

The Kite Runner

A Study Guide



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Introductory Materials — *Why teach The Kite Runner?*

A note from the author of this study guide:

On September 11, 2001, I was in grade 11 at a mostly-white, suburban high school in Southwest Ontario. My first period teacher got a TV so that we could watch the news when he heard that the World Trade Center had been bombed, and in his class we watched the second plane hit, the two towers come down, and we dealt together with the difficult realization of the loss of life we'd just witnessed.

Two of my teachers were particularly important to how I now believe I reacted to the events of 9/11. The first was that first period teacher, who taught English, and redirected our lessons to discussion and writing about the implications of a more dangerous world. The other was my art teacher, who gave the only Muslim girl in my class the floor and allowed her to tell us about her beliefs and her religion. He was right that if she wasn't given that chance, we would have overwhelmingly heard about Islam through the frantic reporting that follows a crisis, and from people who didn't necessarily understand what they were talking about. There just weren't enough people to give us another point of view in my relatively homogenous classes.

Over the next few years the media coverage of the War in Afghanistan made it easy to believe that it was simply a backwards, hateful region of the world. I remember the shock that I experienced when I first saw photos of the country before it became a battlefield in the 1970s. *The Kite Runner* is written by someone with memories of that time, and gives a human face to the tragic history of Afghanistan through the story of Amir and Hassan.

In addition to giving students a first-person perspective on a part of the world that they might not otherwise experience, *The Kite Runner* presents opportunities to talk about history, race, trauma, sexism, Canadian refugee policy, and the immigrant experience.

Above all, it is a beautiful, if sad, story. I hope you enjoy sharing it with your class as much as I enjoyed reading it and preparing this guide.

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Curriculum Connections

- Intermediate/Senior Level English
- Intermediate/Senior Level History
- Senior Level Canadian & International Law
- Senior Level Challenge & Change in Society
- Senior Level Canadian & World Issues

Reading the Book

We suggest exploring this text through discussion based inquiry. A few guidelines:

- Students will read the books and prepare their own questions, or explore the reading beginning with questions introduced for the class.
- Possible points for discussion are outlined in the chapter breakdown below, but students should guide the discussion during Socratic seminars.
- Students should be marked on participation in the discussion, respect for differing opinions, and evidence that they've read the book.
- If using Socratic seminars, periodic journals on class discussions should be kept by students for evaluation.
- Teaching material for the classes leading up to Socratic seminars and in line with the points for discussion outlined below follow the chapter-by-chapter breakdown. (Bookmark links will take you between the chapter breakdown and the suggested lessons.)
- As the material in this study guide is based on student-led discussion questions, it may be necessary to experiment with different formats for the discussions. Literature Circles can work quite well, for example. Also worth considering: timed debates, Think/Pair/Share, Word Walls or role playing.

Chapters 1 – 9

Discussion questions:

- What do you think of Amir's statement that "Afghans cherish custom but abhor rules"? What do you think the difference is?
- Do you think that discrimination had anything to do with Amir's decision not to help Hassan? Or do you think he was just frightened? Or do you think it was something else, entirely?
- Why do you think Amir wants Hassan to hit him? Do you think it would make him feel better or worse?
- Why do you think Amir's father forgives Hassan? Do you think he is hypocritical, as Amir feels he is?

Passages for Socratic Discussion

Chapter 3: "When I was in fifth grade, we had a mullah who taught us about Islam... But I hadn't turned out like him. Not at all."

Chapter 4: "In 1933, the year Baba was born and the year Zahir Shah began his forty-year reign of Afghanistan... and nothing was ever going to change that. Nothing."

Chapter 6: "The kite-fighting tournament was an old winter tradition in Afghanistan... And when the last kite was cut, all hell broke loose."

Chapter 6: "It snowed heavily the night before the tournament. Hassan and I sat under the *kursi*... 'Whatever,' I said. 'Get ready to lose again.'"

Chapter 8: "Hassan milled about the periphery of my life after that. I made sure our paths crossed as little as possible... I knew the answer to that question."

Chapter 8: "Shouldn't you be entertaining your guests?... Almost told him everything, but then what would he think of me? He'd hate me, and rightfully."

Chapter 9: "They'd both been crying; I could tell from their red, puffed-up eyes... I'll never forget the way Baba said that, the pain in his plea, the fear."

Exercises *Chapters 1-9*

Afghan history:

Share with your students some of the resources on Afghan history available on LiberalStudiesGuides.ca.

- How have Amir and Hassan fared, given the history of Afghanistan up to this point?
- Did you find it remarkable to read about the relative peace with which the king was overthrown for a republican government in the book?
- What are some differences between how Amir describes Afghanistan in these chapters and what you thought about Afghanistan before reading the book and seeing these resources?

