

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Witnessing the Turkish century

Review of 'The Endless Country' (Picador, 2024) by Sami Kent

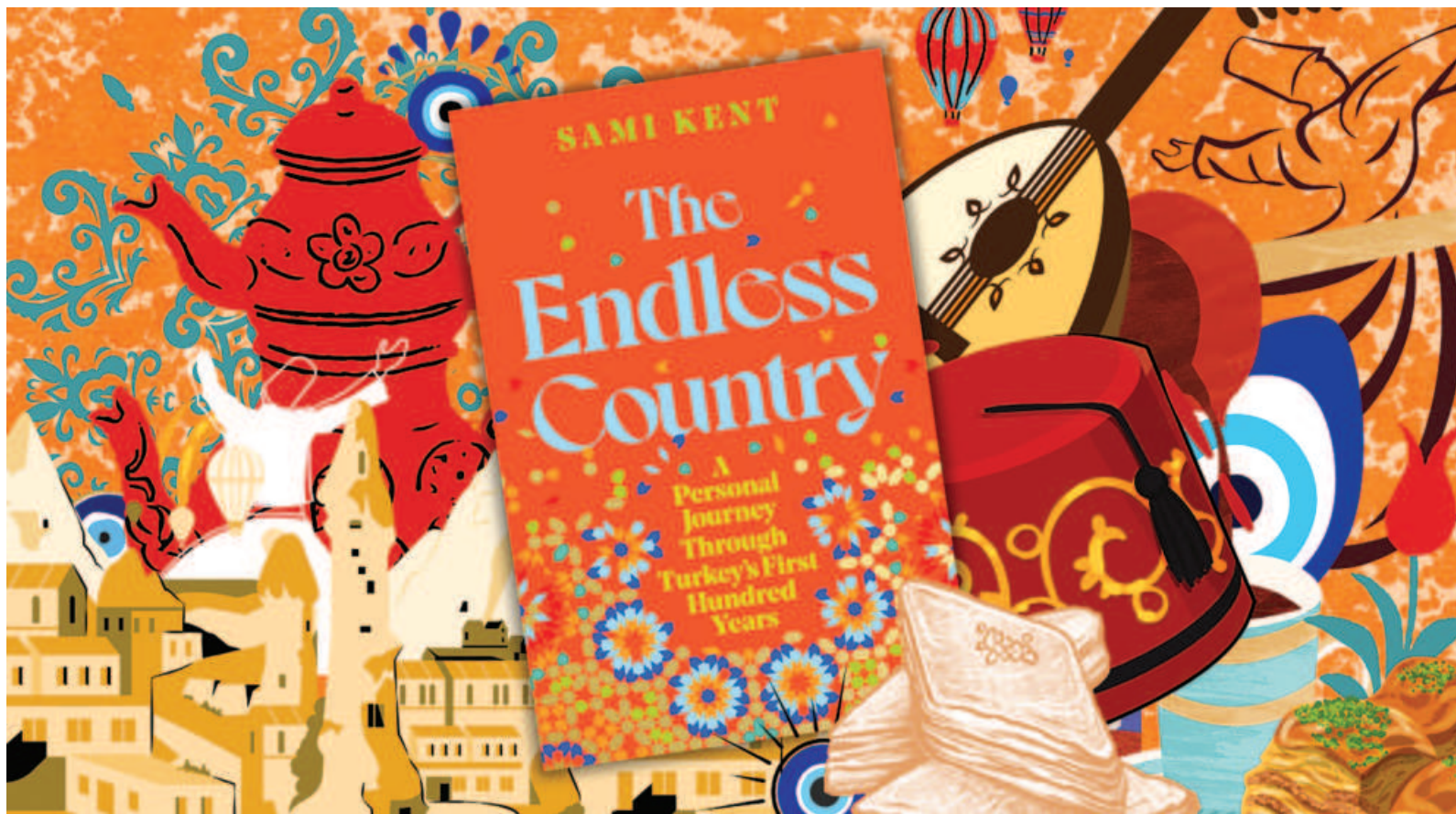


ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

ISRAR HASAN

In the post-9/11 world, no country's name has been evoked more than Turkey's (or its newly rebranded name of Türkiye) in public discussions by foreign policy pundits and politicians alike, to demonstrate the harmonious symbiosis of the East and West, Islam and secularism, and tradition and modernity. Turkey has been championed as a model that other states in the Middle East, and the broader Muslim world, can emulate. It has been 100 years since the multicultural Ottoman empire was abolished, and Turkey has long been its sole, albeit contested, successor, breaking with its past to create a new "Turkish" identity.

