



A House Divided: Ben Lerner's America

Ben Lerner. 2019. *The Topeka School*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. 304 pages

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Published to near-universal acclaim, *The Topeka School* is awash in praise from local bookstores, celebrity tweets and literary critics alike. “A high-water mark in recent American fiction,” as Garth Risk Hallberg described it in the *New York Times* review, the novel topped Barack Obama’s must-reads of 2019 and just this May was announced as a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.

The allure is clear. A half step faster out of the blocks of our political despair and with just the right pedigree to justify the intrusion, it’s a novel that prophesizes the coming demagogue from within the heartland of America. The groundwork of Trumpism was laid not by foreign tinkering or stratospheric inequality but in the barbed souls of young white men coming of age in the 1990s. The call is coming from inside the house.

The Topeka School is less a sweeping epic of our current crisis of democracy than an intimate portrayal of the pathology that first set us on the path to tyranny: white masculinity. From suburbs of Topeka at the height of the Clinton administration, young white men feel the end of breadwinner masculinity without a clear sense of what might come next. For the affluent and the fatherless alike,

violence promises these young white men the feeling of control in a world slipping out of their grasp. As the exceptional find their way out of the destructive pull of white masculinity, others succumb to its caustic draw. The gravity of white masculinity is the force that holds *The Topeka School* together, and perhaps best explains its immense popularity and fatalism about authoritarian America.

Blurring memoir and novel, the story unfolds around Adam Gordon who, like the author Ben Lerner, was born in Topeka, Kansas, in 1979, was raised in a family of two very prominent (and very self-aware) psychologists and graduated high school in 1997 as a nationally acclaimed debate champion before decamping to the campuses, fellowships, and cosmopolitan conviviality of the East Coast. Although tethered to Adam’s senior year of high school, the novel swings back into the marital history of his parents and forward into his own future as a writer, father and conflicted citizen in contemporary New York City.

But the main character of *The Topeka School*—the lit fuse that propels both the story and its account of the populist basis of Trumpism—is white masculinity. It’s a character standing at the cusp of adulthood as their parents’ bland prosperity begins to give way to upheavals of speculative finance, internet start-ups and a new governing theology of public emaciation. Rife with contradiction and adrift in a changing world, the Young White Man is at once insufferably entitled and unnervingly fragile. He is bristling at the waning conventions of success and terrified of what lies beyond them. It’s a character who dresses up the minor slights of immense adolescent privilege in the

swagger of gangster rap, who sizes up customers for brawls while shopping with his mom at Costco, who feels the curtain falling on men who provide and protect while desperately trying to figure out what part he will play in the coming drama, if he is granted a part at all.

Stuffed to the brim with every imaginable satisfaction of cars, drugs, clothes, sex and autonomy, he's nonetheless a character ready to explode. And explode he does, splitting himself decidedly in two by the novel's end: reflexive transcendence and simmering resentment. What begins as an overlapping culture of the Young White Man is shattered by the novel's end into two radically divergent fates. It's this subjective divorce that the novel offers as anthropological explanation of all that divides America today. (The class dimensions of this split, regrettably, remain untouched in the novel.)

The novel unfolds in the alternating voices of Adam and his parents. As Adam faces up to the end of high school and all that beckons beyond, his parents navigate their own struggles with professional notoriety, mild-mannered infidelity and surfacing family secrets. Each chapter feels like background interviews conducted with the leading ensemble, yet each voice does not so much respond to the authors queries as settle in and stretch out upon them, embarking on the confessions of a religiously revealed self while pausing every so often to reflect on recurring details from the wisdom of now. Slender asides disrupt these therapeutic sessions to uncoil the cursed arc of Darren Eberheart, each violent digression marked off in italics from the rest of the story.

A fatherless adolescent whose rage and limited mental range conspire against the

poise of well-adjusted, Darren is a shard of glass in a play of polished stones. Drawing in discord like an unplugged drain, Darren is the rotting core of white masculinity come to life, "the perverted form of empire's privileged subject." Comprising a mere sliver of the novel, the dissonance of Darren nonetheless provides the dramatic tension of the story. And it is the tautness between Adam and Darren—the reflexive and the compulsive, the upwardly mobile and the left behind, the welcoming and the intolerant, the educated and the damned—that drives *The Topeka School* and its best-selling diagnosis of our contemporary. At the start, both Adam and Darren are haunted by an anger boiling just under the surface, threatening to erupt at any moment. Adam and Darren mix a few times at basement parties in the suburbs during their senior year, neither perfectly at home there. Adam stoops down from the erudite affluence of a restored Victorian while Darren stumbles up from a single mother struggling to make ends meet. Both worry that violence may be the only way to prove their place in the fading interiors of middle-class affluence.

