

EPISODE 1490

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FT: So Money episode 1490, reflections and renewal, reflection and renewal on Nowruz, Persian New Year, a conversation with Ana Homayoun.

***AH:** I kind of grew up being like there are certain things you don't talk about. There are certain things you don't say. There are certain things you just – you kind of keep your head down. You keep it moving. We grew up in a different time. And I – you know, so many times in the fall, my eyes were wide open. I was like, 'Wow, okay.' They are saying things. They are doing things. They are sharing things. Really, their bravery, their courage, I have to say, I literally walked in awe."*

[INTRO]

[00:01:05]

FT: Welcome to So Money, everybody. I'm Farnoosh Torabi. Well, this week, hundreds of millions of people around the world began celebrating Nowruz. For Iranians and many others who celebrate, this is our New Year and a time spent with loved ones, reflecting on the past, and setting goals for a new beginning. I thought it would be a good idea to touch on this occasion and dive into culture and catch up with my Iranian American friend, Ana Homayoun, who is also a friend of this podcast.

Ana is an author and the Founder of Green Ivy Consulting, where for over two decades, she's focused on helping students discover practical solutions to promote purposeful learning. Her prescriptive solutions encourage better executive functioning skills, effectively address the culture of teen perfectionism, and they provide real-life advice on navigating social media and technology. She has a new book out this summer as well. Go to erasingthefinishline.com to preorder.

Ana and I spent a lot of the show talking about what we remember about Persian New Year as kids, what it represents, our favorite traditions, and why this New Year takes on maybe a little bit of a different meaning or a new meaning with the ongoing revolution in Iran. She shares insights from her new book. Because she is such an expert, I had to ask her about kids, and social media, and what do I do. Here's Ana Homayoun.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:02:27]

FT: Ana Homayoun, welcome back to So Money. Eid Mubarak.

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AH: Eid-e shoma mobarak.

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FT: Eid-e shoma. You're so much more polite than me. I thought we it would be fun. Well, you thought it would be fun. This was your idea that for the two of us join –

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AH: It was my idea.

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FT: You felt you have all the good ideas. Let's be honest. You're the ideas person in this relationship.

[00:02:45]

AH: Not at all. Not at all. Not at all.

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FT: We're recording this on the kickoff to Eid Nowruz, which is the Persian Iranian New Year that coincides with vernal equinox, typically the kickoff to spring. Like all new years, the Persian New Year, Iranian New Year, and by the way, this is not just celebrated by Iranians. This also spreads to – hundreds of millions of people celebrate Nowruz; Azerbaijanis, Afghans, Pakistanis, some parts of India, the Kurds. So this is a big deal, and it would be fun to talk about how we experienced it growing up, the learnings. This is a time for renewal.

It's just fun talking to you, Ana, because you have been on the show, at least a couple times. Your expertise is in helping parents with young children, teenagers, tweens, helping them with executive functioning, organization. Tell us a little bit about your practice.

[00:03:45]

AH: Yes. Well, Farnoosh, it's always good to see you. You are so amazing and all the things you're doing. I think it's a really special New Year for both of us because we both have books coming out this year. That's why I was like – I sent you a message in your Instagram DMs, where all good ideas go. I said, “Why don't we talk about Persian New Year, which is something we both grew up with?” It's very special to a lot of people around the world and my own childhood memories.

I mean, it's one of those things that in my family you just didn't miss, and you still don't miss. I'm actually going to my families for lunch after this. I just have really great family memories of being outdoors and setting up the Sofreh and just having all of these things that really give you a sense of pride and identity and all the things that we as adults have been talking about a lot more in the last decade.

But really, when we were kids, you didn't really talk about it in the same way. So reflecting on that I think is really important. I think it's really important for the next generation of young people to have a sense of pride and community around New Year and new beginnings and spring.

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FT: I mean, just to give you a sense of how far we've come because I was that kid who growing up in the eighties and nineties, immigrant parents in Worcester, Massachusetts, we – it was not cool to be different, other than Irish Catholic or Italian. Even being Jewish was considered a very big wild difference. I remember every year, our friend, Stacy, would talk about Hanukkah and bringing a menorah. We were like, “What is this foreign –” Then you like grow up, and you live, and you're like, “Oh, this is like actually a big deal.”

But fast forward to today, I have a friend whose son goes to private school in New York. They get a holiday. School is closed on Eid, Eid Nowruz. Maz Jobrani was on Stephen Colbert, a late-night show recently. Maybe not this year, but teaching him how to speak Farsi and say happy Eid on the show, broadcast to millions and millions of people. So it's hipper now to be talking about being Iranian, celebrating these customs.

