

# TEPSA'S READING CORNER

a reading list to stimulate debate



In this edition, **Barbara Vanotti** discusses:

## **‘This is Europe: The way we live now’ by Ben Judah**

*“First you see the lights.  
Then you see the colours.  
White. Orange. Red. A black horizon.  
Coming closer. Tankers. Ferries.  
Containers.  
Moving. Distant glows. Glints in  
single file.  
Welcome to Rotterdam, radios  
control.  
Pilot on the way to your vessel. Over.  
The deck is freezing. The night wind  
bites his face. Jelle can hardly make  
out the waves in the dark water.  
Prepare for pilot boarding. Over.  
‘I’m the start of Europe.’”*

With this bleak image of the bustling Rotterdam port, Ben Judah welcomes us to Europe in his collection of stories entitled ‘This is Europe: The way we live now’. This compendium of narratives from different generations of European citizens showcases the complexities, opportunities, and hardships of living on the European continent in the 21st century.

The book’s first chapter follows Jelle’s life as a Rotterdam harbour pilot who guides container ships into the busiest port in Europe. Alongside the mundane description of Jelle’s mornings on board the international vessels, there is a clear sense of the

magnitude of Europe’s trading power. The pilot paints a vivid picture of the chaotic mercantile life of Rotterdam, the main entrance to Europe, which welcomes “almost 30 000 ships a year”, weighing “467 tonnes” in total. But facts and figures do not stand awkwardly alone in his narrative. In Judah’s book, numbers have clear implications. To sustain Europe’s geoeconomic prowess, a man in his fifties has to wake up before dawn and risk his life, jumping from one ship to another, to help bring thousands of containers filled with somewhat useful products to European shores. This is today’s Europe.

Yet as soon as the reader starts to feel ashamed for contributing to this dangerous consumer society, the page turns, and a new story begins. In each chapter, a new narrator transports the reader to a different corner of the old continent. Judah spent over five years travelling across Europe to meet with people and write up their tales. In the end, the book is a wonderful collection of 23 narratives, recounted in the third person and interwoven with the protagonists’ internal monologues, all responding to the same question: “What is it like to be European in the modern world?”

Judah's 'This is Europe' is tailored to all those who like to look out of windows, sit on balconies and terraces and fantasise about the lives of fellow passengers, walkers, and families, in search of the thread that ties us all together. While each story is unique in its own way, they all have an aura of familiarity as the narrators describe places that we might have seen before, traditions that we can also encounter, and emotions that we have also once felt.

Yet, Judah does not settle for the familiar. In his impressive collection, he also traces the Europe of unsung inhabitants, with stories from refugees, migrants, the queer community, young mothers, and even an adult film actor. Without ever judging or moralising, Judah presents us with a genuine, imperfect Europe. A continent that is not only shaped by businesspeople or politicians, but also by those who often live on the margins of society.

Despite Judah's interest in politics – he is currently the Special Adviser to the United Kingdom's Foreign Secretary – his book was never meant to be a political analysis. "You want what politicians and pundits and political scientists can't give you. You want to listen. You want to know how we live now," he writes in the prologue to the book; and this is exactly what he sets out to do. Judah effortlessly restricts himself from editorialising or providing commentaries on the interviewees' stories, and so should the reader.

However, politics still permeate the book. No citizen living in Europe is unaffected by the crises of the 21st century. Therefore, we are presented with the story of a Portuguese man and his Slovak wife who lose part of their farms in the fires caused by the climate emergency in Southern Europe; the frightful experience of a Spanish flight attendant who is hit by the worst symptoms of COVID-19; an Italian emergency rescuer on the Piedmont Alps who fails to dissuade a group of young migrants from crossing the Italian-French border on foot in the freezing cold; a refugee driver working for Amazon in

Germany who is worried about his lonely wife living in an unfamiliar society.

My personal favourite story follows the adversities of the members of a Belarusian family, who one day decide to participate in a peaceful protest against their country's corrupted elections and find themselves becoming enemies of the state. As we read about the mother's escape to Lithuania and the father's dangerous flight across the border, headlines about the "death of democracy" and the "rise of illiberalism" become more than just newspaper titles, but issues affecting real European citizens.

Is this Europe? In a way, yes. Alongside the historical Europe made of Roman ruins, castles, and villas and the geopolitical Europe of Brussels' summits, trade, and international relations, Judah's stories open the door to another side of Europe. Europe as a fragile, incomplete continent, where many dreams are still unfulfilled, where borders are still being drawn, and where new threats and crises have tangible consequences. This may be something we are already aware of, given the current headlines and results of the European elections. But Judah is asking us to forget statistics and listen.

The crux of the book – perhaps what truly ties us all together – is the desire for freedom: of expression, to vote, to love, to work and to study. 'This is Europe' serves as a reminder that our continent is a living organism, made of generations of ambitious and often unseen people who struggle to live the life they want. At the end of the book, you may draw your own conclusions on what European leaders should do to grant these freedoms, but why not listen to what citizens have to share first?

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Editing and formatting: Allegra Wirmer (TEPSA)

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