

Commissioner's Book Club: Discussion guide

Nation of Strangers

Introduction

The prompts and questions that follow are meant to encourage discussion and support reflection. Human rights-related books highlight challenging issues and topics—take care of yourself in the ways that you need while you dig in.

For more suggestions, including different ways to reflect and share, check out [the Book Club How-to resource](#).

Author Bio

Ece Temelkuran is an award-winning Turkish writer, political thinker and public speaker whose work has been published worldwide. After she left her country in 2016, Temelkuran began writing in English. Her first book in this language, *How to Lose a Country*, received international praise. Her second, *Together*, offers “a way out from the political and moral insanity” that is ushered by the global rise of fascism. Ece Temelkuran has lived in Beirut, Tunis, Oxford, Paris and Zagreb. She is currently based in Berlin and is on the advisory board of Progressive International and DemocracyNext.

Summary

Written as a series of letters to a “dear stranger,” *Nation of Strangers* begins from Temelkuran’s own experience of leaving Turkey and realizing there was no stable home to return to. From there, she widens her lens to consider a world in which more and more people are becoming unhomed: refugees and exiles, certainly, but also those who feel politically alienated, morally estranged, economically excluded or no longer able to recognize the countries and systems around them.

As the book unfolds, Temelkuran argues that this growing condition of strangerhood—and an associated nationhood—is not only about physical displacement, but about the collapse of certainty, belonging and democratic life. The book is set in a time shaped by fascism, war, climate crisis and weakening institutions. *Nation of Strangers* is not a manifesto or a book of easy hope. Instead, it is a personal

and political reflection on dignity, fear, survival and belonging—and on the possibility that home may need to be rebuilt not as a place, but through our relationships with one another.

Linking the book to human rights in B.C.

Nation of Strangers connects to human rights in British Columbia through its exploration of what it means to become unhomed. Becoming unhomed is not only about exile or losing a physical home. Temelkuran also writes about becoming politically and morally unhomed: no longer recognizing the institutions, public life or social values around you.

Refugee protection, forced displacement, housing insecurity and the growing threat of climate-related displacement all raise questions about safety, dignity and the right to live with stability. Temelkuran's writing reminds readers that losing home is not only a private hardship, but it is often shaped by political systems, borders, climate emergencies and unequal social conditions.

The book also speaks to a kind of political unhoming. As trust in institutions weakens and public life becomes more polarized—and as fascism takes hold around the world—many people feel less represented, less protected and less able to recognize themselves in the politics around them. This kind of alienation shapes people's sense of belonging, participation and democratic life.

Finally, *Nation of Strangers* explores what it means to become morally unhomed: to feel that the world around you has grown crueler, more unequal or less human. This connects to human rights through questions of dignity, visibility and social conditions. When systems make people feel disposable, isolated, or in competition with one another, they erode the conditions that allow people to live as full and connected human beings.

Discussion guide questions and prompts

Here are some questions to ignite discussion or thought on the connections between the book and human rights. The provided prompts are not the only or complete answers, but some ideas you might want to incorporate into your conversation:

1. Home, unhoming, orphaning and the 'ache of no return'

Temelkuran opens her writing expressing her realization that there was no home for her to return to. About one call to her mother, Temelkuran writes: When the voice imprinted in you as the one that always calls you back goes silent—you experience an ache, an orphaning if you will.



Who is becoming unhomed in today's world and in what ways? Have you ever experienced a moment when something once familiar—a place, a country, a community or a relationship—no longer felt like home?

Temelkuran writes about three ways of being unhomed: physically, politically and morally. She invites us to think about home as more than shelter or geography, but rather a recognition of safety and belonging and the feeling that you are claimed by a people and a place.

At both individual and collective levels, Temelkuran suggests that much of the politics and morality being exercised no longer create a sense of home for us. This estrangement from our values feels disorienting and can make people feel isolated or alone.

2. A nation of strangers

Temelkuran writes to a “dear stranger,” gathering exiles, refugees, the displaced, the politically alienated, the economically excluded and all those who no longer feel at home in the world around them.

What does Temelkuran suggest about who counts as a stranger? What do you think of the idea of strangers being connected to one another, rather than alone and isolated? What does Temelkuran mean when she is talking about a ‘nascent language’ being shared and learned between and among these strangers?

Perhaps as a play on words of UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer warning that the United Kingdom will “become an island of strangers” without immigration reform, Temelkuran celebrates this growing nationhood of strangers, and that unhomed strangers are becoming a new silent majority.

