

Book tells stories of when romance drives terrorism

BY ALEXANDER HEFFNER • Special to the Post-Dispatch | Posted: Sunday, October 30, 2011 12:00 am

"Terrorists in Love" tells the illuminating, if harrowing, real-life love stories of several Muslim extremists. From their sexual desires and liaisons to frustration with the backlash against these romantic fantasies, to mystical dreams and fiery verses summoning them to martyrdom, the book explores intimate sparks of Islamic fundamentalism.

Author Ken Ballen is president of Terror Free Tomorrow, a Washington-based nonprofit that investigates sources of extremism. For two decades, Ballen has fought terrorism both as a federal prosecutor and a congressional investigator.

"The fact that these jihadis talked to me is not unusual," he writes. "The fact that they revealed so much is. I am going to tell the stories ... in the same way the jihadis shared them with me — from their point of view and in their voice."

Ballen traveled across the Middle East, first to a kind of terrorist-rehabilitation center in Saudi Arabia and later to violence-stricken Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The outcome is a half-dozen portraits grounded in extensive interviews. Throughout the book, Ballen proves a clear and gifted chronicler. And for a counterterrorism expert, he is commendably dispassionate.

The most compelling chapter describes a fundamentalist's Romeo and Juliet love story. Abby, a young Saudi, is head over heels for beautiful Maryam. But when he is unable to afford a \$30,000 dowry to secure her hand, Maryam's father and brother sell her to a former military official who rapes her.

Abby decides he has no choice but to sacrifice his life for Allah so he can marry his love in paradise.

While Abby is captured before carrying out his mission, Maryam escapes her marriage to seek martyrdom and is never heard from again.

In "Terrorists in Love," we also meet Ahmad, a suicide detonator who survives to become genuinely pro-U.S., as well as Zddy, a Pakistani who trains terrorists while the U.S. pays for his faux loyalty, and Kamal, a millionaire's son whose discovery of his own homosexuality and the alienation that follows propel him to terrorist chat rooms.

The book is six extremists' personal accounts. As such, it would benefit from more explicit sourcing of the allies and enemies of these terrorists. Ballen's selection also is not representative of all extremists. Still, "Terrorists in Love" is a must-read that heightens our understanding.

Alexander Heffner has written for The Washington Post, The Boston Globe and Newsday.