



# AND THE MOUNTAINS ECHOED

## READING GROUP QUESTIONS

1. *And the Mountains Echoed* introduces us to Saboor and his children Abdullah and Pari, and the shocking, heartbreaking event that divides them. From there, the book branches off to include multiple other characters and storylines before circling back to Abdullah and Pari. How do each of the other characters relate back to the original story? What themes is the author exploring by having these stories counterpoint one another?

2. The novel begins with a tale of extraordinary sacrifice that has ramifications through generations of families. What do you think of Saboor's decision to let the adoption take place? How are Nila and Nabi implicated in Saboor's decision? What do you think of their motives? Who do you think is the most pure or best intended of the three adults? Ultimately, do you think Pari would have had a happier life if she had stayed with her birth family?

3. Think of other sacrifices that are made throughout the book. Are there certain choices that are easier than others? Is Saboor's sacrifice when he allows Pari to be adopted easier or more difficult than Parwana's sacrifice of her sister? How are they similar and how are they different? Who else makes sacrifices in the book? What do you think the author is saying about the nature of the decisions we make in our lives and the ways in which they affect others?

4. "Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, / there is a field. I'll meet you there." The author chose this thirteenth-century Rumi poem as the epigraph for the book. Discuss the novel in light of this poem. What do you think he is saying about rightdoing and wrongdoing in the lives of his characters, or in the world?

5. The book raises many deep questions about the wavering line between right and wrong, and whether it is possible to be purely "good"—or purely "bad." What do you think after reading the novel: Are good intentions enough to create good deeds? Can positive actions come from selfish motivations? Can bad come from positive intent? How do you think this novel would define a good person? How would you define one?

6. Discuss the question of wrongdoing and rightdoing in the context of the different characters and their major dilemmas in the book: Saboor and his daughter Pari; Parwana and her sister, Masooma; the expats, Idris and Timur, and the injured girl, Roshii; Adel, his warlord father, and their interactions with Gholam and his father (and Abdullah's half brother), Iqbal; Thalia and her mother. Do any of them regret the things they have done? What impact does it have on them?

7. The overlapping relationships of the different characters are complex and reflective of real life. Discuss the connections between the different characters, how they are made, grow, and are sustained. Consider all the ways in which an event in one of the families in the book can resonate in the lives of so many other characters. Can you name some examples?

8. Saboor's bedtime story to his children opens the book. To what degree does this story help justify Saboor's heart-wrenching act in the next chapter? In what ways do other characters in the novel use storytelling to help justify or interpret their own actions? Think about your own experiences. In what ways do you use stories to explain your own past?

9. Two homes form twin focal points for the novel: the family home of Saboor, Abdullah, and Pari—and later Iqbal and Gholam—in Shadbagh; and the grand house initially owned by Suleiman in Kabul. Compare the homes and the roles they play in the novel. Who has claims to each house? What are those claims based on? How do the questions of ownership complicate how the characters relate to one another?

10. The old oak tree in Shadbagh plays an important role for many different characters (Parwana, Masooma, Saboor, Abdullah, and Pari) during its life. What is its significance in the story? What do its branches represent? Why do you think Saboor cuts it down? How does its stump come back as an important landmark later on?

11. In addition to all of the important family relationships in the book, there are also many nongenetic bonds between characters, some of them just as strong. Discuss some of these specific relationships and what needs they fill. What are the differences between these family and nonfamily bonds? What do you think the author is trying to say about the presence of these relationships in our lives?

12. *And the Mountains Echoed* begins in Afghanistan, moves to Europe and Greece, and ends in California, gradually widening its perspective. What do you think the author was trying to accomplish by including so many different settings and nationalities? What elements of the characters' different experiences would you say are universal? Do you think the characters themselves would see it that way?

13. Discuss the title, *And the Mountains Echoed*, and why you think it was chosen. Can you find examples of echoes or recurrences in the plot? In the structure of the storytelling?



Photo: Elena Seibert

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### Q&A WITH KHALED HOSSEINI

#### **What inspired you to write *And the Mountains Echoed*?**

The novel was not something that sprang fully formed from my mind, nor something that I sat down to plan. There was no single moment of inspiration for it, but I do think that the idea for the central event in the novel was with me, at least on a subconscious level, for quite some time. I may have thought of it as early as 2007, when I traveled to Afghanistan with the UN Refugee Agency to visit with returning Afghan refugees. One of the most striking parts of that trip for me was learning from village elders the devastation that Afghanistan's notoriously brutal winters visited upon impoverished villagers, routinely taking the lives of the young, the elderly, the sick and disabled. I listened with a mix of horror and admiration to the tales of survival, the choices villagers made, the lengths to which they went to protect their families through the cold season.