What do you remember most about it growing up as a kid? I – Like you, it was a lot of getting together with family. There was the Sofreh Haft-Sin, which is a symbolic table. It displays seven S words in Farsi that represent renewal and the springtime and things like Sabzeh, which is greens, seed, apple, life, right? How about you? I got also some money. That was part of it too.

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AH: Yes. I mean, everybody likes their Eid money. Yes. In fact, my mom was like, “Stop by later today.” That was like – They take it very seriously, yes, in my household. No. Growing up, I just remember that it was like we took it very seriously in terms of we had a very beautiful spread. Even my dad today – I called him yesterday to say, “Send me a picture.” He was like, “It's not ready yet.” I was like, “Well, I'm not going to get a picture until it's totally ready.” He has a whole – every year, it's a full everything to the nines.

I think one of the biggest things for me, one of the biggest memories from growing up was just feeling a sense of everything new. You got a new outfit. You were in like – you had a mehmoon. You went to different people's houses. You called everybody. They called you. You wish them a

Happy New Year. It went on for several days. Then on the 13th day, you went to a park and you had a picnic. I didn't really fully understand that when I was growing up.

But like you, I spent the first 12 years of my life in rural Connecticut. It was very much like there was very few differences, and nobody really wanted to be different. So I never really spoke about Persian New Year. Then when I moved to California when I was 12 or 13, one of the things that I figured out was that so many people celebrated so many different things. To your point, my nephew, who's seven, he just went to the library and on the peninsula in the Bay Area, and they have a whole Nowruz thing. Two weeks before for all the kids and a ton of students. Young people turned out.

So, yes, we're celebrating these things more publicly. I'm really happy for children to feel a sense of pride and happiness. I also think social media has given this opportunity for kids to see other people celebrating these holidays and these cultural events in a way that's really positive and promising. So there's not just one way to be any part of any culture.

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FT: There was one year recently I tried to find a book or two to teach my kids about Nowruz because, admittedly, I didn't pay a lot of attention growing up to this stuff. You may have been more attentive than I. I was extremely, can we just say, a little traumatized with being so different in our community that I wanted nothing to do with Persian music, Persian food. God forbid, my parents spoke to me in Farsi in front of my friends. It was like my day was ruined. I regret that.

What it, ultimately, led to was as an adult who now appreciates her culture so much, I'm catching up. I got to go back to school on some of these things. There is a business. Folks, if you are Iranian, Persian, listening, speak Farsi, we don't have enough text, I think, for kids to illustrate these cultural traditions. There was like one or two interesting books. I bought them both, and I would love for more to be on the market.

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AH: My nephew has the book. I think it's *The Seven Ss*. He loves that book. So he went around, and he got Superman, and he did his own Sofreh last year with all the Ss that he could find; sunglasses. He went really – and it was fun for him. Yes, I think that the more that we can create different opportunities for kids to grow up seeing themselves, representation. We don't even think about the lack of representation that we saw or didn't see grow growing up and how looking a certain way or being a certain way was how we thought was normal. Yes, I absolutely agree.

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FT: It's an interesting year also for Nowruz because with the backdrop of the modern revolution that we are still seeing unfold in Iran but really was heightened in the fall, I would say. What do you think about what Nowruz this year represents, particularly for Iranians in Iran?

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AH: Well, I can't say because I'm not in Iran, and I don't want to speak for them, obviously. But I also think that any time for renewal and reflection and appreciation of how far we've come and what are the things that we can be grateful for. But I do think it's been a really hard year for a lot of families, a lot of kids. There's been a lot of anxiety. Whether you live in Iran or you live abroad, there are some real things that have been happening.

I am so impressed with so many of the young people, and I say that young people because I realized that I am not a young person anymore in that way. Because the people and the young people that are our generation, I don't want to speak for you, but I kind of grew up being like there are certain things you don't talk about. There are certain things you don't say. There are certain things you just – you kind of keep your head down. You keep it moving.

