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Book Club Kit Discussion Guide



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The Kite Runner
by
Khaled Hosseini
(New York: Riverhead Books, 2003)

Author:

Khaled Hosseini was born in 1965 into an affluent Afghan family in the northern part of Kabul, son of a diplomat and oldest of five children. In 1976, his family moved to Paris, where his father had been posted to the Afghan embassy and where the family would still be living in 1978 when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. The Hosseini family was granted political asylum in the United States and emigrated to San Jose, California in 1980.

Life in America was difficult for Hosseini's parents, who had been successful professionals in Afghanistan. Khaled Hosseini remembers the poverty and frequently wounded pride that characterized those early years in America, memories that made their way into his first novel as well:

It was very hard for them. My father had been a diplomat, and he took a job as a driving instructor. There were a few incidents, soon after we'd arrived. Once the doorbell rang and Boy Scouts came in from the Salvation Army, with hand-me-down clothes, shoes, a Christmas tree -- they just kind of barged in. It was mortifying. We were grateful of course. But mortified. It was a sobering experience. "This is who we are here." (*San Francisco Chronicle*, August 10, 2003)

Eager to repay his parents for all their sacrifices, Hosseini was an able and ambitious student, graduating from Santa Clara University and the UC San Diego School of Medicine. In the wake of a successful novel, Hosseini finds himself frequently asked about his decision to practice medicine, a decision he explains this way: "I was the first-born in a family of five children, and my parents were immigrants who sacrificed for me and I wanted to honor that sacrifice. I was adept in science and wanted to work with people, so it's an honorable profession which has been satisfying and good for me" (*Mercury News*, June 21, 2003).

Hosseini didn't have time to think about writing, or much of anything else, during the busy years of medical school and residency, but once settled into his medical practice,

Hosseini describes the idea for a short story popping into his head in 1999 while driving. He wrote the story when he got home, and that one was followed by several more, some of which were published in small press magazines. His father-in-law was particularly struck by one of his unpublished stories, but felt it should be longer. "So I started developing it into a novel. That was in March of 2001. I wrote it pretty steadily until 9/11. Then I put it away." Despite his initial fear that Afghans would be persecuted and his horror at Afghanistan's involvement in the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, Hosseini was heartened by the outpouring of support he received: "People were incredibly gracious. Patients would leave me voice mails saying, Hope you are OK, hope nobody's bothering you, hope you're [sic] family's all right. After a couple of months I went back to the book, and finished it last June. I sold it in September" (*San Francisco Chronicle*, August 10, 2003)

The book he sold was, of course, *The Kite Runner*, which was published to critical acclaim in 2003. Commercial and critical success came as a surprise, and were not among the dreams that Hosseini had for his book. He told NPR's Liane Hansen what he hoped the novel might be able to accomplish:

Well, my primary concern as a writer is I hope this story resonates with people and that it emotionally is a story that people will think about long after it's done. But I also, from more than just a literary interest, hope that it gets people to keep talking about Afghanistan and to remember that Afghanistan is still there, and that [. . .] Afghanistan still needs the long-term international commitment and so on. So if it achieves anything toward that end in even a small way, I think it will have been worthwhile. (NPR's Weekend Edition, July 27, 2003)

[Reprints of all articles and interviews referenced here are available on Hosseini's author website: <http://www.khaledhosseini.com/>]

Summary:

The Kite Runner is narrated by Amir, a successful writer who has lived in California for some twenty years. He receives a phone call from an old friend of his father's and is drawn into the past in an attempt to redeem himself for the betrayal of a friend when he was but a boy. "*There is a way to be good again,*" Rahim Khan entices him, and Amir realizes he must meet Rahim in Pakistan as the old man wishes.

