

TRIBAL DRUMS

A new book traces tribalism in America and claims it paved Donald Trump's route to the White House, writes **Bron Sibree**

Amy Chua is no stranger to controversy or bestseller lists. In the wake of her 2011 bestselling memoir about her attempt to raise her daughters the strict "Chinese" way, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, the Yale law professor garnered death threats and accolades. Then came the outcry triggered by her 2015 book, *The Triple Package*, which examined why some ethnic and religious groups outperform others in America. Co-written with her Yale professor husband Jed Rubenfeld, it was accused of new racism but it, too, became a New York Times bestseller.

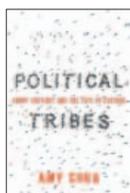
"I never think my books are going to be controversial," says Chua, "but somehow I keep getting into trouble. I just wonder what's going to happen with this one," she says of her fifth book, *Political Tribes*. "I'm sure I'll get into trouble again."

There's no denying that *Political Tribes* – which delivers new, uncomfortable insights into tribalism in America and the human instinct to form tribes – is a biting criticism of conventional American thought on everything from foreign policy through to identity politics and the rise of Trump. In examining why America, a land of immigrants, is so uniquely, dangerously, blinkered to tribal politics at home and abroad, *Political Tribes* also delivers stinging home-truths – any one of which can ignite controversy.

Yet it is American exceptionalism, argues Chua, that blinds it to tribal identities abroad. For America is exceptional, maintains this American-born daughter of ethnic Chinese immigrants from the Philippines. Its ethnicity-transcending national identity, and its unusual success in assimilating people from diverse origins, qualifies it as a super-group, the only one among the world's great powers. "This has shaped how we see the rest of the world, and deeply influenced our foreign policy," says Chua. "This is not to say we haven't got terrible racism, but unlike France, or even England, this is a country with a very strong national identity. So American people just think 'Oh Sunnis and Shias, why can't they just be Iraqis?' It's a naive view, and



Nuestra Senora de la Santa Muerta (Our Lady of the Holy Death) is a female deity personifying death. Her prominent cult holds many poor Hispanic Americans in its grip Picture: Getty Images



Political Tribes: Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations ★★★★★
Amy Chua, Bloomsbury, R295

it's pretty ignorant."

Tribalism propelled Trump to the White House, argues Chua. Race has been traditionally at the core of American tribalism, but Chua notes that America is "on the verge of an unprecedented demographic transformation". Yet even the growing "whitelash" to the "browning of America" which many consider a factor in Trump's rise to power, is as complex and divided as the identity politics of both left and right – which are fracturing so rapidly thanks to bigotry and racism on one side and political correctness and a kind of "oppression Olympics" (when two or more groups compete to prove themselves more oppressed than the other) on the other. She believes it is tearing the country apart. Her insights into the sports of

Nascar and World Wrestling, powerful tribal identities that see themselves as the "true America", are illuminating.

But it is her analysis of lesser-known tribal identities like the Sovereign Citizens, a bizarre anti-government group that law-enforcement agencies have identified as a greater threat to their communities than Islamic extremists, and the Prosperity Gospel – a Christian sect that preaches that being rich is divine and is especially popular with disadvantaged minorities – that are as disturbing as they are revelatory. Not to mention the potent tribal identities of America's 27 000 street gangs. Or the lure of Narco-saints like Nuestra Senora de la Santa Muerta (Our Lady of the Holy Death), a cult which holds many poor Hispanic Americans in its grip as well as many members of the LGBTQIA community. "America's identity as this single, unified country that still allows for a lot of diversity is really under threat today, and from both sides. It's why I wrote the book, so that we can get back to seeing that this super-group status we have is extremely unique," says Chua. "It's about saving America, the country that my parents love, and that I love." @BronSibree

YOUNG LIVES HAUNTED BY THE PAST

Mine ★★★★★
Sally Partridge, Human & Rousseau, R240

People are complicated and love can make us do crazy and unkind things," says Sally Partridge, whose fifth young adult novel, *Mine*, is an intense read. It follows the lives of two ordinary teenagers who fall in love, but their love turns sour as their pasts come back to haunt them.

