

“Sheer despair drives people to put their loved ones on these rubber boats”

Khaled Hosseini

The Kite Runner author, doctor and refugee



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Tears spring to Khaled Hosseini’s eyes as he remembers seeing the photograph of Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old Syrian refugee whose body was washed up on the Turkish shore in 2015. “I was gutted,” he says. “I tried to imagine, as a father, what it must be like to see viral photographs of your deceased three-year-old lying face down on the sand at the water’s edge and being lifted into the arms of a stranger.”

The story of Alan Kurdi inspired Hosseini’s latest book, *Sea Prayer*, in which a father waits for dawn to break and the treacherous sea crossing to begin. “How desperate you must be, what paltry options you think you must be left with, to put the people you care about the most on these rubber boats,” says Hosseini, who speaks almost as lyrically as he writes — even though Dari is his first language and he did not learn English until his mid-teens. “Knowing how many thousands have perished already trying this very same thing... The sheer despair that drives people to put their lives in the hands of these smugglers, whose entire industry thrives on human misery, is not appreciated by a lot of people.”

The author of the bestselling novel *The Kite Runner*, Hosseini, 53, is now a goodwill ambassador for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). A refugee himself, he can identify with such stories more than most. His family sought asylum in America in 1980, following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. They were living in Paris at the time, where his father had been posted as a diplomat. Expecting to return to Kabul, they had left almost all their belongings and family heirlooms behind. “All the photos of our childhood, my parents’ wedding, everything went. There’s no relic of that era.”

The family’s only contact in the US lived in San Jose, California, so that is where they moved: Hosseini, aged 15, his four younger siblings, parents, grandmother and

aunt. “We arrived with a couple of suitcases and a lot of uncertainty and hope.” His father reinvented himself as a driving instructor and his mother worked as a waitress, then a hairdresser. Having been part of upper-crust Kabul, both parents found the change in status tough, especially the humiliation of having to use food stamps. “It was antithetical to the image they had of themselves. In Afghanistan, we had land, a couple of homes...” But their experience, as Hosseini is the first to point out, was as nothing compared to those of the refugees he now helps in his UNHCR role. We meet just after he has returned from a trip to Lebanon and Italy, where he encountered refugees in desperate situations. “Acclimatizing myself to Californian life was a challenge, but of a whole other scale.”

Nevertheless, he does not have especially fond memories of those early days in California, where he was sent to the local high school, despite not speaking a word of English. “I was one of those anonymous characters on the periphery of high-school life, invisible to other students. I gravitated towards some Cambodian refugees. I didn’t speak their language any more than they spoke mine, but there was a sense of kinship — whereas these jocks walking around in their letterman jackets and the cheerleaders, they might as well have been from another planet.”

One day, shortly after he arrived in San Jose, he came to school to see everyone wearing “the most bizarre clothes. Somebody has a vampire cape, somebody else is dressed like a mouse...” It was Halloween — but he had never heard of Halloween. “I was bewildered.”

Now, almost 40 years later, he is one of the most celebrated members of his local community. His 2003 debut novel, *The Kite Runner*, sold 31.5m copies in 60 languages and spent a total of 240 weeks on *The New York Times* bestseller list. It was subsequently made into a film directed by Marc Forster. His second and third books, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And* ➤➤➤

**PHOTOGRAPH
ANDY HALL**



ANDY HALL/UNHCR ILLUSTRATION © DAN WILLIAMS 2016 EXTRACTED FROM SEA PRAYER BY KHALED HOSSEINI

The Mountains Echoed, were also bestsellers. Proceeds from his new book will go to help refugees.

You meet at his brother-in-law's office in Willow Glen, a pretty suburb of San Jose with tree-lined streets, pavement cafes and boutique shops. The office, in a Tudor-style corner building, looks like a private home. Hosseini comes to the door to greet me warmly, looking suave in his open-necked navy shirt, jeans and suede shoes — not quite George Clooney or Russell Crowe, as some have described him, but unarguably good-looking, with an effortless charm. He introduces me to his brother-in-law, who is a financial adviser, then leads the way into a conference room adorned with Afghan carpets, drawn curtains and little silk bags of potpourri on the table.

Five years have passed since Hosseini's last book and anticipation levels are running high. "Cannot wait any more for Sea Prayer," reads one comment on his Instagram. "Your books have made me a better person," reads another. Hosseini is concerned that his fans might be expecting another full-length novel. "Please make sure you mention that it is a short illustrated book. The text is short [545 words to be precise], but the issue is big." How long did it take him to write? "An afternoon," he says, looking a little sheepish.

