

The Translator Interviews the Author: Alex Adams on Torture and its Justifications

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Alex Adams is a writer, critic, musician and novelist who lives and works in the North East of England. He holds a PhD in Literature from the School of English Literature at the University of Newcastle. His critical work revolves around the literary, filmic and popular cultural representation of political torture. His most recent critical book, *How to Justify Torture: Inside the Ticking Bomb Scenario*, was released in 2019, and the Arabic translation was released by Takween publications in 2020. He has many academic articles and other critical work, and he is in the process of publishing a new critical book and fiction soon.

Iman Marouf: Dr. Alex Adams, we are so pleased to have you with us at the Takween platform for creative writing, to ask you some questions about your book *How to Justify Torture*, and to discuss your viewpoint on the issue of torture in particular.

You have introduced yourself on [your website](#) as a critical writer, and you say that you critique the literary, filmic and popular cultural representation of political torture. Can we talk about the role of cultural criticism based on reading literature and cultural representations such as cinema, theater, etc., and its use in understanding societal and intellectual transformations?

Alex Adams: Absolutely. I think cultural criticism has a really important and interesting role to play in social and political life, because it can help us to understand what is at stake in the way we make and circulate meaning. It can help us understand what we enjoy, and why we enjoy it, and it can enrich our understanding of the literature, films and TV we consume. As you say, at its best, cultural criticism can shed light on the relationships between discourse and power, it can give us insight into the power relationships between people that we may have taken for granted, and it can give us new ways of challenging or reshaping these relationships. For me, a writer like Edward Said – or indeed, the many of us who have followed in his formidable footsteps – uses literary criticism to reshape the ways that we understand what literature *is*. After reading Said, I couldn't look at the canon of English literature in the way that I had previously, because he'd made me realize that the exercise of British colonial power over the globe, and all of the violence that that entailed, could not be separated from the refined and beautiful works of art that were produced by writers working in the English language. He

made me realize that writing is not just a gentle pastime, but a deeply political activity that is central to the operation of power.

I think that in some ways the question of the ‘torture debate’ is a perfect example of this. When it comes to my own work, I like to think that what I have done is to make clear connections between the political violence that has shaped the world for at least the last twenty years (if not long before) and the popular culture that we in the West avidly consume. Culture is one of the major arenas in which large moral and political questions are debated, and with my work on torture I wanted to make very clear the ways in which the popular culture that many of us enjoy is also complicit in making us accept or even enjoy the way that our governments commit violence across the world. It was also important for me to try to give people a way to challenge the justifications for torture that we see presented to us again and again, because I think criticism is at its best when it can suggest solutions and not simply diagnose problems.

IM: Can you clarify the meaning of the ticking bomb scenario to those who are not familiar with this concept?

AA: The ticking bomb scenario is a very simple thought experiment. The question runs as follows: Imagine that a terrorist or criminal has hidden a bomb in a public place (a school, a hospital, a city centre plaza), and that you have captured this person. They refuse to tell you where the bomb is, or how to stop it. Would it be justified for you to torture this person until they told you how to stop the bomb? At its simplest, it is a choice: are you justified in using one form of violence to prevent another?

This is, for many people, a very persuasive argument. All of our intuitions about protecting innocent people and about punishing wrongdoers tell us that we should torture this person.

But, of course, it is an artificially clear-cut situation, in which torturing one guilty person will save hundreds or thousands of innocent people. Such situations, in which there is a clear choice between evils, never arise. But the scenario is emotionally powerful enough that it seems to make torture – a crime against humanity – seem not only the practical thing to do, but the morally right thing to do. In my book, I argue that this imaginary scenario is found very widely throughout Western culture, and that it serves as a way of justifying entire systems of torture.

IM: How can anyone detect and combat tricks in this scenario, and avoid falling into its trap?

AA: It can be very difficult to challenge this thought experiment, because you can’t simply say that you would refuse to torture the criminal. Engaging with the scenario on its own terms, and saying ‘no’ when the question clearly requires you to say ‘yes’, places you in a terrible position: it makes you look as though your abstract moral principles are worth more to you than the real lives of all the innocent victims of the bomb. This is one of the ways that the

thought experiment is so clever. It not only serves to justify torture, but makes opponents of torture seem foolish, cowardly, and immoral.

