

The Kite Runner Essay Contest Winning Entries
Fall 2006 Contest Sponsored by the Campus Reading Program
First Place Essay – “Rags”

By Raisa Garcia

I stare down at the crumbs of shattered glass and trails of punch. I was mad that I was not crowned Homecoming Queen and smashed the punch bowl onto the floor. I ruined the night for both teachers and students with my selfishness. Now people are gone and I am alone staring at the mess I created. As I do this, I notice my new white shirt is blemished with red blotches. Apparently the impact of the smash was so hard, the punch somehow managed to reach me. I take it off, disgusted-- it is the evidence of my crime, a token that will trigger bad memories to flow in my head. But instead of tossing it, I decide to use it to clean up the damage. After glass and punch are off the floor, I then decide I might as well clean the entire gym-- all with that stained shirt. Cleaning will not bring back the night, but it will ease the pain I caused. At least now the Associated Student Body will not have to clean the gym themselves. If there is one lesson I learned from Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, it would be just that: “There is a way to be good again,” (2). Though it is Rahim Khan who verbalizes it, polar characters Baba and Amir are the ones who demonstrate that no matter how severe a sin is committed, redemption is possible and the pursuit of reaching inner satisfaction and peace can live on.

In the novel, there is a tale that Baba once wrestled a black bear in Baluchistan with his bare hands. Whether it is valid or not, it acts as a metaphor for what Baba can and would do. No matter how dangerous and hard of a task is, he will take the initiative and take on whatever is needed to be done. Such an example is when he stands up to a Russian soldier who wants a half hour with a lady as an exchange to let the truck pass through the Mahipar checkpoint. Although no one gets hurt in the end, he put himself in a situation where he would rather have himself killed than to allow such an inhumane act to occur. He does this because it is right. But unknown to the other characters of the novel, doing these good deeds because they are the kind/right thing to do is only half the story. If Baba's heart has an upper layer of moral principles, beneath it lays a bottom layer of personal obligation. After the simultaneous death of his wife and birth of his son, he forces Sanaubar to become an adulteress when he bares her a child while she is married to Baba's own servant Ali. In addition, the sin is doubled when

First place \$250, Second place \$125, Third place \$75 + all winners received a “VIP” package for author Khaled Hosseini's visit to campus, and some books. The Campus Reading Program thanks the Friends of the King Library and the SJSU Center for Literary Arts for their support of the fall essay contest.

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he lets Ali believe that Hassan, the child conceived out of wedlock, is his own son. It is ironic how Baba himself considers theft to be the only sin, yet the sins he commits are variations of theft: by forcing Sanaubar to cheat with him and leading Ali to assume he is Hassan's father, Baba steals Ali's right to fairness and truth. This is all for the sake of preserving his healthy reputation-- if the people of Kabul were to discover the sins he committed with Hazaras, as a Pashtun he would be extremely criticized. That he cannot handle-- he is not so tough after all. None of this is known to anyone (aside from his friend Rahim Khan) until Baba, Ali, Sanaubar, and Hassan are dead. This means Baba alone holds the entire weight of his guilt and regret. As a smart man, he finds "a way to create good out of his remorse," (303). He does this by putting up an orphanage and most of all, treating Hassan as a son in any way he could (taking him places, giving him presents, hiring a doctor to fix his harelip, etc.). Baba rips off his bloody white shirt and bleaches it to the point where there is no trace of sin. On the other hand, he does not wear it again to commit another sin; instead, he uses it to rid his house of dust and dirt. Dust and dirt, do not exactly harm anyone, yet wiping them off makes the world that much cleaner and safer. Although this is like a breathless race for justice that does not end till death, it is a race worth running. Baba's death deserves peace because he dies trying to correct/make up for his sins. The shirt can now be put to rest-- it is too worn out from cleaning to be used anymore.

