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Editors' Picks



THE END OF INNOCENCE

Tales of Terror After 9/11

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A I-Qaeda's attacks on New York's World Trade Center on 11th September 2001 sent seismic reverberations through the geopolitical bedrock of the nascent twenty-first century. Within a month, the White House had established the Office of Homeland Security. In July 2002, President Bush proposed the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), a department which would bring together 22 entities with critical homeland security missions, and just four months later, in November, the DHS was established. According to the first *National Strategy for Homeland Security* (2002), the strategic objectives of this new Department (and, indeed, of the United States government) were the prevention of terrorist attacks within the United States, the reduction of America's vulnerability to terrorism, and the minimizing of damage incurred in, and maximizing of recovery from, attacks that actually occur.¹ Indeed, within just ten months of the attacks, more than 60,000 American troops had been deployed around the globe in the war on terrorism; security on American borders and in airports had been tightened considerably; vast quantities of resources had been pumped into the development and stockpiling of drugs to combat bioterrorism; and the United States had taken enormous measures in its campaign against the development and acquisition of weapons of mass destruction. According to a report

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1. *National Strategy for Homeland Security* (July 2002), pp. 3–5 <www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/nat_strat_hls.pdf>

by a group at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, one of the ways of successfully organizing against terrorism is with a 'national security paradigm [which] fosters aggressive, proactive intelligence gathering, presuming the threat before it arises, planning preventative action against suspected targets and taking anticipatory action'.² Clearly, such a paradigm has been instituted since the events of September 2001. The attacks, it seems, engendered a new world order and inaugurated a system of governance based on the pre-emption, prevention and anticipation of further terrorist plots.

Alongside this, the impact of the attacks on the literary imagination was, and continues to be, momentous. Despite Norman Mailer's recommendation to Jay McInerney to 'wait 10 years ... It will take that long for you to make sense of it' (ctd in Gray 2006), recent years have begun to see the creative reflex being exercised with increased confidence and self-assurance. Ignoring Mailer's advice, McInerney published his novel *the Good Life* in 2006, and it joined fictional treatments of the events such as Frédéric Beigbeder's *Windows on the World* (2004), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), Ken Kalfus's *a Disorder Peculiar to the Country* (2005), Patrick McGrath's *Ghost Town* (2005), Claire Messud's *the Emperor's Children* (2006) and, more recently, Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008). And although 9/11 novels and stories have begun to form a sub-genre of their own, they follow a pathway of literary response that can be traced back to the immediate aftermath of the World Trade Center's destruction. On 12th September the British writer Ian McEwan wrote of the confused but compelling horror of the events as they unfolded on the television in front of him. But even he was a late starter, for Paul Auster was only one of many writers who recorded their impressions on the day itself. Indeed, in the week after the attacks so many literary figures contributed commentary, consolatory, inflammatory or diagnostic pieces that by 20th September Sam Leith in London's *Daily Telegraph* could provide a summative overview of the literati's collective effort which not only included Auster,

2. A.B. Carter, J.M. Deutch, and P. Zelikow (1998) 'Catastrophic Terrorism: Elements of a National Policy' <<http://www.hks.harvard.edu/visions/publication/terrorism.htm>>.

McEwan and McInerney but also quoted Martin Amis, Blake Morrison and Jeanette Winterson. And by 30th September John Dugdale recorded in the *Times* that 'among the literary authors to have written about the World Trade Center bombing so far are Martin Amis, Peter Carey, Amitav Ghosh, David Grossman, Ian McEwan, Jay McInerney, Susan Sontag, John Updike and Jeanette Winterson', as well as Tom Clancy, Frederick Forsyth, Jonathan Franzen, Robert Harris, Philip Hensher and Rick Moody (Dugdale, 2001: 37).

