



THE GOOD SON

by Michael Gruber

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A Conversation with Michael Gruber

This is your seventh novel and you have been praised for being able to write on a wide variety of subjects. In what ways does *The Good Son* represent your exploration into new territory as a writer?

I've never done a classic international intrigue novel before and I wanted to take a stab. I started thinking about this book five or so years back when the situation in Pakistan had not become what it is now. Today, *The Good Son* has a ripped-from-the-headlines feel to it that was not my original intent. I was thinking more of a modern version of *Kim*.

But now the novel appears more relevant than you expected?

Yes, the fate of the U.S. expedition in Afghanistan and our resistance to terrorism in general appears ever more dependent on the stability and goodwill of Pakistan. We are assured that the nuclear capabilities of Pakistan are secure, but we also know that the director of Pakistan's nuclear program was selling nuclear technology practically on the open market. We also know that the safeguards against corruption in that country are not all they should be (Pakistan stands toward the bottom of Transparency International's list of the most corrupt countries) and we have to take in faith that the people guarding nuclear material are tremendously unlike their compatriots with respect to corruption. My novel is a work of fiction, of course, but the events described in it seem a good deal more plausible now than they were when I thought them up.

You live in Seattle, yet write with such knowledge about Pakistan. Tell us about your research and how you were able to write characters that are part of the Islamic Jihad Movement.

The best way I've found to imagine a different place and culture is through novels written by writers from



that place and culture. I read a lot of fiction written by Pakistanis and Afghans, including, for example: *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini; *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Moth Smoke* by Mohsin Hamid; *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* by Daniyal Mueenuddin; and *The Pakistani Bride* and *The Ice-Candy Man* by Bapsi Sidhwa. Besides that, the Internet is a trove of information about different cultures. If you want to know what jihadists or Muslim women are thinking, it's all there on the web. Some sites I looked in on include muttaqun.com/ Muttaqun Online—for information about Islamic life in general and the religion; Khyber.org—for a view of Pashtun life; sufi-psychology.org—to get the Sufi take on the psychology of terrorism; forumpakistan.com—for contemporary desi lifestyles; and islamfortoday.com as a gateway to a discussion of Muslim women's issues. This tour d'horizon did not make me into any kind of expert, but did, I think, guard against the more obvious errors. What works on such information, finally, is sheer imagination.

In addition to your research, you also had inspiration for the book from a personal situation. Similar to the mother and son character in the book, your wife has been through the Jung Institute and your son was in the Navy. Can you talk about how your family life directly inspired these characters?

The idea for this book popped into my head during a time in 2004 when our son was with the military in Iraq and was just about to start SEAL training, and my wife was the head of a peace organization. Despite their differences they had and have a close relationship and I thought that odd connection was a good premise for a novel. My wife did train at the Jung Institute and although she is an artist and not a therapist, I thought that was a good thing to throw into the mix.

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Why did you decide to title the book *The Good Son*?

Because it's basically about mother-son relationships. The mother gets in trouble and "The Good Son" naturally wants to get her out of it.

What might you say to your current fans about the direction you are taking with this novel and what makes *The Good Son* similar or different from your body of work?

My work really has two main themes. One is thinking about the underlying nature of reality, the uncanny, religion, how we each decide what's real and what isn't. The other is deracination, or what happens when cultures interact, either in the heart of a particular person or as a function of the enormous increase in emigration that characterizes the modern world. *The Good Son* is just another take on what I started doing in *Tropic of Night*.

You're talking about what happens when cultures interact and the three major characters who narrate the book are multicultural. How are their diverse backgrounds important in understanding their view of reality?

Our view of reality is interpreted through culture and the signal fact about the current age is that cultures are in flux, through deracination, through mixing of populations with varying cultural baggage, and the globalization of culture. The symbol of this is that for the first time the president of the United States is a deracinated individual. Something new is happening in America and the world and I wanted to write about it. I also wanted to say something about cultural imperialism, the idea that the way we see the world is essentially real and the way that others see it is warped. We say, if only others would see the right way to do things—democracy, civil rights, equality of women, secular humanism,



whatever, all would be well. I thought it would be interesting to start from a different premise, to accept other realities as just as valid as our own. I wanted to do a little mindbending.

Though your work is fiction, your book can also serve to educate readers on America's present conflict with parts of the Islamic world. What political lessons or insights do you hope your readers will take away from the book?

The lesson for the American reader would be to suspend self-righteousness for a moment and to see the world through the eyes of the other.

