beginning of the COVID 19 pandemic to live with her ex husband. They've both been married, divorced and widowed since their marriage to each other. But they share two grown children who also at least at the beginning of the pandemic live in New York City, they moved to Maine, which includes many adjustments for the couple learning to live together again, living in isolation, as we all did, because they can't leave although they do have a beautiful by the sea, outdoor area to explore and they are adjusting to the constant unknown, how long are we going to be here? When are we going to see our children again? For her husband, he has a young daughter also who he has not been able to see and only gets to talk to on the phone. So together they face these number of challenges in addition to the adjustments, which I again won't spoil, but they both discover a lot about themselves and where they want this next chapter of their lives to look like even if it doesn't end up looking like what they thought it would like at all. What really drew me in and kept me reading this book was dealing with past pain. They're dealing with the traumas of their divorce the traumas of their youth that they've grown up with. The main author Lucy Barton is a memoirist who has shared her personal pains with the whole world, but now she has to deal with it in a whole new way as she's isolated. Also dealing with the current pain that exists, the pain of being separated from their children, and watching them go through their own personal struggles without being able to help them first person was a very interesting approach to watch from a third person perspective, so to speak. And just dealing with all of the uncertainty, you know, for me, it felt like an affirmation that everything that we went through was real, that it wasn't imagined. It wasn't a dream. You know, a few of my friends asked me how I could read something that would bring up so much hurt within myself, but for me, and really allowed me to kind of process also what it means to start moving forward, and what our new future looks like, instead of being stuck in that space that we were in for so long. And I think that it was also a great reminder that we all had to deal with regular aspects of life, that every day, which is a thread I think maybe in our books, that every day while we were living through a traumatic



experience, so a very character driven novel, there are things that happen, but it's just really a lot about emotions and feelings, which if you know me, you know I don't like talking about or sharing about. And so being able to process that with Lucy Barton was a wonderful experience. So Lucy by the Sea by Elizabeth Strout.

**Kaytee Cobb 26:29**

So it sounds like you had a really great experience with this. Even though it's the fourth in this kind of loosely connected series, you didn't feel like you suffered from not having read the previous three.

**Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada 26:40**

I felt like I missed nothing at all. And honestly, I'm a little bit nervous to go back and read the previous three because I liked this one so much. I kind of don't know that I want a prequel to it. I want it to be a standalone.

**Kaytee Cobb 26:52**

This makes me really glad for when we get to have another voice on the podcast because Meredith and I are both not people who would be like this book look sad. I think I should read it. So I love that you have that energy that you brought to us today. All right, my third one, we may have had a bit of a theme going here, but this one is a big left turn. I'm going to talk about a nonfiction book, *The Devil's Highway* by Luis Alberto Urrea. This was a surprise for me in a lot of ways. I've read *Into the Beautiful North* by Urrea after it was pressed into my hands by a reader friend of mine, Katie Sikkes. It's stunning and lovely, beautiful prose. Later this month, Luis Alberto Urrea is coming to Santa Fe where I live for the Santa Fe International Literary Festival. So he's been slightly more on my radar than he was previously just because I'm kind of looking around for those authors. So when I went to one of my favorite local used bookstores and saw his name on the true crime shelf, I was surprised and I took notice. What is happening? Luis writes true crime, I thought he wrote gorgeous and harrowing novels about the immigrant experience and about Mexican American experience. I grabbed it right away. And in a very non Kaytee like way I picked it up right after I finished my current read. This nonfiction book was published in 2005, and tackles an event that took place relatively close to where I grew up, and where I was living in 2005. In May of 2001, when I was a junior in high school, so I was stuck in my own little world and didn't care about anything ever, except myself, a group of 26 men attempted to cross the US Mexico border into southern Arizona. Again, this is where I grew up, they crossed into the unrelenting Sonoran desert landscape, and only 12 men survived. Luis Alberto Urrea tells this story, because he's a Pulitzer nominated journalist and a Mexican American writer of the highest caliber. He spends the first half of this book, alternating between introducing us to the 26 men who attempted this crossing and the conditions and political considerations around the border. He gets into Border Patrol, the ways the Bush administration looked at immigration. Note that even though this book was written and published in the early aughts, much of this has stayed the same or gotten far worse, danger wise, especially since the start of the COVID pandemic. There's a chapter in this book, where he's giving us more information about the perils of travel through the desert, when he goes step by step through what a body experiences, as it dehydrates and starts to suffer from hyperthermia. He outlines the mental process, the organ systems that shut down, and in what order and the steps that people try to attempt to avert it. It's intensely detailed and unforgettable. And of course, as I said, we're also alternating with small biopics of each of the men who attempted this crossing. So we have general information and personal

