

The Kite Runner

Responses to Preparing for the Film

1. Students preparing to watch the film *The Kite Runner* may find it useful to learn some facts about Afghanistan, provided by Wikipedia and *National Geographic*. The landscape of Afghanistan is mountainous, arid to semi-arid. The landlocked country is located in central Asia. The country has borders with China, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Iran and Pakistan, with Pakistan sharing the longest border with Afghanistan. Because major trade routes cross the country, it has been invaded by many cultures since the 6th Century. According to a February, 2008 article in *National Geographic*, The Mongolian soldiers of Genghis Khan were invaders who intermarried with the Afghans of an isolated region in the central highlands. Their descendants, the Hazara, have Asian features—narrow eyes, flat noses, broad cheeks—rather than the Persian features of the majority of the Afghan population. Pashtun kings of the 19th century launched bloody pogroms against the Hazara, and later rulers used law and manipulation to target the Hazara and keep them confined to a lower caste that still works the least desirable jobs in the country.

The Afghan culture is predominately Islamic; 99% of the population is Muslim. Most of the people are Sunni Muslim and a smaller percentage, less than 20 %, follow Shi'a Islam. Holidays, dress, foods and music follow Islamic traditions. Pashtu and Dari are the languages used in Afghanistan, with Dari the official language of the country. Afghans who have lived and worked in Pakistan learn Urdu and some Afghans living near the Tajik, Uzbek, and Turkmen areas also speak Russian. Proverbs (“Zarbul Masalha” in Dari) reflect Afghan culture and are often used to communicate. The Taliban, an Islamic fundamentalist group, and Al Qaeda, a radical militant organization, have caused strife in Afghanistan and between Muslim sects internationally.

2. When upper-class people move to another country to start their lives over, they may feel disoriented and displaced. No matter how much preparation they have done, adjusting to a new culture and position in that culture takes considerable time and patience. If they had to leave their homeland abruptly or felt compelled to leave, they will inevitably be worrying about their safety, their family, and their future. Many refugees end up no longer having the wealth, comforts, and connections they once had in their homeland. Learning a new language and new customs can be daunting, especially if the move was abrupt. Often transplants will feel homesick or nostalgic for their culture and their past, especially if they feel unwelcome or unwanted in their new community.
3. Children who have been traumatized are often withdrawn or timid around others. They may be sullen, depressed, or feel isolated, even around their family members and close friends. Most will be fearful or anxious about a repeated trauma, often obsessing on the event and avoiding any circumstances that remind them of it. Some may be haunted by nightmares or may act out and become angry and hostile, to keep people at a distance. Others may feel guilty or think they are to blame and may be reluctant to tell anyone about the trauma because of embarrassment or fear.

4. Some challenges for a director who is adapting the novel for a film version may include the following:
- whether to use a voice-over for Amir and then a flashback to his childhood or begin in the past and move chronologically forward
 - finding a substitute location for a war-torn country where it is impossible to shoot
 - creating an Afghani landscape in this substitute location
 - casting young boys to play Amir and Hassan, who carry so much of the film
 - how many details to include about Hassan's mother and her relationship with Baba
 - how vividly to dramatize and shoot the rape of Hassan
 - filming the kite competitions and the cutting of the kites
 - finding expert kite flyers
 - filming the brutal beating of Amir by Assef
 - how much to show Sohrab fitting in with his new family in California

Responses to Reflecting on the Film

1. The initial sweet accord between Amir and Hassan cannot be overemphasized. They link arms when they walk together and they confide in each other. In one scene, Amir asks Hassan if he would eat dirt if Hassan asked him to do so. Hassan replies, "If you asked, I would. But would you really do such a thing?" Amir responds, "Are you crazy? You know I wouldn't," and Hassan quietly shows his confidence in their friendship when he says, "I know." Amir shares his allowance with Hassan and they go to see *The Magnificent Seven* again; they know the script and anticipate the next line: "I admire your notion of fair odds, mister." Amir has carved their names on a tree where Amir reads stories to Hassan. The inscription says: "Hassan and Amir, the Sultans of Kabul." In another scene that shows the early intimate connection between the boys, Hassan respectfully questions the logic in one of Amir's stories, and Amir respects his analysis. They also work in an effective partnership in the kite-flying competition. Amir flies the kite, with Hassan's frequent advice, and when Amir has cut down the competition, Hassan runs, with perfect understanding of where the kite will fall, to the exact spot to retrieve the opponent's fallen kite.

