

# GOING TO AFGHANISTAN

How “The Kite Runner” Opened Our Eyes, Broke Our Hearts,  
and Changed Our Lives in Chatham County, North Carolina

by MARJORIE HUDSON

*March 10, 2004.* The library book sale is gearing up and behind the stacks of boxed books taller than Jim Wiggins, a rather tall man—is Jim himself, sorting and pontificating in equal measure.

“I found the book,” he says, “for the Community Read.”

“What?” I say, playing along. Jim knows it takes months to select a book.

“*The Kite Runner*.” He holds it up, waves it in my face. “It’s tremendous.”

I admit that my first thought was “Afghanistan? Who wants to read a book about Afghanistan?” Little did I realize Jim’s suggestion would lead me to read no less than seven books about Afghanistan and to have my eyelids peeled back by every one of them.

Community Reads are the new Oprah’s Book Club. For those of us who love books, read books, live by books, and even write books, the days of the on-air book club are not only gone, they are passé. We want our authors “live and in person”—we want our books to be dynamic and we want to argue with our friends about page seven, paragraph six, in the grocery store line and church coffee hour and school pickup lane, not by proxy

on TV. As the president of my local Friends of the Library in Chatham County, North Carolina, I see the Community Read phenomenon—in which a town or region all read the same book, then talk it up—as an ingredient as necessary as garlic to spice up the reading lives of the general public. Libraries need people to be excited about reading—and communities need to tell stories to stay connected. With Community Reads catching on, we may all survive this age of TiVo.

This is the story of my journey into community through a single book—you guessed it—*The Kite Runner*, by Khaled Hosseini. It is the first novel published in English by an Afghan American—a book once so obscure that only Jim Wiggins seemed to have heard of it. As of this writing, it is number four on the *Times* best-seller list for paperbacks—due, I am told, to a massive number of Community Reads.

*March 15, 2004.* Jim Wiggins’s declaration notwithstanding, we must take time to select a book. The selection committee has its first meeting—in the General Store Café, just a few steps from the library. I’ve asked people to bring favorite books. I pass out evaluation forms, but the “proof” of a book’s worthiness is in the passion of the reader—if you can convince three other people to read the book, you have a contender. We go around the circle—an attorney, a retired businessman, a librarian, a bookstore manager, a mom. People argue for their books—like democracy at work, or sausage making, this is a messy business. I sit back and watch; already it’s exciting. I’m sitting in a café in downtown Pittsboro, population 2,226, and people



are talking about books they've read and books they love and books they want each other to read, and I get the tingle along the back of my scalp. It's a "Community Read moment," the first of many to come—part excitement, part friendship, part *mise-en-scène*.

Already, two more people have read *The Kite Runner*. I am one of them. I am blown away.

*May 2004.* The selection committee has met every two weeks for several months in the "library room" at McIntyre's Fine Books, our bookstore partner for the Read. There have been some surprising twists and turns. For a time, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is a top contender, but it has faded out of favor. Now an e-mail of biblical proportions has arrived in my inbox—the top three books have been selected, along with reasons why. At the top of the list is *The Kite Runner*.

*June 2004.* A few things are settled: will the book be in paperback soon? Yes. Would it raise themes of interest to us all? Yes. (Would I let my mother read this book? Yes—but there is that word on page seven.) Will the author come to Chatham? Maybe. It is a story of friendship and betrayal, bullying and redemption, war and Afghanistan, and being Muslim in America. After some dissent, and a lively discussion, the board approves it. Let the reading begin.

*October 2004.* We've announced our book, gotten twenty copies on the library shelves. Our committee has also made a list of no less than thirteen other books to read about Afghanistan, on subjects from oil policy to kites. I've read about half of them. What I have learned from each book is mostly in the form of questions, like a series of "Jeopardy!" literary categories:

*The Kite Runner:* Are there really communities of Afghan expats in America? Did they come to es-

cape the Soviets? And—don't read this if you haven't read the book—do the Taliban really dress up little boys like girls and rape them?

*Caravans,* by James Michener: Is the history of Afghanistan the cruelest in the world? Did Genghis Khan really stack his enemies like firewood, in a column twelve feet wide, and seal them in plaster to make a pillar of screams and bones? Do Afghans really ride horses and fight over dead goats for fun?