In his book, *The Endless Country*, Sami Kent, a British journalist of Turkish origin, takes us on a tour of a Turkey seldom known, seen, and heard

of. Part-travelogue, part memoir, and part-history, *The Endless Country* transverses through the annals of statecraft and culture to demonstrate the major events that have helped shape the country. Kent, the son of a Turkish father, finds himself "betwixt-and-between", never knowing his own culture, and notes how his "Turkishness would be lightly worn."

Over the years, the Turkish model began to assert itself on the world stage, as Erdogan's strongman style leadership steered its course from a heavily top-down secularist form of governance to one espousing conservative, Sunni Islamic values. In the same vein, Turkey has anchored not towards the East or the West, but in itself trying to craft a new beginning. It is between the beginning of the nation-state and its current prognosis that Kent tries to uncover the paradoxes of Turkish society and the state.

Kent avoids the typical reliance on past scholarly studies; instead, he leverages his journalistic acumen to offer a vivid and nuanced portrait of the nation. Through extensive travels across the country, Kent interviews a diverse array of characters: communists, Islamists, bandits, prison guards, political dissidents, and family members. These interviews are not just personal anecdotes, but rather tied to various symbols: headscarves, fezzes, hats, books, ice cream, musical instruments, and languages—each representing different eras and policies of the Turkish state over its century-long history. Kent organises the chapters decade-wise, allowing readers to witness the gradual build-up of modern Turkey. This structure helps in understanding the evolution of Turkish society and politics, balancing moments of hope and despair, and navigating through a quagmire of

complex problems.

Turkey's thrust into capitalist modernity involved a top-down approach which wanted to "blow away the Arab winds", and one of the first casualties was the fez, a hat worn by many Turks regardless of religious and political views. The fez, now seen as a "Muslim" hat and inescapably backward, was banned. This was followed by the ban of headscarves, which was uplifted fairly recently in 2013.

In many ways, the modern nation-state of Turkey has largely been synonymous with its spectacular general—the great Mustafa Kemal Atatürk—who moulded Turkey in an image very much unknown to his countrymen: Western, secular, and nationalist—all of which have various contested meanings in Turkish history. The irony is not lost, however, as Kent shows that in order to create a modern state, the founding father of Turkey, Atatürk himself, had transformed the country into a mostly Turkish and almost exclusively (Sunni) Muslim state due to an exodus of non-Muslim minorities. Through his interviews with members of the dwindling Greek and Armenian minorities, and his descriptions of decrepit churches

many Muslim majority countries often discriminating Muslim minority sects.

Kent further notes how the volatile cocktail of ethnic and religious tensions have plagued the country with numerous sides claiming victory, but none have been more everlasting than their skirmishes with the Kurds. Thrust into the modes of democracy and the Cold War, Turkey has always struggled with its "Kurdish question" from the 1930s till this day and multiple forms of repression including militarisation, surveillance, and crackdowns on civil societies have taken place. It is particularly in these chapters that Kent shows how the Turkish republic hankers to its past and how, instead of dealing with its demons of the yesteryear, it keeps bringing it to life. It is this modus operandi of the intolerance towards dissent that has led to it jailing the highest number of journalists, and housing Europe's biggest prison, Silivri Prison, earning the moniker "Prison Nation".

The strength of Kent's book lies in his ability to humanise historical, socio-economic, and political narratives. His firsthand accounts and the variety of perspectives he includes offer a rich and textured understanding of Turkey. Marking

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and monasteries, Kent demonstrates the lost cosmopolitanism of Turkey's yesteryears. With conspicuous religious minorities no longer inhabiting the landscape, the focus on religious exclusion is geared towards the Alevi, a Shia Muslim offshoot who have routinely protested for their civil liberties. The formation of "the other" strikes a jarring resemblance to

the pivotal moments in the country's history, from the formation of the Republic to its current malaises, Sami Kent navigates the massive labyrinth of a nation with diverse misfortunes and fortunate happenings.