We grew up in a different time. So many times in the fall, my eyes were wide open. I was like, “Wow, okay.” They are saying things. They are doing things. They are sharing things. Really, their bravery, their courage, I have to say, I literally walked in awe. Because when you grow up a certain way and you grow up in a certain – again, we grew up in a very different time in a very different set of historical events back to back. That created a sense of fear

You talk a lot about fear in your new book. I'm so excited to read it. I preordered it last week. I think it's really honest that people grow up with a different sense of fear. This younger generation that grew up with social media and seeing the rest of the world lives a certain way, the rest of the world has opportunities, they're like, "We want those things." They really are taking really bold and courageous and amazing stands that I don't – yes. I wouldn't have seen, and we wouldn't have seen, right? Because that wasn't shown so readily.

You can take – the way that video and camera and live stream have utterly changed the way we shape information and share information is really critically important. So for so many of the Iranians in and outside of Iran, throughout the world, I think it's been really an awakening in last year.

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FT: Absolutely. We'll be reflecting on them and wishing them the best possible year. Let's talk about your renewal this year, Ana, and what this theme means to you. This year, you also have a new book coming out. We'd love for you to – you didn't answer my first question, which was –

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AH: I know. What do I do? I know I didn't answer that. I totally went away from that. I'm so sorry.

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FT: That's okay.

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AH: Because I'm so terrible about talking about it. Well, I have to say. So I have worked with teenagers now for about over 20 years, and I love my work. I still see teenagers every week in my office. I'm in my office right now. We work on organizational skills, now known really as

executive functioning skills, so organization, planning, prioritization, task initiation and completion, and really adaptable thinking.

Now, we've done that since before Facebook existed, Google assistant. My office happens to be located right in the heart of the Silicon Valley. So I work with kids, and I've worked with kids, bringing tech into the classroom since the very beginning. So my job has always been really interesting, I think. I always am learning something new. Working with teenagers is always really exciting.

For my next book, which is called *Erasing the Finish Line*, that's coming out in August, I went back and I interviewed my students from 15 years ago. So they're now in their early 30s. The whole concept of *Erasing the Finish Line* is that college admissions has become this faulty finish line for adolescent development, and it's created this stress. It's created this anxiety.

But it's also really not fair to our students that are still growing. It's not fair to families that have this overburden. We really need to rethink. What are the fundamental skills kids need, not just to get through college and graduate, but to thrive in a world that's ever-changing, build community, be accepting of others and themselves, have a sense of perspective? The whole concept is how do we help each kid develop their own blueprint.

So I use the stories of my students that are now in their early 30s, which is so exciting to visit with them and hear their stories. But then also with my students today, right? Navigating technology in the classroom, living in a pandemic-adjusted world, it's been really exciting. I do have you to thank for the book deal because I say this. Oh, my gosh.

Also in Instagram Stories, you in July of 2021, had put in your stories, how Richelle Fredson had helped you with your proposal for your book. You had at that point sold your book. You were excited. I was sitting there with like two years' worth of like scraps of paper that at this point was like, "What am I going to do with this?" It was right about my birthday. I saw the story and I sent you a DM. I said, "Did it work? I mean, how was it?" You were like, "My book sold." I was like, "Sold."

So I talked to Richelle, and that was my birthday gift to myself was working with Richelle, phenomenal like gift to myself, the best thing ever. Within six to eight weeks, she helped me take what I had already and then just shape it. But it was like it would never, it would never have been –

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FT: No. Richelle, she just texted me, actually. We've been on a text back and forth today because she's a forever friend after that.

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AH: She's an amazing, amazing human. Yes.

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FT: Yes. She's been on this show at least once. She is a book proposal coach and so much more. I mean, she has so much knowledge on like marketing a book and all of that.

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AH: I have to say and I want to say this because I'm one of those people that people know that when I refer someone, it's because I genuinely am like, "This person changed my life." I say connection is part of the book that I just finished writing that's coming out, *Erasing the Finish Line*. But the connections and how you get connected to people and having stronger connections and looser connections and knowing people in different places. But I hadn't seen that Instagram story.

Richelle, the minute I met her, what was – her brain works differently than mine. That's what you need. You need people who see things in a different way than you do, who can take what you – I mean, and I remember. I was with my mom. We were on vacation. I met with Richelle, and she made some comments that I literally – it took me two days to process. They weren't great

comments, but it was kind of like where you had to process it. It was like – then it was a hurricane in New England, summer of 2021. Then I just started writing nonstop.

My mom said a couple days later, she goes, “Oh, yes. You were in that focus zone where like I could have come and like dropped all this noise. You would not have been.” I was like, “Yes, I needed Richelle. I needed two to three days to process what Richelle said, and then I needed it.” So anyways, without that story, I would have never – it would have never all transpired. It was absolutely – so thank you. Belated thank you.

