

## **A Thousand Splendid Suns** **Khaled Hosseini**

### Introduction

After 103 weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list and with four million copies of **The Kite Runner** shipped, Khaled Hosseini returns with a beautiful, riveting, and haunting novel that confirms his place as one of the most important literary writers today.

Propelled by the same superb instinct for storytelling that made **The Kite Runner** a beloved classic, **A Thousand Splendid Suns** is at once an incredible chronicle of thirty years of Afghan history and a deeply moving story of family, friendship, faith, and the salvation to be found in love.

Born a generation apart and with very different ideas about love and family, Mariam and Laila are two women brought jarringly together by war, by loss and by fate. As they endure the ever escalating dangers around them --- in their home as well as in the streets of Kabul --- they come to form a bond that makes them both sisters and mother-daughter to each other, and that will ultimately alter the course not just of their own lives but of the next generation. With heart-wrenching power and suspense, Hosseini shows how a woman's love for her family can move her to shocking and heroic acts of self-sacrifice, and that in the end it is love, or even the memory of love, that is often the key to survival.

A stunning accomplishment, **A Thousand Splendid Suns** is a haunting, heartbreaking, compelling story of an unforgiving time, an unlikely friendship, and an indestructible love.

### Discussion Questions

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 Miriam 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?



## ABOUT KHALED HOSSEINI

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 1970, the Foreign Ministry sent his family to Tehran, where his father worked for the Afghan embassy. They lived in Tehran until 1973, at which point they returned to Kabul. In July of 1973, on the night Hosseini's youngest brother was born, the Afghan king, Zahir Shah, was overthrown in a bloodless coup by the king's cousin, Daoud Khan. At the time, Hosseini was in fourth grade and was already drawn to poetry and prose; he read a great deal of Persian poetry as well as Farsi translations of novels ranging from Alice in Wonderland to Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer series.

In 1976, the Afghan Foreign Ministry once again relocated the Hosseini family, this time 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. They lived on welfare and food stamps for a short while, as they had lost all of their property in Afghanistan. His father took multiple jobs and managed to get his family off welfare. 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 and began practicing Internal Medicine in 1996. His first love, however, has always been writing.

Hosseini has vivid, and fond, memories of peaceful pre-Soviet era Afghanistan, as well as of his personal experiences with Afghan Hazaras. One Hazara in particular was a thirty-year-old man named Hossein Khan, who worked for the Hosseinis when they were living in Iran. When Hosseini was in the third grade, he taught Khan to read and write. Though his relationship with Hossein Khan was brief and rather formal, Hosseini always remembered the fondness that developed between them.

In 2006, Hosseini was named a goodwill envoy to the UNHCR, The United Nations Refugee Agency. His new book, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, will be published in May 2007.