It's also a bit of a red herring to point out that it is unrealistic. Anybody who frames the ticking bomb scenario can describe it in any number of increasingly more realistic ways, or alter details until it seems realistic. But thought experiments aren't really supposed to be realistic: they're ways of making general arguments, so the moral point of the question survives any attack on the details of however it is framed, unrealistic or not.

The way to challenge the scenario, and what I have attempted to do in my book, is to refuse to answer the question that the ticking bomb scenario asks us. There is no good answer to the question, for the simple reason that it is not a good question. Instead, in my book I have attempted to deconstruct it and to show that it is actually a trick question composed of lots of reactionary and fascist ideas.

When it comes to challenging the ticking bomb scenario, I often find that it is best to point out that torture is not a matter of dramatic one-off incidents. It is a matter of the systematic abuse of political power to oppress and victimize people. The ticking bomb scenario is a way of distracting us from this reality.

IM: Your book traces the first accounts that embodied the idea of torture. Do you think they made this practice acceptable for the public eye? Are there examples of literature that we did not expect to have such a role?

AA: Yes – I think that ticking bomb stories have pretty much always been about making torture seem acceptable. Quite often, they emerge and circulate in societies facing political turmoil, where state authorities are known to be committing torture. The story has the function of saying, 'yes, torture is happening, but it is being done to keep you safe'. This is not to say that novelists or filmmakers are 'working for the state' – simply that people who sympathize with the aims of torturing states are more likely to create or circulate these ideas.

In some ways, many of the earliest ticking bomb stories emerge from quite predictable contexts. For example, Jean Lartéguy was a French ex-paratrooper who wrote his novels *The Centurions* and *The Pretorians* from the perspective of French paratroopers in Algeria in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the French colonial authorities were committing widespread torture as a way of combatting the nationalist forces. Unsurprisingly, his novels address the theme of torture by saying that, although it was horrific, it was necessary if the French wanted to retain power over Algeria. Lartéguy was proven wrong when France abandoned Algeria, but his ideas about torture have remained with us.

His novels are often credited with being the ‘origin’ of the ticking bomb scenario, so I was surprised to find a ticking bomb scenario in *The Conquerors*. This is a novel by André Malraux, another French colonial writer, written in 1928, over thirty years prior to *The Centurions*. The ticking bomb scenario is often thought of as something that came into being at the time of the twentieth century decolonizations, so it is interesting to see that it has a longer history than we may have thought.

IM: In one way or another, it was interesting to notice the titles mentioned in the book, of the many well-known action movies and thrillers of the 1980s and 1990s before 9/11. How were you able to extract the scenes that serve the scenario within these works?

AA: One of the strange things that happened to me when I was writing this book was that I started to see the ticking bomb scenario everywhere. Initially I thought that I was imagining it, but after a while I realized that there actually *are* torture scenes in a frankly enormous amount of movies and TV. It’s not always a matter of somebody being chained up and having terrifying implements like chainsaws or drills pointed at their sensitive parts. Quite often the torture scenes are played for laughs, or they are quite short scenes that aren’t exploited for lots of dramatic horror. It surprised me to see that fun action films like *Commando* had scenes where villains are interrogated for information and then thrown off cliffs or whatever. When I’d watched that scene in *Commando* in my youth I hadn’t recognized that it was a torture scene, but it is. There are loads of things like this, in films that aren’t supposed to be horrific or dark, and this shows how routine and ordinary torture is in many of our favourite forms of culture.

IM: How does torture practiced by legal authority align with the themes of vigilantism and fatherly masculine protection (imposing punishment without waiting for the rule of law) that are often at work in much of these films?

AA: Again, *Commando* is a good example here, because the hero in that film is chasing down a group of criminals in order to rescue his daughter. We see similar things a great deal, in films like *Death Wish*, *Dirty Harry* and *Taken*. This is another way that the ticking bomb scenario is so clever and flexible. It is not always about a bomb in a café: perhaps it is your daughter who has been kidnapped, and you have to torture someone in order to rescue her.

Now, nobody could reasonably claim that you shouldn’t try to save your daughter. Of course you should. But in these films, this clear moral duty is blurred into a justification for torture. And in many of these films, the law (which prohibits torture) is shown as something that gets in the way of ‘real’ justice. So ideas about vigilantism and fatherly protectivity are blurred into justifications for state violence.

