

A STORYTELLER'S STORY

KHALED HOSSEINI AND 'THE KITE RUNNER'

by DAVE KORZON

When the Taliban banned kite fighting in Afghanistan in 1994, the Afghan people lost one of their most beloved pastimes because the strict religious regime considered it “un-Islamic.” And while the cultural void left by this edict was felt most sharply in Afghanistan, it had a global impact as well. It certainly stirred the memory of Dr. Khaled Hosseini, an Afghan immigrant living in northern California. Kites were his beloved childhood sport, his version of stickball or touch football. But to listen to Hosseini, kites and kite fighting transcended mere schoolyard athletics. “When I think of Kabul in the '70s,” he relates, “I think of kites the way people think of oranges when they think of Florida.” The fond memories from his formative years spurred him to his writing desk.

In 2001, Hosseini began following a disciplined regimen of rising daily at four a.m. to write before heading off to his medical practice at Kaiser in Mountain View. A little more than a year later, he had a completed manuscript for his first novel, *The Kite Runner*. The book was sold almost immediately (“seamless” is the word Hosseini uses when speaking of his path to publication) and *The Kite Runner*, the first work of fiction written by an Afghan in the English language, became a runaway best-seller.

Hosseini, who currently makes his home in Sunnyvale, California, is a strikingly handsome, articulate man of forty and is a husband and



father of two. He has a reserved, analytical quality about him; his keen observational skills are evident, honed, no doubt, by his years of practicing internal medicine. Yet there is also a boyish enthusiasm when certain subjects such as his beloved San Francisco 49ers or Bruce Springsteen are brought up

in conversation. It is easy to see, when his guard is down, the young kite fighter of Kabul within the adult physician and novelist.

The sport of kite fighting, which returned to Afghanistan with the fall of the Taliban, pits kite against kite, much like an airplane dog-fight, with each flier trying to sever

the kite line of the others with his own line—lines are often coated with ground glass—until there is only one kite left in the sky. Kite runners find the stray kites as they drift away unmoored from their owners; finders keep the kites as trophies.

Hosseini's book, however, is not so much about kites as it is about regret, guilt, and redemption. The narrator, Amir, begins his story as a child of privilege from a family of wealth and position in an idyllic, peacetime Afghanistan in the '60s and early '70s. His best friend, Hassan, has no such advantages. Hassan and his father—both Hazaras, an ethnic group often persecuted in Afghanistan—are faithful servants to Amir and Amir's father, Baba. The boys' friendship is real, but ethnic differences serve as a divider and ultimately lead to horrific circumstances. And as Hosseini's characters move and shift and arc, so too does Afghanistan. Peacetime is replaced with turmoil by the invading Soviets and later we are witness to the atrocities inflicted by the Taliban.

In Hosseini's novel, Amir and his father eventually move to the United States and while their fictional situation differs from that of the author, one cannot help but draw comparisons between these characters and Hosseini's own family history. In 1976 the Afghan Foreign Ministry relocated Hosseini's family to Paris where his father held a diplomatic post. The Soviet invasion kept the family from returning to Kabul and instead they moved to America, where they were granted political asylum. All their property lost, the family found themselves on welfare, with Hosseini's mother waitressing at Denny's and his father working a series of jobs (including a stint as a driving instructor) to get the family out from under government aid. Lessons in pride and work ethic and resolve learned in this transition along with an aptitude for science eventually saw

Hosseini through medical school and his residency at Cedars-Sinai Hospital in Los Angeles, but his lifelong love of reading and storytelling was never eclipsed by the demanding rigors of medicine. Drawing on his childhood memories and his own relationships with Afghan Hazaras while growing up, Hosseini has rendered a stunning portrait of the power of friendship and loyalty against the backdrop of an ever-changing ancient land where these qualities, no matter the political climate, have always persevered.

The Kite Runner has now sold over 1,000,000 copies in hardcover and paperback, has been translated into twenty-five languages, and has been a popular pick for community reads and book clubs across the United States, including in Chatham County, North Carolina. Plans are in the works for the novel to be made into a movie, with Sam Mendes (*American Beauty*) attached as the director. Hosseini, on a one-year hiatus from his medical practice, is at work on a second novel, also set in Afghanistan. We are grateful to him for taking time from his schedule to talk with us.

Editor's Note: This interview contains plot details of The Kite Runner. Please be aware of this if you have not yet read the novel.

THE VILLAGE RAMBLER MAGAZINE: Because of the success of *The Kite Runner*, have you become a spokesperson on the subject of Afghanistan? Do people expect more from you in that way?

KHALED HOSSEINI: Yes, they do. Not rightly or wrongly, but they do. I find myself being asked questions about Afghanistan, central Asian politics, the outlook for what's going on in Afghanistan. So I'm kind of an unwitting spokesperson, I guess, and I don't mind. If I feel that the subject matter is outside the scope of what I'm comfortable with, I just say that I don't

have the answer. I usually qualify all my answers by saying, "You know, I wrote a novel. I'm not any kind of specialist or anything." But I think it's natural. For many people, this is their first intimate, personal glimpse into Afghan society and so it's natural that they turn to me and see me as a spokesperson. And it really doesn't bother me. I actually do enjoy it.

RAMBLER: Are you good for political discussion at a party? Do you enjoy politics in that sense?

HOSSEINI: I do enjoy politics although these are sensitive times and the country is so divided on issues. It sometimes can be a bit of a minefield and you'll just strike a nerve with somebody and things get cold, not vicious, but people can get antsy. I like talking politics. At a lot of my readings, people ask me questions about politics in Afghanistan and the Middle East or whatever, and I'm happy to talk about that.