The book sprang out of a speech he gave at a fundraiser for refugees in New York: "The timing was perfect because the issue in the European Union had become increasingly important and divisive. Rhetoric and statistics and numbers have a way of dehumanising the issue. There are people living beneath these numbers and all of them have very specific stories."

The book may be brief, but it is beautiful, poetic — a distillation of his strengths. The sun is "a pale rim of persimmon", the son's eyelashes as he lies in his father's arms "like calligraphy, closed in guileless sleep". It combines Hosseini's multiple personae, as a wordsmith, as a father and even as a doctor: "You have learnt dark blood is better news than bright."

For Hosseini practised as a physician long before he became a writer. Although drawn to storytelling as a child, he never thought he could make a living out of it. So he studied medicine, qualifying as a doctor in 1996. "I chose it not because I had a deep calling for it, but for the same reason so many immigrants choose these hardcore, stable jobs, hoping that they will provide for the future. My parents were thrilled, of course, but my first love was writing."

For years, he combined both, getting up at five every morning to write for three hours before going to his medical practice. Two-thirds of the way through *The Kite Runner*, he was thrown off course by the attacks on the World Trade Center. His first instinct was to abandon the book: "I thought it would feel like I was capitalising on this moment of national tragedy."

It was his wife, Roya, a lawyer, who encouraged him to persist. "She said what many people have said since: that it would help people to better understand

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Afghanistan and to see it as a place of more than just war and poverty and drugs and the Taliban, to see it as a beautiful country with a rich culture. So I went back to writing it in December 2001."

He acknowledges that 9/11 contributed to the success of his book. "To think that it played no role, at least in the initial interest in a novel about Afghanistan, would be disingenuous and delusional, but at the end of the day, a book has to stand on its own legs."

In mid-2002, Hosseini sent the manuscript to 30 literary agents and all but one rejected it. One agent even sent him a letter that said: "Afghanistan is passé now. We're onto Iraq." "That letter shook me to the core," Hosseini says today. "I realised what it meant for the country."

When one agent eventually called and said she loved it, he was so thrilled that he kept the message for a year. Support for the book happened slowly — he remembers going to readings where only a few people would turn up. "It wasn't a barn burner," he chuckles. "But this reservoir of enthusiasm kept growing. When it came out in paperback a year later, there was a watershed moment. I began seeing people on the street and at airports reading it."

Hosseini describes writing as a form of dreaming. He was able to conjure up his childhood and turn it into fiction for his debut: "Dreams come from the subconscious and so does much of writing." He had a vivid recollection of those contented early days in Kabul. "I had a full and happy life. A lot of family, a lot of friends, kite flying in the winter time," he says. So you were that boy, I ask, referring to the hero of *The Kite Runner*. "Every boy flew kites in winter time, we had three months off school with nothing to do because it snowed so much. There's an entire other side of Afghanistan that has been buried in memory that people just don't realise at all."

Yet now they do because of Hosseini. All three of his novels have been based in Afghanistan. "I've had people walk up to me at book signings and say, 'I had no idea that Afghanistan had trees,' because all they see is the US helicopter landing and dust everywhere. They envisage Afghanistan as this barren desert with mountains, but it has a striking landscape — rivers, valleys, trees..."

His wife's family is also Afghan, although she grew up in the US. They were introduced at a party when Hosseini was 28 and Roya was 24, and talked intensely for half an hour. "We connected very deeply and immediately." He took her phone number and spent the next few days trying to call her. But her father →

TAKING FLIGHT

Right: Zekeria Ebrahimi in *The Kite Runner* (2007). Below: an illustration from Hosseini's new book, *Sea Prayer*



THE BESTSELLER OF KABUL

The Kite Runner (2003) has sold more than **30m** copies worldwide. It spent 240 weeks on The New York Times bestseller list

A Thousand Splendid Suns (2007) sold **1m** copies in its first week. It spent 15 weeks at No 1 on The New York Times bestseller list

And the Mountains Echoed (2013) sold **3m** copies in five months. Together, Hosseini's three novels have sold more than **55m** copies worldwide



would always answer the phone. “I kept hanging up,” he laughs. “He’s a lovely man, but he has this very deep voice and I was so intimidated.”

Eventually Roya answered. He proposed to her immediately and they were married six weeks later. “It’s proven to be the best thing I’ve done in my life. She’s an extraordinary person, a source of enormous wisdom. She is deeply ethical and has an enormous heart — a natural-born empath.”