stories alternating and then we get into the crossing of itself and the sequence of evidence. This is not true crime in which we're looking for a killer. We know going in, this is not the work of a sociopath. It's the work of policy and environment and an attempt to reach a better life. A few months back on episode 23 of season five, I brought the book *Solito* by Javier Zamora as a current read. Zamora was only nine years old when he made this same crossing, at the end of a long trek from El Salvador to the United States. While I would not recommend jumping directly from one book to the other, as that would be very difficult as a book flight, I would recommend both wholeheartedly as a way to examine the border from the point of view of a journalist and the point of view of a child immigrant. It's kind of like holding up a two way mirror, and being able to look at the same border from both sides of that mirror. Both were extremely impactful. This one was the *Devil's Highway* by Luis Alberto Urrea. Do you read anything like that?

**Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada 30:46**

You know, I don't often read nonfiction. But the way that they leave the stories through kind of that general fact, I think sounds like a really approachable way. And honestly, I'm wondering if it's maybe too impactful, right? Like, you'd have to really be in a specific emotional place to read stuff as heavy as that. But that just sounds like something everybody needs access to. And everybody needs to learn about because exactly, as you said, you know, the issues are still here, they're still going on, if not escalating, and so we have to be aware of the human impacts that are occurring. Yeah,

**Kaytee Cobb 31:26**

yeah. And it's been 22 years since these 14 men died. And still, we see hundreds of people die in that Sonoran Desert crossing area every year. It's really difficult. And it's really, really well written. He's an exceptional writer. Okay, so those were our six current reads. And now we get to get into the ALA, the American Library Association. So I would love to take one more step back, before we get into this q&a and just put a baseline down here. What is the ALA?

**Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada 31:58**

Yeah, so the American Library Association is the oldest and largest library association in the world with 50,000. Members. Our members are not just librarians and library workers, our members are also library lovers and library advocates. Anyone who believes in the power of the library should absolutely join the American Library Association. We are all about access to information, lifelong learning, ensuring that our society has the freedom to read, and has access to the materials that they need to live the lives that they want to, or to understand also the lives that they are living. So we are here for anyone and everyone, and we welcome all library supporters.

**Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada 31:58**

This is amazing. I had no idea that I as a regular human in my house could also be part of the ALA. And now I have a life goal. I'm excited about this. So does the ALA normally work on policy? Or funding or advocacy? Like what's the main idea? What are we trying to do here?

**Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada 33:03**

The answer is yes, we try to do it all. We do all the things. So we have our public policy and advocacy office who works on federal legislation who works on federal funding for our libraries, who also support

state and local libraries, in their work for local policy, local funding as well. We have professional development opportunities for our library workers, how to write that policy for collection development on what to have in your library, how to program how to do a storytime, you know, what does the intersection of social justice and intellectual freedom look like? We provide webinars and trainings and conferences also on on these subjects. We also do granting to libraries where we have fun so that they can do programs for their communities. A recent one that we partnered with the National Education folks was on the history of Jewish Americans and what the legacy after the Holocaust and including the Holocaust looks like in our communities. So we do so many different things and support library workers and library lovers in so many different ways. And for our library lovers, we have trainings and access on how to support your library. If you are part of a Friends of the Library, how to run a successful one, if you're a trustee on a library board, you know, what are the skills that you need to be a trustee? What is the training that you need? The American Library Association provides that so we provide guidance to libraries across the country. Also across the world. You know, we have a lot of international connections. As President, I got to go to the International Federation of Library Association's conference which was in Dublin, Ireland this year, and to see the different connections that we have across the world. So we do a little bit of everything which makes it a really complex organization I will say, but one where anyone can find their home. You know, we have multiple divisions that focus on library type. But we also have 19 roundtables that focus on kind of different subject areas within libraries that folks looks like we have a graphic novels and comics roundtable for folks who love graphic novels and comics. They do awards, they do book lists, so you bookish people out there, you can get on book list committees, our association of library services to children, that's where the Newbery and Caldecott Awards live. And members can run to be on those award committees. I could never do it because I am not a fast reader. And there's no way I could read 200 300 books, even if they are J fiction, but there's just so much fun stuff out there. And we also have groups that are around identity. You know, we have The Rainbow Round Table, which is the largest LGBTQ professional organization in the United States are the oldest, the oldest, I don't know. Like, I think I said largest, I meant oldest. But so focusing on issues, and that's where the Stonewall Book awards come out of also. And so there's just so many different areas to get involved in and to be a part of no matter what your interest, whether it's in books, whether it's in libraries, the two of them information, digital equity, you know, you name it, we've got it for you.