Dealing with discrimination:

Hassan deals with discrimination in *The Kite Runner* because he is a Hazara, a visible minority and, as a Shi'a Muslim, a religious minority in Afghanistan. Amir mentions some of the discrimination that Hassan faces. In Canada we are lucky and discrimination is less common, but it still exists.

Share with your students the article **Who are the Hazaras?** (available on LiberalStudiesGuides.ca)

If your class has access to a computer lab, or your students are able to access computers reliably, share the game **The Cat in The Hijab** (linked at LiberalStudiesGuides.ca) with them and ask them to play it.

- What did playing **The Cat in The Hijab** teach you about what it is like to have a visible marker that makes you different?
- How do you think this is similar to how Hassan and Ali are treated in *The Kite Runner*?
- Do you think discrimination would be different if it's for something you can't see? If not, why not? If you do, then how would it be different?

Chapters 10 – 13

Discussion questions:

- What do you think Amir means when he says that his father loved the idea of living in America, but that actually living there was difficult for him? Why do you think this would be the case?
- Amir says that Afghans love custom, but abhor rules. Do you think North America is different, or the same? Why?
- What is the difference between “custom” and “rules”?
- Do you think the Afghans sell at the flea market because they are poor, for the sense of community, for both reasons, or for other reasons?
- Do you think that Amir’s father believes anything in America is better than the life that was destroyed in Afghanistan by the revolution and the wars?

Passages for Socratic Discussion

Chapter 10: “Standing on the side of the road, I thought of the way we’d left the house... then the first soldier’s voice, slurry and off-key, singing the old wedding song.”

Chapter 11: “One Sunday in the spring of 1983, I walked into a small bookstore that sold used paperbacks... For me, America was a place to bury my memories. For Baba, a place to mourn his.”

Chapter 12: “Be careful, Amir,” he said as I began to walk. ‘Of what, Baba?’... If I was going to have an adversary in this – whatever *this* was – it would not be her.”

Chapter 13: “I learned that Khanum Taheri – whom I called Khala Jamila now – had once been famous in Kabul... I knew all about regret.”

Exercises *Chapters 10-13*

A refugee experience:

After escaping from Afghanistan, Amir and his father are able to go to the United States where they are safe, but adjustment is difficult.

Because of conflict in the Middle East, Canada has accepted many refugees from the region, including from Afghanistan. A variety of resources on refugees, refugee resettlement, and current issues affecting refugees have been collected at LiberalStudiesGuides.ca. Choose some of these to share with your students.

- Did Amir and his father suffer from a lack of resources?
- Do you think Amir and his father are poor? Do they need more help? Did they want it?
- What kind of help do you think Amir's father would have accepted?
- What are some challenges facing refugees trying to flee to Canada today?
- What kinds of programs does Canada use to accept refugees? What are some pros and cons of each program?

Chapters 14 – 24

Discussion questions:

- Why do you think the Taliban banned kite fighting?
- Why do you think the Taliban massacred the Hazaras?
- Why do you think the Taliban destroyed the Buddahs of Bamiyan?
- Do you think that there were clues about the truth of Hassan and Amir's father, as Amir thinks there were when he looks back?
- Why do you think the Taliban does not want people to cheer loudly at soccer games, but still allows the soccer games? Why do you think they are allowed to cheer for the Taliban?

Passages for Socratic Discussion

Chapter 14: “The conversation inevitably turned to the Taliban. ‘Is it as bad as I hear?’ I said... ‘Yes, hope is a strange thing. Peace at last. But at what price?’”

Chapter 16: “Outside the walls of that house, there was a war raging... but you know how children are, they forget so quickly.”

Chapter 19: “It was Rahim Khan who had introduced me to Farid in Peshawar. He told me Farid was twenty-nine... You? You’ve *always* been a tourist here, you just didn’t know it.”

Chapter 19: “Wahid sat with me against the wall across from the boys, who had ambushed Farid and climbed his shoulders... He was looking down now, playing with the frayed edges of the straw mat.”

Chapter 20: “Rabble and beggars. Everywhere I looked, that was what I saw... I meant to take him up on his offer, come back and see if he’d unearthed any more stories about my mother. But I never saw him again.”

Chapter 21: “To my surprise, most of the houses in the Wazir Akbar Khan district still had roofs and standing walls... ‘I don’t want to forget anymore,’ I said. ‘Give me ten minutes.’”