There is a lot happening here, all at once. Put simply, the ticking bomb scenario works by pushing a lot of our buttons at the same time. We want to rescue our daughter. We want to protect the innocent, and we want to punish the guilty. We think that the law gets in the way.

All of this is very powerful stuff, and when it all overlaps with the clock ticking down, the effect is that we are tempted to agree that torture might be the way out. These narratives all claim that torture will work, so we are prompted to believe that it is a magic solution to complicated, terrifying problems.

IM: Batman, superman, and other similar comics are the favorites of our children. What about media that are aimed at children?

AA: There are two things I want to say here. First, in the UK and USA today superhero stories are one of the major forms of all-ages entertainment, from comics and cartoons for kids, through blockbuster *Avengers* movies, to stories like Marvel's *The Punisher* or *Daredevil* which are made for an adult audience, featuring lots of graphic violence, including torture. Somehow, these stories have taken on the character of modern mythology or fables, and they aren't (as I'm sure you know) only for children.

Secondly, in relation to children's entertainment, it is strangely true that children's films also feature torture. Now, violence in children's media is very often silly anarchic slapstick, a form of play, and isn't necessarily a problem. But there are films like Disney's *Zootopia*, or Pixar's *Minions*, or the *Pokemon* film *Detective Pikachu* in which torture plays a prominent and troubling role. In *Detective Pikachu* and *Zootopia*, heroes torture their enemies for information in ways that echo ticking bomb stories. There is something really dark about this.



IM: How to start changing the narrative in popular culture?

AA: This is a really interesting question, and is more difficult than it may appear. There are a lot of films, novels, plays, and poems that challenge torture, and show torture from the perspective of the victim. These are fantastic, and illuminating, and important.

But the major problem is that the ticking bomb scenario and other glamorizations of torture are so visible, so widespread, and so far-reaching. We need anti-torture narratives that are equally as popular, easy to watch, and engaging, but which show torture as a terrible abuse of power and not as something that can solve problems or rescue those in need. Of course, the problem with this is that such a narrative would be dark, distressing, and hard to watch – you couldn't put Pikachu in that movie.

One of the major problems with the ticking bomb scenario is how easy it is to integrate into exciting, fun, lighthearted stories. You can't expose the horrific reality of torture in the same way. It's a real problem!

IM: Now, away from torture. Let's talk a little more writing, do you tend to write fiction? And who are your favorite writers?

AA: Yes, I love to write fiction, although I haven't had much luck getting it published yet. I have actually written an anti-torture novel, *Ratcatcher*, which addresses some of the problems we spoke about in the last question. The idea is that it is a thriller, which I've tried to make exciting, but which does not glorify torture at all. It is out with agents and presses at the moment, so hopefully it will be in print soon!

But you are right – there's more to life than torture, important though it is. I also enjoy sci-fi, monster movies, and horror, so I am working on plans for a couple of novels in this vein. I have a few thousand words written of a horror story about mushrooms – I know it sounds a bit goofy, but I think it would work quite well. I'd also love to write a werewolf story, and I would love to write a historical novel about ancient Rome.

When it comes to favourite writers, I get a bit stuck. I love lots of different kinds of writing, and I'm not very faithful when it comes to having favourites! I really like George R R Martin, Kurt Vonnegut, and Angela Carter, and when it comes to critical writing, I love Edward Said and a bit of Adorno. The best novel I read this year was *Thinner than Skin* by Usma Aslam Khan.

IM: Are there any upcoming projects?

AA: In January 2021 I'm publishing a study of drone fiction with [Drone Wars UK](#), which examines the ways that drone fiction articulates an ideology of drone warfare and drone strikes. I also have a few plans to collaborate on some video essays or podcasts, although these are not concrete yet, and I have an academic journal article coming out sometime next year. My next priority is publishing *Ratcatcher*, and after that I am working on a project which examines how some torture narratives portray torture as a form of seduction. So I am keeping myself busy!

IM: I am very grateful to you for the valuable information and ideas that you've shared today. I hope that readers will realize the importance of your work and your book *How to Justify Torture* in particular. We look forward to reading forthcoming works of equal importance and success for you. I wish you all the best. Once again, thank you.

AA: Thanks so much for this interview!

IM: Thank you.