

## O Jerusalem

**R. P. Hanna**

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*Ideas about technology, chaos, and political violence are made tangible in the thriller O Jerusalem.*

In R. P. Hanna's provocative thriller *O Jerusalem*, fanaticism wears many guises.

In an alternate post-9/11 world, some are opposed to violence and anarchy; others foment it. Ersan, a westernized Turkish academic, returns to Istanbul in order to write a magnum opus on the psychology of Muslim terrorists. Several lies and interviews later, he is entangled in a terror cell with genocidal ambitions. Meanwhile Bob, a journalist for a Kansas newspaper, is infatuated with his twenty-year-old interview subject, Betsy, a born-again Christian who is overjoyed to go on a charity mission to Afghanistan after winning an essay competition. And Emma, niece of the archbishop of Canterbury, is in an improbable relationship with Jack, a charming, wealthy, militant atheist activist. Further, intermittent chapters reveal that a shady organization, Deus Ex Machina, is controlling all via espionage and technology, fostering conspiracies and feeding hatred by doctoring and fabricating news footage into videos that are indistinguishable from real events.

These threads meet in an international conspiracy in which each person plays into an anarchic trap. Bob is caught up in the same terror cell that Ersan studies in Istanbul. An Israeli bureaucrat, Edward, links several people together in the process of creating a landmark peace agreement between Saudi, Israeli, and Palestinian leaders. In London, this same peace agreement inspires Jack to up the ante of his public assaults on religion.

Homing in on how global events snowball when they're harnessed by digital media, *O Jerusalem* is driven by paranoia and the sense that anything can influence anything else. A terrorist plot in Israel leads to acute suffering in England; a bombing in Istanbul generates images for a vitriolic ad campaign in New York. Described in cinematic terms, Deus Ex Machina's deepfake collages of world leaders and political violence target everyone in the story's divided world.

Playing out in real time, characters' motivations warp and change as they struggle to distinguish reality from propaganda. Imperceptible transitions in the text complement this, creating a limbo in which people from different cultural and geographic regions are united on the basis of ideological antagonism and technology. And the more exaggerated the story elements become (as with a Jewish fundamentalist's quest to prove that he is the grandson of Albert Einstein), the more forceful and involving the characterizations are made.

Still, there are a number of loose ends at the novel's end, which provides a lack of substantive answers to the book's most powerful and intelligent questions. Further, several characters disappear when the novel shifts to follow a pattern of bombings halfway through the book. And new characters continue to be added throughout, muddying the book's focus. The complex dialectic between chaos, technology, and human nature meets a similar fate.

A geopolitical thriller with scenes in Jerusalem, Istanbul, and London, *O Jerusalem* highlights extremes of kindness and criminality in human events.

WILLEM MARX (December 28, 2023)

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