Amir grew up in Afghanistan, only son of one of Kabul's prominent businessmen and philanthropists. After his mother died in childbirth, Amir grew up in a close-knit, if all male, family comprised of his larger-than-life father, long-time family servant Ali, who was a member of the persecuted Hazara minority and crippled by a congenital defect paralyzing his face and a polio-twisted leg, and Ali's son Hassan. Amir and Hassan (marked for the neighborhood bullies by both his Hazara heritage and a harelip) were inseparable, although Amir found himself tormenting Hassan with tests of loyalty and jealously cutting him out of outings with Amir's father. Hassan's affection and courage were unswerving, to the point he even defended Amir with his slingshot against a sadistic neighborhood bully and neo-Nazi named Assef, humiliating Assef in front of his hangers-

on and incurring Assef's enduring hatred. When Amir, desperate for his father's love and approval, told Hassan he had to win Kabul's greatest kite-fighting contest in the winter of 1975, Hassan assisted him in winning the kite fight and then running to win the last prize of the day for Amir by catching the last fallen kite before anyone else. The victorious Amir chased after Hassan, but found him surrounded by Assef and his friends, holding the fallen kite. Amir could not find the courage to intervene, even when Assef's friends held Hassan and Assef raped him. Amir sneaked home, and his shame and self-loathing turned him against Hassan, even as he should have been basking in his father's approval and attention. At his thirteenth birthday party, Amir received a copy of Hitler's biography from Assef, and was forced to watch as Hassan served Assef drinks. Pushed to his limit, Amir framed Hassan for theft in an attempt to force Hassan and Ali to leave. His father never believed Hassan stole anything, but Amir's betrayal did cause Ali to pack up his meager belongings and his son and leave.

After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1978, it was clear that Amir and his father had to abandon their home in Kabul for their own safety. They left secretly in the night, and made the dangerous journey to Peshawar in an oil tanker with other desperate refugees. When a Russian soldier threatened to rape a young mother in the group, Amir's father defended her, and miraculously survived the confrontation unharmed. It was one of the last of Amir's father's great feats of bravery, for in Peshawar, and later after successfully securing visas for travel to the US, Amir's once-great father was reduced to a shadow of his old self. In California he worked as a gas station attendant and on weekends he and Amir scoured yard sales in the mornings for goods they could sell at the flea market where other Afghan exiles and immigrants gathered to do business and tell stories. It was at the flea market that Amir first saw Soraya, daughter of a former Afghan general and diplomat. As Amir's interest in Soraya grew, his father's health failed, but as his death approached, Amir asked his ailing father to do him one last fatherly duty: Amir needed his father to make the trip over to General Teheri's house and ask for Soraya's hand in marriage. Soraya confessed to a previous sexual relationship that scandalized the Afghan community before she would accept Amir's offer, feeling that he deserved to know the truth. Amir was not put off by the scandal, but actually envied Soraya her courage in telling him her most terrible secret while he himself has told no one of his guilt over betraying Hassan, a guilt that still burned in his heart after so many years.

It is after his father's death, success as a writer, and some fifteen happy years of marriage to Soraya that Amir receives the fateful call from Rahim, who insists he come to Pakistan. Amir realizes that Rahim must know about all that happened between Amir and Hassan, and that the chance to find peace after so many years of guilt is worth the journey. When he arrives in Peshawar and finds Rahim, however, it turns out Rahim expects much more of him: He wants Amir to return to Kabul and to atone for his sins by finding Sohrab, the orphaned son of the now-dead Hassan. Rahim also delivers one piece of news perhaps as devastating as news of the murder of Hassan and his wife by Taliban soldiers, namely that Hassan was actually Amir's half-brother. This revelation about his father's past shakes the very foundations of Amir's understanding of his own past, but it also makes him more determined to find Sohrab, despite the obvious dangers of entering Taliban-controlled Kabul to do so.

Amir and Farid, his driver and guide into Afghanistan, look for Sohrab at an orphanage in Kabul, but they are horrified to learn that a powerful member of the Taliban has taken the boy, as he has taken many other children before, leaving money behind that the orphanage needs badly to feed the rest of the children. They are told how to find the man who took Sohrab. When they do, they see that the situation is much worse than Amir ever guessed, for the sadistic Talib is none other than Assef, now brutalizing Sohrab as he once did his father Hassan. Assef agrees to hand-to-hand combat to win Sohrab's freedom, but insists the traumatized boy watch the savage beating. Amir is on the verge of being beaten to death when Sohrab puts out Assef's eye with his slingshot, enabling them to escape.

Although Farid is able to get Amir safely to a hospital in Peshawar, where emergency surgery saves his life, Amir and Sohrab will not be safe so long as they stay in Pakistan. Amir then learns that Rahim Khan has vanished, and he must decide how to rescue both himself and the traumatized Sohrab.

