The Kite Runner: a novel
by Khaled Hosseini

Publication Date: 2003
Publication info: Riverhead Books
Pages: 324 pages.
ISBN: 1573222453

Awards: A San Francisco Chronicle Best book of the Year,
An Entertainment Weekly Top Ten Fiction Pick of the Year,
An American Library Association Notable Book

More than 30 million copies sold.

Summary

An epic tale of fathers and sons, of friendship and betrayal, that takes us on a journey in Afghanistan from the time of the monarch's overthrow to the tyranny of the Taliban.

Synopsis

Taking us from Afghanistan in the final days of the monarchy to the present, The Kite Runner is the unforgettable, beautifully told story of the friendship between two boys growing up in Kabul. Raised in the same household and sharing the same wet nurse, Amir and Hassan nonetheless grow up in different worlds: Amir is the son of a prominent and wealthy man, while Hassan, the son of Amir's father's servant, is a Hazara, member of a shunned ethnic minority. Their intertwined lives, and their fates, reflect the eventual tragedy of the world around them. When the Soviets invade and Amir and his father flee the country for a new life in California, Amir thinks that he has escaped his past. And yet he cannot leave the memory of Hassan behind him.

The Kite Runner is a novel about friendship, betrayal, and the price of loyalty. It is about the bonds between fathers and sons, and the power of their lies. Written against a history that has not been told in fiction before, The Kite Runner describes the rich culture and beauty of a land in the process of being destroyed. But with the devastation, Khaled Hosseini also gives us hope: through the novel's faith in the power of reading and storytelling, and in the possibilities he shows for redemption.
Reviews

Publishers Weekly
Hosseini’s stunning debut novel starts as an eloquent Afghan version of the American immigrant experience in the late 20th century, but betrayal and redemption come to the forefront when the narrator, a writer, returns to his ravaged homeland to rescue the son of his childhood friend after the boy’s parents are shot during the Taliban takeover in the mid ’90s. Amir, the son of a well-to-do Kabul merchant, is the first-person narrator, who marries, moves to California and becomes a successful novelist. But he remains haunted by a childhood incident in which he betrayed the trust of his best friend, a Hazara boy named Hassan, who receives a brutal beating from some local bullies. After establishing himself in America, Amir learns that the Taliban have murdered Hassan and his wife, raising questions about the fate of his son, Sohrab. Spurred on by childhood guilt, Amir makes the difficult journey to Kabul, only to learn the boy has been enslaved by a former childhood bully who has become a prominent Taliban official. The price Amir must pay to recover the boy is just one of several brilliant, startling plot twists that make this book memorable both as a political chronicle and a deeply personal tale about how childhood choices affect our adult lives. The character studies alone would make this a noteworthy debut, from the portrait of the sensitive, insecure Amir to the multilayered development of his father, Baba, whose sacrifices and scandalous behavior are fully revealed only when Amir returns to Afghanistan and learns the true nature of his relationship to Hassan. Add an incisive, perceptive examination of recent Afghan history and its ramifications in both America and the Middle East, and the result is a complete work of literature that succeeds in exploring the culture of a previously obscure nation that has become a pivot point in the global politics.

Library Journal
This novel relates the demise of friendship and the precipitous decline of Afghanistan at the end of the 20th century. Amir, a Pashtun, and his Hazara servant, Hassan, have grown up not only as master and servant but also as inseparable friends. Yet Amir is jealous of his father’s affection for Hassan, who, though poor and illiterate, has many talents. Amir abandons Hassan at a time of extreme need and then, motivated by guilt, brutally betrays him. After he and his father escape to the United States following the Russian invasion, Amir continues to suffer from regret and guilt. In the latter half of the novel, Amir returns to Afghanistan and begins to atone for his childhood mistakes. Although the narrative suffers from an over reliance on coincidence, it provides a vivid glimpse of life in Afghanistan over the past quarter century. The characters of Amir and his father, their relationship, and the relationship of Hassan and Amir are all carefully and convincingly described and developed.

New York Times
This powerful first novel, by an Afghan physician now living in California, tells a story of fierce cruelty and fierce yet redeeming love. Both transform the life of Amir, Khaled Hosseini’s privileged young narrator, who comes of age during the last peaceful days of monarchy, just before this country’s revolution and its invasion by Russian forces. But political events, even as dramatic as the ones presented in The Kite Runner, are only part of this story. In The Kite Runner, Khaled Hosseini gives us a vivid and engaging story that reminds us how long his people have been struggling to triumph over the forces of violence – forces that continue to threaten them even today.

