"A wonderful work... This is one of those unforgettable stories that stay with you for years. All the great themes of literature and of life are the fabric of this extraordinary novel: love, honor, guilt, fear redemption...
It is so powerful that for a long time everything I read after seemed bland."

—Isabel Allende

The Road Not Taken
By Robert Frost (United States)

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

“I became what I am today at the age of twelve, on a frigid overcast day in the winter of 1975.”

—Amir in The Kite Runner
About the Author
Khaled Hosseini was born in Kabul, Afghanistan in 1965. He is the oldest of five children. His father worked for the Afghan foreign ministry and his mother was a teacher of Farsi and History at a large girls high school in Kabul. In 1976, Khaled’s family was relocated to Paris, France, where his father was assigned a diplomatic post in the Afghan embassy. The assignment would return the Hosseini family in 1980, but by then Afghanistan had already witnessed a bloody communist coup and the Soviet invasion. Khaled’s family, instead, asked for and was granted political asylum in the U.S. He moved to San Jose, CA, with his family in 1980. He attended Santa Clara University and graduated from UC San Diego School of Medicine. He has been in practice as an internist since 1996. He is married, has two children (a boy and a girl, Haris and Farah). The Kite Runner is his first novel. He still practices medicine and is writing his second novel, which also takes place in Afghanistan. He gets up around 4:30 a.m. each day and writes before going to his medical practice.

About the Book
The Kite Runner is the first Afghan novel to be written in English. It took Hosseini just over a year to complete; he started in March of 2001, was slowed down some by the events of 9//11, and completed the book in June of 2002. It has been translated into 20 languages, but has not been translated into Farsi, so it has not been widely read in Afghanistan. It is a New York Times bestseller, and it won the 2003 Borders Original Voices Awards for new authors. Recently, Steven Spielberg’s company, Dreamworks, announced plans to adapt the book into a film. Sam Mendes, director of American Beauty and Road to Perdition, plans to direct it. The University of Iowa Center for Human Rights selected it as its Fall 2004 Book Project

Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan

1950’s: The USSR began giving aid to Afghanistan.

1970’s: A Communist party overthrew the Afghan monarchy and tried to institute social reforms. The Afghani people (particularly the rural populations) saw those reforms as alien to the traditional Islamic culture.

1979: The USSR took control of the Afghan capital, Kabul. The Soviets brought in over 100,000 soldiers and installed Babrak Karmal as leader. The Soviets sent in troops to 1) expand their influence in Asia, 2) to preserve the Communist government that lacked support, and 3) to protect their interests in Afghanistan from Iran and western nations. The Soviets were met with fierce resistance by resistance fighters called “mujahidin.” These fighters believed the Soviets were defiling traditional Afghani culture and proclaimed a “jihad” or holy war. The United States immediately condemned the Soviet invasion and gave the resistance fighters weapons and money (including Osama Bin Laden). Soviet bombing destroyed entire villages, leaving millions of people dead, homeless, or starving. Land mines killed/maimed many Afghans, especially children. Several million Afghans fled to neighboring Pakistan for refuge. Homes, animals, and precious irrigation systems were destroyed, leaving the country barren and in ruin.

1989: Soviet forces pulled out of Afghanistan for several reasons: 1) 15,000 Soviet soldiers had been killed, 2) they were unable to defeat the mujahidin, and 3) world opinion was against them.
Afghanistan:
A Historical Timeline (PBS)

1921: Afghanistan becomes an independent nation.

1934: The U.S. formally recognizes Afghanistan.

1956: Soviet Premier Nikita Kruschev agrees to help Afghanistan, and the two countries become close allies.

1957: Women allowed to attend university & enter workforce.

1965: Afghan Communist Party secretly formed.

1973 - Pro-Soviet Daoud Khan overthrows the last king, Mohammed Zahir Shah, in a military coup. Khan's regime, PDPA (People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan) comes to power. Daoud Khan abolishes the monarchy and names himself president. The Republic of Afghanistan is established.