In spite of the differences in their social classes—Amir's father is Pushtan and Hassan and his father Ali are Hazara, people of a lower caste, and Ali has been Baba's servant for 40 years—the boys seem to have a relationship that transcends social class, a respect and concern for each other. In a scene that shows Hassan's courage and willingness to protect Amir, he stands his ground and threatens to hurt with his slingshot the three older bullies who have chased him and Amir down a tunnel, threatening to hurt both of them. He shows in this scene that he has the courage to protect his friend, even when the odds are not in his favor.

In the decisive scene that changes their relationship, Hassan has run down the kite that Amir has cut, winning the tournament. When the bullies chase him again and offer to spare him if Hassan relinquishes the blue kite, he refuses and claims that the kite belongs to his friend Amir. His firm loyalty to his friend costs him his innocence and, because of Amir's guilt in not helping Hassan, ultimately their friendship. By the end of the film, the audience learns that Hassan has returned to Baba and Amir's house, where

he dies loyally trying to protect the house from the Taliban. The audience also discovers with Amir that Baba has sired Hassan with Ali's wife. Hassan's character is explicable; his genes are, in part, inherited from his self-assured, courageous birth father. The fondness and respect that Baba has for Hassan and Ali are also more clearly defined, as is Baba's sorrow in seeing Hassan and Ali leave his home.

2. After the kite-flying festival when Hassan runs to get the kite that Amir has cut, the three bullies surround Hassan in an isolated area and are determined to hurt him because they backed down from him and his sling shot the last time that they had bullied him. We see the boys holding Hassan on the ground while they lower his pants and their own. The boys continue to taunt him, "You're nothing but an ugly pet. You're just a communist's son." One of the boys protests, "My father says it's wrong," but the leader Assef sexually abuses Hassan, and someone says, "He's just a servant's son." The camera zooms in on Hassan's face, showing his pain and relief when it is over.

During all of this abuse, Amir is hiding in the shadows, horrified but unable or unwilling to act or speak. As Hassan is barely able to walk afterwards and is obviously in great pain, the camera focuses on blood dripping from him. Amir joins him then, but neither talks about what happened. After this horror, Amir and Hassan's friendship is never the same. Hassan is in bed for days, as if ill and "sleeping it off," as his father Ali explains. Amir tries to underplay Hassan's suffering when Baba asks if something happened to Hassan. When Amir claims, "He's just been a little sick," Amir's father notes, "Hassan never gets sick." When the boys have not played together in two weeks, Baba tells Amir, "Whatever's going on, you should deal with it before too long. Take care not to let these things fester. Time will only make it worse."

When finally Amir sees Hassan at their favorite spot in a cemetery, trying to teach himself to read, Hassan tells Amir, "I'd rather hear one of your stories." Amir says that he's "done making up stories because they're stupid," Hassan protests, "I don't think they're stupid. I love your stories." Then Amir becomes uncharacteristically aggressive, asks, "What would you do if I hit you with this?" and smashes a fruit against Hassan's shirt. He orders him to "Hit me back," and then keeps pelting him with fruit. When Amir shouts "You're a coward." Hassan picks up a ripe fruit but smashes it against his own face. Both boys have clearly been traumatized in different ways by the sexual attack against Hassan. Amir clearly feels guilty for not having helped or even acknowledged that he was there, and certainly feels like a coward but is projecting his guilt onto Hassan.