[00:18:07]

FT: You’re welcome. You’re welcome. Well, a question for you from our sponsor, Prudential. I'm asking a lot of our guests this month this question, which is this. What was a moment that propelled you to the next level of your financial life? Was there like a moment when you felt like you had arrived or?

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AH: So when I was 23, I started my own business, and it was by accident. I had been laid off from my first job, investment banking. I knew that I wanted to work with kids, but I didn't know what it was going to look like. So I read a couple – actually, I read a couple books in the early 2000s, including, not to give them a plug, but like let's give them a plug, *Smart Women Finish Rich* by David Bach. That totally changed my perspective. That was one of the first books. You have to remember what time it was, right? 20 years ago.

Then I hired an accountant, who's still my accountant today. Those two things really just leveled up like thinking about taxes, retirement, savings. I'll never forget. My accountant said to me. I was like, “Oh, I feel so rich.” He's like, “You have not put any money away for your retirement.” I was like 23 then. I was like, “What are talking about?” I don't know that I would have started saving in the same way.

Again, I still have the opportunity to spend. I love your philosophy on how to spend on things that are important to you, that bring you joy, that bring – it's not just about like saving in this

frugal, crazy way. That just brings like so much stress and anxiety. But I think knowing the different things out there. We didn't talk a lot about money when I was growing up. I just – I didn't feel like – I felt like when I was in my 20s is when I really was like, “Okay, I'm going to make some certain decisions about how I live with money and how I treat myself and how I allow myself to do certain things but also save in a way that makes me feel comfortable.”

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FT: I was just on television today, and the question the anchor asked me like, “Why do you think it's so important to learn about money growing up?” I'm like, “Because where else are we supposed to learn it?” The schools aren't really mandating it. Frankly, even if they do, that's not where you really learn the life skills, and money is a life skill.

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AH: Money is a real life skill and feeling comfortable with – again, there are just so many different ways to live. I love how you share that, not just on the So Money podcast but also on social media every day. I love your ideas. So thank you. Thank you for that.

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FT: Let's talk a little about social media because we often talk about how it's this treacherous place, and we have to be careful. I have two young kids, and I am terrified of handing them a phone, let alone the Internet or social media, when they are older. But you just already gave at least a couple of examples of how it has not just helped your life, but like it has brought the Iranian community together. It has spurred a revolution in Iran. It, for you, led to the next chapter in your career, when you're educating parents and their young kids around social media. Boy, boy has this podcast gone everywhere at this point, but **[inaudible 00:21:23]**. We'll just go –

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AH: That's okay. We're going to go – you know what? Honestly, we have lots to talk about.

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FT: There's no script here. It's just everything I wanted to learn from you.

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AH: Throw in.

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FT: What do you think about social media and kids and phones and kids? What's the right introduction, the right relationship?

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AH: Well, in *Social Media Wellness*, which was my last book, I talk about the three Ss, the three Ss. There's Ss in here too; healthy socialization, effective self-regulation, and overall safety. The biggest thing that I think we also have to think about is the default isn't you give your kid a phone for 24/7 access. Even I had a conversation with a mom of an eighth grader last week, and that was really where she was at. She was like, "Oh, yes. We gave our son a phone, and that's now become a challenge." I said, "Well, did you give it to them from 0 to 60?" She's like, "Yes." "Oh, there was an option?"

So that's one piece, right? The default when a child first gets a phone should be the parent has the phone. There's an agreement in place because it's much easier to make an agreement with a kid before they have a phone than after you've given it, and you're trying to work backwards. Then really putting the parameters in place to help them get motivated to make good decisions, whether or not you're watching. Because honestly, every kid is different. Every kid's maturity is different. For one kid, it might be very easy to follow guidelines and rules that are set within their family and community. For another, they might need extra time, structure, and support around that.

But the idea is helping students understand what is healthy for them socially and how can they effectively self-regulate. Self-regulation isn't just managing their time. It's managing their energy and managing the drama. So how do they deactivate, de-escalate, move on if something happens online that makes them feel uncomfortable? Where is their overall safety? Are they reaching out to adults that they feel comfortable with?

I think to your point, especially for kids who grew up as immigrants or immigrant families, social media and WhatsApp and all of those things can be a total lifeline. I have so many stories. I mean, all of my cousins who I never see because they live across five continents, right? My first cousins, I have 40 first cousins. They – a lot of them are my – I know I have a big family. Most of them are on Instagram. So when the pandemic happened, we used to have family events on my mom's side, where we would get on Zoom. We were across four to five continents, depending on the time. So pretty cool, right?