But as Adam ascends on the wings of his exceptional talent, he is able to slowly shed the mask of aggression and transcend the fray. Like a moth to the flame, Darren comes to embody the anger without the means to overcome its pull or strength to bend its force to productive use. As Adam rises above white masculinity, Darren is hopelessly swept up in its destructive current. For Darren, white masculinity becomes a life sentence. For Adam (and perhaps Lerner), it's a biographical relic that

justifies the gaze downward into so-called “Trump Country” and its benighted residents. Although the novel begins in their awkward overlap, the unbridgeable distance between Adam and Darren is where the story ends: a flash of recognition in a crowd of red baseball caps hurling abuse outside a poetry reading by the now-accomplished writer Adam.

In so many ways, this view of Darren at a distance is already familiar. And it’s curious to me how little the novel does to overcome that distance, how little is added to the character of Darren that we haven’t already come to expect of the type. We’ve grown accustomed to seeing the same figure in the frightful fringe of resurgent white nationalism and in highbrow essays probing the depraved soul of the white working class. Darren is the seething visual texture of Trump rallies, and that’s the venue *The Topeka School* builds the character toward inhabiting as if second nature. And here is the novel theory of Trumpism: Our lurk into authoritarianism is best understood not as a tactical compromise made by conservative power brokers but as the pathology of white masculinity.

It’s a story that clearly resonates. In social media feeds and cocktail rants, Darren has become a go-to indictment of our political plight. The unflappable ignorance and vitriolic patriotism of white masculinity is the wrench thrown in the workings of our democracy. “If white men cannot own democracy, there will be no democracy,” Wendy Brown writes.¹ But Darren, in the novel as elsewhere, is less a fully formed character than the perfectly crafted hook to hang the disease of Trump

upon. The novel never explains why Darren dons the MAGA ballcap; rather, it condemns him to Trump by dint of his accursed lot. Darren is trotted out and tried for all of the sins of the contemporary while granted all the rich interiority and historical complexity of a propaganda poster. This thin caricature, in the novel as elsewhere, commands far more dramatic presence than it can possibly explain electorally.

The groundswell of Trump’s razor-thin electoral victory rose in that perennial fuse of fascism: an aggrieved middle class. To take the clown car as the groundswell of Trumpism is to confuse what Karl Polanyi once called the “sham rebel-lion” of early fascist protests with the actual invading force: a racket of offshore accounts, parish prerogatives, and middle-class status happy to trade in our democracy to maintain the brittle edge of their advantage.² What would that novel look like?

The Topeka School avoids a wider accounting of Trump from greed, sacraments and hijacked media—all of which have out-sized personalities in Kansas today—to place responsibility for Trump more squarely on the shoulders of one downwardly mobile demographic. Can all the sins of contemporary capitalism really be attributed to out-of-work white men? Who, exactly, does such a charge actually condemn? And who, exactly, does such a charge actually serve? These questions strike home for me.

Like Lerner, I was born in 1979, and I grew up several hundred miles to the west in Aurora, Colorado, in the same current of young white men hedged in by claustrophobic boredom and banal brutality. Vio-



Figure 1. Trump Rally in Manchester, New Hampshire (February 10, 2020).

lence was shockingly ordinary (true story, someone once threw a billiard ball at my face at a party; yet this pivotal assault in the novel pales in comparison to the gun violence that brought down several of my classmates). I came from what was politely called “a broken family,” and more than once I was taken as a worrisome specimen of the coming crisis of “lost boys” that gripped conservative thought in the 1990s. Teachers and pastors routinely instructed me to lower my horizon from the university to more technical career paths.

If Lerner narrates this drama of white masculinity from above, I lived it from below. In my neighborhood, the sons of the middle

class were launched toward college as the gateway to their charmed affluence. Kids like me were shunted in the opposite direction with the hopes that manual labor might provide the moral structure of the fathers we never had. Both promises proved false, and both groups of white young men have struggled in the decades since to make ends meet. For those, like me, encouraged to join the working class just as their ranks were being dismantled, lived adversity has brought a new sensitivity to the plight of the marginalized and sparked a broad political turn toward Bernie Sanders and Black Lives Matter. For the heirs of the middle class, however, the disappointment has been harder to stomach.



Figure 2. Trump Rally in Manchester, New Hampshire (February 10, 2020).

It's on their social media feeds that I routinely find strained evangelical logics explaining the moral necessity of Trump. Such nuances of class are lost in *The Topeka School*, which makes no room for my experience but as part of the problem. Indeed, the moral imagination advanced by *The Topeka School* colors all of interior America with the same dark brush. It's a blunt ethnological view increasingly celebrated as incisive political critique.