Hassan is exceptionally kind and forgiving and won't hurt Amir, no matter how much Amir provokes him. Hassan is a wonderful friend to Amir, always protecting him from bullies, applauding Amir's stories, and refusing to hold a grudge. But Amir can't seem to get past his guilt so, instead, he wants Hassan to move away. He angers his father by asking him if he has ever thought about getting new servants. His father explains how attached his family has been to Ali, Hassan's father, for 40 years, and that he would never consider following Amir's request and dismissing Ali and Hassan: "I've never laid a hand on you, but if you ever say that again, you bring me shame." Amir's rift with Hassan is such a sad and unanticipated by-product of the brutal sexual attack on Hassan.

3. Amir's birthday party is a lavish affair with many of his father's similarly affluent friends in attendance. Women are dressed in fine Western clothing and are unveiled. Alcohol is served. Hassan plays his characteristic role as a domestic and serves drinks, including

refreshments to the older boy Assef who raped him. Hassan's humility and self-effacement are evident and a change in the personality the audience has earlier seen. Amir also has observed the personality changes in his old childhood friend and feels discomfort and guilt about those changes in Hassan. Amir must feel responsible for what happened to Hassan when the three older boys, bullies, accosted him and raped him. Amir remained hidden but aware of what was happening to his friend and did not try to help or run to seek help. Amir's cowardice haunts him and his guilt promotes his distance from Hassan when Hassan most needs it, immediately after the assault and later when it is clear that Hassan is depressed.

At his birthday party, Amir realizes that Hassan accepts his Hazara subservience with his father's friends—including the bully and his father, and Amir's guilt and lack of support for his friend is profound. He has earlier tried to motivate his father to remove Hassan and his father from their home, to get Baba to hire new domestics, but his father is adamant in keeping Hassan and his father on to maintain their home. To give his father cause for dismissing them, Amir plants his new watch, a birthday gift from his father, under Hassan's pillow, thinking this act of apparent theft will provide his father, who is intolerant of stealing, the reason to dismiss his servants. Baba's open forgiveness of what he thinks is Hassan's theft is gracious and understandable when the audience realizes the full story of Hassan's paternity. However, Hassan's father realizes the damage that Amir's turning from Hassan has done to the boy and the unwarranted treachery of claiming that Hassan has stolen something from their employer's son. Even before Baba has openly forgiven Hassan for the alleged theft of the watch, Hassan and his father are packed to leave the home.

In addition to its function in the plot, the watch suggests thematic concerns of the film. As a material item, the birthday gift is significant. It is clearly a dazzling, flashy object of Western influence that only an affluent father could purchase for his son. When Amir first reports it missing, laying the groundwork for the planting of the watch in Hassan's family's quarters, Baba's response is, "Have you lost it already?" but he is not significantly distressed. His response seems to be more concern about his son's carelessness than regret that something expensive that he bought for him is lost. Later in the film, when Baba and Amir are hidden in the bottom of a dark tanker truck escaping into Pakistan, the watch's illuminated face glows in the darkness, as Amir recites a Rumi verse that he has memorized. Years later, at his father's funeral in California, Amir kisses the watch face just as the coffin is being covered with dirt.

A thematic interest in time continues to punctuate the film. When Baba senses that something has occurred to distance Amir and Hassan, he advises Amir to "deal with it before too long." He tells his son, "Take care not to let these things fester; time will only make it worse." In fact, time does make the estrangement worse because Amir never sees Hassan again after he and his father leave Kabul. Although he finds a "way to be good again," he does not have an opportunity to right the wrongs with Hassan. The chronology of the film, its sense of time, is distorted. The film opens in the present with the adult Amir's receiving boxes containing copies of his first book, *A Season for Ashes*, another image of time. Immediately, the telephone call comes from Rahim Khan summoning Amir to Pakistan, "to come home" and while Amir is on the telephone, the film flashes back to Amir's childhood in Afghanistan with Hassan. Flooded with guilt about his negligence in that relationship, and advised by Rahim Khan that "there is a way to be good again," Amir travels to Pakistan to meet with him. There is still time to right some wrongs.

