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## **Wrenching Tale by an Afghan Immigrant Strikes a Chord**

By EDWARD WYATT

Few aspects of this swank oceanside resort call to mind the harsh grind of daily life in Kabul, Afghanistan. Yet when a local book group met here recently to discuss "The Kite Runner," the stunningly successful first novel by an Afghan immigrant, many group members said they felt they were reading pages out of their own lives.

To Esta Jacobson, the book's descriptions of a boy's decision to run from the bullies who were tormenting his friend evoked memories of growing up in South Africa and silently watching harassment of blacks in the streets.

To Yvonne Campbell, the arbitrary violence of the Taliban reminded her of the deportation of her parents and neighbors in Toulouse to Nazi concentration camps. And Nancy Hertzberg said the rigid caste system in the novel recalled the interactions of her condominium neighbors with their Guatemalan gardeners.

"The Kite Runner," by Khaled Hosseini, a previously unknown son of an Afghan political refugee, has captivated reading groups across the country with its rich mix of familiar morality tale and timely world history. Without any significant national publicity -- no recommendation by Oprah Winfrey or a morning television show, no superstar author backed by a multimillion-dollar advertising campaign -- the book has steadily climbed the best-seller lists, rising as high as No.5 on the paperback best-seller list of The New York Times and selling more than 500,000 copies in seven months, a significant achievement for a literary novel.

It has done so thanks to the word-of-mouth recommendations of librarians and book sellers and on the strength of local book clubs, like the one here in Palm Beach, as well as community reading programs, where one book is chosen by a city or region, like eastern Connecticut or the central California valley.

The popularity of "The Kite Runner," the tale of the friendship of two Afghan boys and how one's betrayal of the other affects their adult lives in Kabul and California, is all the more unusual in an age when relatively few novels set outside the English-speaking world register much American success. Even after Sept. 11, Afghanistan remains an obscure if not inscrutable place to many Americans, and the book's unsympathetic protagonist and lack of any significant female characters only make it feel more foreign.

People who have read the book, however, speak almost exclusively of how they were touched by its universal themes. "There are so many basic human emotions at work here," said John Tegano, a member of the Palm Beach group.

The book's success validates the decision by Riverhead Books, the publisher, to pay a surprisingly large advance of \$500,000 for the manuscript, even knowing that it would require significant rewriting. But part of the attraction was that the life story of the author, Mr. Hosseini, 39, could itself be the source of a best seller.

The son of an Afghan diplomat and a mother who taught high school in Kabul, Mr. Hosseini grew up in Kabul, Tehran and Paris, where his father was stationed when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1980. The family was granted political asylum in the United States and moved to San Jose, Calif., in September of that year.

Arriving in the United States at age 15, Mr. Hosseini learned English only after starting high school in California. His family, which enjoyed significant wealth in Afghanistan, spent its initial months there on welfare. After Mr. Hosseini graduated from Santa Clara University and earned a medical degree from the University of California, San Diego, he served a residency at Cedars-Sinai Hospital in Los Angeles. A semi-arranged marriage to another Afghan immigrant followed, and he began practicing in internal medicine at a Kaiser Permanente office in Silicon Valley.

It was only after spending several years as a physician that Mr. Hosseini began to write, rising at 5 a.m. each day to sketch out short stories and, much later, his novel, before going to work. A half-dozen stories, mainly thrillers or gothic horror tales, were published online or in experimental zines. But submissions to *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *Esquire* and other mainstream publications brought nothing but rejections.

One short story, however -- a tale of a young Afghan boy and the son of the family servant, whose pastimes included the ancient Afghan sport of kite flying -- caught the attention of a fan. "My wife had passed a copy to my father-in-law," Mr. Hosseini said in an interview. "He called me and left a message saying he wished the story had been a lot longer. He wanted to know what happened to Amir and Hassan."

The story of Amir, the son of a rug exporter, and his friend Hassan stretches across several decades of Afghan history, from the monarchy of Mohammad Zahir Shah, through the bloodless coup in 1973, the Communist takeover in 1978, the Soviet invasion in 1979 and the reign of the Taliban, ending after the American invasion following Sept. 11, 2001.

As first drafted, the novel was far from perfect, but it drew the attention of several New York editors, including Cindy Spiegel, co-publisher of Riverhead, a division of the Penguin Group USA.

"The truth is it needed work," Ms. Spiegel said. "I think that is why other people were less bullish. The last third of the book had to be rewritten."

The main problem, Ms. Spiegel said and Mr. Hosseini confirmed, was that Amir, after escaping Afghanistan and fleeing to Fremont, Calif., married an American woman. The character was unbelievable -- not surprising, perhaps, for a writer who had not grown up

in the United States and who had married an Afghan woman whom he had only met once. Mr. Hosseini agreed to make Amir's wife an Afghan immigrant, a change that required the overhaul of the second half of the book. Published in June 2003, "The Kite Runner" received generally good reviews. Thanks to heavy promotion by the Penguin sales force, it received the endorsements of Book Sense, the consortium of independent bookstores, which put the book on its list of 76 new and noteworthy books. In February, Borders named "The Kite Runner" as the 2003 fiction winner of its Original Voices Awards, giving the book prominent display in its stores.

But except for brisk sales in the San Francisco area, where the local papers gave considerable attention to the new author, sales of "The Kite Runner" in hardcover did not measure up to the author's advance, measuring about 50,000 copies in the first year.

When the paperback edition came out in May, however, sales began to climb. That month, the book was named as the selection of the One Book, One Region program of Eastern Connecticut, sponsored by the Connecticut Library Consortium and other educators and community groups.

At least a dozen other community book groups followed, including those in Woodland, Calif.; Johnson County, Iowa; Saratoga Springs, N.Y.; and Cincinnati. More still have selected the book for reading programs in 2005, including Rhode Island's statewide program, the Las Vegas Literary Society and the community of Pittsboro, N.C. The book has also been adopted for courses at Penn State, the University of Northern Colorado, the University of Iowa and James Madison University.

"The community groups have been very instrumental in the success of this book," Mr. Hosseini said. "When I was in Connecticut, several people came up to me and said this is not a book they would have picked up if not for this program."

"The Kite Runner" finally made it onto The Times paperback best-seller list in September, beginning at No.13 and climbing steadily over the past 12 weeks. (On Sunday's list, the book will rank No.7.)

Mr. Hosseini has been tireless in promoting the book, logging more than 100 appearances, giving readings, signing books and discussing the novel -- all the while continuing to work full-time as a Kaiser physician. Only this month did he begin a yearlong sabbatical. Ms. Spiegel, the book's editor, said that based on the reading programs already scheduled for next year, she expects the book to continue to sell well for a year or two.

The reactions of the Palm Beach group suggest that will happen. "I recognized so many things that happened in my time," Ms. Campbell said, referring to the years she spent living in a French convent, a Jewish girl hidden away by the nuns as her parents and dozens of neighbors were deported by the Nazis. "What struck me about the characters here is that they're all very human."