Resolving that he and Soraya should adopt Sohrab, he promises the boy he will take him to California, and most importantly, that Sohrab will never live in an orphanage again. However, the legal complications of arranging to adopt Sohrab and take him to America mean that Amir may have to leave him temporarily in an orphanage after all, and this prospect leads Sohrab to despair and attempt suicide. At the end, safe in California, Sohrab remains mute, but his faint smile while flying kites gives Amir hope that he can recover.

Questions:

While answers are provided, there is no presumption that you have been given the last word. Readers bring their own personalities to the books that they are examining. What is obvious and compelling to one reader may be invisible to the next. The questions that have been selected provide one reasonable access to the text; the answers are intended to give you examples of what a reflective reader might think. The variety of possible answers is one of the reasons we find book discussions such a rewarding activity.

1. What role do stories play in *The Kite Runner*?

Stories and storytelling play a bigger role in the novel than you might think at first glance. The novel is structured around storytelling, with its first-person narrator and interpolated first-person narrative by Rahim Khan halfway through the novel, and shorter interruptions in the form of the letters by Rahim and Hassan [who learned to read and write after Amir had emigrated]. Amir isn't just telling us his story either; he is by profession a writer and teller of tales. Storytelling played a large part in the childhood play of Amir and Hassan, as Amir read the illiterate Hassan selections from the *Shanamah*, and later his own stories too. Amir's father doesn't approve of his writing, which is also important thematically. Writing is one more way that Amir disappoints his father, as far as he can see. His father is near death before he ever reads anything Amir

has written (p. 150). Rahim Khan, in his long letter to Amir trying to explain his father's character, however, interprets his father's disapproval differently:

I saw how you suffered and yearned for his affections, and my heart bled for you. But your father was a man torn between two halves, Amir jan: you and Hassan. He loved you both, but he could not love Hassan the way he longed to, openly, and as a father. So he took it out on you instead -- Amir, the socially legitimate half, the half that represented the riches he had inherited and the sin-with-impunity privileges that came with them. (p. 263)

Since literacy was a marker of the difference between Amir and Hassan, it stands to reason that Amir's developing a skill in an area where Hassan was prohibited even a rudimentary understanding would make Amir's father feel all the more guilty.

The story of Rostam and Sohrab, Hassan's very favorite story, is also important in the novel. In the story, the great warrior Rostam defeats and mortally wounds the warrior Sohrab in battle, only to discover that Sohrab is in fact his long-lost son. It's a sad tale that often brings Hassan to tears: "Sometimes tears pooled in Hassan's eyes as I read him this passage, and I always wondered whom he wept for, the grief-stricken Rostam who tears his clothes and covers his head with ashes, or the dying Sohrab who only longed for his father's love?" (pp. 25-26). This story resonates through the father-son relationships in the novel, as Amir's father turns his back on Hassan, and as he wounds Amir time and time again with his disapproval. Amir first abandons Hassan to Assef's brutal attack and then drives him from the house, never realizing Hassan is in fact his half-brother. *The Kite Runner* is a story full of fathers, sons and brothers desperate for love, but never recognizing one another until it is too late. One interesting question is why Hassan might have named his son after Sohrab instead of Rostam; to name your only child after a son killed by his own father is a disturbing choice at first glance. Hassan is long-suffering, almost unbelievably so, and so might identify more with the dying son and victim rather than the powerful father figure Rostam, but a simpler explanation is this: in naming his cherished son Sohrab, he may be trying to give the story a happy ending.

2. Doubles fill the novel. Why?

One of the most important functions of doubles in the novel is to provide a second chance. In the form of Sohrab, Amir can see Hassan in the striking physical resemblance between them, but more importantly he can redeem himself in his own eyes and atone for all the things he did to betray Hassan by making things right with Sohrab. Without Sohrab, Amir could never have done so, and would never even have been called by Rahim Khan to travel to Pakistan to begin his quest "*to be good again*" (p. 2).

