



An enthusiastic fan poses with Hosseini.

photo by Eve Quesnel

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On the evening of April 10, the audience at Resort at Squaw Creek eagerly anticipated the arrival of Khaled Hosseini, author of bestsellers “The Kite Runner” and “A Thousand Splendid Suns.” After a well researched and articulate introduction by local psychiatrist and mediator for the evening, Dr. Fred Illfeld, Hosseini arrived to tell his audience what it had been longing to hear: how a doctor transforms into a New York Times bestselling author; if the fictional characters parallel his life; and what beliefs, politically and culturally, does he hold as an Afghan-American. Sponsored by Squaw Valley Institute, Hosseini’s visit provided an engaging and inspirational symposium, the buzz continuing long into the night.

Moonshine Ink: You were raised in Afghanistan until the age of 11, at which time your family fled to Paris because of the invasion of the Soviets and then to America where you have lived most of your life. What is your favorite memory of Afghanistan?

Khaled Hosseini: In the 70s, Kabul was rich, socially, but culture was limited. There was no TV or computer so people had to connect with each other. We were in the company of people all the time. It was unusual to have dinner with just your parents; there were always aunts, uncles, and friends, and you felt comfortable and relaxed. In the West there is often a desire to be alone. Nowadays people constantly text, which detracts from having conversations. With my own kids (ages 7 and 9) I accept reality and technology, but they are also exposed to a lot of family, which for me feels like the natural way.

MI: Tell me about the Khaled Hosseini Foundation.

KH: The foundation began with the concern for shelter for Afghan refugees; there was no protection from the environment. We raise funds to give to the United Nations, and last year we achieved supplying 71 shelters; \$1500 supplies one family with all the necessary materials. In the next year we hope to double that amount. The foundation also funds non-governmental

organizations and education.

MI: What are your first memories of America and how do you see America today?

KH: When I first arrived in America we were financially strapped and on welfare, but we bonded with other families. There was a wave of Afghans who moved to the Bay Area during the invasion of the Soviets. What I love about Americans is their endless curiosity with things they're unfamiliar with, plus they are open minded and accepting; I have never experienced prejudice. Also in the West we accept and follow the rules, which serve a greater purpose. The rules set the way society functions, and we are held responsible, accountable as a whole. In Afghanistan and Pakistan and other Middle East countries their way of life is informal, perhaps too informal. For example, in America we have driving and traffic rules and so we follow them; this is not always the case in Afghanistan.

MI: These days the idea of bioregionalism and being involved in one's own community is an admired practice. Yet, foundations such as yours and Greg Mortenson's (building schools in Afghanistan and Pakistan) also take center stage. How do you see local vs. global involvement?

KH: They're not mutually exclusive. The other side of the world is in your office. This is why the viewpoint of "Ignore Afghanistan. Let it have a civil war; get out of it" doesn't work. You can't ignore the world; get a passport and travel and get to know it. The more you're educated, the more aware you become. This provokes an amazing perspective and places you in context, in a bigger picture. It behooves you to understand how other places affect you. The next generation has to own into it. We're not insular; we're all connected.

MI: What parallels occur from your life in your novels?

KH: Baba in "The Kite Runner" is taken from my father to some extent. He was a strong personality with strong opinions. He's a principled man who I always wanted to be proud of me. He liked my books; the second book was his favorite. My mother and father raised me somewhat liberal; I touch on that in "The Kite Runner." I am Muslim but not a devout Muslim. I don't know what to do with my kids yet, but they do go to Farsi school every Tuesday to learn to read and write Farsi. Hassan from "The Kite Runner" is taken from a servant we had in Afghanistan, a kind man who was also our good friend.

MI: How were your novels received in Afghanistan?

KH: Only in cities like Kabul do people read. The Afghans in the countryside are illiterate; they have to concentrate on surviving.

MI: And your latest writing project?

KH: It's coming along, but I don't know yet if it will be a short story collection or novel. With "The Kite Runner," I simply started with wanting to tell a story about two boys flying kites. I was interested in exploring their relationship, but I also wanted to tell about Afghanistan and its troubles the past 30 years. In the end, it became an ode to where I was born. On this next project, it too takes place in Afghanistan but from a different angle. I will tell you this: Often media pundits portray Afghans as an ungrateful people. That is just not true. They are extremely appreciative for the sacrifices of U.S. service men and women.

MI: With a busy schedule of writing, speaking engagements, tending to your foundation, and raising a family, do you have any time for recreation or hobbies?

KH: From September to January, I watch the 49ers. One to two times a month I play poker with my brother and four friends. I watch three TV shows: "Mad Men," "Breaking Bad," and "Dexter." And of course I read a lot. My current favorite and one who I believe is underrated is Alice Munro. I love her writing. I also enjoy Salman Rushdie, Jim Coetzee, Jhumpa Lahiri, A. S. Byatt, and Marilyn Robinson. I just read "What Is the What" by Dave Eggers and I felt like I lived his story with him in Kenya. The great thing about literature is that it gets you to see things you normally wouldn't see; great literature broadens your world.

While speaking with Hosseini, a teacher from Granite Bay came up and told him what an honor it was to meet him. She was bubbling with excitement and asked to have her picture taken with him (see photo). After she left, I asked, "So, what do you think about being recognized, about being famous?" He humbly answered, "I greatly appreciate the praise and learning the impact my books have had on people, but I'm 45 years old and so being recognized may not mean as much to me as it might to someone younger." Upon hearing Hosseini's answer, I recognized something familiar from "The Kite Runner." And then it hit me. Oh yes, somewhere in the shadows of Afghanistan I heard the unassuming and judicious voice of an older and wiser Amir.