Booklist
Hosseini’s debut novel opens in Kabul in the mid-1970s. Amir is the son of a wealthy man, but his best friend is Hassan, the son of one of his father’s servants. His father encourages the friendship and dotes on Hassan, who worships the ground Amir walks on. But Amir is envious of Hassan and his own father’s apparent affection for the boy. Amir is not nearly as loyal to Hassan, and one day, when he comes across a group of local bullies raping
Hassan, he does nothing. Shamed by his own inaction, Amir pushes Hassan away, even going so far as to accuse him of stealing. Eventually, Hassan and his father are forced to leave. Years later, Amir, now living in America, receives a visit from an old family friend who gives him an opportunity to make amends for his treatment of Hassan. Current events will garner interest for this novel; the quality of Hosseini’s writing and the emotional impact of the story will guarantee its longevity.

Author Biography
http://www.khaledhosseini.com

Khaled Hosseini was born in Kabul, Afghanistan, in 1965. His father was a diplomat with the Afghan Foreign Ministry and his mother taught Farsi and History at a large high school in Kabul. In 1976, the Afghan Foreign Ministry relocated the Hosseini family to Paris. They were ready to return to Kabul in 1980, but by then Afghanistan had already witnessed a bloody communist coup and the invasion of the Soviet army. The Hosseinis sought and were granted political asylum in the United States. In September of 1980, Hosseini's family moved to San Jose, California. Hosseini graduated from high school in 1984 and enrolled at Santa Clara University where he earned a bachelor's degree in Biology in 1988. The following year, he entered the University of California-San Diego’s School of Medicine, where he earned a Medical Degree in 1993. He completed his residency at Cedars-Sinai Hospital in Los Angeles. Hosseini was a practicing internist between 1996 and 2004.

While in medical practice, Hosseini began writing his first novel, The Kite Runner, in March of 2001. In 2003, The Kite Runner, was published and has since become an international bestseller, published in 48 countries. In 2006 he was named a goodwill envoy to UNHCR, the United Nations Refugee Agency. His second novel, A Thousand Splendid Suns was published in May of 2007. Currently, A Thousand Splendid Suns is published in 40 countries. Khaled has been working to provide humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan through The Khaled Hosseini Foundation. The concept for The Khaled Hosseini Foundation was inspired by a trip to Afghanistan Khaled made in 2007 with the UNHCR. He lives in northern California.

Bibliography

A Thousand Splendid Suns (2007)
A Thousand Splendid Suns is a breathtaking story set against the volatile events of Afghanistan’s last thirty years—from the Soviet invasion to the reign of the Taliban to the post-Taliban rebuilding—that puts the violence, fear, hope, and faith of this country in intimate, human terms. It is a tale of two generations of characters brought jarringly together by the tragic sweep of war, where personal lives—the struggle to survive, raise a family, find happiness—are inextricable from the history playing out around them.
Movie Version
(2007, PG-13, 128 mins.)
“There is a way to be good again”.

After spending years in California, Amir returns to his homeland in Afghanistan to help his old friend Hassan, whose son is in trouble.

Zekeria Ebrahimi ... Young Amir
Ahmad Khan Mahmoodzada ... Young Hassan
Khalid Abdalla ... Amir
Atossa Leoni ... Soraya
Shaun Toub ... Rahim Khan
Sayed Jafar Masihullah Gharibzada ... Omar
Homayoun Ershadi ... Baba
Director Marc Forster  Screenplay David Benioff
Nominated for Oscar for Best Musical Score
Won Critics Choice Award for Best Young Actor (Young Hassan)

Background Information for the novel The Kite Runner
Characters in alphabetical order  (and page when first mentioned)
Afifatoon – Amir’s dog in the U.S. (190)
Ali – Hassan’s father; servant to Baba and Amir (2)
Amir – storyteller/narrator
Assef – son of one of Baba’s friends; kid (and adult) with the stainless-steel brass knuckles (37)
Baba - Amir’s father (2)
Farid – Amir’s driver in Afghanistan (228)
Farzani – Hassan’s wife (205)
Hassan – boyhood playmate and servant; one year younger than Amir (2); the kite runner (52)
Kamal – friend of Assef (37); shows up again without Assef (120, 124)
Rahim Khan - Amir’s friend and Baba’s business partner (1)
Sanaubar – Hassan’s mother; ran away soon after birth (6)
Sofia Akrami – Amir’s mother; died giving birth to him (15)
Sohrab – Hassan’s son (211)
Soraya – Amir’s wife (140)

Quick facts about Afghanistan
A land-locked country just a bit smaller than Texas. A lot of the terrain is rugged mountains. The winters are cold and summers are hot (high of 90° F in July and August and 40° F in January).