When I came home, I tried to picture what I would do under those same circumstances. I tried to imagine the despair, the agonizing calculus that went into deciding what was best for the family, and the painful compromises reached. Slowly, a family began to take shape in my mind—not unlike the many I had visited—one living in a remote village, forced to make a painful choice that most of us would find unbearable. At the heart of this family, I pictured a young brother and sister, who become the unwitting victims of their family's despair. The novel begins, then, with this single act of desperation, of sacrifice, an act that ruptures the family and ultimately becomes the tree trunk from which the novel's many branches spread out. The bulk of writing this novel, and really the joy of it, was in pursuing the far reaching ripples of this one act, discovering the lives it had touched and transformed and all the unexpected ways in which it still echoed through the decades.

#### **This is your first book set all around the world. What inspired such a wide range of settings, from Paris to Greece to California?**

It is true that this is a less Afghan-centric book than the previous two. There was an attempt on my part in this book to expand the social, cultural, and geographic milieu of my characters and to add a more global flavor to the story. The book begins in Afghanistan and hops around the world, from Kabul to Paris to

Greece to northern California and elsewhere. Partly, having traveled extensively the last few years, I wanted to expand the landscape for my characters as well, and partly I wanted to surround myself with a few characters who are nothing like me or the people that I know. There are wonderful writers—Alice Munro comes to mind—who can find an endless supply of deeply felt stories set, more or less, in the same settings. For me, I needed some fresh air, so to speak. I needed to, at least now and then, leave a story world that began with Kabul and ended with Kandahar.

#### **When you were a child, your own family ended up living in Paris, unable to return home to Afghanistan due to the 1978 coup. What was this time of life like for you? What memories do you have of being an exile in Paris?**

The first two years in Paris, from fall of 1976 to April of 1978, were quite wonderful. I had never been anywhere outside of Afghanistan and Iran, where I had lived as a child for two years. Paris flattened me the first time I saw it; it was a feast for the ears, the eyes, and in some ways for me, like having fast-forwarded 100 years. I felt like I had stepped onto the set of a science-fiction film. Prior to Paris, I had never seen a skyscraper, been in an elevator, ridden a subway, or watched cars speeding on a freeway. Those were happy years, with all of us in the family learning French, trying new foods, watching French TV, visiting famous sights, and generally adapting to a new culture—though with the understanding that this was temporary and that soon enough we would be reunited with our friends and family back in Kabul once my father's four-year post ended.

Our last two years in Paris, after the communist coup in 1978, were a time of transformation for us. Our world, as we had known it, was coming unraveled, and there was a sense for us that the ground beneath our feet was shifting in a very fundamental way. From our apartment in Paris, we received regular news of family members, friends, or acquaintances who had been imprisoned, tortured, killed, or had gone missing. We received phone calls from family members who had managed to escape and were trying to seek asylum in the West. It was a time of great instability and anxiety, culminating with my father's decision to seek asylum in the U.S., where we would have to adapt to a new culture, a new language, and a new way of life.



Photo Courtesy of UNHCR

**Where does the title *And the Mountains Echoed* come from?**

The inspiration for the title came from “The Nurse’s Song,” a lovely poem by William Blake, in which he ends a verse with the line “*And all the hills echoed.*”

*“Well, well, go and play till the light fades away,  
And then go home to bed.”  
The little ones leaped, and shouted, and laughed,  
And all the hills echoed.*

I changed “hills” to “mountains” partly because of the obvious nature of Afghanistan’s topography, but also because of the pervasive presence of mountains in the book. In fact, the mountains in this book bear sole witness to a couple of key, pivotal events. Just as a mountain would echo back a shout, the fateful acts committed before the mountains too emit an echo. They have a rippling effect, expanding outward, touching lives farther and farther away. I liked the idea of a decision or an act echoing through both place and time, altering the fates of characters both living and not yet born.

**You use a Rumi poem as an epigraph. Is this a poem you knew growing up?**

Actually, this particular poem I learned about in English, and is not one that I grew up with. That said, I did grow up around a lot of Rumi, and other Sufi poets like Hafez, Khayyám, Beydel, and others. Poetry was revered in my family, as it generally is in Afghanistan. You were expected in school to memorize poetry and be able to recite it on demand. Afghans, both urban and rural, traditionally grow up there around poetry, and it would not be unusual at all to run into an illiterate farmer somewhere in a barren part of the country who could recite from memory verse after verse of Rumi. At the risk of self-referencing, a Greek character in *And the Mountains Echoed* says he loves Afghans because even the graffiti artists spray-paint Rumi on the walls. Indeed, on my visits to Afghanistan, I am always struck by how often, instead of vulgarity, I find poetry spray-painted on the walls of abandoned buildings. It is part of the Afghan DNA.

**Your novel opens with a folktale about a giant *div* stealing away a child. Were you told similar stories when you were a boy? Do you read folktales to your own children?**

One of my most vivid and indelible memories of growing up in Afghanistan is of my grandmother telling me and my brother stories about *divs* and giants and fairies. Some of them were stories that she had been told when she was a child; some, I think, she had made up. She was a very skilled storyteller, and I gave to the character of Saboor my grandmother’s ability to harness your attention and keep you listening, rapt and helpless. I read to my children when they were younger (they are ten and twelve now), though mostly contemporary writings from the likes of Lemony Snicket and Kate DiCamillo. I did read them classic folktales as well—Grimm brothers and Hans Christian Andersen—but just as often I invented them. I would improvise and always end with a cliff-hanger before I shut off the lights to my children’s protests.

