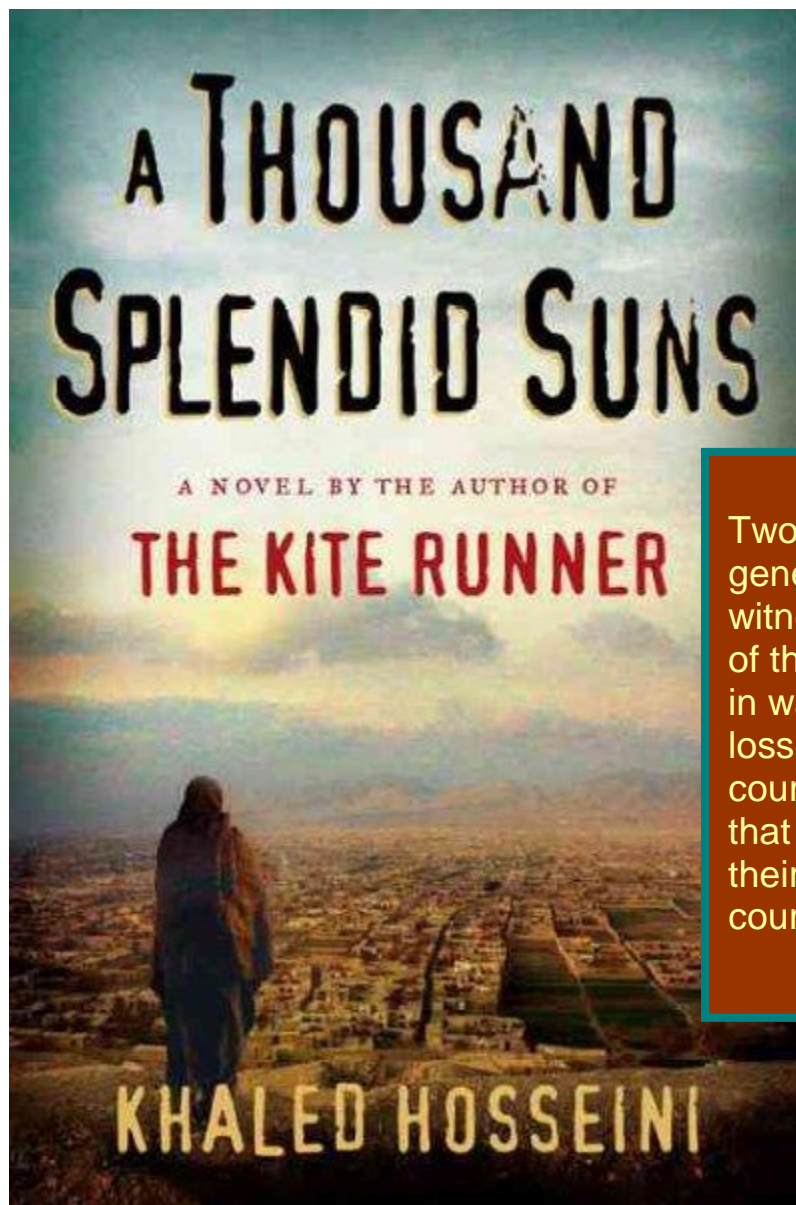


Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

About the Book



Two women born a generation apart witness the destruction of their home and family in war torn Kabul, losses incurred over the course of thirty years that test the limits of their strength and courage.

## About the Author

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 38 countries. In 2006 he was named a goodwill envoy to UNHCR, the United Nations Refugee Agency.

## Awards

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* was nominated for ALA's Best Book for Young Readers Award in 2008

(<http://www.ala.org/yalsa/booklistsawards/booklistsbook>).