The flawed Amir is Baba's son who appears to be the antonym of his father. At the shallow end of the pool of differences, Amir prefers reading and writing stories rather than playing soccer, and he bawls while watching Afghanistan's national (brutal) passion of Buzkashi. As Baba points out, these are signs of weaknesses. And weak Amir is. He always depends on someone to defend him, most of the time Hassan. One example is when Hassan takes out his slingshot, aims a rock at Assef for badmouthing Amir (he says Amir is a disgrace to Afghanistan), and threatens to fight him with his brass knuckles. Fortunately, no one is harmed that night; Hassan succeeds in protecting Amir. Failing to protect Hassan in return is Amir's sin. And surprisingly like father, like son, selfishness is the culprit. In a nutshell, Amir allows Assef, Wali, and Kamal to rape Hassan by simply watching-- all because he does not want to be made fun of for defending a Hazara and because he wants to be able to take home the blue kite unharmed to make Baba proud. In the end, avoiding being made fun of and having Baba's approval are outlived by the regret and guilt of stealing Hassan's right to a friend. This goes on for 26 years until Rahim Khan brings Amir the ultimate opportunity to redeem himself: to adopt Sohrab, Hassan's orphan son in Kabul, and care for him the way Amir should have cared for Hassan. Naturally, repression of a memory for such a long period is going to be extremely

difficult to mentally revisit, but knowing that giving Sohrab a better life is the only way to finally end his misery, Amir grabs the opportunity. Unlike Baba who immediately tries to dig himself out of his ditch, Amir stays in his just trying to forget he is in one. The longer he stays in his hole, the deeper he sinks and the more dirty his white shirt becomes. He is passive and allows internal decomposition to occur-- it might as well be considered committing suicide.

Fortunately, he admits he does not want to die a dirty man, and at the last minute warms one in need with his shirt. It is dirty, but not useless because that warmth saved a life. What is more precious than that?

The anecdote at the beginning obviously never occurred; however, this does not make it fluff. The fact that I can even come up with such a problem/solution scenario is a sign that my horizon of thinking is pretty broad. Previous to reading the novel, the only option in that particular humiliating situation would be to simply leave the gym-- that is, the same thing everyone else does as though brushing off the fact that I caused some harm. The Kite Runner is truly one of my favorite books, and a large part is because Baba and Amir are such inspirational role models. Here are two men who betray their most loyal friends in the most painful way possible, yet they find the strength to convert the negative consequences of their sins into positive ones. Leaving the dance innocently used to be the sole choice, not only because it was easy, but because it seemed like there was nothing else to do. This novel reveals that is not true; there is always something that can be done. Every moment of life is a second chance-- an opportunity for change. Reaching satisfaction is not going to occur at the first attempt to better a situation, but as long as time continues to pass, hope also continues to be present. And fortunately, hope only strengthens and heightens the chances of desires being fulfilled.

Second Place Essay – “*The Kite Runner: Positive Propaganda*”

By Nicole Lieurance

I remember in 2001 when the twin towers were hit and America's view of the Middle East was changed forever. At the time, I went to school with a Muslim girl whose family was from Iran, and I remember wanting to ask her how she felt about what had happened. I never did. Like many Americans, I was ignorant about her culture and her family's homeland. Since 9/11, many of us have developed preconceived notions about things like how Muslims treat women, socialize, and practice their religion. Now, novels like *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini are helping to break down stereotypes about the Middle East. Many use propaganda, a type of message designed to influence people's opinions and behavior, instead of providing impartial information. *The Kite Runner* in particular uses propaganda to change the reader's opinion about the Afghan people through association, demonization of the enemy, and the "common man" technique.

From the start of the novel, Hosseini uses the propaganda technique of association, which links an emotionally charged person or entity to a separate entity to influence someone's opinion. In *The Kite Runner*, the reader's perception of Afghanistan is tied to the sympathetic character of Hassan, the narrator's friend and half-brother. A stereotype exists in America that all Middle Easterners are violent; however Hosseini associates Afghanistan with a boy who is lamb-like in nature. The narrator, Amir, states that "...to me, the face of Afghanistan is that of a boy...with a Chinese doll face perpetually lit by a harelippled smile" (25). He is of course referring to Hassan, who was born with a harelip. Amir connects Hassan with his image of Afghanistan throughout the novel, creating an emotional tie for the reader as well. Hassan is the epitome of goodness and self-sacrifice, who allows himself to be brutalized so that Amir can bring home a trophy to his father. Hassan seems to have no faults, and Amir acknowledges that he is one of those "people who mean every word they say" (54). Hosseini truly makes the reader feel for Hassan, and in turn, for Afghanistan.