1979: USSR invades Afghanistan on December 24 to bolster the faltering communist regime. Deputy Prime Minister Babrak Karmal (member of the Communist Party) becomes Prime Minister. Widespread opposition to Karmal and the Soviets spawns violent public demonstrations. By early 1980, the Mujahahdeen rebels (otherwise known as holy fighters) have united against Soviet invaders and the USSR-backed Afghan Army.

1982: Some 2.8 million Afghans have fled from the war to Pakistan; another 1.5 million have fled to Iran. Afghan guerrillas gain control of rural areas, and Soviet troops hold urban areas.


1986: The Mujahahdeen are receiving arms from the United States, Britain, and China, via Pakistan.


1992: The Mujahahdeen and other rebel groups storm the capital, Kabul, and oust the current leader from power. The Mujahahdeen form an Islamic state: the Islamic Jihad Council.

1995: Newly-formed Islamic militia, the Taliban, rises to power on promises of peace. Most Afghans, exhausted by years of drought, famine and war, approve of the Taliban for upholding traditional Islamic values. The Taliban outlaws cultivation of poppies for the opium trade, cracks down on crime, and severely curtails the education and employment of women. Women are required to be fully veiled and are not allowed outside alone. Islamic law is enforced via public executions and amputations. The U.S. refuses to recognize the authority of the Taliban.

1995-1999: Continuing drought devastates farmers and makes many rural areas uninhabitable. More than one million Afghans flee to neighboring Pakistan, where they languish in squalid refugee camps.
**2000:** International terrorist Osama Bin Laden is widely believed to be hiding in Afghanistan, where he is cultivating thousands of followers in terrorist training camps. The U.S. demands that Bin Laden be extradited to stand trial for the bombing of two U.S. embassies in Africa. The Taliban declines to extradite him. The United Nations punishes Afghanistan with sanctions restricting trade and economic development.

**2001:** The Taliban controls 95 percent of Afghanistan. Over international protests, they order the destruction of two 5th-century statues of Buddha in the Bamiyan valley, northwest of Afghanistan's capital, Kabul.

### General Background

Afghanistan is mountainous, semiarid and landlocked. Located in southwestern Asia, it's bordered by Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, China and Pakistan. The country's area is 647,500 square kilometers, slightly smaller than Texas.

Afghanistan's population is just under 28 million. Pashtuns make up 44 percent of the total population, Tajiks 25 percent and dozens of other ethnic groups the remainder. More than 50 different languages are spoken. Afghanistan is predominantly Sunni Muslim, with a Shiite Muslim minority.

The average life expectancy at birth for Afghans is just 47 years. An estimated 15,000 women die every year from pregnancy-related causes.

Fifty percent of Afghan men and 79 percent of Afghan women are illiterate. Only 39 percent of school-aged boys and 3 percent of school-aged girls are enrolled in primary school.

Afghanistan is desperately poor, devastated by decades of war complicated by severe drought from 1998 to 2002.

There are fewer than 30,000 telephones in the country.

Afghanistan's legal economy centers largely on livestock and agriculture (fruit, nuts, sheep and goats). Its illegal economy revolves around opium poppies: It produces 70 percent of the world's opium and is the source of as much as 90 percent of the heroin in Europe.

Some 700 square kilometers of land is contaminated by mines and unexploded ordnance (UXO). In 1999 alone, there were about 3,000 injuries from land mines and UXO.

Afghans are the largest refugee population in the world. A third of the population left the country during the Soviet occupation. There are 2 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan and 1.5 million in Iran. And 1.2 million Afghans are displaced internally.
Hazaras & Pashtuns

The Hazaras speak Farsi and are mostly Shi’a Muslims. The Pashtuns mostly speak Pashtu and are generally Sunni Muslims. Pashtuns settled in Afghanistan at least as far back as the 13th Century.