**Kaytee Cobb 36:20**

Okay, so as president, is this like the US president election cycle? Is this a yearly appointment? Are you voted in? Are you like trial by fire? How do you take over as a, as a leader in this organization? And what's that been like for you?

**Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada 36:34**

It feels like trial by fire, but it is actually an election process. So we have it's a multi year cycle, actually. So I decided to run for president in the summer of 2020. So right, because nothing was going on in your life, nothing was going on. We were not, you know, at the height of a global pandemic, coming out of the George Floyd murder and the protests around that, you know, I really wanted to make a difference. I had just finished my term on the ALA executive board. And I saw firsthand how library workers were struggling, how we were scared, we were still working, you know, not many public libraries, especially librarians got to work from home, you know, we were still getting putting books in cars with masks and

gloves, and kind of throwing them through windows sometimes. So we wouldn't get too close. And so all of that inspired me to run for president. So we had a one year campaign cycle pretty much a full year. And then I got to serve as president elect for one year. I am president for one year, my term ends at the end of June. And then I will be past president for a year all serving on the executive board. You know, like I said, when I decided to run, it was really COVID focused, library worker focused on our health issues, our safety issues, how we could move forward, and I had no idea that my year would actually be centered around book challenges and book banning across the country. So I had to really pivot a lot of the things that I wanted to do for the association. And I think they're still related, though, you know, library worker safety is absolutely related to book challenges, as we're seeing the effects of when books remain on the shelves. You know, I was also focused on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion and Social Justice. And that is absolutely rooted in the types of books that we are seeing banned, as well as celebrating our stories was really important to me. I think that sometimes in libraries, we don't tell our story well enough, because we are just so excited to be there. And so entrenched in what we're doing, that the impacts that we have, on our communities, we don't always tell that story well, which is also part of book bans, right? Because some individuals want certain stories and not other stories to be told, because they don't understand or don't respect the impact that books can have on each and every one of us. So it's been an interesting year to be president. It's been an honor to be president during this really challenging time for libraries, as we have all this book, these book challenges happening, but also have to figure out how to serve our communities in the best way every day and continue to change and evolve with them.

**Kaytee Cobb 39:18**

Okay, so as president, you're overseeing this huge national organization, are you able to let's let's start with book bans since that was a big focus of what you ran on and what you had to deal with this year, especially. Are you seeing nation wide trends? Are you seeing correlations between where big banning happens and where good funding occurs? Like, are there intersections in that data that you can see, like a bigger nationwide picture than we do at home? When we're like, Well, my local library does this, this and this.

**Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada 39:51**

Yeah. So I think the really interesting thing about book challenges so for those listening, just a little bit of background in 2022 we saw the highest number of book challenges in the 20 year history that ALA has been tracking challenges. There were over 1200 attempts to challenge over 2500 titles. And so that is different from the past, not only in terms of numbers, you know, numbers have more than doubled over the last few years. It's in how those book challenges are also occurring. And this relates to the broader trends. So it used to be a parent or a community member would see a book in the collection and think that it shouldn't be on the shelf. Or maybe it should be in a different part of the library, they would have a conversation with a library worker about that book, they would file a formal complaint, and go through the process. So that's one, maybe two titles that most are being challenged at a time. What we're seeing now is lists of sometimes 100 books, 40% of challenges were contesting 100 or more books in one instance. And so the chances of those individual I mean, I know you read like 300 books a year, which is so impressive to me. But the average person probably has not read every single book on that list because they are getting these lists. And they're getting training on how to do book challenges as an organized effort from organized political groups who are often headquartered in the states that have the