They live with their two teenage children, Haris, 17, and Farah, 15, in south San Jose in a house with a swimming pool and two dogs — “a golden doodle and a bichon frise”. Many of his family live in the area, with two of his brothers close by and his mother only five minutes away. “My mother would be happy on the dark side of the moon so long as her kids and grandchildren were there.” His father, who never returned to Afghanistan, died of prostate cancer in 2009, but lived long enough to see the success of Hosseini’s first two books. “He was enormously proud. It was the culmination of his dreams to see that this grand project of his had paid dividends and that all his children were healthy and had secured good futures for themselves.”

Perhaps as a consequence, Hosseini is reluctant to put the boot into his adoptive country. “It would be unbelievably unseemly of me of all people, who is sort of the poster child [for refugees]. I have enormous faith in the ideal America. It has traditionally been enormously generous. We have taken in more refugees than the rest of the world combined — over 3m people since 1980 — so the lure of the American dream is still very much alive.”

Nor is he game for any Trump bashing. Despite my attempts to elicit any sort of view on the US president, he does not engage, nor does he mention Trump’s name during nearly three hours of conversation. Even his reaction to Trump’s “zero tolerance” policy on immigration is unexpectedly measured: “Every sovereign state has not only the right but a duty to protect its borders. That’s not debatable — but it is vital that it be done in a human and compassionate way.”

Surely separating children from their parents is not compassionate? “I don’t want to get too much into this,” he says apologetically. “There are issues that I have strong feelings about personally, but I can’t go there.”

Nevertheless, he volunteers that he voted, not surprisingly, for Clinton at the last election and one can perhaps surmise his views on Trump when he talks about his appreciation of Obama. “I admired him on a personal level for his dignified demeanour and his calm and reserve.”



Hosseini’s new book was inspired by the death of Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old Syrian boy found on the Turkish coast in September 2015

He has been back to Afghanistan on several occasions since the publication of *The Kite Runner* and has set up the Khaled Hosseini Foundation to provide humanitarian assistance there. “Afghans are exhausted [by war]. We need a generation born to silent guns.”

At home, he moves in a literary circle. “There’s a thriving writer’s community, so I’ve become friends with Amy Tan and Andrew Sean Greer, who just won the Pulitzer prize for his book *Less*. I’m so happy for him, it couldn’t happen to a lovelier guy.”

However, he insists his life is not glamorous. “My day-to-day life is quite dull. I exercise in the morning, either spin or Pilates. I play tennis badly, but I play it stubbornly. I have a spartan office that is utterly nondescript, just four walls, a roof, a desk and a chair. I pull the shutters so there is literally no distraction.”

He works from 9am-3pm, then makes a point of bringing the family together in the evenings. “It was very important to my dad to sit together at a table every night and to talk and fight and laugh and be sad. So we’ve maintained that with our kids. Then the kids do their homework and my wife and I retreat to our room to read a little bit, then watch something like *Game of Thrones* or *The Handmaid’s Tale*.”

He tries to keep Afghan culture alive for his children. “I want them to have an appreciation of their heritage because the ambient culture here is a tsunami. It’s very powerful.” His wife and mother cook Afghan food frequently. Does he cook at all? “I do what dads do — I burn meat on the grill.”

As both an author and a parent, he is concerned that people are reading fewer books. “Reading is being slowly phased out in favour of consuming tiny portions repeatedly throughout the day. Technology has a role in my children’s life that it doesn’t in mine. I’m a private person, I don’t feel any need to share with people what I had for dinner.”

Yet he has Instagram and Twitter accounts, which are regularly updated. “My son does it for me, I wouldn’t even know how. I’m utterly disconnected from that world, to my son’s chagrin. He says, ‘If you tweeted more, you would have more followers.’ I’m sure he’s right, but I just...” He tails off and shruggers.

He prefers a more subtle form of immortality. “I plant little personal things in my books so that my kids can always open a book and see what their father thought, what he felt and what mattered to him, even after I am no longer around.”

For those who might be disappointed at the brevity of *Sea Prayer*, he has a new novel in the works, but is reluctant to give much away as too often his efforts have ended up as “stillborn manuscripts” that never see the light of day. “I’ve learnt a lot about the nuts and bolts of writing, but generally writing is a lot about sitting in front of the screen and worrying. I used to get very frustrated and bang my head against the proverbial wall, think that I could force my way through the impasse, but now I’ve learnt that it’s the normal process and not necessarily a wasted day.”

Sea Prayer ends before the journey over the waves begins. What does he think happens to the father and son? “I hope they make it.” The mournful tone of his voice seems to suggest otherwise ■

Sea Prayer by Khaled Hosseini (Bloomsbury £13) is published on August 30