



## Ramapo Catskill Library System Book Discussion Leader's Guide

### *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

by Khaled Hosseini (Riverhead Books, 2007)

**Target Audience:** Adult readers who enjoy mature, realistic fiction.

**Synopsis:** *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a breathtaking story set against the volatile events of Afghanistan's last 30 years – from Soviet invasion to the reign of the Taliban. Told through the lives of two women, we experience their struggle to survive. It is a chronicle of Afghan history and a deeply moving account of family and friendship.

**Life:** Khaled Hosseini was born in Kabul, Afghanistan, in 1965. His father was a diplomat with the Afghan Foreign Ministry and his mother taught Farsi and History. In 1976, the Afghan Foreign Ministry relocated the family to Paris. They were ready to return to Kabul in 1980, but by then Afghanistan had already witnessed a bloody communist coup and the invasion of the Soviet army. The Hosseinis sought and were granted political asylum in the United States. In 1980, Hosseini's family moved to San Jose, California. Hosseini enrolled at Santa Clara University where he earned a bachelor's degree in Biology in 1988. The following year, he entered the University of California San Diego's School of Medicine, where he earned a Medical Degree in 1993.

While in medical practice, Hosseini began writing his first novel, *The Kite Runner*, which has become an international bestseller. In 2006 he was named a goodwill envoy to UNHCR, the United Nations Refugee Agency. His second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, was published in May of 2007.

#### **Reviews:**

##### **Publishers Weekly** (starred review)

“Afghan-American novelist Khaled Hosseini follows up his bestselling *The Kite Runner* with another searing epic of Afghanistan in turmoil....Hosseini gives a forceful but nuanced portrait of a patriarchal despotism where women are agonizingly dependent on fathers, husbands and especially sons, the bearing of male children being their sole path to social status. His tale is a powerful, harrowing depiction of Afghanistan, but also a lyrical evocation of the lives and enduring hopes of its resilient characters.”

##### **Booklist** (starred review)

Hosseini's magnificent second novel is a sad and beautiful testament to both Afghani suffering and strength. Readers who lost themselves in *The Kite Runner* will not want to miss this unforgettable follow up.”

##### **Kirkus Reviews** (starred review)

“A fine risk-taking novel about two-victimized but courageous Afghan women....Another artistic triumph, and surefire bestseller, for this fearless writer.”

### **USA Today**

“Hosseini tells this saddest of stories in achingly beautiful prose through stunningly heroic characters whose spirits somehow grasp the dimmest rays of hope.”

### **Questions for Discussion:**

1. The phrase “a thousand splendid suns,” from the poem by Saib-e-Tabrizi, is quoted twice in the novel – once as Laila’s family prepares to leave Kabul, and again when she decided to return there from Pakistan. It is also echoed in one of the final lines: “Mariam is in Laila’s own heart, where she shines with the bursting radiance of a thousand suns.” Discuss the thematic significance of this phrase.
2. Mariam’s mother tells her: “Women like us. We endure. It’s all we have.” Discuss how this sentiment informs Mariam’s life and how it related to the larger themes of the novel.
3. By the time Laila is rescued from the rubble of her home by Rasheed and Mariam, Mariam’s marriage has become a miserable existence of neglect and abuse. Yet when she realizes that Rasheed intends to marry Laila, she reacts with outrage. Given that Laila’s presence actually tempers Rasheed’s abuse, why is Marian so hostile toward her?
4. Laila’s friendship with Mariam begins when she defends Mariam from a beating by Rasheed. Why does Laila take this action, despite the contempt Mariam has consistently shown her?
5. The driver who takes Babi, Laila, and Tariq to the giant stone Buddhas above the Bamiyan Valley describes the crumbling fortress of Shahr-e-Zohak as “the story of our country, one invader after another...We’re like those walls up there. Battered, and nothing pretty to look at, but still standing.” Discuss the metaphorical impact of this passage as it relates to Miriam and Laila. In what ways does their story reflect the larger story of Afghanistan’s troubled history?
6. What did *A Thousand Splendid Suns* teach you about the history of Afghanistan? When the Taliban first enter the city, Laila does not believe women will tolerate being forced out of jobs and treated with such indignity. Why do the educated women of Kabul endure such treatment? Why are the Taliban accepted?
7. Were you surprised when Tariq returned? Had you suspected the depth of Rasheed’s deceit?

**Compiled by Marie Arnstein, Monroe Free Library - August 2008  
Ramapo Catskill Library System Adult Services Advisory Council**