Doubles in *The Kite Runner* also demonstrate vividly the external forces that operate on a life. Amir and Hassan are half-brothers born close enough together that they share the same wet nurse, but because Amir is born Pashtun and the legitimate son and Hassan is illegitimate and Hazara, they become polar opposites. Raised by his aloof, disapproving father, Amir will sacrifice anything (even Hassan) for his father's affection. He loves

Hassan, but is vicious and jealous when he feels his father has been kind to him, and Amir is resentful too when he watches Ali show such open love for Hassan. Amir's hunger for approval and love turn destructive, mingling with the prejudices against Hazaras in Afghan society which convince him that Hassan is less important than he is. Two boys who share a single biological father, home and childhood, develop into very different men and suffer very different fates.

Doubles also reflect what Amir most hopes for and most fears in himself. Assef represents everything Amir hates in himself -- his prejudice, his violation of Hassan's trust -- only magnified to become Assef's hideous crimes. When Amir's face is scarred and comes to resemble Hassan's, when he takes Hassan's orphaned son as his own, when he chases a kite and repeats to Sohrab the same words Hassan called out to him while running a kite, "For you, a thousand times over," Amir becomes the good man he knows Hassan was. In ridding himself of his sinister double, he is physically and symbolically joined with Hassan instead.

3. What is the purpose of Rahim Khan's presence in the story?

Rahim Khan, friend and business partner of Amir's father, serves a few very important purposes in the story. First and foremost, it is Rahim's phone call and promise that "*There is a way to be good again*" (p. 2) that draws Amir to Pakistan and sets him on his way to redeeming himself. The importance of that is hard to overestimate. As Hosseini depicts him, Amir has buried himself in his new life in America and shut himself off with his guilt to the extent that even his wife Soraya does not know about Hassan. Soraya tells Amir the dreadful truth about her past when he asks to marry her. She tells him truthfully how she ran off with a man and lived with him for a month, permanently ruining her reputation in the Afghan community and causing the stroke that paralyzed part of her mother's face. Instead of the outburst of anger Soraya expects, Amir is surprisingly calm, in part because rumors about her past had reached him long before, but mostly because he doesn't feel anger. He feels something else:

I envied her. Her secret was out. Spoken. Dealt with. I opened my mouth and almost told her how I'd betrayed Hassan, lied, driven him out, and destroyed a forty-year relationship between Baba and Ali. But I didn't. I suspected there were many ways in which Soraya Taheri was a better person than me. Courage was just one of them. (p. 144)

More than fifteen years later, in 2001 when Rahim Khan calls him, Amir still has not mentioned any of his guilt about Hassan to Soraya. Perhaps Amir is still too awed by his father and fearful of his disapproval to mention it to anyone, but his father is already dying at the time of his engagement. Even after Rahim Khan's call and his decision to go to Pakistan, he lies to Soraya and says the reason for his journey is simply that Rahim is sick. Amir cannot speak of what he did so many years ago, let alone ease that guilt by any action, great or small.

Rahim is also the person who tells Amir that Ali was not Hassan's father and that Amir and Hassan were secretly half-brothers. There probably are other ways that Hosseini

might have contrived to reveal the truth about Hassan's parentage, but Rahim Khan is in a unique position to disclose the fact that Amir's father had betrayed the Hazara man he had been raised with too, just as Amir had. Amir's father was so concerned with his honor (and probably also so paralyzed by his guilt, in the same way Amir is) that he could not acknowledge Hassan, not even privately. There are plenty of signs of the affection he has for Hassan, and he mentions him even in America at moments like Amir's graduation, but still he cannot be moved to expose his sins even to keep his son Hassan near him. The only other person who might have told Amir is Ali, but when Amir frames Hassan and tries to have him thrown out of the house as a thief, Amir believes that Hassan told Ali the truth, and he sees such anger in the older man's face that all ties between them are severed.

Rahim is the key to moving Amir from his comfortable life as a writer in California to danger and salvation in Afghanistan, and it might be fair to say that's his sole purpose in the story. Why would Hassan have told Rahim Kahn about the attack in the alley and Amir's betrayals? Why does Rahim decide to stay in Kabul when everyone else of his stature emigrates in fear for their lives? Why does he risk traveling to Bamiyan hoping to find Hassan as a grown man and lure him back to Kabul? Why does he imagine that a Hazara family will be safe living alone in such a grand house while he seeks medical treatment in Pakistan? Why does he disappear, ostensibly preferring to die alone, rather than waiting in Pakistan for Amir's return with Hassan? Rahim Khan may be a peripheral figure in the story in many ways, and implausibility may mark much of what he does in the story, but he achieves his main purpose in the novel and fills that role in a way it is difficult to imagine any other character could.

