

## A M. Homes

**Things You Should Know**  
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### A Conversation with A:M. Homes

**Q.** Several of the stories have a theme of being "prepared." What is behind this need to be prepared? Is it a compensation for a missing emotional element in their lives? Are these characters more aware of the possibility of disaster or are they just more pragmatic than the girl in "Raft in Water, Floating," Geordie in "The Chinese Lesson," or the young narrator in "Rockets Around the Moon?"

**A:M. Homes:** On the theme of being prepared — it's about wanting to feel in control, wanting to feel in control in situations that are out of control, wanting to know that you're capable of responding, of taking care of yourself and or others. I have to say, I'm kind of "disaster focused" I was just reading about a person who teaches, "disaster studies" at a University and I thought wow, that would be interesting. There are so many different things that can happen — natural disasters, terrorist acts, emotional incidents...I very much want to explore all of that, and am interested in the idea that despite however sophisticated intellectually and technologically we think we might be — we are never really prepared for many things. Re: a relationship between the stories in which preparedness figures and those in which it doesn't — it's just a theme that runs through some and not through others — Also perhaps given that the characters in "Raft in Water" and "Rockets" are so much younger it would be less of an issue for them.

**Q.** In *Things You Should Know*, you often write from a male perspective. How is this different from writing from a female perspective? Is it easier or more difficult? "Rockets..." and "The Whiz Kids" are about boys, and the other three, grown men. Does writing from a particular age group — adolescents vs. adults — have more in common than gender?

**A:M. Homes:** It's not so much about perspective as it is about inhabiting a character and remaining true to that character which is everything from tone, voice, action etc. It's not about age or gender but about the specific people involved, how to render their experiences most accurately, what would they say, think do, in a given situation. If you know a character well enough — their history, experience, what happened every day until the day the novel started. One of my most beloved teachers — Grace Paley, taught me to write — THE TRUTH ACCORDING TO THE CHARACTER — and that's something I've worked to understand ever since. That said, I've very much enjoyed writing male characters — I would say it comes quite naturally, perhaps more naturally than a female characters. Perhaps more so than some other writers — I am a writer of fiction — made up stories, not real life experience turned into a story. I work hard to inhabit characters who are quite different from myself — for me that's the most challenging part of being a writer and the most fun. I also like writing about children and adolescents. Their voices are not well represented in "adult" fiction, writers tend to leave young people to the world of kids books, all too often in "adult" fiction children and teenagers are pushed off to the side where they occupy only walk on roles, but for me children are as much a part of a story as anyone, including the family dog, etc.

**Q.** Many of the men in these stories are more sympathetic individuals than the women, who are characterized as "flat," "cold," even a "bitch." Is this a coincidence in this collection or was it deliberate? Is this what you observe in American relationships or are these just the particular characters who came to you?

**A:M. Homes:** Oh no.... I really hope women aren't coming across as flat, cold, bitches. If you look carefully you'll see that the stories that you're asking about represent specific characters as having some of those qualities, and several of the stories are linked meaning that variations on the same characters reappear in other stories... "Do Not Disturb," and "Please Remain Calm," feature the same characters at different points in their lives — I would also say that Susan in the "Chinese Lesson" is part of that constellation. I see coldness as a reflection of people who have withdrawn emotionally. The male narrator in "Chinese Lesson" is actually the grown up version of the boy in "Rockets Round The Moon." And the shape-shifter in "Raft In Water, Floating" is a variation of the character who appears in "The Weather Outside is Sunny and Bright" — and in fact a paragraph or two from "Raft," appears in the story "The Weather," the hope being that the reader will begin to notice the links... These are the first stories that I've written which are in any way interlinked and that too was a fun part of the process, to capture characters at different moments in their lives, and different sides of the same character.

**Q.** Susan in "The Chinese Lesson" asks in so many words, Why can't life be perfect? Her standards of success are so strict that she will not try something if she thinks she will fail. Several other characters also have rigid standards of how their lives should be. Do you think it is part of the expectations of the American Dream that life be perfect? Conversely, do Americans limit their lives so that they do not have to experience — or acknowledge failure? Does the American culture have the ability to withstand disappointment truthfully or do we remake how events occurred and our experiences of them?

**A:M. Homes:** I could go on for pages about my thoughts on the American dream -- the short version is that we've forgotten what the word dream means and we now think of it as the American entitlement, that we work hard and so therefore are entitled to all these things, including happiness, success, etc. Your last question is the most interesting; do we have the ability to withstand disappointment? Truthfully — NO. Why not — because we've forgotten that failure can be a good thing -- we learn from failing, from going back to the beginning and starting again. But at this point our culture feels the need, the impulse to spin everything so that it reads as a success. We are unable to tolerate the implications of having made mistakes, of failing. Look at the history of the world, of older, more sophisticated countries that vow never to forget their histories. If we cannot remember our history we are bound to repeat ourselves — this concerns me deeply, I fear that we have begun to simply erase any memory that is less than ideal.

**Q.** The characters in your stories, though their knowledge about their lives grows deeper as their individual stories progress, seem "stuck," unable to dislodge themselves from their bleak trajectories. The possibility of change is also present, though usually the reader is left with the sense that these characters are not going to change, leaving a vague sense of hopelessness and resignation. Do you believe this is the current state of the human condition? Or are these the stories that happen to come out in response to something in particular when you are writing?

**A:M. Homes:** Well, I'm fascinated with people being stuck, with the sensation of waking up thinking — hey is this my "real" life. I guess I'm hoping to explore how a person might get unstuck, what it takes to remake oneself and one's life without abandoning everything and everyone — we're a world of makeovers — get a new job, get a new hair color, get a new face, a new heart, but how do we remake,

reinvent the core, the soul if you will. That's what my next project is about.

**Q.** Many of the characters in these stories have an acute sense of anxiety about their relationships and even moreso about something amorphous that they feel is missing. Taken as a whole, the stories convey a not very optimistic look at marriage — excluding "The Weather Outside..." — or of life in general for humans, at least for middle-class suburbanites. Would you agree with this statement? Are suburban families more prone to existential distress? Why?

**A:M. Homes:** First of all, I am hopeful about marriage and family — what else is there? These two elements are key to our society. That said, the family is so fragmented these days, and marriages seem to be considered temporary; contracts a person can break without thinking too much. We all need to be much more responsible and accountable to each other and our communities. People wonder how horrible things happen, Columbine, etc. Where do they come from? They come from us, from our culture, from being hurried, from having no time, not paying attention to what our kids are doing. We're such a pressured society, everyone feels the need to keep up, either to simply pay the bills or to have more — there is rarely a moment when an American says, Thank you I have enough. I'm thinking about all of these things and hope to continue to explore these themes in my new work. In the end, the point of fiction is both to entertain and to prompt us to think about our own lives, what we want, how we want to be, how things could be different. Fiction doesn't instruct as much as illuminate and through this reflection or refracted view I hope we come to see ourselves more clearly — warts and all — and in that clarity of vision we both accept ourselves and endeavor to change what we feel we can or need to.