Another way in which *The Kite Runner* influences opinions about Afghanistan is by using the propaganda technique of demonizing the enemy, in this case the Taliban. Many Americans falsely believe that all Muslims are as strict in their religion as the Taliban. However, Hosseini makes a clear distinction between the average Afghan and the Taliban, and emphasizes the brutality of the Taliban in contrast with the more prevalent, more liberal Muslim practices in Afghanistan. He does this by creating an image of the Taliban that is almost evil in nature. Assef, the face of the Taliban in the novel, is a bloodthirsty sociopath. Amir recalls that, "I will never

forget how Assef's blue eyes glinted with a light not entirely sane" (38). Assef is also the one who rapes Hassan, the kind, sensitive boy whom the reader has already come to associate with Afghanistan as a whole. Hosseini also uses the other Afghan's characters' responses to the Taliban to reveal the gap between the average Afghan and the Taliban. Amir's mentor, Rahim Khan says, "They don't let you be human" (198). This portrayal of the Taliban is blatantly one-sided and seems to damn all of its members. Demonizing the Taliban in this way causes the reader to dissociate them from the rest of the Afghans in the novel who are portrayed in a more positive light.

At the same time that he creates distance between most Afghans and the Taliban, Hosseini uses the propaganda technique of appealing to the "common man" to compel the reader to identify with most Afghans. There is a tendency to label foreigners as "strange" and regard them as inherently different from us. In *The Kite Runner*, Afghan characters are shown doing many of the common everyday things that Americans do: going to see a movie, playing in the streets, and gossiping in the market. It's these small details Hosseini includes that make the Afghans seem human and accessible to the reader. Amir fondly relates how the Afghans would socialize at the flea market. He recalls, "Tea, Politics, and Scandal, the ingredients of an Afghan Sunday at the flea market" (138). Substitute coffee for tea, and I'm sure many Americans can relate to the same experiences of socializing with friends and discussing the latest news. *The Kite Runner* turns Afghans from "the other" into human beings to whom Americans can relate.

Throughout *The Kite Runner*, Khaled Hosseini uses propaganda as a powerful tool to influence his readers' opinions about Afghanistan and the people who live there. His portrayal of Afghanistan is mixed at times, yet I believe it takes steps to positively break down stereotypes that pervade American beliefs about Muslims and the Middle East. It is far from offering a solution to race conflicts, but if everyone read it, perhaps there would be more positive dialogue between Americans who are of Afghan origin, and those who are not. And that would be a good thing.

Third Place Essay – “The Border of Acceptance”

By Cassandra Ng

The author writes that his San Jose State English Professor forbids the use of cliché's, but proceeds to use the “Like Father, Like Son” cliché, without regret. I, too have a wonderful cliché that I would like to share, a cliché that has been used time and time again: “Love Is All Around”. This book is a love story, regarding love for both others and love for the self, in terms of acceptance. There is love written all through the book, from beginning to end. It is not explicitly stated, although as we pick up the words and say them in our heads, we feel the author's soul gushing out on to each page. There are several instances of discomfort that the author places us through, but we only feel this intense because we can identify with love, and it is love that causes this pain. Love- this is the main reason Amir is able to experience every other emotion. In each and every incident that occurs, another emotion seeps, but these emotions lead us straight back to love. Love is the reason for his guilt, for his fear, for his happiness. Another appropriate cliché- “Love makes us do crazy things”.

At the beginning of the book, we sense jealousy within Amir as he sees his father's disappointment in him- he is not like his Baba: strong, tough and able. Instead, we feel Baba wishes Amir was more like Hassan, who to Amir is like a brother, but in “reality”, “just a Hazara,” a servant boy. How painful, to hear this, to have your father wish you were someone who you know you are not. Love for his father inspires Amir to be somebody, in whatever way he can- and to him, he feels as if he must win the kite flying tournament for recognition. As he is triumphant, this is a great moment. We feel as if tension has been released, and we can breathe easily again. It was love that inspires Amir, and love that makes him feel jealous.