4. Why is Farid so significant during Amir's journey?

Farid provides Amir with insight into an Afghanistan largely unknown to him. Farid fought in the bloody wars that beset the country and experienced the gruesome deaths of friends and family, losing several of his own fingers and toes as well, while Amir lived in safety in America. It is not just emigration that separates Farid's experience from Amir's: privilege plays just as big a role. Even during his childhood in Afghanistan, Amir was sheltered from the hardship that characterized life for so many of his countrymen. Farid is disdainful of Amir's journey back "home" to Afghanistan and how he finds it changed, because Amir's Afghanistan was never the real one:

He pointed to an old man dressed in ragged clothes trudging down a dirt path, a large burlap pack filled with scrub grass tied to his back. "That's the real Afghanistan, Agha sahib. That's the Afghanistan I know. You? You've *always* been a tourist here, you just didn't know it." (p. 204)

Farid also represents the qualities of the Afghan people in Amir's mind, much of what is best, and some of what is worst. Amir sees Farid's justifiable hostility towards him and other privileged Afghans who fled, his pride, his bravery in helping Amir, and his generosity with his guests, even when there is literally not enough food to feed his family. Farid's love of children is another feature of his character. Amir first sees Farid

smile when he arrives at his home and sees his family, and he nearly strangles Zaman, the man who runs the orphanage and essentially sold Sohrab to Assef (p. 224). Amir is outraged, but sees the ambiguity of Zaman's situation where Farid simply cannot. "If I deny him one child, he takes ten," Zaman argues when Amir and Farid confront him. "So I let him take one and leave the judging to Allah. I swallow my pride and take his goddamn filthy . . . dirty money. Then I go to the bazaar and buy food for the children" (p. 225). Amir admires the bravery and belief in absolute right and wrong that he sees in Farid and that he saw in his father in moments like the dangerous journey out of Afghanistan, when his father stood up to an armed Russian soldier who intended to rape a young Afghan mother (pp. 99-102). He might have gotten himself killed. He might have gotten all the illegal emigrants in the truck killed. Amir is awed and terrified by men like his father and Farid who see their course so clearly in moments of danger and uncertainty.

Like Amir, however, Farid shares the common prejudices against the Hazara and Shi'a. He accompanies Amir into danger as he tries to rescue his nephew Sohrab, but he asks Amir why he would go to such lengths for this particular boy: "You come all the way from America for . . . a Shi'a?" (p. 233). Amir is horrified to hear Farid ask that, but he is not that much better himself. He has come from America to find peace, not to adopt a Hazara boy -- not even if that boy is his nephew and Hassan's son. It is only Rahim Khan's convenient trickery that sets the wheels in motion for Sohrab to go to America with Amir. Amir initially thinks he will be leaving Sohrab with some American philanthropists in Pakistan whom Rahim knows (and has invented). As a child, Amir only played with Hassan when no one was around; when Hassan found holes in Amir's story plots, a "voice, cold and dark, suddenly whispered in my ear, *What does he know, that illiterate Hazara? He'll never be anything but a cook. How dare he criticize you?*" (p. 30).

Both Farid and Amir inherit prejudices that have marked Afghan culture for centuries, but just as in Amir's case, Farid shows signs he may well be able to overcome the weight of those long years of racial and religious hatred. Farid cares for Sohrab while Amir is fighting for life in the hospital, giving him some of his son's clothes and feeding him despite the fact Farid and his family are very nearly starving: "We don't have a lot of room, but what can I do? I can't leave him to the streets. Besides, my children have taken a liking to him. *Ha, Sohrab?*" (p. 261). He warns Amir that Sohrab and Amir must leave Peshawar as soon as possible because the Taliban have allies in Peshawar who will certainly be looking for them. He offers to take them to Islamabad, despite the fact he has a family to support and will be at risk himself in driving the two of them: "Farid made a waving gesture. 'My boys are young, but they are very shrewd. They know how to take care of their mothers and sisters.' He smiled. 'Besides, I didn't say I'd do it for free.'" (p. 266). At the same time that Amir is still hoping that he can find the fictional John and Betty Caldwell to hand Sohrab over to in Peshawar, Farid is offering to make yet another dangerous journey, this time to Islamabad, to get Amir and Sohrab to safety. He seems to realize what Amir does not yet accept: that Sohrab will not be safe with Farid's family in Peshawar, or even in Islamabad or any other city in Pakistan. He must go to America with Amir. While Amir likes to believe he is less prejudiced than Farid, Farid in fact

overcomes his prejudices and opens his home to Sohrab faster than Amir does, despite Amir's more compelling reasons for doing so. It will take Sohrab's suicide attempt to bring Amir to the same realization.