While many of the initial reactions to the events of 11th September were notable for their uniquely subjective emphasis, with writers discussing what the attacks meant to them, to their art and to their writing, what many writers have also been integrating into their fiction has been the American response to the attacks: the perceived infringement of civil liberties, surveillance, the institution of a climate of fear, the renewed Cold War rhetoric of good versus evil, and the seemingly overnight proliferation of acronyms and governmental institutions and bodies with the primary strategic aim of waging a war on terror. For a number of writers, one of the most pressing issues to emerge from the terrorist attacks has not been the presiding impression of vulnerability to attack but the sense that the post-9/11 global environment is permeated by a sense of government-fanned fear. This is not necessarily a figment of the literary imagination. After all, one of the first (and much derided) announcements on the DHS's Ready.Gov website advised citizens to use duct tape and plastic sheeting to construct a home-made bunker in the event of a chemical terrorist attack.³ This came in the week before the United States invaded Iraq in a quest to disinter evasive weapons of mass destruction.

Sifting through the endless run of Homeland Security documents issued by the State Department and the Congressional Research Department, what is immediately striking is the extraordinarily pervasive rhetoric of fear. The *National Strategy for Homeland Security* lists its critical mission areas as intelligence and warning; border and transportation security; domestic counterterrorism; defence against catastrophic terrorism; and emergency

3. See: www.ready.gov/america/other/faqs.html

preparedness and response. The word 'vulnerability' appears frequently throughout the document, concurrent with lists of possible terrorist methods ranging from kidnaps, hijackings, shootings and 'conventional' bombing to biological, radiological, nuclear or cyber attacks.⁴ That such rhetoric occurs in a strategy document is somewhat understandable, although it would not be remiss to describe it as alarmist. But this kind of language, this thinking infected by fear, is something which has seeped into the socio-cultural landscape. Indeed, it has done so to such an extent that the raised terror alerts which are regularly announced by the global media seem to have engendered a heightened sense of reality, a reality so real that it borders on the surreal in its bamboozling capacity for inspiring terror. Thus the terror with which we are regularly confronted is not solely inspired by the militant acts of angry jihadists, but is also propagated by a global media machine and a network not of terrorist cells but governmental intelligence systems which file reams of individual data and track our every move with the omnipotent powers of surveillance. While the outgoing US administration and the DHS wage their war on the fuzzy, metaphorical target of 'terror', global citizens find themselves entrapped by another form of terror, gripped by the paranoia of those under constant surveillance.

This essay will examine three different literary responses to this culture of fear and the so-called 'war on terror'. It will also explore how various writers present the means whereby the rhetoric and the principles of pre-emption and anticipatory action have penetrated the global consciousness. Focusing primarily on Richard Flanagan's controversial novel, *the Unknown Terrorist* (2006), I will address the author's treatment of government surveillance and the infringement of civil liberties. I will discuss the role of the media in the new global environment of distrust and examine the means whereby he shows the media to distort reality to the extent that it becomes surreal. This is represented in the style of *The Unknown Terrorist*, which assumes a filmic aspect in its shifting perspectives, characterization, cut-

4. *National Strategy for Homeland Security* (July 2002), pp. 3-5. <www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/nat_strat_hls.pdf>.

ting and tracking. From here, the essay will move on to consider briefly John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006), which infiltrates the mind of a homegrown, would-be Islamic terrorist, Ahmad Ashmawy Mulloy, and explore Updike's fictional treatment of the DHS. Finally, I will turn my attention to Mohsin Hamid's *the Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), discussing the formal arrangement of this psychological thriller and the allegorical symmetries it presents in a narrative plotline which moves along in increasingly urgent anticipation of catastrophe.

While these three novels are but a nationally disparate sample of post 9/11 writing, they differ from the usual fare in that they are not steeped in the domestic, inward-looking dramas which many writers have emphasized in their treatment of the 2001 terrorist attacks in New York.⁵ Instead, each of these writers takes up the political rhetoric of homeland security and examines the effects of constitutionally-sanctioned surveillance and pre-emptive action upon the individual. Moreover, each of these novels is forthright in its didacticism, offering either angry rebukes to systems that stoke flames of paranoia and infringe civil liberties or, as in the case of Updike, biting parodies of agencies that seem cowardly and ineffectual in their countenance of possible attack. Finally, I will discuss how each of the novels deliberately plays with the genre of the suspense thriller, thereby moving away from the realism which has mostly characterized post 9/11 fiction, as a suitable alarmist narrative form for our paranoid, terror-infested global landscape.