About 30 million people live there (about 23 million people live in Texas).

Life expectancy is low (43 years) relative to the U.S. (78 years).

Islam is the predominant religion with about 80% of the people being Sunni Muslims and about 19% Shi’a Muslims.
The official languages are Dari and Pashto.

The literacy rate, meaning those over age 15 able to read and write, is 51% for males and 21% for females; the US literacy rate is 97% for both males and females.

The form of government is Islamic Republic. *(CIA World Factbook)*

**Interview with the Author** *(Newsline, November 2003)*


In The Kite Runner, do you create characters and events that are based on personal recollections or is the story purely fictional?

The storyline of my novel is largely fictional. The characters were invented and the plot imagined. However, there certainly are, as is always the case with fiction, autobiographical elements woven through the narrative. Probably the passages most resembling my own life are the ones in the US, with Amir and Baba trying to build a new life for themselves. I, too, came to the US as an immigrant and I recall vividly those first few years in California, the brief time we spent on welfare, and the difficult task of assimilating into a new culture. My father and I did work for a while at the flea market and there really are rows of Afghans working there, some of whom I am related to.

I wanted to write about Afghanistan before the Soviet war because that is largely a forgotten period in modern Afghan history. For many people in the west, Afghanistan is synonymous with the Soviet war and the Taliban. I wanted to remind people that Afghans had managed to live in peaceful anonymity for decades that the history of the Afghans in the twentieth century has been largely pacific and harmonious.

What are your recollections of the last days of the Afghan monarchy and the subsequent invasion of the Soviet force.

Kabul was a thriving cosmopolitan city with its vibrant artistic, intellectual and cultural life. There were poets, musicians, and writers. There was also an influx of western culture, art, and literature in the '60s and '70s. My family left Afghanistan in 1976, well before the Communist coup and the Soviet invasion. We certainly thought we would be going back. But when we saw those Soviet tanks rolling into Afghanistan, the prospect for return looked very dim. Few of us, I have to say, envisioned that nearly a quarter century of bloodletting would follow.

Is Amir’s youth synonymous with your adolescence?

I experienced Kabul with my brother the way Amir and Hassan do: long school days in the summer, kite fighting in the winter time, westerns with John Wayne at Cinema Park, big parties at our house in Wazir Akbar Khan, picnics in Paghman. I have very fond memories of my childhood in Afghanistan, largely because my memories, unlike those of the current generation of Afghans, are untainted by the spectre of war, landmines, and famine.

Can you shed light on the role of women at the time?
I came from an educated, upper middle-class family. My mother was a Persian and history teacher at a large high school for girls. Many of the women in my extended family and in our circle of friends were professionals. In those days, women were a vital part of the economy in Kabul. They worked as lawyers, physicians, college professors, etc., which makes the tragedy of how they were treated by the Taliban that much more painful.

Your novel touches on internal strife before and during the Taliban government but lacks a strong focus on women.

My own background is fairly liberal and so this notion of 'protecting women from outside intrusion' is not in my nature, nor in my upbringing. The Kite Runner is a story of two boys and a father, and the strange love triangle that binds them. It so happens that the major relationships in the novel are between men, dictated not by any sort of prejudice or discomfort with female characters, but rather by the demands of the narrative. The story of what has happened to women in Afghanistan, however, is a very important one, and fertile ground for fiction. I have started a second novel set in Afghanistan, and so far all of the major characters are shaping up as women.

Given the present state of politics and the American agenda in the region, how do you perceive the future of Afghanistan

I returned to Kabul this past March, after a 27-year absence. I came away with some optimism but not as much as I had hoped for. The two major issues in Afghanistan are a lack of security outside Kabul (particularly in the south and east) and the powerful warlords ruling over the provinces with little or no allegiance to the central government. The other rapidly rising concern is the narcotic trade which, if not dealt with, may turn Afghanistan into another Bolivia or Colombia.

Equally important is the lack of cultivable land for farmers, a profound problem when you take into account that Afghanistan has always largely been an agricultural country, and that even before the wars destroyed lands and irrigation canals, only 5 per cent of the land was cultivable. A great deal remains to be done in Afghanistan and the jury is out as to whether the international community has the commitment and the patience to see the rebuilding process through.

This last month, though, I have seen some cause for optimism. The Bush administration tripled its aid package to Afghanistan. Karzai finally (and courageously) announced that warlords will be forbidden from holding office in the future government. And finally, NATO agreed to expand the peacekeeping forces to troubled areas outside of Kabul.

Why did you return after 27 years?