On both sides of the aisle, the symbolic prominence of white masculinity has overshadowed the historical constellations of power at play in the rise of Trumpism. For the Right, the aesthetics of Darren provide an award-winning set design for conservative dissent. The iconography of white working men drapes elite exceptions to democracy in the racialized feeling of working-class resentment. Prompted by and often paid for by the new oligarchs of the Right



Figure 3. Black Lives Matter rally in Troy, NY (June 7, 2020).



Figure 4. Black Lives Matter rally in Troy, NY (June 7, 2020).

(Mercer, Koch, DeVos with assists from Sinclair Broadcasting and Fox News), ragtag caravans of oversized pickup trucks and bearded dudes with assault rifles descend on the public square in a made-for-television spectacle. Casting neo-liberal agendas in the authentic look of a working-class revolt, such performances give the impression that brutal dictates from high are really surging discontent from below. Without qualification, the emboldened ferment of white nationalism around these performances must be rejected and refused. Yet we should never lose sight of the stage direction. Conservative protests now mainline white masculinity, but equally complicit are the cartels behind such broadcasts of addled machismo: the corporate gentry, evangelical power brokers and media conglomerates. As conservative elites willingly hand over the keys to public institutions to this

militia of white masculinity, calls for economic and racial justice bring together a sweeping coalition of Americans. Whether in support of frontline workers or in outrage over racial injustice, these gatherings take to the streets, where they are increasingly met with paramilitary violence as young and old, white and Black, men and women are beaten back with tear gas, billy clubs, and rubber bullets.

If the aesthetics of Darren screen the gilded agenda of conservatives, such aesthetics also amputate the reality of class for progressives. For the past four years, spotlights of liberal disgust have swept across rural America searching for the explanation of Trump. Again and again, they converged on the facade of characters like Darren. The long shadows cast by the resulting caricature of white masculinity mark out new geographies

of acceptable disregard: places and people that no longer matter. In many circles, this led to a bold new progressive stance: total indifference to the dire plight of the rural working class. Neglecting historical accounts of how unbridled profits hollowed out middle America,³ the Left finds itself vindicating the catastrophic effects of vulture capitalism under the rubric of a progressive identarian critique. On this point, the view of Wall Street and many coastal progressives agree: In rural America, those left behind had it coming.

Here the figure of Darren becomes a convenient way of *not seeing* how industrial farming, relentless petro-frontiers and accumulation by despair have ravaged interior America while expecting international travel (cheap energy), lavish meals (cheap food) and steady returns on your retirement portfolio. Perhaps the reluctance to face up to those complicit realities is actually what underwrites the renowned acclaim of *The Topeka School*. As Raymond Williams never tired of pointing out, the moral divorce of city and country in literature always clouds a deeper material interdependence.

In the past few years, conservative agendas and progressive voices alike have reconfigured their politics in relation to the aesthetics of the white working class. In many ways, *The Topeka School* is a perfect novel of this cultural reconfiguration: Wider historical constellations are set aside as the present crisis is reduced a single subjective contrast of enlightened and deplorable (a contrast celebrated on the Left and the Right). Smitten with such aesthetics but never able to explain them, *The Topeka School* provides an exemplary update on that earlier genre of anxious interiority absent historical accounting: the

bourgeois novel. Yet here, the biblical truth of identity—some saved, some damned; not by works but by the predestination of identity—comes to stand in for a wider historical reflexivity around obscene profiteering and the worsening condition of most. Such a theology of identity also obscures the shared grounds of outrage among the diverse ranks of poor and working Americans today, in cities as much as in the countryside.

The sweeping reception of *The Topeka School* also sparks a more dire reading: How is this novel working to create the very conditions of its indictment? Weighing out exactly which lives are worthy of liberal sympathy and which lives are eligible for righteous condemnation, *The Topeka School* has become a worrisome moral agent in its own right. In regions devastated by toxic agriculture, shuttered factories and prolific pain killers, casting out citizens from our democracy can in itself become a winning recruitment of those bruised lives into fascism. The novel, in Lerner's hands, is less a shared moral universe for reimagining our collective plight than a self-righteous axe to cleave the diseased parts from the transcendent. Given Lerner's biography, *The Topeka School* is not so much a vehicle of transformative empathy as it is a more ethically sourced condemnation of rural America and the plight of working people today.

Notes

1. Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 180.

2. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1944; 2nd paperback ed., Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 246.

3. Marc Edelman, "How Capitalism Underdeveloped Rural America," *Jacobin*, January 26, 2020. [https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/01/capitalism-](https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/01/capitalism-underdeveloped-rural-america-trump-white-working-class)

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