

JOHN UPDIKE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

TERRORIST



A NOVEL

"ONE
COMPELLING
AND
SURPRISING
RIDE."

—USA TODAY

John Updike

TERRORIST



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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Praise for *Terrorist*

"*Terrorist* leaves the reader ripping through the book to its finale, desperate to find out what happens. . . . Updike's most adventurous and accessible novel in decades." —*USA Today*

"The richest [novel] Updike has produced in some time."
—WILLIAM PRITCHARD, *Chicago Tribune*

"Updike's ability to get inside the mind of his Ahmad—to deliver the young man's devotion as well as his fear, uncertainty, and malleable innocence—is what renders the novel credible and sometimes wrenching in its authenticity."

—GAIL CALDWELL, *The Boston Globe*

"The most satisfactory elements in *Terrorist* are those that remind us that no amount of special pleading can set us free of history, no matter how oblivious and unresponsive to it we may be. And that history, in disposing of empires, admits of no innocents and spares no one."

—*The New York Times Book Review*

"*Terrorist's* pages are scattered with dozens of stylistic gems. . . . What's most welcome is the page-turning pace the book sets right from the start. . . . We go along for this ride with a keen taste of what it takes to become the driver."

—*Chicago Sun-Times*

"*Terrorist* burrows beneath the surfaces of American popular culture, which Updike traverses so well, to truths worth remembering."

—*The Philadelphia Inquirer*

“Ripped from the headlines doesn’t begin to describe Updike’s latest, a . . . novelization of the last five years’ news reports on the dangers of home-grown terror that packs a gut punch. . . . So smooth is Updike in putting his grotesques through their paces—effortlessly putting them in each other’s orbits—that his contempt for them enhances rather than spoils the novel.”
—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Swift, sinewy, and stylish . . . In the hands of a lesser writer, such a risky topic and premise easily could have come across as presumptuous. . . . This marvelous novel can be accurately labeled as a 9/11 novel, but it deserves also the label of masterpiece for its carefully nuanced building up of the psychology of those who traffic in terrorism. Timely and topical, poised and passionate, it is a high mark in Updike’s career.”
—*Booklist* (starred review)

“Intriguing . . . Updike continues to entice, provoke and astonish.”
—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Marvelous writing and philosophical cogency.”
—*Entertainment Weekly*

“There are blinking signs to hold a thriller-fan’s attention and echoes of his other books for readers whose tastes run more uphill than to resolutions. . . . This is a historical novel of the present moment, the epoch after 9/11, and the life and death issues of the thriller’s plot entail our lives, too.”
—*Houston Chronicle*

"*Terrorist* is a wonderfully sharp work. Part extreme coming-of-age story, part thriller, it is carefully plotted, articulate, and fortified with good writing. But it also has an old-fashioned willingness to make the great problems of the day personal, human-scale, and funny, and it is for this reason that *Terrorist* is a book to admire and be entertained by at once."

—*Esquire*

"*Terrorist* . . . is rich in scenes . . . of arresting brilliance, and sucks the reader into a gripping and suspenseful story."

—*The New York Review of Books*

"*Terrorist* . . . is vivid and compelling. It shows what fiction can do with a subject that seems talked out. Through its access to the interior life and its ability to create empathy, *Terrorist* takes us inside its subjects, enabling us to see Islamic fundamentalism and American decay in personal, immediate ways. . . . A novelist, ultimately, is superfluous if he cannot tell us something about our current and changing world, and in *Terrorist* Updike does just that."

—*The News & Observer* (Raleigh, North Carolina)

"[*Terrorist*] is the best late novel from this American master, opening up a whole new intellectual territory for Updike to explore."

—*The Independent* (London)

"This is a work of considerable distinction. Updike remains one of contemporary literature's most enviable stylists, the lucid economy of his prose often disguising, but never betraying, the remarkable complexity of his thought."

—*The Guardian* (London)

Also by John Updike

POEMS

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NOVELS

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MEMOIRS

Self-Consciousness (1989)

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*And now, O Lord, please take my life from me,
for it is better for me to die than to live.*

*And the Lord said, "Is it right for you to be
angry?"* —Jonah 4:3-4

*Disbelief is more resistant than faith because it is
sustained by the senses.*

—GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ,
Of Love and Other Demons

TERRORIST

I

DEVILS, Ahmad thinks. *These devils seek to take away my God.* All day long, at Central High School, girls sway and sneer and expose their soft bodies and alluring hair. Their bare bellies, adorned with shining navel studs and low-down purple tattoos, ask, *What else is there to see?* Boys strut and saunter along and look dead-eyed, indicating with their edgy killer gestures and careless scornful laughs that this world is all there is—a noisy varnished hall lined with metal lockers and having at its end a blank wall desecrated by graffiti and roller-painted over so often it feels to be coming closer by millimeters.