highest number of book challenges. And so those are states like Texas, like Florida, but there are booked challenges in pretty much all 50 states. So we have a map of where they were in 2022. And the only state that did not report a challenge was the state of Nevada. And I want to emphasize that doesn't mean Nevada didn't have any, it means they didn't report any because we rely on self reporting. And a lot of times individuals are afraid to report or don't know, to report because they're scared for their safety or they're scared for their library funding. In Texas, there was Llano County where books had been removed, the court ordered those books to be put back on the shelf, so then the local government decided to hold an emergency meeting to try to just shut down the library because they'd rather have no books access to anyone than to have those books on the shelf. And so those are the types of trends that we are seeing. Copycat legislation, intimidation to library workers, and just an overall I think disinterest and having an inclusive community but rather silencing voices.

**Kaytee Cobb 42:35**

Right. And so are those challenges... Or maybe the ALA only works with, you know, this certain level of library... But are they seen more in school libraries versus public versus state? Where are the challenges occurring? Most often prison libraries? Do they do those have challenges?

**Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada 42:53**

And then yeah, so prison library and censorship is a whole podcast issue unto itself to be quite honest. Because of the restrictions that are placed. There is a new, I'll just do a quick pitch for there's a new prison libraries act right now in Congress to work through the funding issues for prison libraries to work through the at what access those who are incarcerated have to materials to programs to resources, because it is so important for those who are incarcerated to get ready for what life looks like, you know, afterward or in, you know, when they are incarcerated, they can still continue their personal development and their personal growth through their library. But what we're seeing trend wise is challenges are primarily in public and school libraries. I believe it was like almost 50/50, like 48% public libraries, 47% school libraries, we also do see some in academic libraries as well. Okay, although not as much as the other two. And the types of books that are being challenged often focus on LGBTQ and Black and Indigenous people of color histories and stories. Those are predominantly the types of books and the subject matter of books that are being challenged. And they are challenged under the guise of often being sexually explicit, or pushing a specific moral agenda or drugs and profanity themes that are very broad and sometimes not easy to define also.

**Kaytee Cobb 44:26**

Right. Right. That makes sense. Okay, so what about you also mentioned as one of your kind of three big focuses for your own term as president? Diversity, equity inclusion, and you've mentioned the term digital equity a few times. Can you tell us about what digital equity is?

**Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada 44:43**

Oh, yes. So digital equity is the access that our communities have to technology and to digital resources. You know, I think that this has become especially apparent as during the pandemic, you know, when everything shut down who had laptop sent home who had internet connection at home. I just will never get this image out of my mind of two little girls sitting in front of Taco Bell with a laptop using their Wi Fi so that they could do their schooling. And so libraries are a lifeline to digital equity

because we provide hotspots and laptops for free. But we also provide digital literacy and digital literacy training. It's one thing to just hand a person, a laptop and a hotspot, but if they don't know how to connect those two, or use them, honestly, what good are they? And so we as libraries are there to not only provide these tools, but to help individuals understand how to use them how to use them responsibly as well. You know, I'm an adult services librarian. So we have a lot of seniors who are often inundated with scams. Exactly. So how to tell what is real. And sometimes we sit there together, and neither of us can figure it out. And if we figure if neither of us can figure it out, it's probably a scam. But those are the tools that everybody needs in addition to the hardware. So digital equity is a really broad arena, but kind of narrowed, like, distilled down. That's that's a short glimpse.

**Kaytee Cobb 46:13**

Okay, so is that something that we would look for? I mean, not me, obviously, but that libraries are including in their budgets, like they have like a book, buying budget, and then a digital equity budget, and depending on the community that they're centered in, that would determine how much needs to go toward that line item.

**Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada 46:31**

Yeah, so it probably be like under technology and services, and what replacement of that technology looks like, during the pandemic, there was also federal funding for a lot of technology under the ECF, which I believe was the electronic connectivity fund to have folks get access to broadband to have them, you know, my library bought a bunch of Chromebooks and Wi Fi hotspots with that money. So most libraries now do have a line item, do you have a budget dedicated to those funds. And if they don't, there are a lot of grants and opportunities out there.

