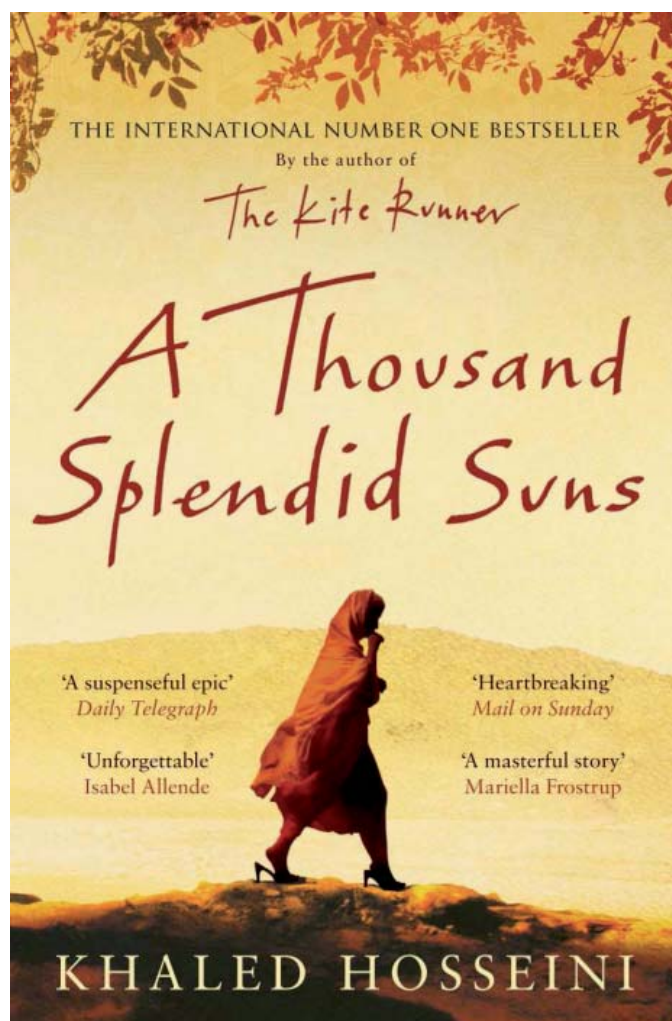


ALLEN & UNWIN



READING GROUP NOTES

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About the book

Mariam is an harami, an illegitimate child who only sees her adored father once a week. On those precious days they go fishing, he reads to her and gives her beautiful presents, but she can never live with him. When she decides to visit his home, a visit he does not acknowledge, she returns to find that her mother has hanged herself. Determined that she will not secure a place in their household, her father's wives marry her off to Rasheed, an elderly widower from Kabul, far enough away for Mariam to be safely forgotten. Theirs is a marriage that soon deteriorates into brutality and misery made worse for Mariam by the arrival of the orphaned Laila and Rasheed's decision to marry her. When Laila disappoints Rasheed by bearing a daughter, she too finds herself the target of his cruelty. Out of this unhappy household grows a friendship which will bind the two women in a union as close as any marriage, and which will endure beyond death. Written in often lyrical prose, Khaled Hosseini's second novel weaves thirty years of turbulent Afghan history through an intensely powerful story of family, friendship and, ultimately, hope.

Background

Khaled Hosseini's reputation as an accomplished storyteller has already been well and truly established with *The Kite Runner*, his celebrated debut novel written in the early hours before setting off for his 'day job' as a doctor. Brought up in a tradition of storytelling, Hosseini has described this tradition as first and foremost what writing novels is about. It is a quality central to *A Thousand Splendid Suns* which seamlessly blends the compelling narratives of Mariam and Laila with the deeply troubled history of Afghanistan over the past thirty years. Hosseini has described writing the novel as 'an even more satisfying experience for me than the writing of *The Kite Runner*, because it was a more complex and ultimately unexpected journey.'

