

A Thousand Splendid Suns

By Khaled Hosseini

Published by Riverheads Books, The Penguin Group, 2007, 420 Pages

Reviewed by

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Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a beautifully painful novel about two women separated by age and background, yet connected by loss, tragedy, and eventually marriage to the same cruel man. At first, it appears those things that separate them will lead to nothing more than resentment and mistrust, but in the end, it is their commonalities that bind them, allowing each to become a devoted friend to the other.

While *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is the story of Mariam and Laila, the country of Afghanistan is an ever-present character. Across decades, Hosseini portrays Afghanistan's heartbreaking devolution from prosperity to poverty, from lush to war-torn as battles wage first with the Soviet Union, then among Afghan factions, and finally the Taliban, causing death and destruction throughout the country. In spite of the hardships, the characters still maintain a reverence and devotion to their homeland.

The story opens with Mariam, living with her mother on the outskirts of town, the illegitimate daughter of a wealthy man who resides in the city. Even though she and her mother are not permitted to live with her father, Mariam adores him. One day, after her father fails to visit as promised, Mariam enters the city for the first time to find him. She arrives at his home only to be refused entry, and upon her return home, she discovers that her mother has committed suicide. Soon after, Mariam's father arranges for her to marry a man in another city in order to appease his other wives who do not want to welcome Mariam into their home. Mariam soon becomes pregnant, much to the delight of her husband Rasheed. Following a miscarriage (and several others), Rasheed's demeanor towards Mariam changes from indifferent to angry to abusive. Mariam withdraws from the world, and she becomes a passive bystander to the life being lived on her street.

Laila's family shares that same street, and she is a young child when Mariam arrives. Laila's family is experiencing hardship as well. Both of her older brothers have been killed while fighting against the Soviet forces, which has a devastating effect on her mother. As Laila becomes older, she begins managing more and more of the household tasks, taking care of herself, her mother, and her father. Across time, her friendship with a boy in the neighborhood, Tariq, evolves into a teenage romance. Following the departure of the Soviet forces, the fighting among factions descends upon their city, and many neighbors, including Tariq's family, begin to leave their homes, seeking refuge in Pakistan. Before he departs, Laila and Tariq

reveal their true feelings and make love. Laila's family makes plans to depart shortly thereafter, but her parents are killed when a rocket hits her home.

Following her parent's death, Rasheed offers Laila a place to stay if she becomes his wife. Laila agrees to marry Rasheed after she receives word from a stranger that Tariq has been killed. Laila is pregnant with Tariq's child, and she requests a speedy wedding in hopes that Rasheed will not realize he could not have fathered the child. Laila gives birth to a daughter, which displeases Rasheed greatly.

Mariam's initial reaction to Laila is harsh. Mariam sees Laila as opportunistic and a threat, but soon their mutual love for Laila's daughter, Aziza, and their shared disdain and fear of Rasheed allows for a friendship, if not a mother/daughter relationship, to blossom. After Laila gives birth to a son, Mariam and Laila's relationship grows even stronger.

The bond formed between Mariam and Laila gives them the collective strength to leave Rasheed, but their plans are thwarted at the local train station. After being returned to home, they both endure brutal punishment from Rasheed with Mariam, as usual, receiving the most vicious attack. Following their recovery, no more plans to leave Rasheed are discussed.

Clearly not dead, Tariq returns to Kabul to seek out Laila, and it is then that she realized Rasheed misled her about Tariq's death so that she would marry him. Rasheed discovers that Tariq has visited, which confirms his suspicion that Aziza is not his child. He attacks Laila with full intent on killing her, but Mariam intervenes and kills Rasheed instead.

As the book comes to a close, after so much pain and suffering, Mariam performs one final act of sacrifice in order to ensure Laila has the happy ending that she could never have. This act embodies the earlier description of the book as beautifully painful. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a well written book about a painful story that has a beautiful ending.

This selection would be very successful in a new student reading program as a myriad of curricular and co-curricular activities exist that would enrich or enhance the reading of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. As students begin college, the book provides an opportunity to explore historical events from a perspective that is potentially distinct from what was portrayed in history class in high school, in the media, and through popular culture. For instance, the movie *Charlie Wilson's War* portrays the United States' covert efforts to support Afghan rebels fighting for freedom from communist rule in their war with the Soviet Union; but in the novel, Laila's father, Babi, states that "women have always had it hard in this county, Laila, but they're probably more free now, under the communists, and have more rights than they've ever had before" (p. 135). A class could spend days researching, discussing, and exploring the context of this one statement, and students would find themselves challenging preconceived notions and preexisting knowledge.

Additionally, there are several themes and ideas introduced in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* that provide an opportunity for students to seek out more information as an extension of the reading. For instance, a student could complete an annotated bibliography on a topic related to the book. A few examples include:

- Women's rights in the Middle East
- Access to education in the Middle East

- Afghanistan refugee camps in Pakistan
- Soviet-Afghan War
- Pre-arranged marriages

The topic list could be quite comprehensive, and yet, students could be given the freedom to explore a topic of their choice. An assignment such as this encourages students to be naturally inquisitive, seeking out a deeper, more complete understanding of ideas, viewpoints, and other cultures—an understanding that yields a more informed, engaged global citizen.

As with any new student reading program, it is critical that students feel its integration into their educational experience from the moment they step on campus. During the orientation or welcome week programming that takes place at the start of the semester, several opportunities exist to connect with *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. A faculty-panel discussion could shed light on the recent past and present circumstances of Afghanistan and its people in order to provide greater insight into what the book portrays. In light of the U.S. military action in Afghanistan over the last decade, this is both a relevant and timely topic to explore.

Further, the title *A Thousand Splendid Suns* comes from a poem about Afghanistan that Laila's father, Babi, recites to her. For Babi, this poem puts into words his love and devotion to his country; even if circumstances require them to leave, Afghanistan will always be his beloved home. At a time when feelings of homesickness abound for many students, it could be cathartic to discuss with others their connection to Babi's sentiment, realizing that they are not alone in their sadness, and that even though they may make a home in this new place, it does not need to diminish their connections to other aspects of their life—be it their family, friends, or a physical location.

Finally, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* details in disturbing realism the physical, emotional, and psychological abuse of Mariam and Laila—a criminal act that has roots as strong locally as it does internationally. Keeping that in mind, a service excursion could be developed with a focus on domestic violence. Students could provide assistance at local battered women's shelter, allowing them to not only dedicate time to a worthy cause but also to educate themselves about issues of domestic violence and engage their new community through service.

These are but a few ways in which *A Thousand Splendid Suns* could be utilized in FYE and new student programs. The possibilities truly are endless, and yet, it will be important to keep in mind that as a work of fiction, the experiences/actions of Mariam, Laila, and the other characters should not be generalized to the entire Afghanistan population or culture. In making generalizations, one diminishes the richness and complexity of any culture and nation. The initial assignments above encourage students to use this work of fiction as a starting point by which a more complete understanding can be achieved through scholarly research. Additionally, while for many entering freshmen the United States will be their nation of citizenship, it is important that the U.S. is not utilized as the sole country of comparison when discussing the novel. As our campuses become more international with each passing year, it will be important that discussions are inclusive, keeping in mind that many students will not have the shared experience of growing up in the United States.