**Kaytee Cobb 47:04**

Okay, excellent. So then digital equity is different than diversity, equity and inclusion. And that is kind of working, in contrast to the book banning that you're talking about. Right? If this is what's being challenged, diversity, equity and inclusion is fighting the opposite battle. Is that right?

**Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada 47:20**

Yeah, I think so. There's an interesting tension, sometimes in the library world between intellectual freedom, and Equity, Diversity and Inclusion and Social Justice. Because sometimes when we are talking about what social justice looks like, it means trying to do the least amount of harm and do the best amount of good. And sometimes our materials and our collections can do harm, because we are trying to represent many points of view. And so there is this notion that libraries are neutral spaces, and that we have to represent information and misinformation, every viewpoint from any point. And so I think, actually, that those two need each other. I think that we have to have intellectual freedom, and have many viewpoints represented. But we have to do that responsibly for our community. If we know that something is untrue, we can't have that in our collection, because part of our responsibility is to provide factual information to our communities, you know, not hearsay, not rumors. There is a place to understanding conspiracy theories, you know, we do have sections on that, but we also have to label it as such. And so, when we are able, though, to have many points of view available, we're able to embrace Equity, Diversity and Inclusion. You know, there was a time where books that showed that Black people were whole people were human beings would not be accepted in a large swath of our

society, but because of intellectual freedom, we would be able to have those viewpoints represented and get to where we are today to being able to see the whole intersectional lives of our communities.

**Kaytee Cobb** 49:12

Definitely. Okay, so what's the what's the biggest challenge there? Is it librarians getting to curate their own collection? Is it having kind of nationwide policy around library? Diversity? Is it like, Where? Where do you see the biggest challenges in that area? Is it book banning?

**Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada** 49:35

You know, I think one of the biggest challenges is in the education of our communities. So our libraries, one of the beautiful things, but also the difficult things is how localized they are. So you know, there's no one right way to run a library. There's no one right way to fund a library. Every library looks a little bit different and has a little bit different policies because every community is a little bit different. And so at the American Library Association, you know, we set that base standard for our libraries, this is what you need to function. But the beauty of our libraries is and how we can customize and tailor them. And so I think sometimes the greatest challenge in in the library world is how we navigate those, those customizations for our community, when sometimes the loudest voices are the minority of voices. And so we really have to understand who we're listening to, how we are getting information about our community, how we are interacting with our community, and how we are doing it in such a way that we are including everyone, and not just those who are comfortable speaking at a board meeting, who know that they can challenge a book, who know that maybe they have political or financial influence in the community, and can manipulate the library to look like the way that they want it to. And so I think that's a newer level of librarianship, making sure that we are upholding our values, making sure that we know what our base is and making sure that we know what outreach and listening and being a true community space looks like, where our community members are part of our planning process, are our partners in creating this space, and that we have everybody in the community involved.

**Kaytee Cobb** 51:33

Okay, so to kind of wrap up this section, because I want to talk to you for hours. But I also need to respect your time, you've already mentioned that we, as regular listeners have currently reading and avid readers can get involved in the ALA as personal members, right? What else can we as readers and listeners and audiobook lovers and Kindle downloaders be doing in order to make sure that there's also a majority voice that is loud and impactful in our libraries?

**Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada** 52:04

Yes, thank you for asking. So one thing that you can do right now is go to [uniteagainstbookbans.org](https://uniteagainstbookbans.org). At [uniteagainstbookbans.org](https://uniteagainstbookbans.org), you can add your name to the list of individuals who are against book challenges, you can take a look at our toolkit to see what you can do in your community, whether it's writing an op ed to your local newspaper, whether it is reading for a school or library board seat, whether it's just writing a letter to the director of your library to talk about what the impact those books have on you and your family are in a proactive approach so that if a book challenge ever does come to your library, they can say, Look, we know what the community wants, because they have told us and we have it in print. So it's not just hearsay, hold your own book clubs, right? You bookish people out there. I know you're talking about books all the time, talk about those banned books and what they

mean to you, because so much of what we're seeing are these books being taken out of context, and not being looked at for their whole beautiful selves. So those are and of course, visit your library to check out those books, I think are some of the wonderful things that you can do right now.

