

## Following Amir – A trip to Afghanistan in which life imitates art

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by Khaled Hosseini  
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Amir will be the first to tell you that he is neither the noblest nor the bravest of men. But three years ago, he did something both noble and brave:

He went back to Afghanistan, then ruled by the Taliban, to settle an old score. He went back after a 20-year absence to atone for a sin he had committed as a boy. He went back to rescue a child he had never met, and to rescue himself from damnation. The journey almost cost him his life. The thing is, I was the one who sent him. It was easy. After all, I created Amir; he is the protagonist of my novel, "The Kite Runner."

Then, in March 2003, with the novel proofread and in production, I found myself tracing my protagonist's footsteps, sitting in the window seat of an Ariana Airlines Boeing 727 headed toward Kabul. Like Amir, I had been gone a long time, almost 27 years, in fact; I was an 11-year-old, thin-framed seventh-grader when I left Afghanistan. I was going back now as a 38-year-old physician residing in Northern California, a writer, a husband and father of two. I gazed out the window, waiting for the plane to break through the clouds, waiting for Kabul to appear below me. When it did, a few lines from "The Kite Runner" came to me, and Amir's thoughts suddenly became my own: The kinship I felt suddenly for the old land É it surprised me. É I thought I had forgotten about this land. But I hadn't. Maybe Afghanistan hadn't forgotten me either. The old adage in writing is you write about what you've experienced. I was going to experience what I had already written about.

Given this unusual circumstance, my two-week stay in Kabul took on a decidedly surreal quality, because every day I saw places and things I had already seen with my mind's eye, with Amir's eyes. For instance, walking through the crowded streets of Kabul for the first time, I was buoyed, like Amir, with a sense of coming home to an old friend. But also like Amir, I felt a bit like a tourist in my own country. We'd both been away a long time; neither one of us had fought in the wars, neither one of us had bled with the Afghan people. I had written about Amir's guilt. Now I tasted it.

Soon, the line between Amir's memories and my own began to blur. Amir had lived out my memories on the pages of "The Kite Runner," and now I found myself living out his. When I was driven through the once beautiful, now war-ravaged Jadeh-maywand Avenue, past collapsed buildings, piles of rubble and bullet-pocked, roofless walls where beggars took shelter, I remembered my father buying me rosewater ice cream there one day in the early 1970s. And I remembered that Amir and his loving servant, Hassan, used to buy their kites on this same street, from a blind old man named Saifo. I sat on the crumbling steps of Cinema Park where my brother and I used to watch free undubbed Russian films in the winter and where Amir and Hassan had seen their favorite Western, "The Magnificent Seven," no fewer than 13 times. I passed with Amir by smoke-filled, tiny kabob houses where our fathers used to take us, where sweaty men still sat cross-legged behind charcoal grills and feverishly fanned skewers of sizzling chopan kabob. Together we gazed up at the sky over the gardens of the 16th century emperor Babur and spotted a kite floating over the city. I thought of a sunny winter day in 1975, the day of Hassan and Amir's kite-fighting tournament. That was the fateful day when 12-year-old Amir made a choice and betrayed his adoring friend Hassan, a day that would haunt him for the rest of his life; his choice would draw him back to Afghanistan and the Taliban as a grown man seeking redemption. And as I sat on a bench at Ghazi Stadium and watched the New Year's Day parade with thousands

of Afghans, I thought of my father and I watching a game of buzkashi there in 1973, but also of Amir, who had witnessed the Taliban stone a pair of adulterers in this same stadium, at the south end goalpost, in fact, where now a group of young men in traditional garments were dancing the atan in a circle.

But perhaps nowhere did fiction and life collide more dizzyingly than when I found my father's old house in Wazir Akbar Khan, the house where I grew up, just as Amir rediscovered his baba's old house in that same neighborhood. It took me three days of searching - I had no address and the neighborhood had changed drastically - but I kept looking until I spotted the familiar arch over the gates.

I got to walk through my old house; the Panjshiri soldiers who lived there were gracious enough to grant me this nostalgic tour. I found that, like on Amir's childhood house, the paint on mine had faded, the grass had withered, the trees were gone, and the walls were crumbling. Like Amir, I was struck by how much smaller the house was in reality than the version that had for so long lived in my memories. And - I swear to this - when I stepped through the front gates, I saw a Rorschach blot-shaped oil stain on the driveway, just as Amir had on his father's driveway. As I said my goodbyes and thanks to the soldiers, I realized something else: The emotional impact of finding my father's house would have been even more intense if I hadn't written "The Kite Runner." After all, I had already been through this. I had stood beside Amir at the gates of his father's house - now overtaken by murderous Taliban soldiers - and felt his loss. I'd watched him set his hands on the rusty wrought-iron bars, and together we'd gazed at the sagging roof and crumbling front steps. Having written that scene took some of the edge off my own experience. Call it art stealing life's thunder.

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