Kayla is a beautiful skater girl with long blue hair and a love for comic books and classical music. Her mother sends her to a posh school in Rondebosch where she can hone her musical craft, but the boys take advantage of her and the girls smear her name. Friendless and alone, Kayla finds it difficult to trust Finlay, who enters her life and

promises to save her. Fin makes promises he can't keep. He's broken too, and copes by smoking weed and binge drinking. He lives with his old man in Lansdowne, and often arrives at school with fresh bruises on his face. Fin is repeating matric, but he's the lead rapper in a crew (not band) and calls himself Thor on stage. When he meets Kayla, all he wants to do is protect her from the world that's been so cruel to her.

But good intentions have a way of causing more trouble.

The most impressive thing about *Mine* is that the characters are three-dimensional young people who could be from anywhere in the world, battling with anxiety, self-doubt, paranoia, and self-sabotage.

Partridge says the young adult genre appeals to her, "because this is the time we



start experiencing the moments that define us and not all those experiences are happy ones. I try to explore how we deal with these experiences."

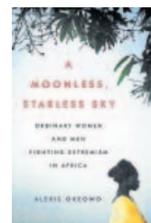
Some of the scenes were difficult to write, she says. "If say, a description of a young girl being manipulated or gaslit (having her head messed with) is important to the story or the message I want to communicate, then it needs to be written, even if it's uncomfortable."

Partridge gets inspired by "watching people and wondering what's going on in their heads, making up their stories". She has a notebook and jots down observations.

Mine is exceptional, from the fast-paced plot, evocative landscape and haunting characters to the awesome cover art by illustrator Astrid Blumer. Anna Stroud @annawriter_

Book Bites

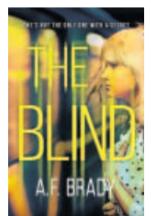
A Moonless, Starless Sky: Ordinary Women and Men Fighting Extremism in Africa ★★★★★
Alexis Okeowo, Corsair, R315



Okeowo, an American-Nigerian New Yorker staffer, set off to better know the vastness of the continent of Africa and the people who are bravely fighting fundamentalism.

She believed, "If I wanted readers to understand that the people I interviewed were not that different from them, I needed to practise empathy while writing." This led to her pursuing four in-depth stories: a Ugandan couple who were kidnapping victims of Joseph Kony's LRA; a Mauritanian who devoted his life to fighting slavery; two people who were affected by Boko Haram in Nigeria; and the brave girls and women who risk their lives by continuing to play basketball in Somalia. An emotionally tough read, yet beautifully done. @TiahBeautement @ms_tiahmarie

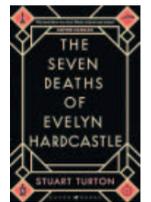
The Blind ★★★★★
AF Brady, HarperCollins, R295



Sam James is a well-known psychologist at a psychiatric institution in New York. Richard is a difficult patient who nobody wants to treat but Sam is unfortunately assigned to him.

Through Richard and his sordid history, Sam confronts her own demons, something she has always avoided. At the same time, Richard is moving from patient to counsellor, but only one person will walk away healed. Its clever plot and constant thrills will throw any reader off balance, but that is what makes this book a must-read. Jessica Levitt @jesslevitt

The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle ★★★★★
Stuart Turton, Bloomsbury, R295



Tweeds, dinner jackets, valets and butlers, crystal stemware and a murder mystery with a small cast of characters in a once magnificent 1920s country house in

England. It's a few years after WW1, and the Hardcastle family have a masquerade ball to celebrate their children Evelyn and Michael. But Evelyn is murdered and the mysterious protagonist Aiden Bishop has to find the killer. He is in a time loop and lives the day over and over by inhabiting different guests to solve the murder. It's a wacko plot, but Turton delivers a well-constructed concept and a refreshing read. Jennifer Platt @Jenniferdplatt