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## Updike imagines a killer who may be victim himself

"Terrorist" departs from the novelist's norm.

By John Esposito  
For The Inquirer

John Updike is among America's most acclaimed authors and the recipient of two Pulitzer awards. With a precise, highly individual approach and subtle realism, his works have chronicled everyday people, middle-class suburban life, and the social, sexual and religious context of the times. Updike recently spoke with John Esposito about his current novel, "*Terrorist*."

**Question:** Your 22d novel, titled *Terrorist*, is part thriller and a departure from what Updike readers have come to expect. The protagonist, Ahmad Ashmawy Mulloy, 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. He is angry and confused. Through the efforts of his imam and a trucking company supervisor, he is groomed as a suicide bomber. The novel is unique because it is written from the perspective of the young terrorist, as a victim himself. Why did you craft the story this way?

**A:** I'm interested in the phenomenon of suicide bombing and the wider phenomenon of Islamic hostility toward the U.S., toward 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, 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.

**Q:** Ahmad is clearly struggling with his own identity. Can you identify with 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 parented almost too much, whereas he was under-parented. Not only is his father absent, but his mother is half absent and preoccupied with her own life. But like any 18-year old, you're kind of a seeker and rebel. Ahmad, like me, is an obedient, relatively docile student who hangs out on the fringes... not a member of either of the major gangs in the school. He only really makes any contact with the opposite sex when the girl is the aggressor... is occupied by the religion and wants to keep on the straight path and... keep pure in a radically impure

world.

**Q:** The novel supplies a more powerful dimension by presenting a sad portrait of how contemporary America is perceived in many parts of the world. Was it your intent to consider life 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. 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. But that's more Ahmad. My own image of my country I hope is more balanced.

**Q:** Given the challenges that America faces today, do you have a sense of optimism for the future?

**A:** Yes, in a word. I'm of an age now where I saw America meet the challenge of World War II and the longer challenge of the Cold War, in which there was a chance of nuclear holocaust, and 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. 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.

**Q:** What can we expect next from John Updike?

**A:** I have a collection of criticisms... 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:** 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. Maybe I see some kind of a family saga, a long book full of dialogue... But this is just the haziest kind of sense of what I ought to be thinking about.

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