***Booklist's* starred review of *The Good Son* says "if only governments were half as interested in the psychology of violence, maybe war itself might become a work of fiction." Do you think psychological insights could indeed get through to a terrorist?**

Yes, in that war of any kind (with the exception of literal defense against patent attack on the literal homeland) is a form of madness. Islamic terrorism, in particular, has nothing to do with the actual tenets of Islam. People in Muslim countries are literally driven mad by personal and social conditions and pursue terrorism as a result. The insanity on our side is more subtle and we don't see it as easily because we take it that our leaders are sane by definition. But they're not. The foreign policy of the United States has often been conducted with as much respect for reality as that presented by someone who thinks he's Jesus or Napoleon. But we're all inside that crazy fantasy, and accept it as the way things are.

How has the experience of writing *The Good Son* affected you as a person?

I read the news from South Asia and the Middle East with enough grains of salt to promote hypertension.

*In His Own
Words*



An Original Essay by the Author

“Consciousness, Culture, and Creativity: Writing *The Good Son*”

There's a note in my notebook from around three years ago that says: "Woman, peace worker, Jungian, kidnapped by terrorists, SEAL son tries to rescue her." I have a lot of notes like that, some of them get turned into novels and others don't. Most of them just pop into my head but this particular one came out of my life. At the time, my wife was an organizer in the Catholic Peace Movement at the beginning of the Iraq War and studied dreamwork with the Jungian-influenced Process Work Institute based in Zurich. Her son was in the Navy and about to embark on SEAL training, because he wanted to become a bomb disposal guy and the training is largely the same as it is for the SEALs. I thought it was an interesting situation, quite apart from the tension and terror in our house, the warrior son and the peacenik mother. After some years, with the young man safely back home from Iraq, I decided to turn the idea into a novel.

My fiction has two major themes. One is how culture influences our view of reality, especially in people who are the product of two very different cultures, deracinated people, if you will, and the other is the underlying nature of human consciousness, especially as that relates to what may be called the unseen world. Given the current world situation, I also wanted to place the characters in a context where they could explore our present conflict with parts of the Islamic world.

So I decided to make the mother eclectically religious, a Jungian, a Catholic, married to a Muslim and an



occasional and heterodox practitioner of that faith. The son would be the product of an upper-class Pakistani, raised in Lahore, and an American mother with a speckled past. And then I worked out a series of events that brought the boy into the jihad against the Russians in Afghanistan, because I wanted him to be not only an elite American soldier, but someone having deep contacts with mujahideen, someone who understood Islamic jihadism from the inside.

The problem with this basic story, man seeks captive mother, is that it wants to slide into the old melodramatic mold, where the hero is terribly good, and brave and noble, and the victim is innocent, and the villains are very evil indeed. Melodrama always arises from the unexamined assumptions of a culture; its purpose is to affirm those assumptions rather than prompt any deep examination of the culture's values, far less to penetrate them to the layers where the deeper feelings are engendered.

But one of the uses of fiction is to take the received wisdom of a writer's society and hold it up to a hard light, and so we have the imperfect hero, even the anti-hero, and the villain who inspires sympathy. What I've tried to do in *The Good Son* is a version of that effort. The society in which I am located is loosely known as the West. It is a liberal (in the original sense of the word) democracy, with a free-enterprise economy, the rule of law, equal rights, freedom of speech and religion, and is characterized (at least in its leadership) by a scientific worldview and, especially, an almost religious devotion to material progress. It further believes that these qualities have made it both powerful and rich. As members of this society, we naturally assume that it is inherently right, and that all rational human beings will aspire to live in such societies, and that the only reason

Behind the Novel

they do not is either a defect in the minds or education of people who live otherwise or the malign influence of wicked rulers. This assumption is called cultural imperialism, and it is very deep, even subconscious in most of us. How, we ask, can anyone not want to be rich in things? How can anyone not want freedom? And further, since all people are the same (another unexamined assumption), it is insulting to these all-the-same folks to believe they might want something different.

It is, however, an obvious fact that some people do want something different, and are willing to fight and die for it. Across the Islamic world, the *umma*, or community of believers, rejects the basic cultural assumptions of the West. The primary value here is not political freedom or material progress but submission to the will of God, as expressed in the Qur'an, in the sayings of the Prophet Mohammed, and in the codification of these writings in sharia law. Those who cherish such values look not ahead to material progress, but back in time, to an era when, they believe, the *umma* had attained a perfect relationship with God and His laws, the time of the Prophet and the "rightly guided" caliphs, when Islam was the most advanced and powerful culture on earth. Education or exposure to Western ways does not seem to have much of an effect on this way of seeing the world; quite the opposite in many cases. It is one of the horrible ironies of the 9/11 events that the leader of the attack was a man with an advanced degree in (what else?) urban planning.