The Australian writer Richard Flanagan makes fear of the state and its powers one of the central conceits of *The Unknown Terrorist*. Provocative from the outset, the novel is dedicated to David Hicks, the first Australian to be detained at Guantánamo Bay, and it centers on the story of a female stripper, hunted by the state and by the media for alleged terrorist offences. The novel opens in the wake of unsubstantiated reports of an attempted bombing at Sydney's Olympic Stadium, reports that are recycled

5. For a discussion of such texts see C. Morley (2008) 'Writing in the Wake of 9/11', in M. Halliwell and C. Morley (eds) *American Thought and Culture in the 21st Century*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 245–259.

on a continual news loop such that they become conflated with fact in spite of their possibly spurious source. Gina Davis, or 'The Doll' as she is known, finds herself the prey of a media and government hunt for an alleged terrorist after a one-night-stand with a stranger named Tariq. Caught on CCTV in the lobby of Tariq's apartment building, Davis is instantaneously catapulted into the public limelight as Tariq is suspected of being behind the possible bombing at the Homebush Stadium. In this way, presumed a threat before any threat has arisen, in the click of a button the Doll becomes an accomplice and her image proliferates across every aspect of the national media. Flanagan's novel is willfully polemical, warning of the exploitative capacities of a centrally controlled media, yet at the same time it skillfully demonstrates the means whereby the rhetoric of terror has infiltrated the everyday lives of ordinary individuals to the extent that reality takes the shape of a suspense film. Thus the novel is rooted in the mundane yet at times it seems to career into the realms of the hallucinatory surreal.

This dizzying aspect of the novel, whereby it moves quickly from a depiction of ordinary life to a pacy manhunt is, of course, designed to reflect the technological apparatuses that shadow the characters' existences. In this regard, the novel assumes the filmic qualities remarked upon by numerous reviewers.⁶ Moreover, as one moves from chapter to chapter, the novel offers the effect of moving from screen to screen, as if the reader were someone implicated in the voyeuristic activities described therein. With this in mind, Flanagan first offers a kind of scrambled preview of what is to come in a two-page overview which introduces the themes and foretells the death of the heroine. Thus Flanagan presents Christ as the first suicide bomber in his willing embrace of death to enable the future of the world to come; he unpicks Nietzsche's description of the dreamer as reality-inducing dynamite; and he describes Chopin's Nocturnes as the soundtrack which portends the Doll's demise. We then oversee a series of retrospective scenes

6. See, among many others, S. Kerr (2007) 'In the Terror House of Mirrors', *New York Review of Books*, 11 October; and Peter Conrad's review for *the Observer*, 'Days of Thunder Erupt Down Under' <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/apr/08/crimebooks.features>>.

from the Doll's life before moving into her present-day Saturday as she makes her way to the Chairman's Lounge, the strip joint at which she performs. From here, the camera eye focuses upon Richard Cody, a down-on-his-luck TV news reporter, and offers the same retrospective-type scenes before bringing him into the present and to his first encounter with the Doll. This back-and-forth-between-screens technique continues for the rest of the novel, with the introduction of secondary characters, and at times we are offered zoom shots, crane shots, flashbacks and flashforwards, and sometimes several camera angles spliced together at once to achieve the effect of experiencing multiple strands of visual and auditory information simultaneously.

The meshing of lives in this manner, flickering from one camera angle to another, is deliberately disorientating, with stories and frames of reference tumbling over into one another in messy entanglements. Shortly after we are first introduced to Cody, we find ourselves in a fly-on-the-wall position at a dinner party where he holds court on the subject of international terrorism and the question of the mandatory detainment of refugees. In his excitement and desire to attract the attentions of a female graphic designer at the party, Cody consciously begins 'inflating several stories he had heard of "dangerous Islamic types" who had been allowed into the country' (Flanagan, 2006: 28). When the subject moves on to terrorism, he finds himself

speaking about the end of innocence and the destruction of ordinary lives of good people, and somehow the fate of people killed by terrorist bombs and his demotion by Jerry Mendes and his rejection by the graphic designer were all one and the same, and all the wounds of the world were his. (Flanagan, 2006: 30)

The effect here is to present, in microcosm, the means whereby real stories and events become conflated with misinformation, personal hostilities and untruths. The implicit irony in Cody's speech is that these are the mechanisms which undo the lives of ordinary people, and this is the very method by which he will bring about a national witch hunt.