I returned to Afghanistan because I had a deep longing to see for myself how people lived, what they thought of their government, how optimistic they were about the future of their homeland. I was overwhelmed with the kindness of people and found that they had managed to retain their dignity, their pride, and their hospitality under unspeakably bleak conditions.

I did see plenty that reminded me of my childhood. I recognised my old neighbourhood, saw my old school, streets where I had played with my brother and cousins. And, like Amir, I found my father's old house in Wazir Khan.

What were the reactions of Afghans in exile in the US after reading your novel?
I get daily e-mails from Afghans who thank me for writing this book, as they feel a slice of their story has been told by one of their own. So, for the most part, I have been overwhelmed with the kindness of my fellow Afghans. There are, however, those who have called the book divisive and objected to some of the issues raised in the book, namely racism, discrimination, ethnic inequality etc. If this book generates any sort of dialogue among Afghans, then I think it will have done a service to the community.

Discussion Questions

1. The novel begins with Amir's memory of peering down an alley, looking for Hassan who is kite running for him. As Amir peers into the alley, he witnesses a tragedy. The novel ends with Amir kite running for Hassan's son, Sohrab, as he begins a new life with Amir in America. Why do you think the author chooses to frame the novel with these scenes? Refer to the following passage: "Afghans like to say: Life goes on, unmindful of beginning, end...crisis or catharsis, moving forward like a slow, dusty caravan of kochis [nomads]." How is this significant to the framing of the novel?

2. The strong underlying force of this novel is the relationship between Amir and Hassan. Discuss their friendship. Why is Amir afraid to be Hassan's true friend? Why does Amir constantly test Hassan's loyalty? Why does he resent Hassan? After the kite running tournament, why does Amir no longer want to be Hassan's friend?

3. Early in Amir and Hassan's friendship, they often visit a pomegranate tree where they spend hours reading and playing. "One summer day, I used one of Ali's kitchen knives to carve our names on it: 'Amir and Hassan, the sultans of Kabul.' Those words made it formal: the tree was ours." In a letter to Amir later in the story, Hassan mentions that "the tree hasn't borne fruit in years." Discuss the significance of this tree.

4. We begin to understand early in the novel that Amir is constantly vying for Baba's attention and often feels like an outsider in his father's life, as seen in the following passage: "He'd close the door, leave me to wonder why it was always grown-ups time with him. I'd sit by the door, knees drawn to my chest. Sometimes I sat there for an hour, sometimes two, listening to their laughter, their chatter." Discuss Amir's relationship with Baba.

5. After Amir wins the kite running tournament, his relationship with Baba undergoes significant change. However, while they form a bond of friendship, Amir is still unhappy. What causes this unhappiness and how has Baba contributed to Amir's state of mind? Eventually, the relationship between the two returns to the way it was before the tournament, and Amir laments "we actually deceived ourselves into thinking that a toy made of tissue paper, glue, and bamboo could somehow close the chasm between us." Discuss the significance of this passage.

6. As Amir remembers an Afghan celebration in which a sheep must be sacrificed, he talks about seeing the sheep's eyes moments before its death. "I don't know why I watch this yearly ritual in our backyard; my nightmares persist long after the bloodstains on the grass have faded. But I always watch, I watch because of that look of acceptance in the animal's eyes. Absurdly, I imagine the animal understands. I imagine the animal sees that its imminent demise is for a higher purpose." Why do you think Amir recalls this memory when he witnesses Hassan's tragedy in the alleyway? Amir recollects the memory again toward the end of the novel when he sees Sohrab in the home of the Taliban. Discuss the image in the context of the novel.
7. America acts as a place for Amir to bury his memories and a place for Baba to mourn his. In America, there are "homes that made Baba's house in Wazir Akbar Khan look like a servant's hut." What is ironic about this statement? What is the function of irony in this novel?

8. What is the significance of the irony in the first story that Amir writes? After hearing Amir's story, Hassan asks, "Why did the man kill his wife? In fact, why did he ever have to feel sad to shed tears? Couldn't he have just smelled an onion?" How is his reaction to the story a metaphor for Amir's life? How does this story epitomize the difference in character between Hassan and Amir?

9. Why is Baba disappointed by Amir's decision to become a writer? During their argument about his career path, Amir thinks to himself: "I would stand my ground, I decided. I didn't want to sacrifice for Baba anymore. The last time I had done that, I had damned myself." What has Amir sacrificed for Baba? How has Amir "damned himself"?

10. Compare and contrast the relationships of Soraya and Amir and their fathers. How have their upbringings contributed to these relationships?

