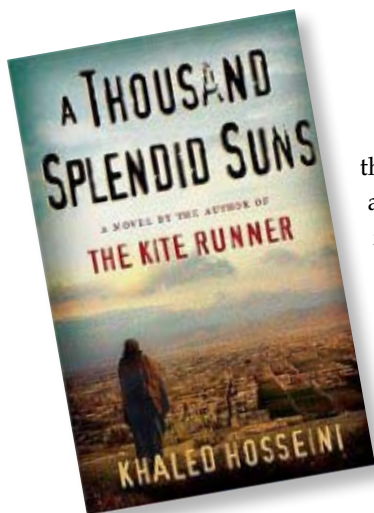


Book Review

A Thousand Splendid Suns Khaled Hosseini

By Helen Anco, Sunday Book Group



“Like a compass needle that points north, a man’s accusing finger always finds a woman. Always.” This evocative quotation is taken from Khaled Hosseini’s second book, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. It is always difficult to read a book in isolation of an author’s earlier writing,

especially when, as in Hosseini’s

first book, *The Kite Runner*, it was an internationally acclaimed novel, a major film release and is now on the DVD shelves. Indeed, it is not even appropriate to do so, as Hosseini has through *Suns* provided the reader with further insight into Afghanistan’s recent history – the strife of her people and, in this case, the relationship between two females living in an abusive home situation in Kabul.

The first key character we meet is Mariam. She is raised by her shamed, single mother in a rustic hamlet and visited by her father who lives in comfort with his wives and legitimate children in a town close by. The circumstances that lead to her enforced marriage to a much older man are tragic. Initially, we see her adapt to a domesticity in which she is shown affection and in which she accepts her husband’s requirement that she wear the burka when she steps outside or when visitors arrive. We soon discover that her role is to provide a son for her husband; when she fails to do so, the result is a daily life of physical and emotional abuse, toil and fear.

We meet the second key character, Laila, when she is growing up in her liberal family home. Her life is unusual – she is a girl in Afghanistan who is encouraged to study, attends school, talks to boys and has ambition. Her life is also beset by tragedy – in her case driven by the political struggles. She finds herself alone, pregnant and desperate. Mariam’s husband is still hungry to produce a son and, not knowing Laila is already pregnant, takes her as his

second wife. Mariam is not welcoming and the three exist under the same roof living independent lives. Hosseini’s writing creates a tension that is nearly tangible.

It is when Laila gives birth in horrific circumstances that Mariam’s heart goes out to her. The two women become close and together they exclude their husband, who extends his vile treatment to both.

As we follow the stories of these two women, feeling their desperation and discovering how they will escape their fates, Hosseini portrays the Soviet defeat within Afghanistan, the rise of the Mujahideen and the power of the Taliban on the lives of both men and women.

The book weaves a complex and harrowing personal story within the tight boundaries of a strict Islamic house and within an abusive environment that is set in one of the most erratic and turbulent periods of Afghanistan’s history. The author drops in comparisons with the West

that amuse and then shock, such as Kabul’s obsession with all things *Titanic*. The conclusion of the book is both gruellingly cruel and, in this reviewer’s opinion, too neat.

Suns is an ‘historical novel’ – not necessarily a highly literate work, but one which I dare anyone to say

they are not pleased to have read. It is an insight into female struggles within the context of war and faith, and deserves to be read by both women and men.

Yet again, Hosseini has provided an excellent read – an insight into the country in which he was born and which he left as a young boy. It would be surprising if the film rights to this novel are not already being fought over.

Do put this novel on your ‘to read’ list and, while you are reading it, do not compare it to *The Kite Runner*. When you have finished, then recollect the relationships between the two brothers in *Kite* and the two women in *Suns* and consider how Afghanistan’s conflicts and struggles create and steer the lives of her people.

“Like a compass needle that points north, a man’s accusing finger always finds a woman. Always.”

Helen Anco arrived in Singapore in the mid 1990s and joined FOM shortly after, serving as Vice-President during 2003-2004 and President during 2005. She is a regular contributor to **PASSAGE**.
