

Updike presents a new terror: Author's latest comes right from the headlines

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John Updike is among the most acclaimed American authors of the post-World War II period. He has received two Pulitzer Prizes; the National Book, American Book, National Book Critics Circle, and Rosenthal awards; and the Howells Medal.

Here are excerpts from a recent phone interview with the 74-year-old author, whose current novel, "Terrorist," is on shelves now.

Q. The core of your work has been novels and stories about white, middle-class life in small towns and suburban neighborhoods in the United States. You have chronicled American life by writing about everyday people in domestic situations and the social, sexual and religious issues that confront them. You have also ventured into writing books on science fiction and magical realism. Now here we are in the summer of 2006 with the release of your 22nd novel. The story line is a significant departure from what John Updike readers have come to expect. The new book, titled "Terrorist," is, in fact, part thriller. The main character is an 18-year-old, American-born high school student, half-Irish and half-Egyptian, who converted to Islam at age 11 and ultimately becomes a Muslim terrorist firmly entrenched on U.S. soil.

Before we explore the pages of this book, let's begin with a mention of the jacket photograph. It is quite intriguing. Did you provide any input into the design for the book's cover?

A. I thought this book needed a photograph for some reason. I didn't want to see an illustrated vision of my characters and I asked The New Yorker, they have quite a library or access to an archive of photographs, and I asked the art director if they had any things of shadowy men, vague representations of possibly sinister men, and they came up with a surprising number, maybe 20, of which I sent three down to Knopf and they picked the one that's on the jacket and I thought it was kind of brilliant, actually, because when you turn it upside down, you know you see that it's a reflection of a man walking along the street coming closer. Wrong side up, it looks like he's walking away from you, but in

fact, he's walking toward you.

Q. I guess the mirror image could serve as a metaphor for a world turned upside down since the course of events after Sept. 11, 2001.

If my research is correct, this is the first time in many years that you have gone on the road to promote one of your books. Why did you decide to do so at this time in your career?

A. I think both Knopf and I had hopes that maybe with a push, this book would sell better than most of my novels and, in fact, it has. I don't know to what extent my being out on the road, it probably doesn't hurt, but I'm not sure it helps greatly. However, the book had a lot of advance publicity and the apparent topic is certainly timely enough. I mean, just today (June 23) they've uncovered a nest of homegrown terrorists in Miami apparently, so it's topical.

Q. It certainly is. In fact, "Terrorist" will enter The New York Times best sellers fiction list in its first week, at No. 8.

Let's provide some background into the novel. The setting is a fictional New Jersey town, circa 2004. Your protagonist is É an angry and confused young man. Through the efforts of his spiritual imam at the local mosque and his supervisor at the furniture trucking company that employs him after graduation, Ahmad is carefully being groomed as a willing suicide bomber, primed to set off explosives inside the Lincoln Tunnel. What makes this novel unique is that you have chosen to write it from the perspective of the young terrorist, as a victim, himself. Could you elaborate on why you decided to craft the story this way?

A. Well, like everybody else, I'm interested in the phenomenon of suicide bombing and the wider phenomenon of Islamic hostility towards the U.S., towards the West in general. I just had the strange idea that I could empathize with the young American Muslim of a certain kind. I would not have attempted to describe a Palestinian terrorist from inside or an Iraqi insurgent, but I thought that a young American who was bewitched, you could say, by Islam, or to put it in a more kindly light, returned to Islam as a sort of base and a way of connecting with his own inner needs and with his father. Anyway, I thought I could animate that. It isn't so long ago that I remember being 18 and it's important that he not be younger or older really. Younger, it becomes truly a story of a helpless victim being imposed upon by others around him, being manipulated, and if he was much older he would be a more hardened case and in a way, less interesting, because he's merely an instrument of Islamic rage.