The teachers, weak Christians and nonobservant Jews, make a show of teaching virtue and righteous self-restraint, but their shifty eyes and hollow voices betray their lack of belief. They are paid to say these things, by the city of New Prospect and the state of New Jersey. They lack true faith; they are not on the Straight Path; they are unclean. Ahmad and the two thousand other students can see them scuttling

after school into their cars on the crackling, trash-speckled parking lot like pale crabs or dark ones restored to their shells, and they are men and women like any others, full of lust and fear and infatuation with things that can be bought. Infidels, they think safety lies in accumulation of the things of this world, and in the corrupting diversions of the television set. They are slaves to images, false ones of happiness and affluence. But even true images are sinful imitations of God, who can alone create. Relief at escaping their students unscathed for another day makes the teachers' chatter of farewell in the halls and on the parking lot too loud, like the rising excitement of drunks. The teachers revel when they are away from the school. Some have the pink lids and bad breaths and puffy bodies of those who habitually drink too much. Some get divorces; some live with others unmarried. Their lives away from the school are disorderly and wanton and self-indulgent. They are paid to instill virtue and democratic values by the state government down in Trenton, and that Satanic government farther down, in Washington, but the values they believe in are Godless: biology and chemistry and physics. On the facts and formulas of these their false voices firmly rest, ringing out into the classroom. They say that all comes out of merciless blind atoms, which cause the cold weight of iron, the transparency of glass, the stillness of clay, the agitation of flesh. Electrons pour through copper threads and computer gates and the air itself when stirred to lightning by the interaction of water droplets. Only what we can measure and deduce from measurement is true. The rest is the passing dream that we call our selves.

Ahmad is eighteen. This is early April; again green sneaks, seed by seed, into the drab city's earthy crevices. He looks down from his new height and thinks that to the insects

unseen in the grass he would be, if they had a consciousness like his, God. In the year past he has grown three inches, to six feet—more unseen materialist forces, working their will upon him. He will not grow any taller, he thinks, in this life or the next. *If there is a next*, an inner devil murmurs. What evidence beyond the Prophet's blazing and divinely inspired words proves that there is a next? Where would it be hidden? Who would forever stoke Hell's boilers? What infinite source of energy would maintain opulent Eden, feeding its dark-eyed houris, swelling its heavy-hanging fruits, renewing the streams and splashing fountains in which God, as described in the ninth sura of the Qur'an, takes eternal good pleasure? What of the second law of thermodynamics?

The deaths of insects and worms, their bodies so quickly absorbed by earth and weeds and road tar, devilishly strive to tell Ahmad that his own death will be just as small and final. Walking to school, he has noticed a sign, a spiral traced on the pavement in luminous ichor, angelic slime from the body of some low creature, a worm or snail of which only this trace remains. Where was the creature going, its path spiralling inward to no purpose? If it was seeking to remove itself from the hot sidewalk that was roasting it to death as the burning sun beat down, it failed and moved in fatal circles. But no little worm-body was left at the spiral's center.

So where did that body fly to? Perhaps it was snatched up by God and taken straight to Heaven. Ahmad's teacher, Shaikh Rashid, the imam at the mosque upstairs at 2781½ West Main Street, tells him that according to the sacred tradition of the Hadith such things happen: the Messenger, riding the winged white horse Buraq, was guided through the seven heavens by the angel Gabriel to a certain place, where he prayed with Jesus, Moses, and Abraham before returning

to Earth, to become the last of the prophets, the ultimate one. His adventures that day are proved by the hoofprint, sharp and clear, that Buraq left on the Rock beneath the sacred Dome in the center of Al-Quds, called Jerusalem by the infidels and Zionists, whose torments in the furnaces of Jahannan are well described in the seventh and eleventh and fiftieth of the suras of the Book of Books.

Shaikh Rashid recites with great beauty of pronunciation the one hundred fourth sura, concerning Hutama, the Crushing Fire:

*And who shall teach thee what the Crushing Fire is?
It is God's kindled fire,
Which shall mount above the hearts of the damned;
It shall verily rise over them like a vault,
On outstretched columns.*

When Ahmad seeks to extract from the images in the Qur'an's Arabic—the outstretched columns, *fī 'amadin mumaddada*, and the vault high above the hearts of those huddled in terror and straining to see into the towering mist of white heat, *nāru 'l-lābi 'l-mūqada*—some hint of the Merciful's relenting at some point in time, and calling a halt to Hutama, the imam casts down his eyes, which are an unexpectedly pale gray, as milky and elusive as a kafir woman's, and says that these visionary descriptions by the Prophet are figurative. They are truly about the burning misery of separation from God and the scorching of our remorse for our sins against His commands. But Ahmad does not like Shaikh Rashid's voice when he says this. It reminds him of the unconvincing voices of his teachers at Central High. He hears Satan's undertone in it, a denying voice within an affirming voice. The Prophet meant physical fire when he

preached unforgiving fire; Mohammed could not proclaim the fact of eternal fire too often.

