



The ripple of small failings

Ordinary Afghans make bad choices in Khaled Hosseini's intertwined stories

AND THE MOUNTAINS

ECHOED, by Khaled Hosseini.
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BY MARION WINIK

Special to Newsday

'And the Mountains Echoed," the third novel from Afghan-American writer Khaled Hosseini, is a bit different from the author's beloved earlier books. Between them, "The Kite Runner" and "A Thousand Splendid Suns" have sold 38 million copies worldwide; both have intense, melodramatic plots that revolve around brutal events: rape, murder, suicide. Like them, the new novel tells a tale of heartbreak and betrayal. But its scope is wider, its crimes of a gentler sort.

Rather than giving us extreme villains, Hosseini now focuses on the trespasses of essentially likable characters — ordinary people whose moments of weakness have results worse than they could ever imagine. There is a girl who pushes her sister out of tree, a father who gives up his daughter to a wealthy family, a foreign doctor who doesn't make good on his promise to a wounded girl. (Actually, there is one craven Afghani warlord who is purely villainous.) Human failures, and their ripple effects over time, are seen in a context beautifully described by the book's epigraph from the poet Rumi:

*Out beyond ideas
of wrongdoing and rightdoing
there is a field.
I'll meet you there.*

"And the Mountains Echoed" has an ambitious structure. It is a novel in stories, each chapter told from a different character's perspective, set in a different



In "And the Mountains Echoed," the bestselling author of "The Kite Runner" explores the small decisions on which much of life hinges.

time and place. At first, this is a little confusing, but within a couple of chapters, the reader catches on, and fitting the puzzle pieces together becomes a pleasure. The story unfolds from the 1940s to 2010, everywhere from a tiny village in Afghanistan to a tiny island in Greece, with stops in Kabul, Paris and San Francisco.

In the first section, an Afghan father tells a sad fable to his two children, Abdullah and his sister Pari. A man is forced by an evil spirit, a *div*, to give up the most beloved of his offspring. When he goes to get the boy back, the

div shows him that the boy, who has lived in poverty and hardship, is now living with a happy band of beautifully dressed children in a pleasure garden with swimming pools. Take him if you want, says the *div*. The father finds he cannot.

In the next chapter, told from Abdullah's perspective, something much like this happens in real life, tearing from him his adored sister Pari. In that chapter, three more key characters are introduced: a strange, wealthy resident of Kabul named Mr. Wahdati; his rebellious, beautiful young wife; and their chauffeur, who is Abdullah's Uncle Nabi, the brother of his bitter and stingy stepmother.

In Chapter 3, we flash back to 1949 to get the goods on the stepmother.

Chapter 4 is a letter written by Uncle Nabi, meant to be read

after his death. This explains a lot, and also raises a whole new set of questions.

Chapter 5 takes us to 2003, where two Afghan-American cousins have come to reclaim their family's home after the war. It happens to be the house next door to the Wahdatis.

This may sound bewildering, but it all starts to make sense. Clearly it's all going to circle back eventually — but how? The pages turn by themselves as Hosseini makes it happen.

What works slightly less well is the ever-expanding cast of characters. Some feel essential, but some of the tertiary characters strain a bit to keep our attention.

Hosseini's writing is not as lyrical as Rumi's, but he moves a story like a locomotive and paints character in fast, sure strokes. Here is one character,

as described by his daughter. "Baba and his grease-stained white shirt, the bushel of gray chest hair spilling over the open top button, his thick hairy forearms. Baba beaming, waving cheerfully to each entering customer. *Hello, sir! Hello, madam! Welcome to Abe's Kabob house. I'm Abe. Can I take your order please?* It made me cringe how he didn't realize that he sounded like the goofy Middle Eastern sidekick in a bad sitcom."

How wrongs are righted, or not, how good balances evil, or doesn't — these are Hosseini's concerns, both in fiction and in humanitarian work he does for the United Nations. His ability to make us look hard at these matters — and to bring the inner life of Afghanistan to the world — make his novels more than just good reads.

EXCERPT

Read part of 'And the Mountains Echoed'

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