RAMBLER: Where do you fall politically? Are you to the left, to the right?

HOSSEINI: I think I'm somewhere in the middle. There are things where I feel I'm close to the left and there are things where I feel I'm close to the right. That whole division to me seems a little artificial.

RAMBLER: Well, we have red and blue states. The country is literally color coded now.

HOSSEINI: It really is. So I guess I'm sort of purple.

RAMBLER: Of course, your personal history led you somewhat to the writing of *The Kite Runner*, but what was the contemporary trigger that prompted you to say that this book needs to be written?

HOSSEINI: The relationship between those characters and the essence of that relationship had been in my mind for some time. The actual trigger I guess came around 1999 when I was watching a news report on television about Afghanistan. It was a retrospective of what's happened there, specifi-

cally about the Taliban and what the Taliban were doing and all the things that they had banned. Somewhere in the news report they mentioned that they had banned kite fighting. And a light bulb went off in my head and I thought, wow, I remember when I was a kid and I used to fly kites and now it's banned. Almost immediately after that I sat at my computer and I cranked out this short story about a couple of boys in Kabul who flew kites. It was called "The Kite Runner" and that became the seed around which I built the novel. I ended up just putting the short story away, but about two years later, in March 2001, I began expanding it into a novel.

RAMBLER: And the rest, as they say, is history.

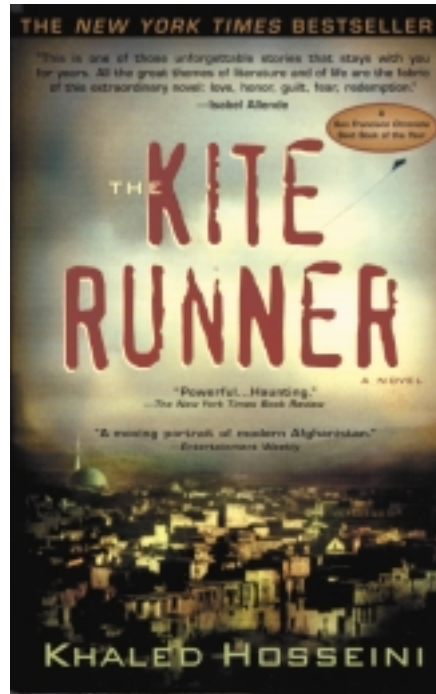
HOSSEINI: I guess, for better or worse.

RAMBLER: I'll tell you, there are a lot of writers who will hear the story of how your novel came to be and will probably think it happened so easily for you.

HOSSEINI: It happened very seamlessly and I'm aware that's an unusual scenario. Usually, you write your five, six novels and pay your dues, but I feel like I paid my dues in med school [*laughs*]. But there were a lot of things that went right, a lot of stars were aligned. Six months into the writing of my novel, September 11 happened and suddenly everybody was interested in Afghanistan and what was going on there. By then I was about halfway through my novel, and by the time I finished, which was in June 2002, and I sent it out, there was already this seed of interest about Afghanistan, although I think things had already moved on to Iraq even though the war was still a year away, but you know the weapons and the talk about all that was already starting. So there was, like I said, a certain level of public interest in that part of the world.

RAMBLER: Publishing can be so much about timing.

HOSSEINI: Yes, but publishing is a very subjective business. I actually got rejected by some agencies who said there's too much about Afghanistan and people just aren't interested anymore—they want to move on to something else. But what I had written was fiction, and there wasn't much of such fiction



at all, and most of what had been published was based around bin Laden and the war on terrorism and all of that. So I felt like my novel filled a unique niche in a big picture. In other words, it helped in getting it published. Now, what's happened with the book since has more to do with the book than with what's going on in Afghanistan because that's been on the back burner now for quite a while. It doesn't make the front pages anymore. I think the novel kind of found its own sea legs.

RAMBLER: Did September 11 change your writing of the book—its tone or your attitude about the characters?

HOSSEINI: 9/11 affected the writing only slightly. I felt I had to make some kind of reference to it and some events that affected Afghanistan after 9/11 are included

in the book—the rise of Mr. Karzai, the Grand Council, the Bonn Agreement. 9/11 is such an enormous event that I thought the only way to approach it was to mention it almost in passing. So much had been written about it already and I would not have had that much more to add.

RAMBLER: During the writing process did you work from an outline? Did you map out the plot before you started writing?

HOSSEINI: I sit down every day and I see what happens. I've never outlined. I had the short story, which I had written a year or two before, so that was sitting there as an outline, I suppose.

RAMBLER: What was the scope of the short story? Did it take place over the course of a day?

HOSSEINI: No, it was years, actually. It really mirrored what happened early in the book and ended with Amir going to Pakistan and meeting Rahim Khan and reading Hassan's letter and then he simply came back to the States and that was that. Of course in the novel I knew that wouldn't fly. I felt very strongly that Amir should go back to Afghanistan, but most of this novel was written in a "let's see what happens next" way. I don't outline. I really like the spontaneity of just sitting down and working. I usually have a vague notion of what the scene is I'm going to write about, but all kinds of things happen simply in the process of writing. A thought leads to another, which leads to another, and the next thing you know, you're someplace completely different. I really like that.

RAMBLER: Along those lines, did this group of characters surprise you? Did you have a hard time keeping them in line?

HOSSEINI: They surprised me all the time. For instance, it surprised me that the boys were brothers because I didn't know that from the start.

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