The parallels Flanagan implies are all too apparent and draw directly on ASIO (Australian Security Intelligence Office) direc-

tives, DHS press releases and the speeches of George W. Bush which both precede and defend military action in Afghanistan and Iraq.⁷ For instance, Cody's insistence that there is an 'irrational evil lurking out there' and his 'dark tales of terrible plots foiled, of the mass poisonings and bombings and gassings planned and, through vigilance, averted' (Flanagan, 2006: 32) mirror Bush's remarks in 2000:

When I was coming up, with what was a dangerous world, we knew exactly who they were. It was us versus them, and it was clear who the them were. Today we're not so sure who the they are, but we know they're there. (cited in Fitzgerald, 2002: 84)

After 9/11 the 'they' outlined here became cultural caricatures as the President went on to list what 'they' wished to attack, these again comprising a conflation of history and American ideology neatly packaged as freedom, civil democracy and the American way of life. In fact, Flanagan even has Cody discuss a lurking irrational evil as threatening Australian values. The list of potential disasters that might befall the ordinary Australian, according to Cody, reads much like the litany of possible strikes outlined in the DHS's *National Strategy for Homeland Security* and which

7. The Sydney-based Flanagan clearly has in mind the Australian Security Intelligence Office in his critique of the various governmental institutions which fan the flames of fear, not least because of a series of very highly publicized scandals associated with the office. For instance, shortly after the September 11 attacks the ASIO mistakenly raided the home of Bilal Daye and his wife, later admitting that the warrant on Daye was for a different address. The Kim Beazley and Ratih Hardjono investigation followed in 2004. And in 2005, visiting US citizen and peace activist Scott Parkin was detained and removed from Australia by the ASIO and later billed in excess of \$AU11,000 for the cost of his detention and removal. Similar negative assessments by the ASIO of Iraqi refugees Mohammed Sagar and Muhammad Faisal brought about their indefinite detention on the island of Nauru. More recently the office has been involved with the controversial case of Izzar ul-Haque, a suspected terror-camp trainee. The 2007 case collapsed when it was revealed that ASIO officers had engaged in improper conduct amounting to false imprisonment and kidnap during the investigation. It is widely speculated (though unproven) that the ASIO acted under pressure from the DHS in the case of Parkin who had given talks on the role of the US contractor Halliburton in the Iraq War.

are mentioned earlier in this essay. Cody's argument for the necessity of torture and the need for a new Geneva Convention paving the way for torture in a 'civilized fashion' is directly comparable to Donald Rumsfeld's remarks to reporters on 7th February 2002 in defence of the assertion of executive presidential power on the issue of torture at Guantánamo Bay: 'The reality is the set of facts that exist today with the Al Qaeda and the Taliban were not necessarily the set of facts that were considered when the Geneva Convention was fashioned' (cited in Cockburn, 2007).

The merging of this American military rhetoric with that of the Sydney media man is clearly not coincidental. Flanagan has in mind the most powerful Australian media mogul of them all in his depiction of the exploitative powers of print and TV news media and in Cody's self-appointed moral mission to reveal the true identity and motivations of terror-suspect number one, Gina Davis.⁸ At the heart of Flanagan's critique, however, as evidenced by the dedication of the novel and the claustrophobic surveillance effects of the narrative, is the collusion of government and media in their attrition of the privacy and civil liberties of the individual. From the moment that we encounter the Doll, she is undressed, probed and catalogued. As hazy video footage of her is unearthed, a narrative of her life is pieced together by the newsman anxious for a story and hell-bent on his moral mission to protect the nation. Similarly, the narrative trajectory progresses by offering the reader the story of the Doll's life, presenting a series of flashbacks that yield insights into her manifold identities. The great irony of Cody's rhetoric is that he ultimately obliterates the very thing he claims that he wants to protect: his exposé reveals the details of a woman's life to the national presses, simple and innocent actions and errors are inflated into monumentally dangerous exploits indicative of latent evil intent, and freedom and innocence are denied the terror suspect. In a resounding echo of Rumsfeld's description of the Guantánamo Bay inmates, the Doll 'does not have any rights' (cited in Cockburn, 2007).