5. Why is Assef so evil?

Are there any bad qualities Assef doesn't have? Assef isn't just a childhood bully, he carries brass knuckles, bites off ears, and idolizes Hitler. He's a rapist, assaulting first Hassan in the alley and then countless children, male and female, taken from the Kabul orphanage. As a powerful member of the Taliban, he stones a man and woman to death for adultery and he exults over the massacre of Hazaras in Mazar-i-Sharif: "You don't know the meaning of the word 'liberating' until you've done that, stood in a roomful of targets, let the bullets fly, free of guilt and remorse [. . .]" (p. 242). "Years later, I learned an English word for the creature that Assef was," Amir tells readers, "a word for which a good Farsi equivalent does not exist: 'sociopath.'" (p. 34). "Creature" is an important word here as it separates Assef from humanity.

If you don't subscribe to the theory that Hosseini simply overdid it, there are two other possible explanations for why Assef's crimes and character are so extreme and so evil. First of all, he is a Talib, and Afghanistan under the rule of the Taliban is depicted as fanatical and murderous distortion of Islam. Assef puts a human face (or an inhuman one) on that dark period in Afghan history. He also provides continuity between the sins of the days before the Soviet invasion and the Taliban regime. As much as Afghans might want to believe that the Taliban sprang up out of nowhere, Hosseini provides parallels to make the crimes of the Taliban harder to dismiss as a total aberration. Amir's father takes him to see the yearly Buzkashi tournament, where on this occasion, one of the horsemen falls and is trampled to death while competition continues (p. 18), and even kite-flying costs a great deal of blood. Stoning at half-time in the soccer stadium may be a particularly disturbing and bloody thing and not appreciated by many of the spectators, but the combination of spectator sports and death is not altogether new in Afghanistan. The prejudice against Hazaras is nothing new either, even if the mass murder of them in the style Assef practices it is.

Assef is perhaps also painted as so unfathomably evil because Amir fears that he and Assef are alike. Amir's self-loathing and feelings of guilt are so extreme that he sees Assef as his twin, even in his hospital bed in Peshawar, after his rescue of Sohrab: "I had a dream later that night. I dreamed Assef was standing in the doorway of my hospital room, brass ball still in his eye socket. 'We're the same, you and I,' he was saying. 'You nursed with him, but you're *my* twin.'" (p. 268). They are, indeed, the same: in their privileged backgrounds and schooling in prejudice, in their status as outsiders in Afghan society (Assef is half-German, after all, and Amir is, as Farid reminds him, little better than a tourist), and in their crimes against Hassan. If Assef violates Hassan's body, Amir violates his trust in a way just as brutal.

Assef describes laughing as he was beaten by Soviet collaborators before the Taliban took power (p. 247-48) and Amir begins to laugh as Assef savagely beats him (p. 252-

53). Assef describes his laughter as an epiphany and a sign that he is on a mission from God (p. 247-48). In Amir's case, the beating is one he desperately wanted from Hassan:

What was so funny was that, for the first time since the winter of 1975, I felt at peace. I laughed because I saw that, in some hidden nook in a corner of my mind, I'd even been looking forward to this. I remembered the day on the hill I had pelted Hassan with pomegranates and tried to provoke him. He'd just stood there with pomegranate juice soaking through his shirt like blood. Then he'd taken the pomegranate from my hand, crushed it against his forehead. *Are you satisfied now?* he'd hissed. *Do you feel better?* I hadn't been happy and I hadn't felt better, not at all. But I did now. My body was broken - - just how badly I wouldn't find out until later -- but I felt *healed*. Healed at last. I laughed (pp. 252-53).