With his first novel Hosseini had wanted to give a Western public assailed with media images of war-torn Afghanistan, firstly during the Soviet occupation and then under the Taliban, a glimpse of the country he remembered from childhood and to dispel some of the misconceptions that some of his adopted countrymen had about it. Many of those misconceptions were about women who had not suffered repression before the Taliban seized power contrary to popular Western belief. During what many have called the 'Golden Years' of the '60s and '70s, women actively contributed to Afghan society – Hosseini's mother, for example, taught history at a girls' school - and their rights had been confirmed in a new constitution in the mid-1970s. It is the role of women that Hosseini has chosen to explore in his second novel and he does so vividly through the stories of Mariam and Laila, two women separated by a generation but united by an unbreakable bond of friendship. These two endure not only the brutality of their husband Rasheed, but also the appalling atrocities of the Taliban, yet remain resilient and true to themselves.

Hosseini's family sought asylum in the United States in 1980 shortly after the Soviet invasion. He returned to Afghanistan after a twenty-seven year absence, following the fall of the Taliban, partly to satisfy a yearning to see his homeland again but also to find out how it was faring. He came back to the United States with a sense of optimism although not as much as he had hoped for, citing the security situation and the narcotics trade as two causes for grave concern.

About Khaled Hosseini

Khaled Hosseini was born in 1965 in Kabul where his father was a diplomat and his mother taught Farsi and history. After the 1978 coup and the subsequent Russian invasion, the family fled Afghanistan for the United States, receiving political asylum in 1980. They settled in San Jose, California where his father found work as a driving instructor. Hosseini is now a physician and lives with his wife and two children in Northern California. *The Kite Runner*, his first novel and, reputedly, the first to be written in English by an Afghan, has been met with great critical and popular acclaim.

Some suggested points for discussion

- ☞ The novel opens with the sentence 'Mariam was five years old the first time she heard the word harami.' How important is that word in the novel? How does her illegitimacy shape Mariam's life?
- ☞ 'The next time Mariam signed her name to a document, twenty-seven years later, a mullah would be present.' Khaled Hosseini foreshadows events, both domestic and national, at many points throughout *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. What effect does this have?
- ☞ 'But it was the women who drew Mariam's eyes the most.' What is it that fascinates Mariam about the women of Kabul, and why does it capture her attention? How are women treated by the various regimes that take control of Afghanistan? How are the main female characters portrayed in the novel? To what extent do these portrayals differ from any preconceptions that you may have had about women in Afghanistan?
- ☞ Mariam protests at the idea of marrying Rasheed, begging her father not to force her. What kind of husband does he prove to be? How does she come to feel about him? How does their marriage change? Why do you think Rasheed behaves in the way that he does?
- ☞ 'And in this fleeting, wordless exchange with Mariam, Laila knew that they were not enemies any longer.' How is the deep bond between Mariam and Laila forged? How does this bond sustain both of them?
- ☞ How does the observation of Islam in Kabul differ from Mariam's hometown of Herat? What part does religion play in her life? How important is it in the novel?
- ☞ 'To me, it's nonsense – and very dangerous nonsense at that – all this talk of I'm Tajik and you're Pashtun and he's Hazara and she's Uzbek. We're all Afghans and that's all that should matter.' Laila's father tells her. How important is this ethnic diversity both in the novel and in what happens to Afghanistan throughout the thirty years the book spans?
- ☞ What is the significance of the novel's title? Why do you think Hosseini chose it?
- ☞ What did you think of the novel's ending?
- ☞ How would you describe Hosseini's writing style? Were there particular passages that impressed you and if so what were they and why?

☞ How are the West and the Soviet Union portrayed in the novel? What part do they play in Afghanistan's troubles?

☞ Hosseini is an expatriate Afghan. To what extent do you think this has influenced the writing of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, and his portrayal of Afghanistan?

Resources

www.khaledhosseini.com – Khaled Hosseini's website

www.barnesandnoble.com/writers/writerdetails.asp?z=y&cid=1145572#interview – interview published on Barnes and Noble's website

www.bloomsbury.com/Authors/microsite.asp?id=480§ion=1&aid=863 – conversation between Hosseini and Riverhead Books, his American publisher

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/1162108.stm – Afghanistan timeline published at the BBC's website

Further reading

Fiction

Half a Yellow Sun by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

A Married Woman by Manju Kapur

The Woman Who Walked into Doors by Roddy Doyle

The Swallows of Kabul by Yasmina Khadra

Non-fiction

The Sewing Circles of Herat by Christina Lamb

The Bookseller of Kabul by Asne Seierstad

Other books by Khaled Hosseini

The Kite Runner