Q. It's my understanding that you originally conceived the main character to be a seminarian, as opposed to Islamic.

A. The idea of someone whose faith feels threatened by the world and everybody in it, kind of a devil, has been with me for a while. É But yes, you're right, I did imagine this

first as a, ... what do you call it when you are trying to be a priest and you're not a novitiate, you're a postulant, you're a seminarian. I didn't get very far with it because really it seemed like an idea that others might or maybe already have carried out better. But the notion of, yes, the world is kind of full of devils and drastically impure was readily transferred to Islam and the present.

Q. You were visiting friends in New York on Sept. 11, 2001, and were witness to the (World Trade Center) being bombed. I am going to presume that this factored into your decision to write this book.

A. I happened to be in Brooklyn Heights and seeing the first tower collapse quite unexpectedly, it gave me a sense of witness of having seen the, what can we call that, the first body blow of Islam's war on the United States. Yes, it gave me some handle on the overall mood. It didn't much help with the details of Ahmad's particular scheme but yes, it did make me feel somehow that I had a right to write this.

Q. The landscape is the fictional town of New Prospect, in northern New Jersey. It appears to have been modeled after the city of Paterson, which is only a short distance from New York. Can you tell me about your research and the decision on using Paterson?

A. Well, as you would know better than I, Paterson was actually the place that a number of these 9/11 terrorists used and lived in and congregated for a while, including Jersey City. I think both have sizeable Islamic populations, Arab-American populations, and it just seemed a very natural place to locate my hero, the protagonist. I didn't call it Paterson because once you call a city by its real name you get into all kinds of complications as far as accuracy and in fact, Paterson is rather bigger than I think New Prospect is in my mind's eye. But I've been to Paterson in connection with a novel called "In the Beauty of the Lilies" where the first chapter takes place in Paterson in 1910 and I had no opportunity to use the Paterson that I saw around me, but in this novel I was able to use a few impressions I gathered and my impressions were reinforced or amplified by a tour I took of northern Jersey in a car. My father is from Trenton, originally, so New Jersey has been a factor in my psyche for a long time.

Q. Your books have always been character driven and "Terrorist" is no exception. It can be said Ahmad is clearly struggling with his identity. Given you are not of his ethnicity, can you in some way identify with him and his inner conflicts?

A. I'm not of his ethnic mix nor was my upbringing very much like his. I had both a father and a very attentive mother. I was, if anything, parented almost too much, whereas he was underparented, I would say. Not only is his father absent, but his mother is half-absent and preoccupied with her own life, her own art, her own problems. But like any 18-year-old, even me at that age, you're kind of a seeker and kind of a rebel really. Ahmad, like me, is an obedient, relatively docile student who hangs out on the fringes. He's not a member of either of the major gangs in the high school. He only really makes any contact with the opposite sex when the girl is the aggressor and he is occupied by the religion and wants to keep on the straight path and he wants to keep pure in a radically

impure world.

Q. Indeed, there are many Americans that would certainly understand and identify with Ahmad's disgust over waste, overspending, sex, manner of dress and so on. It's no wonder that Ahmad walks with precision past his fellow high school students always sporting his crisp "white" shirt.

A. Yes, he kind of invents a uniform for himself. The novel begins with his inner discourse on the high school around him and widens into a description of the city, itself. He isn't the only critic of American conditions now. Jack Levy, his guidance counselor is equally bleak really in what he sees around him but Ahmad has a religious vision on the one hand of things being correct and pure and orderly and what he sees instead is kind of a lawless, sinful, relatively godless America.

Q. And as an aside to Ahmad's inner conflicts and ultimate recruitment as a terrorist, the novel *É* presents a sad portrait on how contemporary America is being perceived in many parts of the world. If recent polls are to be believed, hatred for Americans is at an all-time high. Considering such a bleak picture, was it your intent to have the reader take a look in the mirror and consider what life might be like on the opposite side of the fence?