Shaikh Rashid is not much older than Ahmad—perhaps ten years, perhaps twenty. He has few wrinkles in the white skin of his face. He is diffident though precise in his movements. In the years by which he is older, the world has weakened him. When the murmuring of the devils gnawing within him tinges the imam's voice, Ahmad feels in his own self a desire to rise up and crush him, as God roasted that poor worm at the center of the spiral. The student's faith exceeds the master's; it frightens Shaikh Rashid to be riding the winged white steed of Islam, its irresistible onrushing. He seeks to soften the Prophet's words, to make them blend with human reason, but they were not meant to blend: they invade our human softness like a sword. Allah is sublime beyond all particulars. There is no God but He, the Living, the Self-Subsistent; He is the light by which the sun looks black. He does not blend with our reason but makes our reason bow low, its forehead scraping the dust and bearing like Cain the mark of that dust. Mohammed was a mortal man but visited Paradise and consorted with the realities there. Our deeds and thoughts were written in the Prophet's consciousness in letters of gold, like the burning words of electrons that a computer creates of pixels as we tap the keyboard.

The halls of the high school smell of perfume and bodily exhalations, of chewing gum and impure cafeteria food, and of cloth—cotton and wool and the synthetic materials of running shoes, warmed by young flesh. Between classes there is a thunder of movement; the noise is stretched thin over a

violence beneath, barely restrained. Sometimes in the lull at the end of the school day, when the triumphant, jeering racket of departure has subsided and only the students doing extracurricular activities remain in the great building, Joryleen Grant comes up to Ahmad at his locker. He does track in the spring; she sings in the girls' glee club. As students go at Central High, they are "good." His religion keeps him from drugs and vice, though it also holds him rather aloof from his classmates and the studies on the curriculum. She is short and round and talks well in class, pleasing the teacher. There is an endearing self-confidence in how compactly her cocoa-brown roundnesses fill her clothes, which today are patched and sequinned jeans, worn pale where she sits, and a ribbed magenta shorty top both lower and higher than it should be. Blue plastic barrettes pull her glistening hair back as straight as it will go; the plump edge of her right ear holds along its crimp a row of little silver rings. She sings in assembly programs, songs of Jesus or sexual longing, both topics abhorrent to Ahmad. Yet he is pleased that she notices him, coming up to him now and then like a tongue testing a sensitive tooth.

"Cheer up, Ahmad," she teases him. "Things can't be so bad." She rolls her half-bare shoulder, lifting it as if to shrug, to show she is being playful.

"They're not bad," he says. "I'm not sad," he tells her. His long body tingles under his clothes—white shirt, narrow-legged black jeans—from the shower after track practice.

"You're looking way serious," she tells him. "You should learn to smile more."

"Why? Why should I, Joryleen?"

"People will like you more."

"I don't care about that. I don't want to be liked."

"You care," she tells him. "Everybody cares."

"*You* care," he tells her, sneering down at her from his recently acquired height. The tops of her breasts push up like great blisters in the scoop neck of the indecent top that at its other hem exposes the fat of her belly and the contour of her deep navel. He pictures her smooth body, darker than caramel but paler than chocolate, roasting in that vault of flames and being scorched into blisters; he experiences a shiver of pity, since she is trying to be nice to him, in accordance with an idea she has of herself. "Little Miss Popular," he says scornfully.

This wounds her, and she turns away, her thick books to take home pushing up at her breasts, making the crease between them deep. "Fuck you, Ahmad," she says, still with some gentleness, tentatively, her lower lip of its soft weight hanging loose a little. The saliva at the base of her gums sparks with reflected light from the overhead fluorescent tubes that keep the hall safely bright. To rescue the exchange, though she has turned to end it, Joryleen adds, "You didn't care, you wouldn't pretty yourself up with a clean white shirt every day, like some preacher. How's your mother stand doing all that ironing?"

He doesn't deign to explain that this considered outfit sends out a non-combatant message, avoiding both blue, the color of the Rebels, the African-American gang in Central High, and red, the color always worn, if only in a belt or headband, by the Diabolos, the Hispanic gang. Nor does he tell her that his mother rarely irons, for she is a nurse's aide at the Saint Francis Community Hospital and a spare-time painter who sees her son often for less than one hour in twenty-four. His shirts come back stiffened by cardboard from the cleaners, whose bills he pays out of the money he