At the end of the film, we see Amir's willingness to let time take its course with Sohrab, his nephew who has been brutalized by the Taliban who control the orphanage and the orphans who live there. It is clear that Amir and Soraya's gentleness and love will guide Hassan's son, Sohrab, back to strength and mental health.

4. When Amir and Hassan are boys in Kabul, they grew up as close friends even though Hassan and his father Ali were servants for Amir and Baba. While Hassan served Amir and protected him, they were also best buddies who supported and cared about each other. But the older boys in the neighborhood were much more aware of class consciousness and political distinctions. They degrade Hassan as a servant and refer to him as Amir's puppet. They also put down others by referring to them as "communists." There is antagonism between the intellectuals, like Amir's father, and the fundamentalist mullahs whom Baba terms "bearded idiots." Baba warns his son that he'll never learn anything from those "self-righteous monkeys. They do nothing but thumb their prayer beads and recite a book written in a tongue they don't even understand."

As soon as the Soviets invade Afghanistan in 1979, Amir's father realizes that he needs to escape to Pakistan because "everyone in Kabul has heard me cursing the Communists. We'll be back when the Russians leave." Baba believes that Pakistan is safest for Amir, but his father almost doesn't survive being smuggled there because he defends a young wife and just escapes being shot to death.

5. In the dramatic scene of Amir and Baba's escape from Kabul to Pakistan, the film director is not only adding drama to the film but vividly showing the characters of father and son. As the Russian makes clear his intention to rape the young Afghani mother, Baba steps forward and challenges the soldier by asking him if he has no shame. The soldier replies that "there is no shame in war," to which Baba retorts: "Tell him he is wrong. War doesn't negate decency." In spite of Baba's previous actions to keep attention away from himself and his son because he knows that the Communists are looking for him and other wealthy Afghans like him, he asserts his presence and makes clear he will not permit the soldier's taking the woman. When the driver says that the soldier would "enjoy putting a bullet in you almost as much as he'd enjoy her," Baba says: "I will take a thousand bullets before I let this indecency take place." Baba further threatens the soldier to kill him with the first bullet or he will tear him to pieces.

Amir is sensitive to the dangers they are facing in their escape from the Communists who have overtaken Kabul and are moving to close borders in all of Afghanistan. He must imagine what will become of them if they are taken prisoners. He may even imagine what will happen to him if his father is killed. Further, Amir sees that his father is a man of courage and ready to act on his principles. In seeing his father step forward to stop the armed Russian from molesting the woman on their truck, Amir must confront again his cowardice. Amir did not step forward to help Hassan, either during the assault by the bullies who outnumber him or after the fact, when Hassan clearly needed emotional and perhaps physical assistance. Amir must feel that he is not up to his father's courage.

6. The film characterizes the Afghani community of Fremont as expatriates who have had to take whatever jobs they can to make a modest living for their families. Amir's father, a

wealthy man with servants in Kabul, in Fremont works at a mini-mart in a gas station and lives with his son in a small apartment. Amir, always a successful student, graduates from a community college rather than a university. The Afghani community meets newcomers and socializes at the local flea market where they buy and sell products to support their families. When Amir and Soraya fall in love, they follow Afghani customs and have their parents agreeing to the engagement first. The couple also needs to have Soraya's mother accompany them when they go out to walk and get better acquainted. Both young people seem to respect their parents' wishes while still asserting themselves, too, and their wedding is packed with other relatives, friends, and expatriates.

7. Soraya keeps her history secret from Amir until the day he is to ask her father's permission to marry her. Before she accepts, she tells Amir that before her family came to California, they lived in Virginia and in a moment of youthful passion, she ran off with an Afghani man to live in his apartment. She was there for a month before her father found her. She admits that she didn't speak to her father for "a very long time," but now she is grateful to him. To escape the shame of the Afghani community in which they lived, Soraya's family moved to California. Soraya wants Amir to know her sexual history before he marries her. She asks him, "Does what I told you bother you?" and Amir responds, "A little." But when she asks if it bothers him enough to change his mind, Amir says, "No, not even close. I'd marry you tonight if I could." Amir must love and admire Soraya for her passion, desire to escape her father's hold, and her honesty in telling him openly about her past. The story also illustrates the General's hold on his daughter and his wife, and the power this man might think he has over Amir. Amir might have told Soraya his history with Hassan because when the call comes from Rahim Kahn, Amir has Soraya's encouragement to leave for Pakistan and Kabul at once, and it is clear at the end of the film that Sohrab will be welcome in their home.