Criticizing or condemning the political or psychological aspects of this view is beside the point. It is a real difference in consciousness, and since the relationship



of consciousness to culture is, in my view, at the core of any novel, I wanted to see what happened if I took this strange and alien consciousness seriously, on its own terms. In the book, this central theme is played out in two theaters: a struggle within the mind of the young soldier, and between the mother and the terrorist leader who holds her life in his hands. In the latter of these, I try to show what happens if we were to take the deep religious impulses of Islamic jihadism seriously, instead of treating them like a kind of nostalgic psychosis.

Good novels are supposed to make us look at ourselves and our culture through fresh eyes, and almost nothing does this as well as getting into the head of a character who shares not one of the assumptions on which we have constructed our own lives. (Of course, the actual way that novels do this is by packing all that sort of thing in what the author hopes is a ripping good yarn, and I have tried to do that as well.) In order to write this book I had to read a lot of material about Islam and its culture, and novels set in that culture, and the works of writers who thought that nothing I believed was true, and that death and murder were better than accepting a world that I was entirely at home in. I gained at least partial entry to a world that is, as one book I read has it, "lost in the sacred." The experience shook me; I hope *The Good Son* does the same for its readers.

Behind the Novel



Recommended Reading

Here are just some of the books I read in preparation for writing *The Good Son*. Each one of these books was eye-opening in its own way and added a layer of complexity in what I hope turned out to be a book that not only entertains but illuminates a subject about which I learned so much from my own reading.

Counseling and Psychotherapy with Arabs and Muslims

Marwan Dwairy

The case for believing that the psychology of people from traditional Muslim cultures is very different from what we understand the psyche to be in Western psychotherapy. The goals and practice of therapy are entirely different—assuming “they are just like us” leads not to understanding but to confusion and failure.

Afghan Guerilla Warfare: In the Words of the Mujaheddin Fighters

Ali Ahmad Jalali and Lester W. Grau

The anti-Russian jihad described through interviews with the men who fought the Soviet Union to a standstill. The best oral history of this war.

The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost

**Translated and Edited by Lester W. Grau
and Michael A. Gress**

The same conflict from the Soviet side, based on the after-action reports from Soviet commanders.



Killer Elite: The Inside Story of America's Most Secret Special Operations Team

Michael Smith

A nameless organization acting as the Army's private CIA. The unit Theo belonged to is based on these guys.

City of Sin and Splendour: Writings on Lahore

Edited by Bapsi Sidhwa

A collection of writings about the Punjabi city in which much of *The Good Son* takes place.

In Other Rooms, Other Wonders

Daniyal Mueenuddin

A wonderfully vivid evocation of modern Pakistani culture, told in linked stories.

Pashtun Tales

Aishe Ahmad and Roger Boase

If you want to understand a people, a good place to start is with the stories they tell about themselves, and the tales they tell their children. What the Pashtuns have instead of Snow White and Goldilocks.

Body of Secrets

James Banford

An anatomy of the supersecret National Security Agency, the people who track electronic signals worldwide. Why bin Laden can't use his cell phone.

Reading
Group
Gold



*Keep on
Reading*



Reading Group Questions

1. What role does America play in this novel? As a character, how does it influence the course of the story?
2. This novel introduces many different archetypal women—Gloria, Rashida, Cynthia, Sonia, and all the unnamed “black figures” that appear throughout. What are their main differences? Similarities? What do all of these women bring out in Theo?
3. In the beginning of the novel, we are presented with the image of a hawk swooping down and killing a pigeon. How is this image carried throughout the rest of the story, and what are some of its possible interpretations?
4. Throughout *The Good Son* we are shown many scenes of torture—the mujahideen torturing Sonia and the prisoners, the U.S. agents torturing Cynthia, and the many scenes of torture in Hell that we see through the dreams Sonia interprets. How do each of these kinds of persuasion tactics differ and what do they tell us about the people behind them?
5. How does this novel touch upon relevant current events? How does it relate to your experiences in the aftermath of 9/11?
6. What can we learn about the world—and ourselves—from Theo’s story? From Sonia’s?



7. Is there a moral to be taken from *The Good Son*?
8. The role of family is very important throughout Theo's life. Discuss his relationship with his father, mother, and women in general.
9. What do you think is the next chapter for Cynthia and Theo—do you think they will, in fact, work together? Would you have ended the book the same way the author did?

*Keep on
Reading*