*The Mulberry Empire,* by Philip Hensher: Did 16,000 British soldiers, under safe passage from Kabul, really leave their bones in a narrow pass, forty miles of crimson

umentary coming out about this rubble-strewn country every week.

People come to me with questions I have no answer for: Is it really that bad in Afghanistan? My god, if so, what can we do? Can we stand to learn more?

In the background, on everyone's mind but unspoken, is the continuing bad news from the Iraq war. Despite the "free election," the bombing continues, a contagion of violence that seems all too familiar.

It is Hosseini's book that keeps bringing us back—"There is a way to be good again," he promises. There is a way to change the world.

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blood on snow marking the merciless revenge of the Afghans?

I also read *The Storyteller's Daughter*, by Saira Shah, the story of a British journalist's search for her Pashtun roots in the midst of the war against the Taliban; *The Swallows of Kabul*, by Yasmina Khadra, the story of a woman's imprisonment and impending execution under Taliban rule; *The Book-seller of Kabul*, by Åsne Seierstad, a controversial exposé of life with a Kabul family; then *The Breadwinner* and *Parvana's Journey*—both are grim tales of youthful courage by Deborah Ellis—the former in which an Afghan girl dressed as a boy helps her family survive war by selling human bones from the cemetery.

Needless to say, I'm a little depressed.

Not only are these books flogging the painful history of Afghanistan, but there seems to be a new article, essay, film, or TV doc-

Some of our committee members host an event where they read scenes from several books. I begin to overhear people talking in the grocery store line about *The Kite Runner*. Someone reports an argument about it in yoga class. I learn that one of our Library Friends was posted in Afghanistan for years; another was ambassador to a neighboring "-stan." My husband Sam tells me one of his volunteers is building a Habitat for Humanity house in Afghanistan. A radio show host I know tells me his son was stationed there. Another friend's son is on his way. Something is going on. We are more connected to Afghanistan in Chatham County than we ever dreamed.

*November 2004.* We have tracked down Afghan recipes; we have a potluck to try them out: my yogurt spinach dish is a success, and the rice pudding is delicious.

We begin to encounter the large,

blank plain of our ignorance: we are duly corrected on our flagrant mispronunciation of Kabul (cobble, not kah-BOOL, which sounds cool but is completely wrong). We learn that Afghans are people, Afghans are pieces of money. We learn that the Hindu Kush is a fierce mountain range, meaning “Hindu Killer,” an explicit warning against invaders from India.

The creativity of this group is like a flag whipping in the wind: *Let’s have a dinner with real Afghan food; let’s have a kite-flying day, a kite-making workshop, an art show.*

The one thing we’ve been working on since July but haven’t been able to do is track down an actual living Afghan person, though not for lack of trying.

Then, a miracle. Someone named Bashir has returned my call. I wonder if people have last names in Afghanistan, but I’m afraid to ask. I invite him to our first event, a discussion with Islamic studies scholar and UNC-Chapel Hill professor Carl Ernst, who was recently honored in Cairo with the Bashrahil Prize for his passionate defense of the Muslim faith.

*November 16, 2004. Pittsboro Library.* Amid the library regulars, the retired ambassadors, the Pittsboro intellectuals, I see an unfamiliar face—a trim young man with dark eyes. I introduce myself. He smiles. I have met my first Afghan American.

Bashir is a leader in his Islamic Center. Listening to Ernst may be the first time he’s heard an American defend Islamic people as principled, moral, and good-hearted.

The next day I get a call. Having driven two hours from Johnston County to feast on our famous library cookies and punch, Bashir

now decides to return the favor. He invites me to the annual formal dinner of APPA—Americans for Permanent Peace in Afghanistan—a kind of local expat group. “Bring friends,” he says, and I begin to remember another question raised in all the books I’ve been reading—is the Afghan culture of hospitality for real? I’m about to find out.