## Reviews

### *NoveList*

Hosseini's follow-up to his best-selling debut, *The Kite Runner* (2003) views the plight of Afghanistan during the last half-century through the eyes of two women. Mariam is the illegitimate daughter of a maid and a businessman, who is given away in marriage at 15 to Rasheed, a man three times her age; their union is not a loving one. Laila is born to educated, liberal parents in Kabul the night the Communists take over Afghanistan. Adored by her father but neglected in favor of her older brothers by her mother, Laila finds her true love early on in Tariq, a

thoughtful, chivalrous boy who lost a leg in an explosion. But when tensions between the Communists and the mujahideen make the city unsafe, Tariq and his family flee to Pakistan. A devastating tragedy brings Laila to the house of Rasheed and Mariam, where she is forced to make a horrific choice to secure her future. At the heart of the novel is the bond between Mariam and Laila, two very different women brought together by dire circumstances. Unimaginably tragic, Hosseini's magnificent second novel is a sad and beautiful testament to both Afghani suffering and strength. Readers who lost themselves in *The Kite Runner* will not want to miss this unforgettable follow-up.

### *Publishers Weekly*

Afghan-American novelist Hosseini follows up his best selling *The Kite Runner* with another searing epic of Afghanistan in turmoil. The story covers three decades of anti-Soviet jihad, civil war and Taliban tyranny through the lives of two women. Mariam is the scorned illegitimate daughter of a wealthy businessman, forced at age 15 into marrying the 40-year-old Rasheed, who grows increasingly brutal as she fails to produce a child. Eighteen later, Rasheed takes another wife, 14-year-old Laila, a smart and spirited girl whose only other options, after her parents are killed by rocket fire, are prostitution or starvation. Against a backdrop of unending war, Mariam and Laila become allies in an asymmetrical battle with Rasheed, whose violent misogyny is endorsed by custom and law. Hosseini gives a forceful but nuanced portrait of a patriarchal despotism where women are agonizingly dependent on fathers, husbands and especially sons, the bearing of male children being their sole path to social status. His tale is a powerful, harrowing depiction of Afghanistan, but also a lyrical evocation of the lives and enduring hopes of its resilient characters.

### *Library Journal*

Raised in poverty by her unwed epileptic mother and married off early by the rich, elegant father who has always kept her at arm's length, Mariam would seem to have little in common with well-educated and comfortably raised young Laila. Yet their lives intertwine dramatically in this affecting new novel from the author of *The Kite Runner*, who proves that one can write a successful follow-up after debuting with a phenomenal best seller. As Mariam settles in Kabul with her abusive cobbler husband, smart student Laila falls in love with friend Tariq. But she loses her brothers in the resistance to Soviet dominion and her parents in a bombing just as the family prepares to flee the awful violence. Simply to survive, she becomes

the second wife of Mariam's husband and is bitterly resented by the older woman until they are able to form the bond that serves as the heart of this novel. Then the Taliban arrive. Hosseini deftly sketches the history of his native land in the late 20th century while also delivering a sensitive and utterly persuasive dual portrait. His writing is simple and unadorned, but his story is heartbreaking. Highly recommended.

## Literary Criticism

### *Afghanistan's True Darkness*

It's nearly impossible for a novel--a work of fantasy and fabrication--to deliver a formidable blow, a pounding of the senses, a reeling so staggering that we are convinced the characters and their dilemmas are genuine. Such a persuasion is particularly difficult when the setting is Afghanistan, a country and culture many see as too strange for recognition, for empathy. But that's what Khaled Hosseini does again and again in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, his masterful follow-up to his best-selling debut, *The Kite Runner*, also about his homeland. I was pummeled so many times by *Suns*, the wind knocked out of me so unexpectedly that at one point I had to shut the book to unclench my stomach. This is not a predictable story. It is not a happy one, either, but it is absolutely compelling on every level. The book interjects readers into the lives of Afghani women who are caught in the crossfire of the various ruling forces--first the Soviets, then the various ethnic factions, then the Taliban--that have strip-mined the country of its soul and its humanity. Thirty years of war have succeeded in eliminating all rights for women, forcing them out of jobs and into burqas, closing schools for girls and making them dependent on the mercy of men for survival.

