

Visiting novelist tells why she chose to explore the life of a New Yorker recruited to become a suicide bomber

By Arthur Lightbourn

She can't prove it, but Masha Hamilton is pretty sure her phone was bugged after she visited a number of jihadist recruiting websites while doing research for her latest novel, *31 Hours*, the story of a young New Yorker who signs up to become a suicide bomber.

Hamilton lived in Moscow for five years as a foreign correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times* during the Gorbachev/Yeltsin era, "and our phone was bugged there too and recorded, so I know the sound that it makes."

Under the current atmosphere in America, faced with threats of terrorism, she added, it makes sense that her phone might be bugged "because I probably set off certain alarms, [until] they realized I was harmless."

For her book, she also drew on her knowledge of the Mideast where she previously worked as a correspondent for The Associated Press and gained insights into the mentality of terrorists.

We interviewed the critically-acclaimed novelist and now freelance journalist in a quiet corner of the Del Mar Marriott lobby.

The evening before she had read from her latest book and talked about her life at a "special evening" sponsored by the San Diego-based website StyleSubstanceSoul.com at The Book Works in the Flower Hill Promenade.

StyleSubstanceSoul encourages people to live lives of passion, compassion and action, which describes the 53-year-old Hamilton to a "T" as a writer, mom, and ardent supporter of world literacy.

31 Hours, a literary novel with elements of a thriller, covers the 31 hours before 21-year-old Jonas Meitzner, coached by Islamic radicals, is scheduled to strap on an explosive vest and head into the New York subway system for the final act of his life.

While the idealistic Jonas mulls over his decision, bolstering himself through prayer and ritualistic cleansing, novelist Hamilton interweaves multiple viewpoints of his potential victims and people who know and love Jonas.

The *Washington Post* selected *31 Hours* as one of the best novels of the year.

Hamilton lives in Brooklyn, New York, with her husband, a news editor for NBC and MSNBC, and their three children. In addition to writing novels (four so far) and taking on the occasional journalistic assignment, to make ends meet, she operates a bed and breakfast out of their home.

She began writing fiction 16 years ago when she decided to leave the grind and pressure of daily journalism.

Her first novel, *Staircase of a Thousand Steps*, was published in 2001, followed by *The Distance Between Us* in 2004 and *The Camel Bookmobile* in 2007.



Amy Krause, author Masha Hamilton, Lois Alter Mark, Susan Jensen. Krause, Mark, and Jensen are with the event sponsor: www.stylesubstancesoul.com.

She wrote the first draft of *31 Hours* in one month during a stay at an artists' colony, away from New York City and her family, in the Adirondacks.

"It was great," she recalled. "I was in a tiny room overlooking a calm, non-judgmental lake and I was able to pour through the first draft, which I think contributed to the driving force of the novel."

"While the first draft was my discovery of what was going to happen in the course of the book, the later drafts [which took an additional 18 months to complete] were more my explorations of various threads that are connected to the main story line."

During the revision process, she would, at times, write parts of her book while riding on the New York subway system, so much so that the subway takes on a life of its own in her book and becomes a character in itself.

Hamilton was born in Phoenix, Arizona, and grew up in Tucson, far from the subways of New York.

As she relates on her Website (www.mashahamilton.com), her first encounter with violent death came when she was 14 and a classmate was murdered in the Arizona desert.

Later, after earning a degree in semiotics (communications) from Brown University in 1979, and working as an Associated Press reporter on assignment in Indiana, she

befriended the family of Steve Judy, a young convicted murderer who was the first inmate scheduled for execution at the end of a nationwide death penalty moratorium. He had murdered and raped a young single mother and drowned her three young children in an Indiana creek.

Becoming privy to Steve Judy's personal life as seen through the eyes of his family, Hamilton found herself asking: Does being able to see both sides of a story make you more empathetic or perverse?

She attempts to address the issue in *31 Hours*.

"The goal for me was to write a book that would not make the would-be terrorist 'the other,' so distant and alien that we can dismiss because he's nothing like us and we can't understand him anyway; but, instead, to make the

would-be terrorist the young man next door."

In writing the book, she said she also had to think about spirituality and what does spirituality mean today to us if we have not been raised with the foundation of a religious institution and how do we find answers to questions in our hours of need.

"Jonas is not a religious fanatic," she said. "He's a searcher. He wants answers to questions."

"It was a risky book for me. It is probably the riskiest book that I've written in that sense. There were times when I thought, was it even fair to ask a reader to empathize with someone planning violence?"

Is it fair?

"I think it's necessary," she concluded.

It would have been much easier just to dismiss the idea, she added, but that approach is "not going to get us closer to understanding the situations that give rise to terrorism and how we can actually combat it."

31 Hours (Unbridled Books, 2009) is available at independent booksellers, Amazon, Borders, Barnes & Noble. For more information on Masha Hamilton, visit www.mashahamilton.com.

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