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THE SHELF

4 books I was grateful to read this year

The Earth Spinner shares some central concerns with *Djinn Patrol*, such as a memorable dog, and more importantly the hate born of Hindu-Muslim conflict. But Roy is more interested in showing how art is inextricably tied to politics, and how identity politics itself is such a deeply embedded and problematic part of life in India.

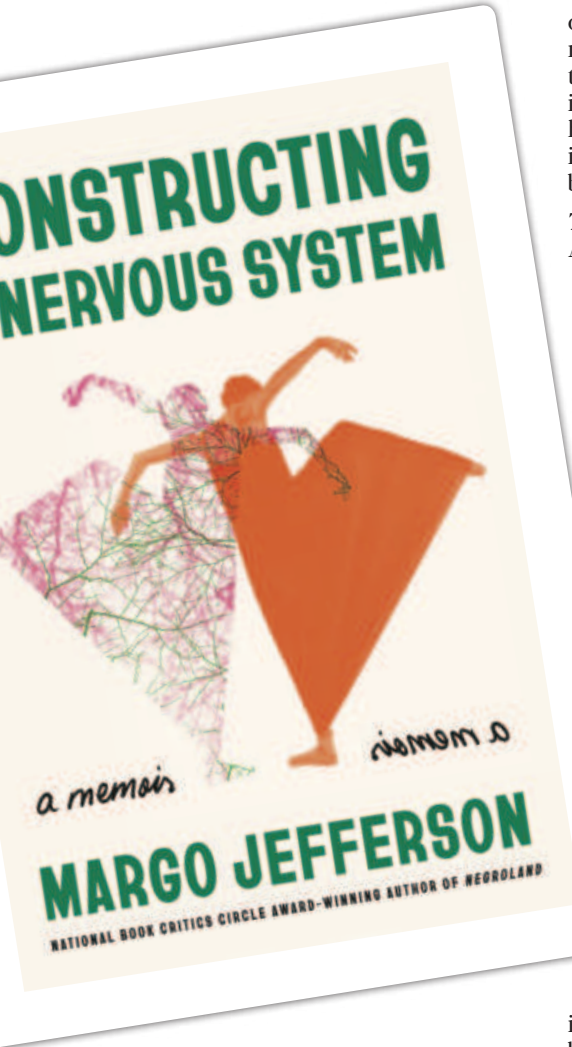
SARAH ANJUM BARI

Books are so intrinsically tied to space. A fellow writer from my MFA program recently told me that she's "only buying books [she] actually want[s] to have, not just read." It's true, I feel differently about books that I previously disliked or enjoyed reading and books that I want as a physical presence in my life. A few that fall in the latter category: An author whose voice, craft, or research moves I want to emulate; a book with gorgeous cover art; an edition with an especially insightful preface; or, books on my nightstand that left me, by turns, frustrated, intimidated, laughing, crying, or wrestling with thoughts that fluctuated as I made my way through the text. Some of these books I found through an author, professor, or friend whose taste I trust. Others were related to subjects or texts I'm already drawn to. Reading is never a solitary act; it almost always spins out through such webs of association.

I've come to recognise this as a uniquely different experience from simply liking or disliking a book. Instead, I felt gratitude for specific things about a text—things that I both agreed and enjoyed disagreeing with. Perhaps we all read this way subconsciously—our responses goopy and contradictory, often heightened by emotions. Perhaps we give (social) media rhetoric too much power when we reduce our reading responses to 'good/bad', 'one to five stars', 'would or would not recommend to a friend'.