Crafted as a double narrative of two women from two different generations and classes, the book merges their stories with a trifecta of tragedy: a bomb barely spares 14-year-old Laila but kills her mother and father while another rocket kills her boyfriend--or so she is led to believe. The man who saves her, who digs her from the rubble, is 60ish Rasheed, a shoe salesman, who has a penchant for young girls. His wife, Mariam, was given to him when she was only 15.

Educated and destined for college before the war took over her living room, Laila finds herself an orphan, much as Mariam, a bastard, had 18 years

earlier when her mother committed suicide. Rasheed offers to marry Laila instead of turning her out into the rubble of Kabul, and Laila accepts with all the joy of one approaching her own rape, which, of course, it is. Laila is not a victim, however, but a survivor. Had it been just her, Laila would have tried to get to a refugee camp. But she felt the kick of another generation growing inside of her, the result of a single carnal moment with her boyfriend.

Though they are cast as competitors, Rasheed's dissimilar wives team up to offer each other support from the beatings and the verbal lashings. They plan a risky escape but when that fails, the powerlessness of their plight couldn't be more palpable: Strangers turn them in to the authorities, and police officers shrug their shoulders at the likelihood that Rasheed may kill them for causing dishonor. When they are forcibly returned to their house, the policeman lights a cigarette and says with sarcasm: "Welcome home."

Downstairs, the beating began. To Laila, the sounds she heard were those of a methodical, familiar proceeding. There was no cursing, no screaming, no pleading, no surprised yelps, only the systematic business of beating and being beaten, the thump-thump of something solid repeatedly striking flesh, something, someone, hitting a wall with a thud, cloth ripping. Now and then, Laila heard running footsteps, a wordless chase, furniture turning over, glass shattering, then the thumping once more.

Afterward the women and Laila's infant daughter, Aziza, are boarded up in a room without food and water as punishment. To the reader, the darkness feels impenetrable and the heat suffocating. But Rasheed's words work like a branding iron on our skin: "... there isn't a court in this godforsaken country that will hold me accountable for what I will do."

Readers will certainly wince at the brutality of this book--the bruises beneath the burqa, the grotesque murders--but ultimately their faith in humanity will be rewarded. Despite its gripping and graphic depiction of war, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is at its core a multilayered love story--a long-enduring romance, a mother--daughter chronicle, a tale of what people are willing to endure for others. For fans of *The Kite Runner*--which has been made into a movie for the big screen due out this fall--*Suns* will feel familiar but far more ambitious.

While *The Kite Runner* was the story of redemption, of male friendship and the bond between fathers and sons, *Suns* is a multigenerational story with a larger cast of characters, spanning 45 years and told from the dual perspectives of two powerless women. *The Kite Runner* mostly depicts Afghanistan from a distance--the view its author has had of his native country since he emigrated to the United States in 1980. But *Suns* plants its characters in the middle of a war zone both outside and inside the home. That incisive portrayal was inspired, the author says, by a recent visit to his homeland where he met women who routinely turned out their children to beg and where he learned of others who, faced with starvation, offered their families bread crumbs laced with rat poison.

There is a subtle difference, of course, between imagining the depravity of war and actually smelling the orphans left in its wake. That is the difference between these two haunting novels.

Source: Reed, Cheryl L. "Afghanistan's True Darkness." *Chicago Sun-Times* (10 June 2007): B12. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 254. Detroit: Gale, 2008. Literature Resource Center.

<http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books>

### Discussion Questions

Source: <http://www.khaledhosseini.com/>

1. The phrase "a thousand splendid suns," from the poem by Saib-e-Tabrizi, is quoted twice in the novel – once as Laila's family prepares to leave Kabul, and again when she decides to return there from Pakistan. It is also echoed in one of the final lines: "Miriam is in Laila's own heart, where she shines with the bursting radiance of a thousand suns." Discuss the thematic significance of this phrase.
2. Mariam's mother tells her: "Women like us. We endure. It's all we have." Discuss how this sentiment informs Mariam's life and how it relates to the larger themes of the novel.
3. By the time Laila is rescued from the rubble of her home by Rasheed and Mariam, Mariam's marriage has become a miserable existence of neglect and abuse. Yet when she realizes that Rasheed intends to marry Laila, she reacts with outrage. Given that Laila's presence actually tempers Rasheed's abuse, why is Mariam so hostile toward her?