But, again, those are ways connection can really be forged. I don't want us to discount that. Particularly, we started this conversation around being an immigrant, feeling like this sense of identity, this sense of belonging, this sense of pride. My cousins who grew up in Iran grew up going to Sunday family dinners with 30 people at it. I didn't grow up with that. They live very – all of them have lived different lives. But being able to see and experience and communicate in much more readily real time, I think, is pretty extraordinary. We shouldn't discount that part of social media.

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FT: No, you're right. 40 cousins.

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AH: I know. Yes. My mom has seven siblings, and my dad has three. So they all had multiple – yes. So there you are. I mean something like that, so yes. To you – now, let me ask you. What were your childhood memories of Nowruz growing up?

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FT: Yes. It was like everything you described. Probably we didn't have as much family here. It was like my family, and then my dad had an aunt, and then we had a lot of friends. My mother is extremely extroverted. She cannot be alone. She will find the Persians and she –

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AH: Oh, my goodness.

[00:25:22]

FT: Friends with the Persians. She will be the connector. Even though she's like new to the community, she'll run into a woman in the grocery store. She'll find a woman in the schoolyard. She'll find a woman and then she'll be like, "What's your number? What's your number? What's your number? Everybody, come to my house."

So growing up, we had a huge extended family, I like to say, or friends who were eventually like family to us because we saw them all the time at the mehmoonis. Eid Nowruz was very much that. It was a continuation of getting together, eating. I remember there was this one sort of patriarch in the community, who everybody really respected and revered. He was a doctor, no less. That was like – you probably have that guy in your group.

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AH: We had, yeah, we had all of those things too. I mean, it's –

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FT: Yes. We call them duktur because there were like a million doctors in the Persian community, but he was the doctor. He would invite us all to his home. He had a beautiful home in Boston. He would give at the front – you'd open the door, and you just knew he was going to give you a dollar coin, a one dollar coin, which I had never seen until I went to his house. I was

like five, six years old. I was like, "What is this? Can I actually use it?" Yes, and I felt so rich in that moment, at that party.

It's just like great. I don't think it's anything different than how a lot of us celebrate the New Year. It's all about putting your best foot forward, all your hopes and dreams for the year captured, although we get two weeks of celebration. I think it's a lot about the community. We love a good party. I mean, mehmoonis, which you mentioned earlier, and I talked about them in my book, these were weekend events, every weekend. It was just about whose house was it going to be this weekend. It was a rotation of gatherings. My parents and I think like a lot of their friends in the community.

These days, I'm like, "Oh, it's past night. I can't bring my kids or I got to get a sitter." No, they just rolled us into the mehmoonis.

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AH: Yes. You were falling asleep in the –

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FT: In the coat closet.

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AH: The coats. Yes. The coat closet bedroom. Yes. Then saying goodbye at an Iranian party is going to take you about two or three hours. But it's so funny. I actually didn't grow up with a lot of family here too because my parents came here in 1976. They were planning on just staying for grad school. Then I was born and then the revolution happened that same year. Yes. So we stayed. I didn't have a lot of family growing up either.

But when we lived in Connecticut, before we moved to California, we had a very similar childhood. Then when I moved to California, we actually had some extended relatives that lived in California like my dad's cousins or – again, it would be like second or third cousins. Then you

would find – so you're going around the Bay Area, visiting all of them. That's the other thing is that you have community.

We had this one photo not too long ago on Eid, and it was like my first cousin who lives now in the Bay Area, my second cousin, and then their child. So my third cousin was like in a row on a couch. It was pretty funny.

[00:28:27]

FT: Well, Ana, thank you so much for joining us. This has been a really fun, all over the place conversation. But I knew it would be. I knew what I was getting myself into. Thank you so much for joining us. Tell us your book again. Of course, we'll have you back closer to the pub day. But tell us again where we can preorder.

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AH: The book is called *Erasing the Finish Line: The New Blueprint for Student Success Beyond Grades and College Admission*. You can find it everywhere that books are sold.

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FT: Great. I will put the links in our show notes. Thank you again. Come back soon.

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AH: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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FT: Thanks to Ana for joining us. Visit erasingthefinishline.com to preorder her new book, which comes out in August. I'll see you back here on Friday for Ask Farnoosh, all things investing, with

our special guest, Prudential Financial Planner, Sara Benton. Until then, I hope your day is So Money.

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