*November 18, 2004. Raleigh, N.C.* The Afghan at the door is dressed like an ambassador, in a European-cut suit and polished shoes, friendly but formal. I am suddenly



shy—having read so many books about women in burqas who are not allowed to speak, I wonder if it is forward for me to converse with an Afghan man, a stranger? I strike up conversation with the first two women I see—both of whom look, well, like Regular Americans. A petite blonde with azure eyes begins telling me a story in a Southern accent: *When ab read Caravans, ab had just moved to Kabul with mah husband. Ab looked out the window, and there it was, the Hindu Kush!*

Here is a subset of culture I never imagined: an Afghan by marriage—an Afghan *Southerner*.

During the evening, Bashir introduces Sam and me to brothers, cousins, friends. Elegant women with earfuls of gold and wearing sari-like dresses and silk pants begin to gather. Children in embroidered shirts and matching pants cluster at the door. One cousin says he indeed flies “fighting kites”—maybe he will come show us how? The idea of kite fighting in Chatham—it’s a Community Read moment, for sure. Another friend, who is a cook, smiles when I mention my recipe trials. Another confirms *buzkashi*, the goat carcass game, still exists. Languages unknown to me fly past in the scented air. One of the exquisitely suited men begins to sing onstage—accompanied by *tabala*. Out on the landing, I ask Bashir to tell me about his life. He begins his story: *My father was killed by the Russians* . . .

It is a story of escape and refuge, Pakistan and California, New York, and, finally, North Carolina, a resting place for an immigrant family of nine. It is the story of an American dream—a proud college degree, the first in the family, a small business that supports a large family, a dream of a restaurant someday. It is a story that seems familiar—it is the story in *The Kite Runner*.

War brought Afghans here thirty years ago. There are thousands of them. Hundreds here in the Triangle. I grew up in Washington, D.C., where all you have to do to meet an immigrant from the East is get on a bus. I never expected to be in a roomful of Afghans in Raleigh. For the second time that night the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.





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## People who love Afghanistan have come out of the woodwork. Some of us spent Superbowl Sunday learning “The Dance of Attan.”

Sam and I must leave early, a workday tomorrow, and around eight o'clock we explain that we must go. A tempting array of sixteen covered serving trays has remained closed—awaiting some unknown ritual before being opened. As we tiptoe out the door, Bashir comes running after us. “Oh no!” he cries. “You have not *eaten*.”

We are about to explain that we already ate at home, when Bashir's stricken face compels our attention. “It is very rude,” he whispers, “in my culture, to leave without eating!”

We are horrified. Here we have come to make friends and instead have insulted the famous Afghan hospitality. We step back inside to find everyone looking in our direction. “Forgive me,” I say. “We would love to eat with you.”

That, apparently, is the secret signal. The lids are whipped off the chafing dishes, the crowd turns our way, and we are led to a stack of plates and encouraged to take something of everything, which we do. Chicken in sauce, pilau with lamb, kababs, curry, jasmine rice, rice with raisins, it is all delicious. Like at a Chatham County potluck, it is impossible to complete the line without accumulating a dangerously high pile of food. “You see?” Bashir whispers, with ineffable kindness. “They were just waiting for an excuse to start. You are their excuse.”

The fragrance of curry begins to penetrate my mind. I dimly recall rules of conduct from my reading: when eating with Muslims I must use only my right hand. No one may kill me while I eat. Friendship

and alliances are sealed by food. We are friends forever.

*February 20, 2005.* A mysterious package in the mail from my stepdaughter. Inside, layers of towels and bubble wrap. Could it be? Five weeks ago I sent her a copy of *The Kite Runner* and an application sheet for “The Kite and the Veil,” yet another creative celebration of the book in which local artists interpret images and phrases from Hosseini's story. Under the wraps is a golden oblong: a painted frame inscribed with the word *Inshallah* in painted handmade paper on a foil background. “When a person makes a journey, or a promise, he always invokes the blessing of Allah: the words mean ‘God Willing.’” I am moved to tears. This is my stepdaughter's first gallery piece, and it is both beautiful and deeply moving. *Inshallah* is what Hosseini's hero says, when faced with the journey that will risk his life and save him. My stepdaughter has been through such a journey not so long ago.