8. The Australian-born press baron and owner of Fox News, Rupert Murdoch, was of course an ardent admirer of Rumsfeld and a supporter of the Bush Administration's direct response to terror threat.

While government- and media-fanned states of fear are key to the novel, Flanagan suggests that this is not necessarily something that is new and attributable to the post 9/11, post-Bali world. Rather, he sets his heroine in a long line of female victims—likening her to a suspected French female collaborator with the Germans in the Second World War and a bog woman drowned on suspicion of witchcraft—all of whom are ritually shorn of their hair and exposed for public ridicule.⁹ In each case, the woman's punishment is seen as necessary for public self-affirmation. And in *the Unknown Terrorist*, Gina Davis, or the Black Widow as she is known because of her strip performances with a veil, comes to realize that she needs to be a martyr so that society has something to measure itself against. The plot hatched by Cody and his terrorist-expert collaborators, therefore, is not the pursuit of truth but the construction of a narrative of fear. And so, in a meeting with the ASIO's counter-terrorism delegate, when a minor character confronts the officer with the possibility of error, he is quickly reprimanded:

Let's suppose we're wrong. ... and you know what? It's still important that the public know these bastards are out there. That this is going to happen here. And that they need people like us to stop it. It's important that the public know they have people like us looking over them. That's very important. I'm sure you can understand that. How bad would it look if we were wrong? What a victory for bin Laden's bastards that would be. People out there don't understand all the threats, all the issues, how we can have a war between good and evil happening here. ... the terrorists want to turn all our cities into Baghdad. It's bloody frightening, Tony, and people need to be frightened. And that's part of our job, too. (Flanagan, 2007: 271)

Flanagan claims that the inspiration for the novel came to him from 'everywhere ... the grabs of politicians and the sermons of shock jocks' (Flanagan, 2007: 325). Certainly the novel and its blatant critique of the ASIO and DHS is rooted in a deep anger against the manipulation of cultural consciousness by discourses of fear, evil and terror promulgated by such government offices and by global media corporations. Just as the fictional news channels juxtapose images of the 'evil' Davis in her Black Widow

9. Indeed, in this regard the novel much resembles its declared influence, Heinrich Böll's *the Lost Honour of Katharina Blum* (1974).

costume with shots of the blazing World Trade Center, the Bali bombings and Osama bin Laden to gather support for their own existence (especially so in the case of the various scandals associated with the ASIO), so the American media juxtaposed images of a severely damaged Ground Zero with report after report on the evil of bin Laden and his brainwashed band of terrorists.¹⁰ Alongside this were the recurrent tropes of the Bush administration, with the repetition of the word 'evil' (utilized to great effect by Flanagan) in his televised response to the attacks, and in later addresses his promise to capture bin Laden 'dead or alive' and to 'smoke out and pursue ... evil doers, those barbaric people'.¹¹ With its hyper-real CCTV-format narrative and its cast of innocent victims and cynical bureaucrats, Flanagan's angry, polemical novel is a warning that the global landscape may have changed but that this altered world in which we live is as much the product of those who supposedly watch over us with benign intent as it is of those who do not.

Flanagan's hyper-stimulated world of strippers and surveillance is something which John Updike addresses in his novel *Terrorist*, which takes us into the mind of a potential suicide bomber. Updike's young terrorist, Ahmad, rages against a world where sex is freely available and in which the common standards of decency have eroded:

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?* ... (Updike, 2006: 3)

Despite the negative critical commentary Updike has received regarding his depiction of the young Muslim, what is most interesting about the novel is the affinity Updike sketches between

10. See Douglas Kellner's *From 9/11 to Terror War: the Dangers of the Bush Legacy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), pp. 66–70, which makes the case that the public's sympathies were manipulated with the edited images in order to gain widespread support for the US's incursions into Afghanistan.