A. Yes, of course. The Arab belief of the U.S. as a godless, oversexed, racist society is a long cultural indictment that's been around for a while, of course. It's a long list and not so different from what many Americans say about their own country, the waste of it all, the kind of heedless consumption, even the size of restaurant portions and prevalence of overweight people, all that figures in. But that's more Ahmad, really. My own image of my country I hope is more balanced. Jack Levy, too, in a way is more balanced and kinder. Against all the harsh words spoken about American conditions, you could set the description of the high school commencement, which occurs sort of in the middle of the book and it's meant to be sort of a thrilling picture of a very ethnically mixed high school, yet the kids united in this moment of graduation and people are trying to make do. People are trying to make do with the cards that they're dealt so it's not entirely a negative portrait of even the less fortunate areas in the country.

Q. Have you read the Quran? Would you recommend that Americans read it?

A. Oh, I've read it. I haven't studied it. The Arab education, Muslim education, to a great extent, is reading and memorizing the Quran and I wouldn't urge that on Americans, but yes, I think it helps flesh out what we read in the newspapers every day, if you look into the Quran and see what it says and also what it does not say. It does not really urge suicide bombing. It speaks of the sacredness of life and in many respects the Quran echoes the Judaic-Christian beliefs in life and so on. It's not an easy book to read, but then the Bible, much of the Old Testament, is not an easy book to read, either.

Q. Given all the challenges that America faces today, most specifically, the threat of terrorism at our doorstep, do you have a sense of optimism for the future of the country, and how should we go about meeting these challenges?

A. Yes, in a word. I'm of an age now where I saw America meet the challenge of World War II and I saw it meet the longer challenge of the Cold War, in which there was a chance of nuclear holocaust and really with all respect to the real challenges of today, I think if we got through those, we can get through the present difficulty. The world is never going to be a tension- or violence-free place, so the United States, as the only superpower, so-called, can never disengage from involvements. Some of them may be ill-judged. Perhaps the Iraq intervention is ill-judged. It certainly hasn't gone the way it was painted three years ago. But, yes, I have great faith in the resilience and good sense of the American people and I have some faith in the good sense of the government but I wouldn't mind seeing a different bunch than now run the country after the next election.

Q. I would like us to move on to a separate topic apart from the book. It would not be unusual given your many years as a contributor/book critic for The New Yorker that from time to time a piece you have written might ruffle a few feathers among your peers. Case in point was a period in the late 1990s when you became involved in what became known as a literary war between you and the writer, Tom Wolfe, which also came to include the writers Norman Mailer and John Irving. It resulted in considerable mud slinging. For the record, what precipitated the feud?

A. I think if I felt any animosity toward Wolfe, it began when he wrote in the late '60s, a rather sassy and even cruel article about The New Yorker. I came from the other direction, I loved The New Yorker and thought it was a terrific magazine and Wolfe was saying it was a dull magazine run by a bunch of semi-invisible people. So I wasn't positioned to be a great admirer of Wolfe, although some of his writing is very admirable. You have to hand him that. ...

Wolfe has energy and also a kind of shrewdness, I mean, he does see things. He trained as an architect and he can describe furniture and what-not like crazy, but anyway, it was just my private opinion at that point. I was asked to review and reluctantly did review "A Man in Full," though it was, while not without merit, overlong and kind of steroidal, I mean it was bulked up. It was about a guy who was in great shape, in part, and the whole novel I thought was trying too hard. And another thing I didn't regard very well was an article he wrote telling other American novelists that they were navel gazers playing self-indulgent literary games. So I was one of the navel gazers. I guess I thought this was a very, I don't know, kind of vulgar and off-the-mark thing to say.

Q. John Irving came to the defense of both you and Norman Mailer.

A. Mailer had written independently of my review in The New Yorker. He'd written an even longer review in The New York Review of Books saying what a disappointment "A Man in Full" was. Irving, I don't know when he came in. He did not write a review, but he was somehow asked on radio, maybe Canadian radio, for an opinion which he freely gave. As I say, Wolfe had his talents and I did think that "A Man in Full" was a chore for me to read and I said so. I've since read "Bonfire of the Vanities" and must say it's a pretty good job. Had I read it before I reviewed "A Man in Full" I might have pitched my

opinions a little more kindly.

