

'The Kite Runner' novel moves the world

Khaled Hosseini, whose best-seller opened a window into Afghanistan, appears at an O.C. benefit this week.

By VIK JOLLY

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AFGHAN HERITAGE NIGHT - The **Afghanistan Relief Organization**, a Cypress-based humanitarian organization, will honor author Khaled Hosseini of San Jose. The event will feature live Afghan music, a taste of the country's cuisine, and a silent auction of Afghan jewelry and art. Hosseini is being honored for sharing the Afghan experience and culture with his best-selling book, "The Kite Runner."

All Khaled Hosseini wanted to do was tell a story.

He wrote a short one about a privileged Afghan boy and his relationship growing up with an ethnic Hazara servant child, a tale drawn from some of his own life experiences.

The wealthy boy leaves to live in the United States with his family, escaping the invading Russians, never to return to Afghanistan.

The poor Hazara stays behind, and many unresolved issues between the two remain after the Hazara's death.

Hosseini sent the transcript to The New Yorker, Esquire and The Atlantic Monthly. It never got published.

Then one day, his father-in-law's wish that the story were longer sparked something in Hosseini, an Afghan-born doctor living in San Jose.

"That was really my first crack at writing a novel," said Hosseini, 40.

In an effort that lasted 15 months, Hosseini crafted a masterpiece, "The Kite Runner," which nearly three years after publication has topped several best-seller lists and sold more than 2.5 million copies. In the novel, the protagonist returns to a changed Afghanistan to face his past and for a chance to atone for mistakes.

In the book, Hosseini, the son of a diplomat, who lived in Tehran and Paris before moving to the United States when he was 15, cobbles a story of human failings and guilt set largely in his native country.

He and his family were granted political asylum in the United States in 1980, after the Communists took over Kabul.

The success of his book has "blown me away and it continues to do that," Hosseini said. He's working on a second novel also set in Afghanistan, due next year.

Friday, he will be honored at an Afghan fundraising event in Laguna Niguel. Here are excerpts from a telephone interview he gave last week from his home.

Q. What inspired you to write the book?

A.The act of novel writing, especially the first novel, is very difficult without dipping into the pools - emotions, experiences, memories and observations - that make up the writer. The protagonist (Amir) and myself had similar upbringings: We grew up in the Wazir Akbar Khan neighborhood, both influenced by Western culture, both precocious writers.

Q. How did you settle on the theme and why?

A.I was compelled by characters and entanglements between people. As I was writing the book, I found I was also telling the story of Afghanistan. I didn't sit down with a theme in mind. As the story unfolds, the lives are affected.

Q. Your central character is guilt-ridden. Did you feel guilty for having led a privileged life?

A.I think certainly in Kabul I had a privileged life, and I remember as a boy being kind of aware of where I fit into that society. It's hard not to feel some guilt in a country where privilege and poverty are basically next door to each other.

Q. Did you want Amir's actions to engender in the reader a sort of revulsion toward him?

A. I was very intrigued by writing a central character as someone who was deeply flawed. But the reader could not fully condemn him; there was something redeeming in him. There had to be something human in this deeply troubled boy, and that was the balancing act that I had to do with this character.

Q. A defining moment in your protagonist's life was when he was "peeking into the alley near the frozen creek." What did he learn and is it applicable to other people, other times?

A.I think that's more of a question for the reader. It's possible to look at the scene in various different ways. To some, the scene is reminiscent for what happened to Afghanistan when the Soviets left, and you substitute Afghanistan for Hassan (the Hazara

servant boy). For 10 years the world watched what was happening as Afghanistan was being brutalized, and the world kind of stood around.

Q. What is the status of the Hazaras today? Are they still second-class citizens?

A.The constitution allows equal rights to everybody, and Hazaras are allowed to have an equal role in the government as everyone else. There are Hazaras in the Parliament and cabinet. But it's hard to change attitudes overnight.

Q. Describe the reaction to your book: from Afghan-Americans, from Afghans still there and among the public.

A.I think the Afghan reaction to my book largely has been very positive, especially here in exile. I get e-mails all the time (from those) who say they see themselves in this book. Some object to the ethnic contempt and divide. Mainly the naysayers are in the minority.

Q. Have you returned to Kabul since the Taliban was ousted?

A. In March 2003, two weeks before the book came out. It's a whole different city now. It was a city of 500,000, now nearly 4 million, incredibly overcrowded, and there's guns everywhere. The military presence is obvious and there are tons of people who've been ravaged by the war. People who lost limbs.

Q. Did you return to your home?

A.I found it. It was there and I had very similar experience to Amir's. It was nothing as I remembered it; it was incredibly small. Like in the book, the house was in terrible shape. The house was occupied by seven Northern Alliance soldiers.

Q. Is Afghanistan better off today than in the past quarter century?

A.It's in terrible shape. There's huge problems: the health-care system and the economy. Narcotics has become a serious problem. Deep corruption. That said, it's the first time in 30 years, perhaps, there's a reason for optimism. (The country) is moving in the right direction. That's a big step forward.

Excerpts from 'The Kite Runner'

"Did you know Hassan and you fed from the same breast? Did you know that, Amir agha? Sakina, her name was. She was a fair, blue-eyed Hazara woman from Bamiyan and she sang you old wedding songs. They say there is a brotherhood between people who've fed from the same breast. Did you know that?"

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Hassan didn't struggle. Didn't even whimper. He moved his head slightly and I caught a glimpse of his face. Saw the resignation in it. It was a look I had seen before. It was the look of the lamb.

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"Do you want me to run that kite for you?" I thought I saw him nod. "For you, a thousand times over," I heard myself say. Then I turned and ran. I ran. A grown man running with a swarm of screaming children. But I didn't care. I ran with the wind blowing in my face, and a smile as wide as the Valley of Panjsher on my lips.