

In Dreadful Times

By Peter Wolfe

Book Review:

Terrorist, by John Updike. Alfred A. Knopf, 2006.

When Gore Vidal dismissed John Updike as a middlebrow, he unknowingly touched the animating core of Updike's art—a love of the ordinary and the commonplace. Only someone content to be on a level with life could find so many surprises in it. Updike's policy of withholding judgment can even endow the heretofore unrevealed with mythic power.

This explains why his novels often shock us. *Gertrude and Claudius* (1999) unfolds in the Danish court of 12th-century Elsinore. In this prequel to *Hamlet*, Shakespeare's moody, mocking prince appears only on the last page, where he makes one brief statement. Another surprise: His mother, Gertrude, has many of the same traits of a modern-day feminist heroine. Irked that her welfare was forgotten in the dynastic arrangement that yoked her to Denmark's future king, she feels "like a submissive female pressed between the fires of the nursery and those of the kitchen."

Her illicit bond with Claudius, her husband's brother, has deep roots in Updike. Adultery dominates his first major novel, *Couples* (1968). It had appeared in the early stories featuring the hopeful young marrieds, Richard and Joan Maple, who are trying to launch themselves professionally and socially in the "silver town" of New York. This staple of Updike's art recurs in *Villages* (2004), a work built around a retired software executive who, like Updike, another Pennsylvania-born only child, will sire four kids en route to Boston via New York City. In *Toward the End of Time* (1997) and *Bech at Bay* (1998), the illicit sex cuts across generations, as it does in *Terrorist*.

Through it all, Updike remains honest about the surge and ferocity of sex while also viewing it from the harsh, unforgiving

standpoint of his boyhood Lutheranism. This standpoint isn't always safe. A source of joy and uplift, religion, like sex in Updike, can wreck lives. The wreckage takes place quickly in *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996), the first chapters of which show a minister losing his faith, forsaking the pulpit, and, after failing as a door-to-door encyclopedia salesman, dying. The church militant will figure even more brutally in the death of Clarence Wilmot's grandson 80 years later, in a Colorado commune run by a fundamentalist fanatic.

The spiritual anxiety driving *Terrorist*, more suitable to our post-9/11 age, stems from Islam, or, more accurately, the impact Islam has made on Ahmad Mulloy, the 18-year-old son of a free-spirited Irish-American nurse and an Egyptian exchange student who fled the nest when Ahmad was three. Having first studied Islam at age 11, Ahmad, who always wears a pristine white shirt and black stovepipe jeans, now embraces the faith with a driving, nearly rabid, passion.

Misapplied, this rigor can create suicide bombers, and Ahmad agrees to detonate four tons of explosives in the Lincoln Tunnel. This mission he embraces as a divine blessing. Though it won't kill as many infidels as did the 9/11 bombing of the World Trade Center, it will snarl New York's street traffic for months, in addition to lifting Ahmad's soul straight to Paradise.

We want to scathe Ahmad for taking on this mad mission. We wouldn't be alone. The man who assigns it to him usually calls him "Madman," and the young beauty he gets closest to in the book accuses him of having his "head up there in Arab Neverland." But, always ready to fault the snap judgment, Updike fits Ahmad's zealotry inside a broader cultural frame, where it looks less maniacal. General George Washington mounted his 1776 campaign in Ahmad's home state of New Jersey, the target of which was another "imperial overdog" who condemned Washington's hit-and-run battle tactics as a violation of fair play.

The similarities between these tactics and those used by today's jihadists give us pause. Ahmad's rebellion is more typically American than it looks. The school he's seen graduating from in the early going is called Central High. Like Updike's best-known

character, Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, this track star and truck driver defines himself by motion. Again following Rabbit, the events of the novel align Ahmad with people he feels alienated from.

For instance, he discovered Islam at the same age that Jack Cohen, his Jewish high-school guidance counselor, gave up playing the violin. Then, Ahmad's mixed blood invokes that of the son Cohen had with his Lutheran-born wife. Another expression of the oneness of creation comes forth in the mosque where Ahmad learns the Qur'an. The makeshift mosque occupies the storey above a "dusty-windowed old pawn shop . . . [and] Chinese laundry," which once sited a dance studio, suggesting the same kind of rhythmical bonding of life's far-flung elements celebrated in W. B. Yeats' "Among School Children."

Ahmad stands light years away from that celebratory ideal. His anger over America's recent unraveling makes good sense. Once a thriving industrial center, his hometown has dwindled into a "Third World Jungle," with its slummy houses, shabby, cracked streets littered with fast-food trash, and grimy, boarded-up factories. His nation's leaders have been ignoring these depredations in order to tout the virtues of consumerism and corporate greed. Ahmad might well fume and fret.

But his zealotry is misguided. He needs to develop tolerance for a flawed humanity trapped in the same moral soup as he. His father's bolt from the family deprived the boy of the protection, authority, and control associated with fatherhood. And though Jack Cohen's job as a guidance counselor means little in a world whose leaders have shrugged off accountability, this tired, wheezing 63-year-old becomes the father figure who could stabilize Ahmad.

A key moment in *Terrorist* finds Ahmad in church. And though the boy also reads and discusses tons of Islamic writ, he inhabits a world at odds with divine love. Sex provides some warmth and connection, even though all the erotic bonds in the novel violate barriers imposed by race, religion, marriage, or the generational gap. Imperfect creatures, we're condemned to love each other imperfectly. Let no one scowl at the forbidden intimacies formed in

the book. Because of them, a train of heavy losses gives way to a hint of redemption.

Terrorist is a coming-of-age story masterfully shaped to the needs of our dreadful times. Using more plot structure and narrative drive than is usual for Updike, it's polished, profound, and up-to-date without conceding to slickness, solemnity, or the riffs of the pop-trendy. Enriching its linear movement with moral complexity and psychological depth, it also gives five or six leading characters both the substance and the backstory to merit a novel of their own.

Read it. You may confront sooner than you think your neighborhood, your workplace, your face. Don't blame everything you see on the Taliban.