4. Laila's friendship with Mariam begins when she defends Mariam from a beating by Rasheed. Why does Laila take this action, despite the contempt Mariam has consistently shown her?

5. Growing up, Laila feels that her mother's love is reserved for her two brothers. "People," she decides, "shouldn't be allowed to have new children if they'd already given away all their love to their old ones." How does this sentiment inform Laila's reaction to becoming pregnant with Rasheed's child? What lessons from her childhood does Laila apply in raising her own children?

6. At several points in the story, Mariam and Laila pass themselves off as mother and daughter. What is the symbolic importance of this subterfuge? In what ways is Mariam's and Laila's relationship with each other informed by their relationships with their own mothers?

7. One of the Taliban judges at Mariam's trial tells her, "God has made us different, you women and us men. Our brains are different. You are not able to think like we can. Western doctors and their science have proven this." What is the irony in this statement? How is irony employed throughout the novel?

8. Laila's father tells her, "You're a very, very bright girl. Truly you are. You can be anything that you want." Discuss Laila's relationship with her father. What aspects of his character does she inherit? In what ways is she different?

9. Mariam refuses to see visitors while she is imprisoned, and she calls no witnesses at her trial. Why does she make these decisions?

10. The driver who takes Babi, Laila, and Tariq to the giant stone Buddhas above the Bamiyan Valley describes the crumbling fortress of Shahr-e-Zohak as "the story of our country, one invader after another... we're like those walls up there. Battered, and nothing pretty to look at, but still standing." Discuss the metaphorical import of this passage as it relates to Mariam and Laila. In what ways does their story reflect the larger story of Afghanistan's troubled history?

11. Among other things, the Taliban forbid "writing books, watching films,



and painting pictures.” Yet despite this edict, the film *Titanic* becomes a sensation on the black market. Why would people risk the Taliban’s violent reprisals for a taste of popcorn entertainment? What do the Taliban’s restrictions on such material say about the power of artistic expression and the threat it poses to repressive political regimes?

12. While the first three parts of the novel are written in the past tense, the final part is written in present tense. What do you think was the author’s intent in making this shift? How does it change the effect of this final section?

## Multimedia

### ***Khaled Hosseini’s ‘Thousand Splendid Suns’ (Radio Broadcast)***

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=10302277>

An interview with the author on NPR’s *Morning Edition*.

### ***Khaled Hosseini, Spinning Tales of a Faraway Home (Radio Broadcast)***

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=12485448>

An interview with the author on NPR’s *Fresh Air*.

### ***Khaled Hosseini discusses A Thousand Splendid Suns (Video Clip)***

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S4kyaITT\\_wY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S4kyaITT_wY)

Khaled Hosseini, author of *The Kite Runner*, discusses his new bestselling novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

## Further Reading

### **\*Book Club To Go!\* *The Kite Runner* by Khalid Hosseini**

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1204066>

(Call number: Fiction Hosseini)

Amir and Hassan are childhood friends in the alleys and orchards of Kabul in the sunny days before the invasion of the Soviet army and Afghanistan's descent into fanaticism. Both motherless, they grow up as close as brothers, but their fates, they know, are to be different. Amir's father is a wealthy merchant; Hassan's father is his manservant. Amir belongs to the ruling caste of Pashtuns, Hassan to the despised Hazaras. This fragile idyll is broken by the mounting ethnic, religious, and political tensions that begin to tear Afghanistan apart. An unspeakable assault on Hassan by a gang of



local boys tears the friends apart; Amir has witnessed his friend's torment, but is too afraid to intercede.