8. Rahim Khan summons Amir to Pakistan to reveal to him that Hassan was also his father's son, born of a union between Baba and a servant. Baba loved both Amir and Hassan because they were both his sons. Rahim needs to tell Amir that Hassan and his wife have been murdered by the Taliban in Kabul, but that Hassan left a letter for Amir the week before he died. In the letter, Hassan confirms Rahim Khan's report that Kabul is worse now. No one is safe there. "Kindness is gone from the land. I dream that my son" will have a real future and that "kites will fly in the skies." Rahim Khan tells Amir that by rescuing Hassan's son and raising him as his own, "there is now a way to be good again."

Amir decides that he must rescue Hassan's son Sohrab from Kabul. He hires a driver, wears a fake beard, and makes the treacherous journey to Kabul. While there, he witnesses a public stoning of a woman and man in a huge stadium. He is driven to meet a Taliban leader who is keeping Sohrab, and the leader has Sohrab join them and perform a dance that makes Amir feel sorry for Hassan's son. When the leader sends his men from the room, he reveals to Amir that he is the brutal bully Assef. Amir tells Assef, "I am taking the boy home with me," but Assef, catching him offguard, beats him viciously until Sohrab uses his slingshot, as his father would have, and sends a stone into Assef's eye. Sohrab helps Amir escape and get to their vehicle, so Sohrab is finally free from captivity. Later Sohrab reveals that Assef had sexually abused him each morning, and viewers realize that Amir has been able to "be good again" and make amends to Hassan

by rescuing his son from abuse and providing a loving home for him in an Afghani community in California.

9. In spite of the sexual humiliation Sohrab must have endured in being taken from the orphanage and manipulated by the Taliban official, he retains his father Hassan's spunk and courage—and skill with a sling-shot. It is his well placed stone that blinds Assef, now a Taliban official. He and the beaten Amir flee the compound and ultimately escape to Pakistan. Later, in the United States, we see a withdrawn boy, as his father was withdrawn after the assault he endured in his childhood, but we also see Sohrab's interest in Amir's kite flying, which was one of his father's strengths, as Amir tells him. It is an activity that might be new to Sohrab because of the Taliban's forbidding that Afghan pleasure, but he has surely heard his father tell stories about winning kite competitions with his friend Amir.

10. In addition to being a part of the culture of Amir and Hassan's boyhood, kite flying represents soaring high and feeling free in the fresh air, gliding in the wind. Kite flying is exhilarating and often draws spectators. The kites are colorful and distinctive, each reflecting individuality. The kites represent the human spirit, and the kite festivals were a time for lively but harmless competition when kite flyers could exhibit their skill by "cutting off" the other kites and causing them to head to the ground. Amir's father held the record for cutting kites in Kabul, so it is especially exciting when Amir is able to cut off all opponents and win. However, the sport also requires a kite runner, someone who knows where to retrieve the cut kite and can keep it from the other boys who would love to steal it. Hassan was an expert kite runner, so he and Amir were the perfect team, each with complementary abilities.

Kite flying is a universal past-time that all cultures and classes can enjoy together because kites are inexpensive and can be homemade but getting them to stay in the air longer than others requires skill and strategy. In Afghanistan, the cutting off of a rival's kite requires masterful execution. However, the film suggests that even innocent child's play can sometimes be transformed into something horrendous that can haunt children for life. At the end of the film when Amir is flying a kite with Hassan's son, we see once again the exhilaration and joy associated with kite-flying.