11. 'Statement by the President in his Address to the Nation' <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010911-16.html>>.

the terrorist 'other' and the American citizen.¹² Ahmad's voyeuristic disgust at perceived sexual flamboyance is not so different from the distaste of his antagonist—a sixty-something white male American school-teacher. Indeed, Updike goes one further by depicting a home-grown US-born potential terrorist. And, as Jonathan Raban has noted, by setting his novel in New Prospect, New Jersey, Updike observes that the cradle of jihad rests not in the Middle East but in the crumbling, peripheral and immigrant-laden cities of the West (Raban, 2006).

While certainly not as directly censorious as Flanagan, Updike seems to be making a rather deliberate, if subtle, point which acknowledges the complicity of the West in the propagation of the current state of fear which has engulfed the occidental consciousness. In this regard his depiction of the DHS throughout the novel is uncompromising. His beleaguered Secretary for Homeland Security, Secretary Haffenreffer, is clearly a reworked version of the first US Secretary for Homeland Security, Tom Ridge. After leaving the department, Ridge's proudest boast was that there were no attacks on American soil during his watch, and in Updike's book his fictional equivalent worries that a disaster on his patch will mean 'there'll be no sitting on fat-cat boards for me. No speaker's fees. No million-dollar advances on my memoirs' (Updike, 2006: 261). Similarly, while Haffenreffer is seen anxiously planning to raise the security code of the Mid-Atlantic region to the Orange level of alert, Ridge in fact raised it to Orange five times during his short two-year tenure. All in all, in fact, Updike presents the DHS as an utterly shambolic bureaucracy with little power or effect and wholly reliant on its informants in the prevention of terrorist activities. Indeed, Haffenreffer's adoring aide, the spinster Undersecretary for Women's Purses, Hermione Fogel, describes his day-to-day work as comprised mainly of thinking up 'worst-case scenarios' (Updike, 2006: 132). Whether lost in a nostalgic drift of Judy Garland and Kirk Douglas movies or preoccupied with his moderate earnings, the Secretary himself seems more

12. See, for instance, S. Abell (2006) 'John Updike's Simplifications', *the Times Literary Supplement*, <http://tls.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,25339-2286503,00.html>; and Michiko Kakutani (2006) 'John Updike's "Terrorist" Imagines a Homegrown Threat to Homeland Security', *New York Times* 8.

worried about his image and the negative portrayal of his office in the national media than he does about the possibility of a terrorist attack in New Jersey. When faced with the proposition that the majority of the populace do not know what a color change in alert levels means, he is nonplussed but unwilling to address the issue. The DHS Secretary, it seems, is as much in the dark regarding codes and alerts as the wider populace. Similarly, when considering the loopholes at airports and other ports of entry, the Secretary admits defeat in the face of the terrorists' will and can only charge his underlings to reprimand the 'underpaid watchdogs' who are 'defending democracy' in their daily vigilance of suitcase interiors. It is, after all, important that the Department is seen to be doing something.

Just as Flanagan draws comparisons between those who engage with terrorist activities and those who claim to defend the public from such atrocities, Updike outlines similarities between the followers of militant Islam and some of the actors in American ideology. For instance, Ahmad engages in a lengthy conversation on the nature of jihad and his heavenly rewards with the Lebanese-American (and possible CIA mole) Charlie Chehab in which the latter likens Osama bin Laden to George Washington and the mujahideen to the 1776 American revolutionaries. He attends a Christian service to hear a high-school friend sing and listens to an effusive pastor sermonize on salvation and Moses who led the chosen people out of slavery and yet was denied himself admission to the Promised Land. Later still, Jack Levy (the man who thwarts the terrorist plot) likens many of Ahmad's beliefs lifted from the Qur'an with the 'repulsive and ridiculous stuff in the Torah' (Updike, 2006: 295). When they discuss Sayyid Qutub's concept of *j-a hilliyya*, Levy describes it as 'sensible': 'I'll assign him as optional reading, if I live. I've signed up to teach a course in civics this semester' (Updike, 2006: 302). Throughout the book, Ahmad's faith in the Qur'an and his faith in God is set comparatively alongside American patriotism, secularism, Christianity and Judaism. This alignment seems deliberately designed to highlight the comparative elements of the American and the Muslim 'other', to show us how closely aligned both really are. Levy's pronouncement that he'll assign Qutub's *Milestones* as optional reading on his civics course

reinforces the sense, impressed at the outset by the mundane American setting, that this is now the reality of American identity; it is against this that post-Cold War Americans define themselves. And by choosing a jihadi foot-soldier born and raised in New Jersey, Updike seeks to make his terrorist a knowable and recognizable entity, an enemy of the state conceived and bred within it and who is not so unlike his adversaries.

