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The Servant

By EDWARD HOWER

THE KITE RUNNER

By Khaled Hosseini.

324 pp. New York:

Riverhead Books. \$24.95.

THIS powerful first novel, by an Afghan physician now living in California, tells a story of fierce cruelty and fierce yet redeeming love. Both transform the life of Amir, Khaled Hosseini's privileged young narrator, who comes of age during the last peaceful days of the monarchy, just before his country's revolution and its invasion by Russian forces.

But political events, even as dramatic as the ones that are presented in "The Kite Runner," are only a part of this story. A more personal plot, arising from Amir's close friendship with Hassan, the son of his father's servant, turns out to be the thread that ties the book together. The fragility of this relationship, symbolized by the kites the boys fly together, is tested as they watch their old way of life disappear.

Amir is served breakfast every morning by Hassan; then he is driven to school in the gleaming family Mustang while his friend stays home to clean the house. Yet Hassan bears Amir no resentment and is, in fact, a loyal companion to the lonely boy, whose mother is dead and whose father, a rich businessman, is often preoccupied. Hassan protects the sensitive Amir from sadistic neighborhood bullies; in turn, Amir fascinates Hassan by reading him heroic Afghan folk tales. Then, during a kite-flying tournament that should be the triumph of Amir's young life, Hassan is brutalized by some upper-class teenagers. Amir's failure to defend his friend will haunt him for the rest of his life.

Hosseini's depiction of pre-revolutionary Afghanistan is rich in warmth and humor but also tense with the friction between the nation's different ethnic groups. Amir's father, or Baba, personifies all that is reckless, courageous and arrogant in his dominant Pashtun tribe. He loves nothing better than watching the Afghan national pastime, buzkashi, in which galloping horsemen bloody one another as they compete to spear the carcass of a goat. Yet he is generous and tolerant enough to respect his son's artistic yearnings and to treat the lowly Hassan with great kindness, even arranging for an operation to mend the child's harelip.

As civil war begins to ravage the country, the teenage Amir and his father must flee for their lives. In California, Baba works at a gas station to put his son through school; on weekends he sells secondhand goods at swap meets. Here too Hosseini provides lively descriptions, showing former professors and doctors socializing as they haggle with their customers over black velvet portraits of Elvis.

Despite their poverty, these exiled Afghans manage to keep alive their ancient standards of honor and pride. And even as Amir grows to manhood, settling comfortably into America and a happy marriage, his past shame continues to haunt him. He worries about Hassan and wonders what has happened to him back in Afghanistan.

The novel's canvas turns dark when Hosseini describes the suffering of his country under the tyranny of the Taliban, whom Amir encounters when he finally returns home, hoping to help Hassan and his family. The final third of the book is full of haunting images: a man, desperate to feed his children, trying to sell his artificial leg in the market; an adulterous couple stoned to death in a stadium during the halftime of a football match; a rouged young boy forced into prostitution, dancing the sort of steps once performed by an organ grinder's monkey.

When Amir meets his old nemesis, now a powerful Taliban official, the book descends into some plot twists better suited to a folk tale than a modern novel. But in the end we're won over by Amir's compassion and his determination to atone for his youthful cowardice.

In "The Kite Runner," Khaled Hosseini gives us a vivid and engaging story that reminds us how long his people have been struggling to triumph over the forces of violence -- forces that continue to threaten them even today.

Edward Hower's latest novel is "A Garden of Demons." A former Fulbright lecturer in India, he teaches in the writing department of Ithaca College.