The parallels between Assef and Amir emphasize Amir's feelings of guilt, but the differences between them and the scene where they literally battle point to Amir's ultimate redemption. It is not coincidental that after the beating, Amir physically resembles Hassan, with a surgical scar above his lip mimicking the scar from the surgery to repair Hassan's harelip. After battling with his demons in Afghanistan (quite literally), Amir is ready to put his darker side and Assef behind him, and to become Hassan, who in his purity and loyalty is at least slightly more human than Assef.

6. Why is Sohrab's suicide attempt so crucial to the story?

It seems like too much. The little boy has lived as a persecuted minority his whole life, his parents were executed by the Taliban, he was sent to an orphanage to live under horrific conditions and from there was essentially sold to a sadistic pedophile (the same one who had raped Sohrab's father as a young boy). He's forced to watch Amir's near-fatal beating at Assef's hands, and although he saves Amir's life by shooting out Assef's eye with his slingshot, he remembers his father's lessons about responding to bad people and is convinced he is damned for his actions (pp. 277-78). He's forced to flee Kabul for Pakistan, where he and Amir face an uphill battle to get Sohrab safely to America. And Sohrab is only a child.

7. Why isn't that enough? Why does one last betrayal have to push him to slash his wrists with Amir's razor?

In a plot full of unlikely coincidences, Sohrab's suicide attempt prevents too neat an escape from peril and too quick a salvation for Amir, first of all. It is only in the hospital waiting for word that Amir begins to pray, a moment that marks the rediscovery of his faith. Even his own near-death hadn't moved him in the same way, and since he continues praying after he returns to California, there are signs that his moment of spiritual awakening in the hospital waiting area is part of a lasting change. Amir's transformation and redemption were incomplete until Sohrab's terrible, desperate attempt to escape the horrors of his life.

Perhaps more importantly, however, Sohrab's attempted suicide changes the relationship between Amir and Sohrab in critical ways. Regardless of what Amir thinks of himself, his actions seem heroic as he comes to rescue Sohrab from his abusers. Upon hearing the purpose of Amir's travel to Afghanistan, Farid's older brother Wahid is filled with admiration: "You are an honorable man, Amir agha. A true Afghan" (p. 208). Amir nearly loses his life in saving Sohrab as well, adding to the appearance of amazing heroism and bravery. But in promising Sohrab will never go back to an orphanage and then telling Sohrab later that conferring with a lawyer had convinced him that might be the only way to adopt Sohrab legally, he breaks the promise on which Sohrab was pinning all his hopes. Amir realizes "Something was lost between Sohrab and me. Until my meeting with the lawyer, Omar Faisal, a light of hope had begun to enter Sohrab's eyes like a timid guest. Now the light was gone, the guest had fled, and I wondered when it would return" (p. 310). How serious that loss of hope was is demonstrated by the desperate action Sohrab takes to avoid going to another orphanage.

Amir must relinquish his role as savior and try to win Sohrab's forgiveness, something he struggles to accomplish even as Sohrab lies in his hospital bed in Pakistan:

"You know, I've done a lot of things I regret in my life," I said, "and maybe none more than going back on the promise I made you. But that will never happen again, and I am so very profoundly sorry. I ask for your *bakhshesh*, your forgiveness. Can you do that?" (p. 310)

Not surprisingly, after giving this speech, Amir's mind flashes back to Sohrab's father Hassan. Amir's crimes against Hassan were always hidden, from his petty torments and tests of loyalty to his greater betrayals after the final kite run. Amir never had to confess what he did and beg Hassan's forgiveness. After Sohrab tries to kill himself, Amir must beg forgiveness and win the trust -- deserve the trust -- of the young boy who so resembles Hassan. Sohrab, whose fate has mirrored his father's as much as his face has, will provide Amir the opportunity to complete his redemption and atone for his sins.

8. Is there a happy ending in this novel?

"If someone were to ask me today whether the story of Hassan, Sohrab, and me ends with happiness, I wouldn't know what to say," Amir says once he and Sohrab have made it safely to California (p. 311). At a darker point in the story, Amir despairs of his native land and wonders if it is beyond help. Farid, who has helped Amir so much in his search for Sohrab and will risk even more before the two men part company in Pakistan, asks Amir as they begin their search for Sohrab in Kabul, "What I mean to ask is why *that* boy? You come all the way from America for . . . a Shi'a?" Amir despairs and cannot help seeing in Farid's prejudice a reflection of the problems that beset Afghanistan as a whole: "I stayed awake, hands crossed on my chest, staring into the starlit night through the broken windows, and thinking that maybe what people said about Afghanistan was true. Maybe it was a hopeless place" (p. 233). At the end of the novel, is there a happy ending for Hosseini's characters, or at least hope? Is there any for the country they represent?