Exercises

Mental health of children in conflict:

Sohrab has obviously been traumatized, but Amir and Hassan faced trauma in their childhoods as well. Unfortunately, this is far too common as war, conflict, and refugee crises affect children the most severely. Share with your students some of the resources in the **Mental health of children in conflict** section on the LiberalStudiesGuides.ca page accompanying this guide.

- What are examples of traumatic experiences affecting children in *The Kite Runner*?
- Do any children in *The Kite Runner* receive treatment for their mental health? If they do not, why don't they?
- What kinds of care and resources would be helpful for children and adults who suffered trauma as children but are still in conflict situations?
- What kinds of care and resources would be helpful for children and adults who suffered trauma as children but who have escaped conflict situations?
- If the above two answers are the same, why do you think they are? If they are different, why?
- Do you think the experiences in refugee camps may sometimes be a source of trauma?

Banned books, banned art, banned ideas:

The Taliban banned many books, art, music, and different religions, as well as kite flying. They also destroyed cultural relics such as the Buddahs of Bamiyan. Share with your students the resources on banned books and banned art available on LiberalStudiesGuides.ca.

- Do you think that banning books is an effective way of suppressing ideas?
- Do you think that banning art and music is an effective way of controlling dissent?
- Do you think that books can be banned if the ideas in them are popular?
- Do you think that books can be subversive?
- Do you think that speech, art, or music can be subversive?

Share with your students the statement, **Free Inquiry on Campus: A Statement of Principles by Over One Hundred Middlebury College Professors** (available on LiberalStudiesGuides.ca) or, as an alternative, the **University of Chicago's Statement on Principles of Free Expression**.

- Do you think the professors are right that the only way to fight wrong ideas is to allow them to be expressed?

Chapters 23 – 25 and Conclusion

Discussion questions:

- Why do you think it is so difficult for Amir to adopt Sohrab?
- What kind of support do you think Sohrab needs?
- What allowed Amir and Soraya to get a visa for Sohrab? Is it a solution for other children? Why or why not?

Passages for Socratic Discussion

Chapter 25: “The skirting finally came to an end over dinner when the general put down his fork and said... In our house, the new year began much the same way the last one had ended. In silence.”

Exercises

Poetry from refugees and immigrants:

Share with your students the because we come from everything **Poetry & Migration** project (linked on LiberalStudiesGuides.ca). Have them explore the various projects, choose a poem that they like, and write a short explanation of why they like it and whether they think it relates to any of the stories from *The Kite Runner*.

The challenging process of international adoption:

Amir's attempt to adopt Sohrab involved challenges that exist in the real world. There is some controversy in Islamic tradition about whether or not adoption is permitted, but many liberal Muslims believe it should be. Share with your students the article **The Islamic View of Adoption and Caring for Homeless Children** from the Minaret of Freedom Institute, available on LiberalStudiesGuides.ca.

In addition to problems specific to dealing with adoption in a way that is respectful of Islam, challenges are posed by international law, which was tightened in response to kidnapping and illegal adoptions in unstable countries, but now makes it difficult to adopt children, even legitimately. Choose articles or videos to share with your students from LiberalStudiesGuides.ca on this topic.

- Do you think adoption would be one helpful tool for addressing the costs of war and conflict?
- What are some challenges that the international adoption process has faced?
- What are some changes that you think would be helpful to make the process work better?
- Do you think that the Islamic approach to adoption has anything to offer our Western approach?
- Do you think that it's OK to ask adoptive parents to respect a religiously sensitive adoption plan? Why or why not?
- Are there ways to help children stay in touch with their culture other than denying out-of-country adoption? What might they be?

Final assignment/essay questions:

- Do you think Sohrab will be OK? Draw on the resources that we've talked about through studying this book to support your case.
- Do you think there is anything Canadians can do to help Afghans as conflict continues in their country, or other people in other conflict countries? Draw on resources that we've talked about through studying this book to support your case.

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Liberal Studies Guides help teachers engage their students when discussing literature through study guides and cross-curricular resources made freely available for classroom use. We also offer free workshops on using the Socratic method with secondary students of all levels.

Our study guides break down novels into lessons with ideas for discussion, exercises, and assignments. We tie our guides together with additional resources on our website, LiberalStudiesGuides.ca, including ready-to-use worksheets, to encourage the discussion of current events, history, music, philosophy, and economics to help tie the lessons to the real world.

Although our guides are aimed at English classrooms, the supplementary resources may be useful for history, music, drama, communications studies, economics, philosophy, and social studies.

Liberal Studies Guides is a project of the Institute for Liberal Studies, a non-partisan educational charity. We believe that encouraging discussion in the classroom helps to better equip students to discuss the problems facing Canadian society.



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