From its founding in 1747, Afghanistan has been dominated by the Pashtuns. As a result of Pashtun expansionism in the late 18th and early 19th Centuries, the Hazaras were driven to the barren dry mountains of central Afghanistan. Many Hazaras migrated to major towns, particularly Kabul, where they occupied the lowest economic rungs.

Before 1978, the Pashtuns were 47% of the population. Hazaras made up about 20%, and the Tajiks and Uzbeks made up about 30% of Afghans. After the Soviet invasion, about 85% of the refugees who fled to Pakistan and Iran were Pashtuns, which lowered the population of Pashtuns in Afghanistan. In the mid 1990s, many of these refugees returned restoring them as the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, but the Pashtuns hold on the government was weakened.

Mostly Tajiks and Uzbeks comprised the Northern Alliance, many of whom started as Mujahidin (holy fighters). In 1955 the Northern Alliance drove the Hazaras from Kabul, but later on Hazara factions were included in the Northern Alliance. The Hazaras and other Shi’i organized politically in the 1960s and 1970s.

During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the Soviets did not care about controlling the region; thus, the Hazaras engaged in a violent civil war. The Northern Alliance and Pashtun Warlords also engaged in this period of civil war. Mohammed Hanif, the Taliban Commander, announced to a crowd of 300 at a mosque on a day when 15,000 Hazaras were killed: “The policy of the Taliban is to exterminate the Hazaras.” The Governor of Mazar-e-Sharif said, “Hazaras are not Muslim. You can kill them. It is not a sin.” After the Soviet occupation, which began in 1979, the Northern Alliance ruled Afghanistan from 1992 to 1996. The people of Afghanistan saw those who drove out the Russians as a religious and moral force; therefore, the Taliban was initially well-received in 1996 when it came to power, driving the Northern Alliance northwest.

Eventually, the Taliban banned many things that had been part of normal, everyday life and enforced harsh punishments of infractions of their rigid rules. At that time, only Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates recognized the Taliban as Afghanistan’s legitimate government. Today, only Pakistan recognizes them as such.
Life Under Taliban Rule

Restrictions in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan:

* reading banned books
* keeping cameras without license
* music news.bbc.co.uk
* promotion of non-Muslim ideas
* women without complete body coverings
* cinema, television and VCR (decadent, used for watching pornography, promotes non-Muslim ideas) news.bbc.co.uk
* internet (though users can log into uncensored ISPs in Pakistan) newsbytes.com
* women working outside the home (except in health care when kept separate from male workers and patients)
* women going on picnics or to tourist resorts
* kite flying (wastes time, Hindu ritual)
* women being pictured (whether on the printed page or on a frame)
* women appearing on television or during public performances
* converting people from Islam (death penalty for Afghan convert, expulsion for foreign nationals)
* growing opium poppies
* Although boxing was not banned, Afghan boxers were unable to compete internationally under Taliban rule, because the Taliban banned men from shaving their beards. International boxing rules require contestants to be clean-shaven.

Practices Reported in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan:

* amputating the hands of thieves.
* public executions
* shooting of prostitutes in sport stadiums
* shooting of murderers by victim's family, in sport stadium
* hanging or throat cutting of robbers, in sport stadium
* stoning of adulterous (married) couples
* collapsing a wall over homosexuals
* destroying ancient Buddhist statues prior to September 11, 2001
* On the advice on the Hindu community elders, who used to be disturbed by the police who thought them to be Muslims who had shaved their beards, on May 22, 2001, the Taliban issued an order that Hindus and other non-Muslims must wear a yellow identity symbol. This policy was replaced in June of the same year, by an order that Hindus were required to carry a special identification card.
* Muslim men are beaten or jailed for shaving or excessively cutting their beards
* women are not permitted to wear see-through socks or shoes, nor to wear shoes that make noise when walking
* women suffer physical punishment if showing face in public
* houses with women present must have windows facing the street painted over so people outside would not be able to look inside.