Unhoming is not just a physical loss, but the cognitive and emotional disconnection we experience in our times: “what world are we living in? How did we get here? Is this reflective of who I am—who my community is? I don’t recognize myself here anymore.” If you have had these thoughts, Temelkuran welcomes you into this nation of strangers.

Temelkuran’s writing suggests that when people recognize this condition in one another, a new language begins to form—not always polished or complete but rooted in survival and mutual recognition.

One particularly powerful story was that of a young mother, seeking information about her and her family’s immigration status after waiting for weeks and months and navigating paperwork amid high levels of stress. When she got unwelcomed news about her paperwork and status, she broke down. Temelkuran calls this the “first unhoming collapse”—often public, as a result of being denied dignity and care. In those



moments, this emerging language makes its presence felt. Bystanders and strangers who have also experienced this collapse comfort her with a knowing shoulder squeeze, eye contact or shared tears.

3. Art, expression and a new language

As this new language emerges from strangers, Temelkuran writes about how she often has to attend sanitized spaces—keynote lectures or interviews where political ideas and stories of survival are supposed to be clear, tidy and ultimately hopeful. Temelkuran explores some arts-based spaces, where improvisation and forms of expression allow her to express herself differently.

What can art or creative expression make possible when public language feels exhausted, performative, or too restrained? How might movement, storytelling, imagination or even play help people find one another, and practice new ways of survival? Has an arts-based performance ever made you feel differently about an issue or personal experience?

Some communication and words are deemed appropriate or palatable for maintaining a comfortable status quo, but these forms of expression may no longer feel sufficient or accurate. Art and expressive-based performances make room for honesty, emotion, experimentation, interpretation and a shared recognition. It can help people imagine possibilities beyond fear or maintaining a status quo and create forms of connection that are less scripted and more human.

4. Shame, staying and leaving

Temelkuran shares a sense of shame she carries about leaving home, and shame she feels about having no home to go to. Questions of shame and cowardice arise frequently: “did I leave too soon? Did I do enough? Was I brave, or was I a coward?”

What can we learn about the self-judgment we might carry when we are forced to leave, or remain in places that no longer feel safe or recognizable? How do fear, pride and shame shape the choices people make about when to stay, when to leave and how to survive?

Displacement can bring with it constant self-questioning and a search for moral clarity within one’s self. Temelkuran does not suggest there is a “right” choice between staying or leaving. People may judge themselves under conditions they did not choose to live under, measuring themselves against impossible standards of courage, loyalty or sacrifice.

Fear may keep us in a place long after a situation has become unsafe; pride may make it harder to ask for help or leave when it is time; and shame may follow us no matter



what choice we make. Survival can bring a painful kind of clarity about what to do next, but that clarity does not necessarily bring comfort, solace or relief.

5. Neighbours, defeat and bridge-building

What does *Nation of Strangers* suggest about what happens to communities when defeat begins to set in? How can fear, exhaustion or political despair turn neighbours into strangers? What happens to people who try to build bridges across deepening divides?

Temelkuran shares the pain that comes from becoming a stranger in her own nation, while watching ordinary people choose support, silence or submission in the face of rising authoritarianism. In times of increasing polarization and division, this feels like a warning and call to action to maintain bridges and connections.

At the same time, Temelkuran writes “when the hate is activated on both sides, the bridges are targeted first and hit the hardest.”

People may direct anger toward neighbours, allies or those closest to them rather than towards systems and powers causing harm. In that kind of climate, bridge-builders can come under pressure from all sides, and the work of connection may begin to look naive, suspicious or even disloyal. Without excusing or dismissing real harm, we can resist this temptation to alienate those trying to hold connection across difference. They play an important and necessary role in reinforcing connection, staying in community and committing to dialogue and understanding.

6. The wisdom of strangers

Why does Temelkuran insist that strangers—the unhomed—should not be treated as pity stories or as warnings from somewhere else, but as people whose experience carries wisdom the rest of us need to hear?

One of the book’s central and recurring themes is that those who have already become strangers may recognize danger, instability and political breakdown before others do. Their stories are not valuable because they are tragic, or can be romanticized—rather, they are valuable because they contain hard-won clarity and wisdom. This wisdom was refined through survival. Temelkuran asks us to move beyond sympathy alone, and toward attention, humility and a willingness to learn.

The dignity of strangers can be gifted by recognizing their stories as symbolic canaries in a coal mine—harbingers that warn us of the world we are already living in, and strategies and connections needed to survive these times.

