And the Mountains Echoed by Khaled Hosseini

This work is Hosseini’s latest novel, and has been as successful as his previous works, *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Most of the group have read at least one of the earlier books, but overall we enjoyed this less than the others.

The novel adopts a fractured narrative style (one member likened it to a plait) that ranges widely in both temporal and geographical terms; whilst the main plot centres on two Afghan families, their story spans sixty or so years from 1949, and quite large sections take place outside Afghanistan, in particular Paris, a Greek island and America. We all felt that the sometimes abrupt change of time and place made the rather complicated plot somewhat disjointed and hard to follow.

The two central themes are families, which are portrayed as disrupted and disappointing, sometimes due to events they cannot control, and the position of women in Afghan society. These are huge themes, and we felt that Hosseini’s narrative structure and large sub-plots distracted from them, rather than helping us to engage with them. For example, we felt that the section on the warlord who had benefited from the Russian invasion and his son Adel added very little to the plot and seemed somewhat of a side-show. The long section dealing with a Greek surgeon who works in Kabul and the disfigured daughter of his mother’s friend, could almost have been a novel in its own right.

The theme of the place of women in society, particularly Afghan society, on which Hosseini focused in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, is developed through the many female characters who suffer at the hands of men. One, the Greek girl whose face is destroyed by a savage dog owned by her mother’s lover, and who adopts a veil to hide her terrible injuries, is literally effaced, whilst those in Afghanistan must totally hide their face with the veil or burqa. Yet another who, though born and living in the USA is still banned from many activities and is not allowed to take up a place on a prestigious art course. We agreed that many of the characters were well drawn and we felt great sympathy for the family we first meet.

We discussed at some length the question of Afghanistan and its people. Hosseini left Kabul at the age of 11 and did not return until he was 38, so we wondered to what extent he could still “get into the skin” of his compatriots who have lived through civil war, the Russian invasion, the Taliban era and the US invasion. These political events are only referred to obliquely in the novel and do not seem to have great impact on the characters; those who leave do so either to escape poverty or a failed relationship. We did feel, though that his descriptions of the landscape, both rural and urban, were very good and the tensions within families are sometimes quite painful.

Our conclusion was that although the novel is beautifully written, and deals with important themes, the structure is unnecessarily complicated which, for us, lessened the impact of life stories that are often sad and sometimes tragic.