This sense of a recognizable yet indeterminate enemy is the major strategy of Mohsin Hamid's *the Reluctant Fundamentalist* which plays with the traditional understanding of the term 'fundamentalism'. Narrated from the perspective of the Princeton-educated, Pakistan-born Changez, the novel deals with the fundamentals of management consultancy with its mesmerizing promise of rich rewards in return for the expediting of employee casualties in the pursuit of Mammon. Hamid turns the post-9/11 novel on its head, presenting us with a day-long monologue which relates the impact of the attacks on a non-American Muslim who has dedicated himself to an American way of life. Upon meeting an American stranger in a Lahore café, Changez (an apt name given his change of heart) engages the man in conversation and relates his experiences as a brilliant Ivy Leaguer in New Jersey, his time in Manhattan at Underwood Samson, and his love for an inscrutable American woman before his return to Pakistan after the attacks. The American is given neither name nor voice, he is silent throughout and his motivations (or those of Changez) are entirely unclear. If the loquacious Changez's intentions are unclear, then those of the quiet American are even more so. Why does he spend a day drinking tea in the company of a stranger? and why does he follow him down a dark alley after he learns that his guide is a mentor for dissident students who advocate anti-Western causes? Hamid elects for a pervasive indeterminacy in his characterization. The novel refuses the clarity of clearly defined 'good' guys and 'bad' guys sought by the West in the wake of 9/11. It offers only ambiguity.

As well as its evident didacticism, the novel is an exploration of the nature of symbolism and its implications for individuals.¹³

13. Though suffused with ambiguity, the novel is clearly didactic in terms of Hamid is intent upon offering a worldview from the East. For instance,

In relating his reaction to the September 11 attacks, Changez confesses to the American that he was overcome with the urge to smile, not because of any sympathies for the attackers but by the audacity of the symbolism—the strike of the militant East against the most powerful symbols of the West.

But at that moment, my thoughts were not with the *victims* of the attack—death on television moves me most when it is fictitious and happens to characters with whom I have built up relationships over multiple episodes—no, I was caught up in the *symbolism* of it all, the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees. (Hamid, 2007: 83)

The novel abounds with variations on this theme: Changez and the voiceless American are each symbols, the idealistic Erica (whose idealism which is truncated—like her name—in the face of disaster) is a symbol of her nation, and even the site of Changez's and Erica's coupling, Athens, is a symbol of the meeting of Eastern and Western cultures. Later in the novel, Changez eloquently observes the heightened symbolism in the wake of the attacks—the profusion of American flags throughout New York, the sudden sense of a national homeland, the uniformed generals addressing cameras in war rooms—and the invasion of words like 'duty' and 'honor' into media headlines. Indeed, the novel succeeds on a much more subtle level than *Terrorist* or *The Unknown Terrorist* insofar as it inhabits the consequences of 9/11, Afghanistan, Iraq and the US's changed relationship with the East. It offers no overt diatribes against government or parodies of its agencies but delicately illuminates

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his protagonists consider the injurious consequences of the US's failure to support Pakistan in the face of Indian aggression (indeed, this is analogous to Changez's relationship with Erica in terms of the pain she has the capacity to inflict when she withdraws her affections); Changez entreats the American to consider the fate of the nation constantly on the cusp of war and in which terrorist attacks are the norm. Changez even offers a mini tutorial on Pakistani customs and history. He reminds his companion of the beatings enduring by Pakistani cabdrivers in New York, the FBI raids on mosques and the detention of Muslim men throughout the nation after September 11. Indeed, this didacticism extends as far as a clunky injunction against stereotypes: 'It seems an obvious thing to say but you should not imagine that we Pakistanis are all potential terrorists, just as we should not imagine that you Americans are all undercover assassins' (Hamid, 2007: 209).

the landscape of the new world order and its effects on global citizens.