***Djinn Patrol On The Purple Line*
Deepa Anappara
Hamish Hamilton, 2020**

Obsessed with the sleuths of Indian television (Byomkesh Bakshi, Karamchand, characters from *Crime Patrol*), nine-year-old Jai wants to do some "detectiving" into why children are going missing from the Delhi slum he calls home. As with most famous detectives, Jai decides that a skinny street dog he calls Samosa will be his sidekick and key to finding clues. Meanwhile, it's his bookworm friend Pari who gets closest to the truth, asking all the right questions to the missing children's family and neighbours. Their friend, Faiz, believes it is djinns who are abducting their classmates, while the rest of the slum soon begins to blame Muslim families



like Faiz's for the crimes. Deepa Anappara's novel delights in the tropes of mystery noir, with its world feeling familiar to that of *Slumdog Millionaire* and Katherine Boo's reportage in *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*. But while both those works brought a western, partially-outsider gaze to the poverty and corruption of slum-life in India, *Djinn Patrol* is interested in speaking through the minds of its most marginalised characters. The young, the abused, the tortured—a little boy escaping his violent home; his mother who must work through her rich employers' family party while her son is missing; a woman whose abused soul has taken to haunting a traffic signal—these are the characters we get to know intimately. A crisply choreographed climax does arrive, but the book seems to be about, instead, recentering stories and pushing the reader's perspective not

only into political peripheries, but also into the mind of a frustrating, endearing narrator who is too young and mercurial to be reliable. You believe in his passion for solving these crimes, but it's a hard ask to trust him. Mostly, your heart is caught in your throat for the child's safety. It makes for a breathless and heartbreaking reading experience.

The Earth Spinner
Anuradha Roy
Hachette, 2021

Anuradha Roy's writing is graceful and unassuming because it doesn't scream its politics. She tells simple stories that reveal complex social dynamics. Just by sharing their pasts before a reader, her characters gain some semblance of freedom or catharsis from their difficult lives.

The Earth Spinner shares some central concerns with *Djinn Patrol*, such as a memorable dog, and more importantly the hate born of Hindu-Muslim conflict. But Roy is more interested in showing how art is inextricably tied to politics, and how identity politics itself is such a deeply embedded and problematic part of life in India. Her protagonist, Elango, is a potter whose family has, for generations, devoted itself to the primarily Hindu artform. But Zohra, the woman he loves, belongs to an ancestry of Muslim calligraphy. Roy gives us multiple love stories—Elango and Zohra's, Elango and Chinna's (the dog he befriends from the woods), Chinna and the entire neighbourhood's, and that of Elango and young Sara, his pottery student and the narrator of the book.

The idea of all their unions is manifested in a clay horse that Elango is creating based on a burning horse he sees in his dreams, onto which Zohra's grandfather will etch the Arabic verses of Kabir. Descended from Hindu mythology, the burning, underwater horse denotes apocalypse as well as a balance between fire and water, desire and purity, man and woman. Its physical form in their lives becomes a site on which art and language can shed divisions of caste or religion. A tall promise and a fevered dream, one that crumbles against the harsh reality of communal violence.

Constructing A Nervous System
Margo Jefferson
Pantheon, 2022

Towards the end of a History of the Essay seminar I took last year, we had to create a family tree of essays for ourselves. It brought up the question of how we considered ourselves 'related' to certain pieces of writing—work that forms part of our

socio cultural or political history, work that we're literally, familiarly tied to, writers whose style have informed our own, essays that made us realise what we like, why we want to write, what we don't want to write.

Margo Jefferson, professor of writing at Columbia University and a Pulitzer-winning giant in the world of criticism, takes on a similar project in *Constructing A Nervous System*. The memoir presents the 'nervous system' of writers, artists, (Jazz) musicians, athletes, and other cultural milestones that have informed Jefferson's mind and heart. But she's writing particularly about engaging with art (as a Black woman) that won't imagine you unless you're white. "Too much of white art requires a negative capability that negates whole parts of one's self", she writes.

It's the way she marries language and form to replicate the concept of a nervous system that blows your mind. Her prose feels sinewy—she's teasing apart and garlanding pieces of culture across time and space, with her own mind as the connecting force. "Temperamental autobiography", she calls it. The effect is like witnessing a mind shaping itself in real time, like watching an animated x-ray.

This is an excerpt. Read the full listicle at **The Daily Star** and **DS Books'** websites.

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