**Kaytee Cobb 53:16**

Definitely, we have a saying here are currently reading, when in doubt, check it out. The more books you check out, the higher the circulation numbers are for your library, which helps with requests for funding requests for larger collections space, more resources in every way. So even if you're like me, I probably can't read that many books in the next two weeks while I have this loan period. It's okay. Check it out anyway, maybe you'll have your what was the Mona Hana? Yes, the power will call toward you. And that book will rise to the top of your TBR. And even if it doesn't, you're still helping your library by checking it out, right?

**Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada 53:52**

Hey, man, I am always for the optimistic growth mindset that we can read all those books.

**Kaytee Cobb 53:58**

We can read all the books Perfect. Okay, that was incredible. I can't wait to have people come and ask you questions or find you on social media and ask more about what you've shared with us today. Because like I said, I could spend another like six hours talking about this. Clearly I need to sign up for a class or a seminar or something. Let's move to the fountain. We like to picture like a whatever fountain is your perfect fountain. Maybe you're on an island in Hawaii, and you have a fountain running out of lava rock, right? Whatever your perfect fountain is. It could be very carefully manicured English garden. It could be a creepy, scary Ring well movie. Whatever it is, and we get to make a wish about our reading lives. So Lessa, what are you wishing for in your reading life this week?

**Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada 54:44**

In my reading life this week, I'm wishing for everyone to find that one book that changes their life and the way that they see the world.

**Kaytee Cobb 54:52**

How do we do that?

**Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada 54:53**

By visiting your local public library!

**Kaytee Cobb 54:56**

Oh, it's a library ad. I love it. All right. So hypothetically, your librarian can help you with that. Right?

**Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada 55:04**

Your librarian can absolutely help you find that. And we also have tools I know you all are Libby lovers out there Libby is also great with next recommended reads. And if you haven't heard of it, Novelist is also how I find a lot of my next reads.



**Kaytee Cobb 55:18**

Excellent, excellent. Okay, my wish this week is that publishers would help us get a book with different information on the Library of Congress page. So we have this regular like Library of Congress page on the front right has all this information about where it was published, and the city and state and address of the publisher and the ISBN number and such. I would like a library of Kaytee page. I want chili peppers, or eggplants for spiciness one to five. I want people heads or roller coasters for character driven versus plot driven. So you can get a visual representation of some of these different ways that the content of a book can affect your reading experience. Right? So it could be there's lots of skulls, if it's very gory, right, so you can flip to that first page, even as the mom of a preteen, who's like, Can I read this? Can I read this and I haven't read everything. I could flip to that first page and be like, well, it has four chili peppers, honey. So I think we're gonna wait on this for a minute or you're you're kind of a to Skull Kid right now, three could be a little much for today. Maybe next year, this would be the perfect book for you. It would help librarians to make great recommendations. It would help moms or other caregivers it would help just a regular reader to be able to look at that first info packed page and get a better feel for what kind of things they might find inside that are great for them. Or challenging for them. That's my wish this week. Oh, lot of these wishes don't come true. It's fine. But we do throw a coin in our fountain so I go ping splash. That's our wish. Okay. That is it for this week. As a reminder, here's where you can connect with us. You can find me I'm Kaytee at @notesonbookmarks on Instagram. Meredith is at @Meredith.reads. Lessa, where can our listeners connect with you?

**Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada 57:12**

Please connect with me. I am at @Lessaforlibraries on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. They are all "Lessa f o r libraries" except for Twitter because I don't know how word counts or letter counts count. So it's "Lessa number four libraries" and also Lessaforlibraries.com.

**Kaytee Cobb 57:31**

Lessaforlibraries.com. You even have your own website. Love it. Full show notes with that information, of course, along with the title of every book we mentioned in this episode, and timestamps, so you can zoom right to where we talked about it can be found on our website at currentlyreadingpodcast.com. You can also follow the show on Instagram at @currentlyreadingpodcast or email us at currentlyreadingpodcast@gmail.com If you super want to help us become a patron of us and the ALA. You can also rate and review us on Apple podcasts or shout us out on social media. Those make a huge difference in our being able to find our perfect audience. So until next week, thank you so much for joining me Lessa. It was a delight to talk to you. I loved every moment of our conversation together and I will wish you happy reading.

**Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada 58:16**

Happy reading Kaytee, thank you so much for having me.