

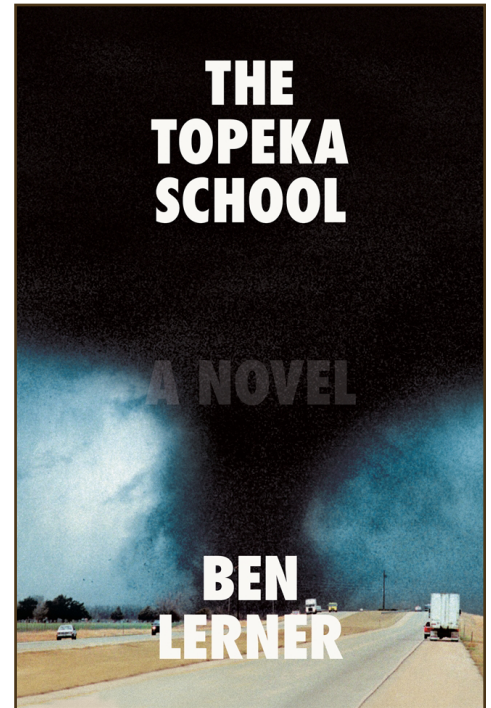
FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

# Reading Group Gold

## *The Topeka School*

*A Novel*

by Ben Lerner



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**Note from the Editor:**

Ben Lerner is one of the most celebrated writers of his generation. Both *Leaving the Atocha Station* and *10:04* are known for their brilliance and humor—and for the unusual way they understand and describe how historical events insinuate themselves into our intimate relationships. Lerner’s new novel, *The Topeka School*, is set in Kansas in the 1990s, far from the cities through which his previous two protagonists have wandered. It tells the story of Adam Gordon, a high school senior “whose hair is drawn into a ponytail while the sides of his head are shaved, a disastrous tonsorial compromise between the lefty household of his parents and the red state in which he was raised.” This novel is the history of that household, told in his psychologist parents’ voices; it is also a disturbing, if often very funny, exploration of the forces that have led us to Trump. Unlike Adam’s horrible haircut, *The Topeka School* is utterly uncompromising: it confronts topics ranging from sexual abuse to racial appropriation to the bankruptcy of what passes for our political discourse. It does so with a courage and a clarity that ultimately leave one full of hope. —Mitzi Angel, Publisher

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## Questions for Discussion

1. In the novel's first scene, Adam gives a speech to his high school girlfriend, Amber, without realizing that she's disappeared (7). Later, Amber recounts abandoning her stepfather's dinnertime polemic without his noticing (13). What kinds of speaking, and listening, do the two stories introduce? How do they reflect conditions of gender and power?
2. Who are the primary voices in the book? Why does the perspective shift between first, second, and third person? How does the italicized, untitled format of Darren's sections distinguish him from the other characters, and what is the effect of his voice being set apart in this way?
3. The novel serves as "a genealogy of [Adam's] speech, its theaters and extremes" (142). How are different kinds of speech—including talk therapy, competitive debate, and political discourse—rehearsed and performed in the book?
4. Recalling his affair with Sima, Jonathan says: "Maybe I was a man who sought substitute mothers, then left them like my father" (172). What does the book reveal about parents and children? What do Adam and Jane's recitations of "The Purple Cow" suggest about the ability to disrupt intergenerational patterns?
5. As Jane describes her fraught public conversation with Sima, she states: "I was both on that stage and back in Brooklyn in the fifties; I was very briefly on the train" (105). Why do several timelines converge in this instance? What genres of time exist in the book?
6. How does Jane recover the memory of her father's abuse? Why might the book refrain from explicitly portraying the scene on the train?
7. The young Adam "wanted to be a poet because poems were spells" (126). Elsewhere, he experiences the "abstract capacity" of language through freestyle rap, a cultural appropriation of hip hop that also contains "pure possibility" (256). What qualities distinguish poetry from free-style? What other verbal expressions contain the potential for magic? For oppression?
8. Like Adam, Ben Lerner is a poet from Topeka whose mother is a renowned psychologist and author. In the novel, the adult Adam explicitly wonders: "Why does it feel dangerous to fictionalize my daughters' names?" (265). How does the book disturb distinctions between fact and fiction?
9. Different technologies mediate the voice: strangers harass Jane via landline; Jonathan records speech-shadowed passages of *Sportsmanlike Driving* (45); Jane directs the distraught Adam to the safety of a payphone (182); and the trio encounters Adam's grandfather's voice through Jonathan's cassette player (239). How does technology shape the listener's ability to intercept and alter speech? How do these moments underline the novel's historical concerns?
10. The title introduces school as a primary setting. What are some of the schools featured, both literal and figurative? How do instruction and indoctrination take place?

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11. Lerner’s first novel, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, opens in a museum as Adam Gordon witnesses another visitor’s emotional breakdown, potentially caused by “a profound experience of art.” In what ways do visual art and artifice, including Rose’s pilfered painting, Jonathan’s visits to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Duccio’s *Madonna and Child*, operate in *The Topeka School*?

12. How does race inflect the novel, from Adam’s freestyle—“a crisis in white masculinity” (127)—to Jason’s recognition of his “ethnic difference” following the September 11 attacks (120), to Jonathan’s memories of his Taipei upbringing? What is the relationship between whiteness and violence?

13. The novel bridges various settings: Jonathan and Jane’s New York, Klaus’ Europe, Adam’s forecasted return to the “vaguely imagined East Coast city from which [his] experiences in Topeka would be recounted with great irony” (15). How does tension exist between and within places? Does Topeka become a city of “milieu therapy” (54)?

14. The text makes a number of overt and implicit political references: the former senator Bob Dole’s face appears on a stranger’s television screen (12) and Donald Trump’s remarks about his daughter surface during the playground altercation between Adam and another father (270). How do personal stories—of the Gordon family, of Darren’s act of violence—acknowledge or reflect the political landscape of the past and present? How do these strains collide, such as when the adult Adam encounters Darren “wearing a red baseball cap, holding his sign in silence” (275)?

15. Does the motif of “the spread” complicate the transcendent possibilities of language? What questions does the novel pose about language’s ability to convey meaning in our contemporary moment? Does the book “spread” its readers with a surplus of allusions, materials, perspectives, and timelines?

## About the Author

**Ben Lerner** was born in Topeka, Kansas, in 1979. He is the author of the internationally acclaimed novels *Leaving the Atocha Station* and *10:04*, three books of poetry (*The Lichtenberg Figures*, *Angle of Yaw*, and *Mean Free Path*), and the monograph *The Hatred of Poetry*, as well as several collaborations with artists. Lerner has been a finalist for the National Book Award in Poetry and has received fellowships from the Fulbright, Guggenheim, and MacArthur Foundations, among many other honors. He is a Distinguished Professor of English at Brooklyn College.

*Reading guide written by Molly Walls*