Changez's description of the September 11th attacks as a clash of symbols is far from unique. One of the most interesting early responses, for example, came from Martin Amis, who commented upon the figurative nature of the acts:

The Pentagon is a symbol, and the World Trade Center is, or was, a symbol, and an American passenger jet is also a symbol—of indigenous mobility and zest, and of the galaxy of glittering destinations ... It was well understood that an edifice so demonstrably comprised of concrete and steel would also become an unforgettable metaphor. (Amis, 2001: 4)

Furthermore, this emphasis on language and symbolism was not confined to the West. As Alex Houen has pointed out in *Terrorism and Modern Literature* (2002), Osama bin Laden also read the 11th September attacks figuratively. In extracted interviews and transcripts of television messages Bin Laden described the attacks as targeted at the 'icons of military and economic power' (Mir, 2001: 2); stating that it is 'thanks ... to God that what America is tasting now is only a copy of what we have tasted' (Gillan, 2001: 1). Indeed, according to Houen, on many levels September 11th 'amounted ... to a monumental collision of symbols, metaphors and shadowy figures' (Houen, 2002: 4).

In conclusion, one might argue that this invasion of symbols and metaphors, the stuff of fiction and nightmares, across contemporary global relations seems to have necessitated a change in narrative mode whereby a certain kind of surrealism has taken the place of a more traditional narrative realism. In December 2001, Don DeLillo wrote a piece for *Harpers* in which he described the events of the previous September. Noting that many people had described the attacks as 'unreal' or as akin to the stuff of Hollywood movies, he observed that when people describe something as 'unreal' what they really mean is that it is 'too real', a reality which is too visceral to be cogitated (DeLillo, 2001: 33). Reflecting Slavoj Žižek's thoughts on the changed nature of reality in the wake of the attacks, DeLillo identified an element of surrealism to the day, whereby many experienced the attacks in both real time and in TV time on the televisual news loop.

According to Žižek, the reality that settles into cultural consciousness in the aftermath of terrible trauma is of a different nature to that which preceded it and formulated our sense of identity and understanding of the world. He observes that 'the Real which returns has the status of a(nother) semblance: precisely because it is real, that is, on account of its excessive / traumatic character, we are unable to integrate into it our reality, and are therefore compelled to experience it as a nightmarish apparition' (Žižek, 2002: 19).

Each of the novels explored throughout this short essay deviates from the rules of realistic portrayal, and each, in different ways, is suffused with elements of the surreal. Each textual landscape is a space of impending doom, the imminent catastrophe that leapt out from newspaper headlines in the autumn of 2001. Flanagan's novel offers a filmic suspense thriller, with an innocent woman on the run from the ASIO and from the media. Her reality is presented in the fragments one might catch on a CCTV camera, her life a feverish montage. Updike, meanwhile, deviates from his usual narrative realism to indulge in some heavy plotting. *Terrorist* is the stuff of a seedy spy-thriller, saturated with sex, intrigue and insights into governmental offices. But it veers from the straight path of realism in its abundance of coincidences and improbabilities: the hero's wife happens to be the sister of a DHS Undersecretary, the would-be terrorist just happens to be in the right place to coincidentally bump into his resistor, and so on. And finally *the Reluctant Fundamentalist*, a psychological thriller, offers a hallucinatory day in Lahore in the company of an enchantingly pedantic storyteller and his American companion, both of whom seem poised to attack. In different ways, each of these writers has absorbed the rhetoric and the mechanisms of an ideologically construed notion of 'homeland' with its accompanying language of vulnerability, hijack, terror and prevention and channeled this into surreal fictions which feel oddly real. The final irony, therefore, is that Flanagan, Updike and Hamid experiment with formal realism precisely to reflect a very real post-traumatic cultural consciousness of paranoia and fear.¹⁴

14. The competition between the visual and the written, and the challenge to the author's imagination, were noted by authors and critics alike. See McIn-

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