



A Sunnyvale Physician's Glimpse of Afghan Life

BOOK REVIEW



By Marlene M. Mirassou, MD

KITE RUNNER by Khaled Hosseini, MD, Riverhead Books, New York 2003, 371 pages, \$14 (paperback), ISBN 1-57322-245-3.

AMIR, THE PROTAGONIST of "The Kite Runner" and a writer, begins his story in the present in San Francisco with a promise that what he will show us how he now is the product of events that occurred in Kabul, Afghanistan, in the winter of 1975.

His story begins in Kabul of the 1970s, before the Soviets or the Taliban controlled Afghanistan. As he relates his history, we learn much of himself, his culture, its turmoil, strengths and shortcomings. He introduces us to Afghan-istan, from its geography and climate, through the pride of country of its inhabitants, as well as the cruelty of racism and the constraints of highly stratified classes in a society, onto the devastation of repeated violent political change.

This is Khaled Houseini's first novel. Born in Kabul in 1965, he is the son of an Afghan diplomat. He lived in Afghanistan, Iran and Paris with his family. In 1980, they sought and were granted political asylum in the U.S. because of the bloody communist coup and invasion of the Soviet Army.

He subsequently became a physician and now practices as an internist in Sunnyvale, California. In an interview in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, he notes he hadn't intended to become a writer, but "I wanted to work with people. Something honorable. I never wanted to get up in the morning and feel what I'm doing doesn't serve a purpose. And I wanted to honor my parents..."

However, as the intensity of medical training decreased, he began to think of stories, started writing and his short stories began to be published. He began his first novel prior to 9/11 but halted because of concern about the reaction of people to his country's involvement. He resumed when he found "People were incredibly gracious. Patients would leave me voice mails saying, 'Hope you are OK, hope nobody's bothering you'..."

At the start of the novel, Amir and Hassam, the child of his father's servant, are fast friends (when it suits Amir). The first part of the novel relates Amir's view of his relationship with Hassam, his troubled interactions with his father, Baba, and his own feelings of somehow not being the son his father hoped for.

Amir's and Hassam's effort in the Afghan sport of kite fighting and kite running (vigorous competition to capture the cut-down and defeated kites) lead to the eventual parting of the friends. As Afghanistan's political upheavals continue, Amir and Baba must escape from their homeland. They settle in the San Francisco Bay Area where they must re-establish their relationship and adjust to a new culture while keeping ties to their past.

Amir becomes a writer but continues to be haunted by his past. Eventually, he returns to Afghanistan for a visit that leads to the resolution of his past conflicts as we learn of the

plight of Afghanistan under the Taliban.

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