***Stones Into Schools: Promoting Peace With Books, Not Bombs, In Afghanistan and Pakistan*** by Greg Mortenson

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1348838>

(Call number: 371.822 Mo)

In this dramatic first-person narrative, Greg Mortenson picks up where "Three Cups of Tea" left off in 2003, recounting his relentless, ongoing efforts to establish schools for girls in Afghanistan; his extensive work in Azad Kashmir and Pakistan after a massive earthquake hit the region in 2005; and the unique ways he has built relationships with Islamic clerics, militia commanders, and tribal leaders even as he was dodging shootouts with feuding Afghan warlords and surviving an eight-day armed abduction by the Taliban.

***Author's official website***

<http://www.khaledhosseini.com/>

Information, resources, and biography from the author.

***The Kite Runner (Movie)***

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1309124>

(Call number: DVD Drama Kite)

In a divided country on the verge of war, two childhood friends, Amir and Hassan, are about to be torn apart forever. It's a glorious afternoon in Kabul and the skies are bursting with the exhilarating joy of a kite-fighting tournament. But in the aftermath of the day's victory, one boy's fearful act of betrayal will mark their lives forever and set in motion an epic quest for redemption. Now, after twenty years of living in America, Amir returns to a perilous Afghanistan under the Taliban's iron-fisted rule to face the secrets that still haunt him and take one last daring chance to set things right.

*Summaries from AADL.org Catalog*

**Read-Alikes** *Source: NoveList*

***The Emancipator's Wife*** by Barbara Hambly

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1235810>

(Call number: Fiction Hambly)

As a girl growing up in Kentucky, she lived a sheltered, privileged life filled with picnics and plantation balls. Vivacious, impulsive, and intoxicated by politics, she is a Todd of Lexington, an aristocratic family whose ancestors defeated the British. But no one knows her secret fears and anxieties. Although she is courted by the most eligible suitors in the land, including future senator Stephen Douglas, it is a gangly lawyer from Illinois who captures her heart. After a stormy courtship and a broken engagement, Abraham Lincoln will marry twenty-four-year-old Mary Todd and give her a ring inscribed with the words "Love Is Eternal." But their happiness won't last nearly so long.

***Third Girl from the Left*** by Martha Southgate

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1248053>

(Call number: Fiction Southgate)

This enormously entertaining yet serious novel tells a story of African-American women struggling against all odds to express what lies deepest in their hearts. Like Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* or E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*, it ranges freely through time, fact, and fiction to weave an enthralling story about history and art and their place in the lives of three women.

***Liars and Saints*** by Maile Meloy

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1206817>

(Call number: Fiction Meloy)

This richly textured, emotionally charged novel tells a story of sex and longing, love and loss, and of the deceits that can lie at the heart of family relationships. Set in California, *Liars and Saints* follows four generations of the Catholic Santerre family from World War II to the present, as they navigate a succession of life-altering events -- through the submerged emotion of the fifties, the recklessness and excess of the sixties and seventies, and the reckonings of the eighties and nineties. In a family driven by jealousy and propriety as much as by love, an unspoken tradition of deceit is passed from generation to generation, and fiercely protected secrets gradually drive the Santerres apart.

***The Space Between Us*** by Thrity N. Umrigar

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1258646>

(Call number: Fiction Umrigar)

Poignant, evocative, and unforgettable, *The Space Between Us* is an intimate portrait of a distant yet familiar world. Set in modern-day India, it is

the story of two compelling and aching real women: Sera Dubash, an upper-middle-class Parsi housewife whose opulent surroundings hide the shame and disappointment of her abusive marriage, and Bhima, a stoic illiterate hardened by a life of despair and loss, who has worked in the Dubash household for more than twenty years. A powerful and perceptive literary masterwork, author Thrity Umrigar's extraordinary novel demonstrates how the lives of the rich and poor are intrinsically connected yet vastly removed from each other, and how the strong bonds of womanhood are eternally opposed by the divisions of class and culture.

*Summaries from AADL.org Catalog*