As much as we might like to see little Sohrab happy at the end of the book, that's not the case. At the story's end, he has been in America and mute for a year. Amir's wife Soraya has all but given up hope that he will ever speak or show interest in what goes on around him. Perhaps the child simply can't recover from the violence and horror he has experienced. Hosseini leaves the ending open to that sad possibility.

On the other hand, there is a sign at the end of the novel that Sohrab might yet heal and that the ending should be read as at least a potentially happy ending. Amir sees a response in Sohrab's eyes as Amir flies a kite for him and shows him one of his old tricks for cutting down an opponent in kite-fighting:

I looked down at Sohrab. One corner of his mouth had curled up just so.

A smile.

Lopsided.

Hardly there.

But there. (p. 323)

Amir has been redeemed from his years of self-condemnation and guilt by his journey to Afghanistan, and what's more, his life has been completely transformed: he prays every day (p. 318); he becomes active in fund-raising for a small hospital on the Afghan-Pakistani border (p. 317); he is a father at long last; he has repaired his family and atoned for his father's sins by acknowledging Sohrab as his nephew and taking him in as a son; the distinctions between Pashtun and Hazara, between rich and poor, no longer matter to him. Despite the fact we do not see Sohrab make a full recovery and find joy in life again, he is safe, and he smiles, if only a little. After suffering as much as Sohrab and Amir have, perhaps this is already a very happy ending.

Hassan seems to represent Afghanistan in the story in many ways -- its ethnic strife, its social stratification, its doomed beauty. His fate would bode ill indeed for Afghanistan's future if the correlation were as simple as that. But in many ways, Hassan and Amir are presented as two sides of the same coin, or the Afghan character: Hassan is the good-hearted, optimistic, loyal and pure brother, while Amir sees himself as mean-spirited, cowardly, possessive, guilty, and too blindly accepting of centuries of ingrained prejudice. If Hassan represents a beauty and innocence in Afghanistan's past -- a beauty and innocence threatened anew in the form of his young son Sohrab -- Amir personifies its darker impulses. Amir is not Assef, however, who truly is evil; Amir has more strength than he realizes and good mingled with his weaknesses. He is able to achieve a measure of peace, transform his life for the better, and reach out to his fellow Afghans both in the form of the little boy he takes as his son and the people he helps via his work with the hospital on the Afghan border. Amir's story demonstrates that he can not only change himself, but change Afghanistan for the better, and that after years of prejudice and violence, symbolized in the fates of the two brothers Amir and Hassan, there is yet hope.

Hosseini has also mentioned in interviews that he believes there is an innocence and dignity in the Afghan spirit that has not been destroyed and perhaps cannot be, despite all

the destruction, deprivation and despair. He described this scene from his visit to Kabul in March of 2003 to Adair Lara of the *San Francisco Chronicle*:

When I was in Kabul, I was walking down the street, and the city is packed with beggars. Most of them are either women or children. This little boy came up to me. I struck up a conversation with him. I naturally assumed he was a beggar. I shot a photo of him. I took out some money and I said, "Here you go son, go buy some bread or something." He looked at the money. He goes, "I'm not a beggar. Do you want to come over for tea?" He pointed me to his house, and there were these three walls with no roof, the walls were crumbling. There was a big hole in the middle, and the basement had been shelled. People were just sitting underneath this, this rubble. And he was inviting me to tea. (<http://www.khaledhosseini.com>)

In real life, after the publication of his novel *The Kite Runner*, he found the same glimmer of hope in the face of devastation that he had depicted in the flicker of a smile across Sohrab's face.

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.

Yasmina Khadra, *The Swallows of Kabul* (2004)

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.

Asne Seierstad, *The Bookseller of Kabul* (2003)

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.

Michael Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost* (2000)

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.

Andre Dubus III, *House of Sand and Fog* (1999)

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.

Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake* (2003)

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.

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This Book Discussion Guide was developed by Janet West, who teaches literature and writing at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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