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Entertainment

**Review: How to Lose a Country is a first-class analysis of the rapidly changing world geopolitical map; Turkish journalist Ece Temelkuran's new book asks what is behind the rise of the global populist right**

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\* Title: How to Lose a Country

\* Author: Ece Temelkuran

\* Genre: Non-fiction

\* Publisher: HarperCollins

\* Pages: 278

Ece Temelkuran's new work, *How to Lose a Country*, may be the most important political book you read in 2019.

The journalist became a thorn in the side of the Turkish government after publishing *Turkey: The Insane and the Melancholy* in 2015, which documented the destruction of a modern-secular democracy under authoritarian strongman, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his AK Party (or Justice and Development Party) government. First was the unravelling of public and civic institutions; then the erosion of standard democratic checks and balances; and then finally, the disintegration of a free and fair press. These steps ensured Erdogan's success in replacing democracy with a conservative, pious, Islamic, authoritarian state. Those refusing to embrace the so called "New Turkey" – including journalists and members of parliament – were publicly vilified, imprisoned or exiled. Temelkuran, subsequently seeking political and intellectual refuge in Zagreb, Croatia, found the ample philosophical space required to ask: How exactly did the secular country she once called home suddenly vanish into the ether?

Global political events of 2016 provided some kind of answer, proving that this ideological war waged on cosmopolitan progressive liberals wasn't just confined to Turkey.

Donald Trump became U.S. President; Brexit happened in the U.K.; Central European states such as Poland and Hungary, meanwhile, were, ironically, calling out the EU as an elitist public enemy; even countries such as France and Germany – once seen as the glue that held the solid, rational centre of postwar Europe together – saw millions of supporters embracing mainstream political parties spouting slogans with undertones of fascism.

So if right-wing global populism is, in fact, a global meme, what is driving it? Who are its supporters? And what are its ideological roots?

These are just some of the questions that Temelkuran grapples with in: *How to Lose a Country*.

The outspoken writer, intellectual, poet, novelist, public speaker and social media sensation doesn't claim to have a ready-made panacea that will instantly provide magical solutions for many of the numerous deeply complex questions she asks. Temelkuran does, however, identify certain commonalities prevalent to right-wing populist movements.

They always use, the writer argues with stern conviction, a cynical process of political manipulation. Leaders begin by initializing the masses; after that, they create an enemy; what's needed then is a catchy slogan, which helps to drive a wide ideological wedge between voting groups; soon politicians have given the common voter a mythological belief to cling to; until finally, the masses willingly surrender themselves to the messianic message their new-found political cult heroes have promised them.

The book's central message can be neatly summarized as this: If Turkey could turn from democracy to an authoritarian state seemingly within the blink of an eye, then so, too, could any number of countries across the West – if they don't pay attention to the early warning signs.

Temelkuran believes populism's ascent has surfaced in conjunction with the empty promise of neoliberalism, which has become the dominant economic and governmental ideal infiltrating mainstream society across the globe since the late 1970s. Humans, after all, require much more than the promise of consumer choice to stay alive: They also need meaning, purpose, moral values and, most importantly, identity and a sense of community. Moreover, politics, just like nature and narrative, Temelkuran posits, always abhors a vacuum.

How to Lose a Country is imbued with the worldly, poetic, skeptical spirit of philosophical and literary heavyweights, such as Hannah Arendt, George Orwell, Albert Camus, and W.B. Yeats. And Temelkuran's persuasive polemic always uses solid primary research, which in turn, provides real voices and real life experiences, to back up her claims. Her tone is brave, deeply personal, witty, honest and melancholic in its delivery, with the writer's style leaning more toward emotional humanism than cold-blooded rational political science.

This is a first-class analysis of how the world geopolitical map is rapidly altering at a speed not seen since U.S. global hegemony was achieved in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Four books to help you understand Kashmir, Nigeria, Syria and Russia

**The Far Field** (Grove Press, 448 pages): In Madhuri Vijay's debut novel, the past visits the present in the contested region of Indian Kashmir. Having recently been fired from her first job out of university, Shalini travels from Bangalore to Kishtwar in search of a man from her childhood whose story intersects with that of Shalini's deceased mother. When she arrives in the Himalayas, however, she realizes she is not the only person looking for someone: Amid myriad human-rights abuses, thousands of Kashmiris have gone missing since 1989 in the heavily militarized region. Naive about this political history and oblivious to the brutality of her good intentions, Shalini – like her mother before her – won't be the one to pay the highest price.

**An Orchestra of Minorities** (Little, Brown, 464 pages): Chigozie Obioma's second novel takes its name from a scene where young Nigerian poultry farmer Chinonso, the story's protagonist, captures and kills a hawk. In the hawk Chinonso sees all the people who prey upon humble and honest folk like him. Who listens to the cries of Chinonso or his chickens, this orchestra of minorities? As with his debut, 2015's *The Fishermen*, this new work has a feeling of fate as it is narrated by Chinonso's chi, or guardian spirit, who must account for its host's actions, for reasons we don't fully understand until novel's end. Initially a love story, Chinonso's predicament represents something larger by the end: the anger and resentment of Nigerians who feel something has been stolen from them, without their notice until it is too late.

**Death is Hard Work** (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 192 pages): In Khaled Khalifa's latest novel, death is hard work, though it has no right to be. All around Abdel Latif's children, people are dying. After all, this is Syria and there's a civil war on. But in the opening pages of Khalifa's novel, translated from Arabic by Leri Price, resistance-fighter Abdel, dying of old age, prides out of his younger son a promise to return Abdel's body to Anibiya. During peacetime, Anibiya is but a two-hour drive from Damascus, but in present-day Syria the Latif siblings' journey is a multiday nightmare revealing all the horrors of war. This is a story rife with dark ironies by an author who refuses to leave Syria behind.

**The Putin System** (**Columbia University Press**, 256 pages): Russian economist and politician Grigory Yavlinsky's explanation can sometimes get academic for a general reader, but it's too insightful not to take notice. Its main takeaway: Vladimir Putin has not turned an about-face from the program Boris Yeltsin started, but instead continued the concentration of political power that Yeltsin began. The mistake on the part of the West was to conflate competitive politics with the appearance of an emergent market economy —neither has taken root in Russia, Yavlinsky argues. Putin's authoritarianism is not without weaknesses, however. Originally published in Russia in 2015, this updated English edition includes a new afterword.

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