11. Discuss how the ever-changing politics of Afghanistan affect each of the characters in the novel.

12. On Amir's trip back to Afghanistan, he stays at the home of his driver, Farid. Upon leaving he remarks: "Earlier that morning, when I was certain no one was looking, I did something I had done twenty-six years earlier: I planted a fistful of crumpled money under the mattress." Why is this moment so important in Amir's journey?

13. Throughout the story, Baba worries because Amir never stands up for himself. When does this change?

14. Amir's confrontation with Assef in Wazir Akbar Khan marks an important turning point in the novel. Why does the author have Amir, Assef, and Sohrab all come together in this way? What is this the significance of the scar that Amir develops as a result of the confrontation? Why is it important in Amir's journey toward forgiveness and acceptance?

15. While in the hospital in Peshawar, Amir has a dream in which he sees his father wrestling a bear: "They role over a patch of grass, man and beast...they fall to the ground with a loud thud and Baba is sitting on the bear's chest, his fingers digging in its snout. He looks up at me, and I see. He's me. I am wrestling the bear." Why is this dream so important at this point in the story? What does this dream finally help Amir realize?

16. Amir and Hassan have a favorite story. Does the story have the same meaning for both men? Why does Hassan name his son after one of the characters in the story?

17. Baba and Amir know that they are very different people. Often it disappoints both of them that Amir is not the son that Baba has hoped for. When Amir finds out that Baba has lied to him about Hassan, he realizes that "as it turned out, Baba and I were more alike than I'd never known." How does this make Amir feel about his father? How is this both a negative and positive realization?

18. When Amir and Baba move to the States their relationship changes, and Amir begins to view his father as a more complex man. Discuss the changes in their relationship. Do you see the changes in Baba as tragic or positive?
19. Discuss the difference between Baba and Ali and between Amir and Hassan. Are Baba’s and Amir’s betrayals and similarities in their relationships of their servants (if you consider Baba’s act a betrayal) similar or different? Do you think that such betrayals are inevitable in the master/servant relationship, or do you feel that they are due to flaws in Baba’s and Amir’s characters, or are they the outcome of circumstances and characters?

**More Questions for Discussion**

Why does Amir thinks he became who he is at age 12. What events and circumstances shaped his life?

How is kite flying significant to the story? Why might it be part of both the beginning and end of the story?

The symbols and events the author uses and why (kites, the tree the boys carved their names in, the mythical stories, the slingshot, Sohrab’s silence, and others).

The use of religion, culture and politics in the story.

Whether Amir and Hassan are friends. What is friendship?

Baba’s opinion of Amir. Does it change after the kite flying victory? Does it changes in the U.S.? How?

The significance of Amir and Soraya’s infertility.

Why Farid tells Amir that he was always a tourist in Afghanistan. (p 232)

Why the author may have made Assef so evil.

What Amir means by the beating healing him. (p 289)

What significance is there of Amir’s lip getting split in two and a scar being made. (p 297)

**For Further Reading**

**Diana Abu-Jaber, Crescent** (2003)
*Crescent* is filled with romantic and culinary delights, the tradition of storytelling and a love story, as it tells the story of American-born Sirine’s romance with Iraqi scholar Hanif in Los Angeles's Arab community. The novel extends its reach well beyond the personal story of two people who fall in love to look at Saddam Hussein’s dictatorship when Hanif decides he must return to find the imprisoned brother and missing sister he left behind in Iraq.

This illustration of life under the Taliban and the fate of the Afghan people focuses on the lives of two couples whose lives intersect. Their lives as a diplomat and lawyer disrupted by Taliban rule, violence rips the marriage of Mohsen and Zunaira apart, and Zunaira is arrested and condemned to death.
In one of the best books of reportage of Afghan life after the fall of the Taliban, Norwegian journalist Seierstad tells how he spent three months living with the Kabul bookseller Sultan Khan in the spring of 2002, observing the public and private worlds of Kabul's people as a country rebuilds itself.

Returning to her lush, dangerous homeland of Sri Lanka after years abroad, forensic scientist Anil Tissera investigates a mysterious skeleton that might hold the key to exposing a government conspiracy and bringing international attention to the horrors that years of terrorism and civil unrest have wrought in the country.

A former colonel in the Iranian military under the Shah and a self-destructive American alcoholic fight for ownership of a house that has taken on great symbolic value for each of them. For the colonel, the house represents the American Dream, while for the American woman, the house's former owner, it is a place full of memories of happier days.

A portrait of the immigrant experience follows the Ganguli family from their traditional life in India through their arrival in Massachusetts in the late 1960s and their difficult melding into an American way of life.