Q. I would like to discuss certain comments from the speech you delivered to booksellers and editors at the annual Book Expo America Convention in Washington, D.C., last month. You referenced The New York Times Magazine cover story, a 7,500-word manifesto (May 14) titled, "Scan This Book," by Kevin Kelly (a founding editor of "Wired Magazine"). You concurred with Kelly's premise that eventually there will be a digitization of all books into an online "universal library." In the same respect, you reminded the booksellers that they are the "salt of the book world" and the future digitization of books was a "grisly" scenario, one that would lead to readers treating books like music, downloading and cutting them into playlist-like "snippets." I particularly enjoyed your closing to the audience: "So booksellers, defend your lonely forts. Keep your edges dry. Your edges are our edges. For some of us, books are intrinsic to our sense of personal identity." From all that has been written, the speech was very well-received and resulted in a standing ovation.

A. Right, it was a wonderful piece last month in The New York Times on digitized information available on the Internet, on the Web. It was no great speech, really. I had to say something to the booksellers and I happened upon this striking article and read parts of it to the audience and made a few comments. I don't remember the standing ovation, actually. I remember that during the same program was Barack Obama, the senator from Illinois, and I think he might have gotten the standing ovation. He's a wonder, he's a really charismatic politician. I was honored to be on the same stage with him.

Q. Several articles appeared shortly thereafter, picking up on your comments. One article in particular that appeared in Time (May 31) was titled "Why John Updike Is So Wrong About Digitized Books" by Sean Wilsey. The author took an opposite approach and believes in the importance of book scanning. In your own estimation, do you believe that a writer's work will eventually not be protected?

A. Kelly, if you remember, kind of calls the copyright a capitalist device to insure the flow of revenues and he rejoices at the notion that copyrights will be rendered obsolete by the web and digitized access. "The End of Authorship," is what the article was called when it appeared back in The New York Times Book Review. You may have seen that. That's sort of what I cut down and refined a little bit but basically, I'm just echoing what he predicted, confidently predicted and while we speak, as you know as a writer, there's constant tension in publishing circles over the unrestricted free quotation of copyrighted work. And it's very hard to defend against because bloggers do all this informally and you know there may be changes in the air.

Q. Do you see any remedy or solution as to how this can be prevented?

A. No, I think for a while the copyright will be preserved and authors will still get a royalty on their books. But looking ahead in the future, I think fewer and fewer people will go into the writing game in the faith that they can make a living at it. I did that, and even when I was doing it, it was a fairly unusual hope to make a living by writing. Most

writers have got PhDs and are prepared to teach and write on the side. I thought you could manage, and it was true in my case, but not in other cases. But basically, I don't know what's going to happen to the so-called art of writing. One characteristic of text on the Web is that it's like a letter, it's written very fast, a letter from one to the other. It's a way that people can talk among themselves and the hope was with literature that it was more than talk, that it was carefully weighed and judged and like a painting in words. It was precise and had interesting qualities and I see that being dissolved away by the kind of discourse that the web encourages.

Q. What can we expect next from John Updike?

A. Well, as you can see, I'm still giving a few interviews but only a few now. I think the work has been done and it's time for me to move on. I have a collection of criticisms. You mentioned criticism. These things pile up and I have eight years' worth, which will make a fairly hefty book. I've already submitted it to Knopf and they are reading it now. I expect it will come out in 2007. Then by the rhythm I've set myself on, I should produce another novel and I confess I have no idea about that novel yet. I have to wait for the dust to settle on this last one.

Q. That being said, can we expect yet another thriller?

A. No, I don't think so! You try not to repeat yourself, at least two books in a row so it should be different from a thriller. Maybe I see some kind of a family saga, a long book full of dialogue and in the same family as "Couples" and "In the Beauty of the Lilies." But this is just the haziest kind of sense of what I ought to be thinking about.

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