11. Meaningful lines and aphorisms resonate in the film:

- **"It's a dangerous thing being born"**: Baba's wife, Amir's mother, died in childbirth, and in one scene in the film Amir shares his fear with Rahim Khan that his Baba must hate him because he "killed" his mother and Baba's wife. Rahim explains to him that birth is dangerous for the mother as well as the child. In the troubled times that the citizens of Afghanistan must endure at the hands of the Communists who have tried to subjugate them and then during the repressive control of the Taliban, the people must reiterate the expression: "It's a dangerous thing being born."

- **"Stealing is the only sin and all sins are variations of this sin"**: Baba, who is outspoken and often didactic, finds the Mullahs "self-righteous monkeys," and

has no use for their holy hypocrisy. Yet he explains to Amir his position on theft with the pronouncement that “all sins are variations of this sin.” When you kill a man, Baba explains, “You steal a life. You steal his wife’s right to her husband and his children’s right to a father.” He goes on to define a lie as stealing “someone’s right to the truth.” These explanations are especially meaningful to Amir who has claimed that Hassan has stolen his watch, and he realizes that he has stolen Hassan’s right, as well as Ali’s and his father’s right to the truth.

- **"I admire your notion of fair odds, mister"**: This line, from *The Magnificent Seven*, is known to both Amir and Hassan, and they anticipate its coming up as they watch the film together. On the day of the kite-flying competition, Amir is clearly nervous, but Hassan calls it “a beautiful day” to encourage Amir. Hassan exclaims, “It’s the two of us against all of Kabul,” to which Amir retorts: “I admire your notion of fair odds, Mister.” The humor is short-lived. After the final kite is cut and Hassan takes off to retrieve their competitors’ blue kite, he must face impossibly unfair odds when the three older bullies trap him and Assef rapes him. Later in the film, Hassan’s son Sohrab must deal with the unfair odds of the Taliban who have removed him from the orphanage for their amusement and sexual pleasure. Finally, Amir will face unfair odds in rescuing Sohrab from the Taliban and escaping to Pakistan.
- **"I’d rather eat dirt"**: We encounter this expression when Hassan and Amir are boys and Hassan chases after a cut kite, knowing where it will land. Amir says that the kite has drifted the other way, but Hassan insists that it will come where he is waiting for it. Amir asks, “How do you know?” and Hassan replies, “I know. . . Have I ever lied to you?” Amir responds, “How should I know,” to which Hassan openly replies “I’d rather eat dirt.” Clearly, it would seem that nobody would willingly eat dirt, so what Hassan means is that he would never lie to Amir. Sadly, Amir forces Hassan to metaphorically “eat dirt” by not helping him survive the ordeal of his humiliation by Assef who attacks him in part because he is Hazara and fair game for the arrogant Pushtan bully. In that scene, Assef wants Hassan to admit he is dirt, and a servant rather than a friend of Amir. When Hassan insists that he and Amir are friends, Assef is enraged and shoves him into the dirt for the assault. In one final scene of degradation, Amir throws a piece of ripe red fruit directly at Hassan’s chest, staining his shirt. Amir hands Hassan a piece of fruit and invites Hassan to throw the fruit at him, but Hassan will not do it, no matter how many pieces of fruit Amir throws at him. Finally, in fact, Hassan—who has courageously stood up against Assef to protect Amir—pushes the ripe fruit into his own face, accepting his own self degradation, or eating dirt, rather than returning fire on his friend.
- **"There is a way to be good again"**: Rahim Khan calls Amir to bid him “come home,” agreeing with Amir that it is a bad time, but “there is a way to be good again.” Rahim Khan knows that the Taliban is a terrible threat and it will be difficult for Amir to rescue Sohrab. Rahim is preparing for death and he must tell Amir his father’s history and encourage him to go after Hassan’s son, to rescue him from the Taliban. By the end of the story, Amir has accomplished that rescue and has put the General, his father in law, in his place by forbidding him to ever

again call Sohrab “a Hazara” rather than using his name. Defying his father’s earlier expectation that “a boy who won't stand up for himself becomes a man who won't stand up for anything,” Amir shows he does have courage and that there are ways to be good again. That theme concludes the film and rewards the audience with its optimism.