The most uncomfortable part of the book, by far, is the point at which Amir sees Hassan getting raped and does not do anything about it. We think back to the earlier segments and think about how happy they were, climbing the pomegranate tree, talking, reading, and teasing. The rape of such an innocent victim is written with an intention to provoke, making you say to yourself, “Go stop this, Amir! Go do something!” And for a minute, you almost wish the writer would stop writing. Then you think to yourself “What would I have done in that situation?” This scene depicts fear. We feel Amir's fear, and recognize it. We recognize it because we've all been there- too afraid to do anything that we can do nothing but freeze. Perhaps we have never felt fear in a circumstance as serious, but we can identify. Perhaps it was that speech you needed to give, or that girl you wanted to talk to. As I explained before, there is love pulsing through each

page. So where's the love in this scene, you ask? It's right there, through all the horror. The love Amir feels at this moment is love for himself. He decides, through his fear, that he loves himself more than he loves Hassan. And we, as the reader, feel sick because the author has already described Hassan as a beautiful, compassionate ray of sunshine.

This guilt stays with Amir and consumes him, until Ali and Hassan leave the house. And the guilt stays with him all the way through his adult life, as a rotten piece of his soul, which would kill if he chose to indulge in it. It lingers there, and even through his marriage, a time in which he is happy, he still cannot forget. It is still real, because he does not tell his wife about it, even though she has confessed to secrets of her own. He cannot bring himself to do it, because he is still ashamed. He has not yet come to accept his past.

I have to say my heart sank at the news that Hassan and his wife were killed. How wonderful it would have been for a reuniting of the brothers, especially after discovering that they were indeed joined by blood. But then that wouldn't have added to the drama, would it? It was at this point, when Amir returns to Afghanistan, that I realized who Rahim Khan, Amir's friend and Baba's business partner, really is. Rahim Khan is the reader. Rahim Khan is the character the reader's emotions are reflected in- the character who shows care to the boy who felt neglected by his father, and the character who sends Amir to confront his past. He is even the character who, like the reader, carries the knowledge of Amir's secret. This is the part where Amir begins to really show love for others. First, we see him finally opening up to his wife, and accepting what he has done. He conquers this fear, because he loves his wife- he wants her to know. He no longer wants to be consumed by this secret. And in his love for his dead half brother, he goes on a quest to find his half nephew. Amir is a self described "softy," and roaming into a country of political turmoil, what seems like a foreign land goes against all that is natural to him. Amir has a sense of duty now, and what he doesn't know, is that he is about to face his greatest fear in physical form- Assef. He is on a quest, because as Assef depicts Amir's fear, Sohrab depicts Amir's dignity. Dignity is worthiness. And Amir must go get Sohrab back.

True love is on almost every page of the book. But, there is one section in which there is no love. This is when Assef is beating Amir to a pulp. We know there is no love here, because there are no more signs of fear. He has no more fear, because he has no more love for himself. Amir takes all the swings that come to him. The reader feels pain with every blow, and Amir is liberated. He is getting what he deserves, what he believes to be the "right thing." He takes the pain, and is even humored by the irony of the situation, because he knows he is back on the road to accepting himself. This cleanses him, and makes him feel whole again. Sohrab (dignity)

saves him. And with this, we feel Hassan's presence.

Again, Sohrab is Amir's dignity, and after he is beaten by Assef, Sohrab is saved. In fact, Sohrab saves him. We find Sohrab has been beaten, worn, raped, and now he is free. Just like Amir. Peace is short lasting, because Amir soon finds Sohrab in the bathtub. This makes the reader want to slap himself on the forehead and say "No! They were so close to "happily ever after." Not just yet. Amir almost loses his dignity again by breaking his promise, the promise to never send Sohrab to an orphanage; so it seems just that Sohrab, in his physical form, is almost lost again, too.

Kite flying resembles a fight. In this case, it is a fight for- what else? Love. Like I said, everything in this book returns to the issue of love. Amir used kite flying to fight for his father's love and acceptance. When he won the tournament as a boy, he saw his father smile and his fists in the air, which was an exhilarating experience, making the reader smile with delight. We've all felt like we don't belong, and when we find that glimmer of hope that there will be a change for the better, we feel a tinge, we get goosebumps, and we feel a rush of blood to our hearts. Amir believes he is fighting for much more than first place in a kite tournament. And he is victorious! Years later, Amir is in the same situation, but this time he fights for the love and acceptance of his half nephew, Sohrab. They bond, briefly, while Amir familiarly destroys the kite that has challenged him. It probably did not matter whether or not Amir won the kite flying competition as a boy, just as it probably did not matter whether Amir cut the green kite that day at the park. But to Amir, kite flying was more than a sport- it was a sign of acceptance. Amir's victory in the park gives us the impression that a new love is about to bloom.