*February 26, 2005.* The Senior Center banquet room, where I've had church suppers and weekly yoga classes for years, is transformed. Red plush carpets line the floors, silhouettes of Kabul rooftops shade the windows; Indian fabrics and silk scarves make colorful tablecloths; camel bags hang on the walls; and candles, teapots, and baskets of grapes and figs and *naan* (flatbread) grace the tables. This is “An Evening in Kabul,” the brainchild of one of our volunteers, a night we have been plan-

ning for months. Fifty volunteers have made decorations, shared rugs, and donated auction items. The fragrances of curry, cardamom, and chicken hang in the air. We are aiming for a Kabul bazaar—I've never seen one but if they are like this, they are wonderful.

It turns out a Chatham man lived for years in Afghanistan and collected rugs; a Chatham woman lived in India and collected brass and fabrics; a Pakistani man in Silk Hope runs a halal meats outlet (for the Muslim equivalent of kosher food, with a blessing on food before painless butchering); there's a kabab place in Cary. People who love Afghanistan have come out of the woodwork. Some of us spent Superbowl Sunday learning "The Dance of the Attan," a circle dance popular at Afghan weddings and other celebrations, with Bashir and his teenage cousin. Tonight it will be rendered by eleven-year-old girls from Brittany's Dance Studio in Pittsboro.

Servers bring us fresh *naan*, cucumbers with yogurt, falafel, stuffed grape leaves, *barbuya pilaki* and hummus, chicken kababs, dough (yogurt with salt and mint, cultured by Bashir himself from Food Lion milk), *banjan bourani* (eggplant), lamb pilau, *sabse borani* (spinach and yogurt), and pot after pot of strong black tea. I can't eat, I am so mesmerized. (Later that night I will microwave my dinner leftovers and the smell of cardamom will fill my house for days.)

Bashir turns to me, his face joyful and amazed. "It is like home," he says.

Some of us begin to talk of going to Afghanistan.

*March 26, 2005.* Fifteen children and adults have shown up for the kite-making workshop, the brainchild of two local artists. I am doing something I never do: cutting paper, folding it, and drawing on it with colored markers. I am having a blast, making my kite look like an Afghan tapestry. The kids I



brought are decorating their kites with a different theme: One is blue and white for Duke; the other is red and white for N.C. State. It's March, after all. What better battle to put kites to?

We head out to the field at the community college for a trial kite fly. The air is misty and the paper kites are damp, not what I had in mind for this day. I keep running down the hill, throwing my kite into the flaccid air—if nothing else, my running is keeping the girls amused. Then I begin to see: somehow, when I wasn't looking, families with small children have begun taking over the field. They have brought their own kites and are running like mad to get them up. I turn and see Raj, an acquaintance from Pittsboro. A baby strapped to his chest, a five-year-old girl at his feet, a multicolored kite tail twisted in the scant breeze like the tail of a dragon. It is a scene from *The Kite Runner*, American style.

*April 1, 2005.* After all the events, after the Evening in Kabul dinner that brought Afghanistan to Pittsboro; after the discussions about race in the South, and ethnic oppression in Asia, and the spiritual path Hosseini's novel circumscribes; after the day an Afghan teen came to a meeting in her burqa to make *Parvana's Journey* come alive; after photographer Luke Powell's thirty-two mesmerizing images of an untouched land

and a fierce, hospitable people came down from the Pittsboro Library's walls; after the day I watched potter Kira Dirlik take notes as an Afghan American man spelled out Farsi phrases for her to inscribe on her Afghan lorry, a majolica masterpiece; after the day I opened up my stepdaughter's carefully wrapped first gallery piece; after all these things comes the day when Khaled Hosseini arrives in Chatham County.

That night before I drop him at his hotel, I tell Hosseini of a scene from my own life: two years ago, at my father's deathbed, one of his closest friends, Abdul, spoke a Muslim prayer. It was the day America invaded Baghdad. "I remember that day," Hosseini says. "I was with the king of Afghanistan, in his palace. We watched the war on CNN."

The next morning, before a crowd of eight hundred, the Afghan storyteller confides his personal journey of becoming an American and how that journey wove around his life until he became a writer of books. He is a person with a story to tell that we needed to hear, a story that would save our lives and teach us how to be good again in a world full of war and bullying and corruption.

Sitting across from Hosseini at lunch is Bashir Ahmady, this time feasting Chatham County style, smiling as he confides to me, "Did you know that I write stories?" ☺