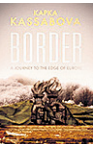


BOOKS

Twilight zone of Europe

Bulgaria, Turkey and Greece meet in a confused tangle, discovers *Michael Kerr*

BORDER
by *Kapka Kassabova*



400PP, GRANTA, £14.99,
EBOOK £9.49

★★★★★

There's a passage early in this book in which the author hints at a moment of terror she will recount in detail later; a moment that might – or might not – have been all in the mind. It was a passage that at first I found irritating rather than tantalising; one that held me up rather than sped me on. Later, it seemed somehow appropriate: holding us up is one of the things borders do.

Kapka Kassabova's *Border* is about the land where Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey run into one another; a land that is still feeling the aftershocks of the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, a century later. In parts, she says, it's a place "beautiful enough to give you a heart attack"; but it's also one where people have suffered exile, military rule, border terror and poverty, interference and neglect. Myth and folklore endure – perhaps, she suggests, because at

times only the imagination was free of state control.

As a child under communism, Kassabova saw the edge of this land when her parents, both scientists, took her on holidays from their home in Sofia to the southern beaches of Bulgaria. They went for the swimming and the sun. Many of the East Germans who joined them on the "Red Riviera" had a different aim: to sneak away from the sands at night, and into the dark forest next to Turkey known as the Strandja, where, they had been told, there was only a bit of barbed wire between them and freedom.

Twenty-five years after she left Bulgaria (she now lives in Scotland), she returns to see what has become of these once-militarised border villages and towns, the rivers and forests that for two generations were off-limits. Starting at the Black Sea, on the Bulgarian side of the border with Turkey, she travels through the Strandja ranges, on to the plains of Thrace and into the passes of the Rhodope Mountains – where, they say, Orpheus went into the Underworld – to finish "on the mirror side of the beginning – [at] Strandja and the Black Sea."

Her account of that journey is about fences both on the ground and in the head; about the frontiers between the real and the imagined,

between the scientifically proven and the remotely possible. There are happenings that might be from the pages of García Márquez, including the nocturnal sighting of fireballs in Strandja: a phenomenon "so common that people accepted it as a law of nature". And there's a cast of characters that wouldn't disgrace Dickens: border guards and people smugglers, refugees and ritual fire-walkers, spymasters who have retired and faith healers who are never out of work. Among those she meets is a border guard, one of "yesterday's killers", who shows no remorse over the would-be escapers he "liquidated" in Soviet times, and a Kurdish refugee from Syria, who, when the author's back is turned, pays for her lunch in a café.

On the ground, Kassabova is a difficult character for the locals to pigeonhole: she drives through villages where lone female travellers are unheard-of, where women prepare meals and leave others to eat them. On the page, she segues seamlessly between myth and history, memoir and reportage. In a couple of passages,

East Germans on holiday by the Black Sea used to run into the forest to escape

including an episode when she says she put her notebook down, she presents in direct speech long conversations involving three or more voices. You believe its substance because, in the maxim of a 13th-century Sufi mystic she quotes elsewhere, "If you are true, your words will be true." Kassabova, you have no doubt, is true.

In a book where she's intent on blurring borders and avoiding division, she does declare, towards the end, a preference for the people of the mountains over the people of the plains. The former have survived a tougher terrain and a rougher history. In an echo of Henry James, she notes: "They seem to know what others don't:



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kindness is the one thing that matters in the end."

Kassabova describes the region she traverses as "the last border of Europe". It might not be for long. Anti-establishment and anti-EU winds are blowing hard and fast across the continent. The great European "project", constructed in the aftermath of the Second World War, has never looked in so much danger of falling apart as it does now. At the far west of Europe, Brexit, we're told, might necessitate a "harder" border

in Ireland – if not as hard as the wall with which Donald Trump wants to keep Mexicans out of the United States.

I've read a lot of good travel books lately. *Border* is a great one. But it's more than that: it's a big-hearted book for what seems an increasingly mean-spirited age. It spells out the human consequences of nationalism and totalitarianism; of a narrow focus on identity and ethnicity; of divisions and fences and walls designed to keep "them" from "us".

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Grief Works by Julia Samuel

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About the author: Julia Samuel is a grief psychotherapist who has spent the last 25 years working with bereaved families, both in private practice and with the NHS at St Mary's Paddington where she pioneered the role of maternity and paediatric counsellor.

She is Founder Patron of Child Bereavement UK, where she continues to play a central role. *Grief Works* is her first book.

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