**What do you see as the common themes between *And the Mountains Echoed* and your previous two novels?**

I am drawn over and over to family as a central theme of my writing. Like my previous two books, this latest book is a multigenerational family story. Mostly, it is because I think all the grand themes of life, of being human, can be found within family stories—love, grief, conflict, duty, sacrifice. And yet, they play out differently from family to family, as each has its own unique makeup, dynamics, and volatile antagonisms, grounded as they may be in affection. And so there are endless variations on the theme. To me, families are puzzles that take a lifetime to work out—or not, as often is the case—and I like to explore how people within them try to connect, be it through love, duty, or circumstance.

Also, like the previous two books, the “home base” is still Afghanistan. No matter their nationality, the characters in this book have varying degrees of intimacy with Afghanistan. Some are Afghans living in exile who have a tenuous bond with their birthplace. Some are foreign aid workers who have adopted intense relationships with the country and its people. Others have deep ties that they are trying to either sever or keep alive, and yet others are more ambivalent about their Afghan roots.

Last, much of what the characters experience—as in the previous books—is universal, regardless of their own nationality: loss of family, fear of abandonment, finding the courage to be a good person, the pull of “home,” taking care of a dying loved one. These are human experiences that transcend international borders, language, or religion.

**Can you expand a little on the theme of the sibling relationship that is recurring in *And the Mountains Echoed*?**

Having three brothers and a sister of my own, this specific aspect of family—siblingship—is one that I find thematically rich. The landscape of sibling ties is peppered with love, volatility, envy, and a host of other—and often conflicting—emotions that make it such fertile ground for fiction. I am interested in the manifest complexities of the relationship, its contradictions, its tensions, its inherent push-and-pull nature, and the early-life experiences that either rupture or intensify bonds between brothers and sisters. I am always drawn to these indelible and often transformative experiences that siblings share. How do these childhood events mold the adults that brothers and sisters will become? How do they serve as the driving force behind their duplicity, devotion, estrangement, and acts of altruism? These are questions that have appealed to me for a very long time.

**Can you comment on the recurring theme of caregiving in *And the Mountains Echoed*?**

Like both of my previous books, *And the Mountains Echoed* is first and foremost a love story. To varying extents, characters in this book yearn for love, and some of them find it, though often in unexpected places. But love has many different manifestations beyond the traditional idea of romantic love.

To wit: My father died late in 2009 after a long battle with cancer. In the last year of his life, he was nearly helpless. My mother took on the task of caring for him. She fed him, cleaned him, drove him, dressed him, read to him, dispensed his pills, cooked for him. Her life morphed into a series of chores from the moment that she rose until bedtime. She never asked for gratitude and she never complained. I found in my mother's daily labors for my dying father, in her being *present* for him, the stoutest, most truthful, most unassailable expression of love I had ever come across. I learned how laborious love can be, how cumbersome, the patience it demands, the heavy toll it can exact on you, the compromises it corners you into. I learned that caregiving becomes an act of salvaging what is best, and shines the brightest in those we love. And in that process, we too become transformed and unearth our true nature.

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**As a physician, what have been your impressions of the medical situations in the countries you have visited?**

The first time I returned to Kabul in 2003, I was quite struck by the lamentable state of the hospitals that I visited. The facilities' infrastructures had been damaged quite badly. The patient rooms were crowded, people were lying in gurneys in hallways. The hospitals lacked basic essentials such as antibiotics, electrolyte bags, normal saline infusion bags, anesthetics, etc. I was both dismayed and awed at the ability of the physicians to care for their patients given the very limited resources.

The good news is that Afghanistan has since seen significant improvements in the field of healthcare. Vaccination campaigns are making a difference. There has been a 25% drop in infant mortality. Over 80% of the population now has access to some form of healthcare. Under the age of five, mortality has also dropped from 97 to 77 deaths per 1,000 child births. Importantly, the maternal mortality rate has also decreased from 1,400 to 327 per 100,000 live births (these are all Afghan Mortality Survey results carried out by the Afghan health ministry). Life expectancy has also increased for both men and women to 62 and 64 respectively. These are all positive trends, though, obviously, much more work remains to be done.

**Is there anyone you've met in your travels as an envoy whose story will stay with you?**

I met a pair of young sisters during my last visit in Afghanistan in 2010. Right away I could spot the powerful bond between the sisters. Saliha, who was five, protectively held her three-year-old sister Reyhan's hand. In another world, I thought to myself, they could have been child models. Both were breathtakingly beautiful, with big, luminous eyes and striking blond hair. But they would never be models, they were Afghan children, part of a family of returning refugees, now scratching a living in a barren part of the poorest non-African nation in the world. Theirs was one of only two families living in a remote corner of the windblown, dusty Shomali plains, north of Kabul, a few miles from the Bagram Air Base. It was a desolate place, empty, hot, windy, everything the color of dust. The girls' father, a soft-spoken, gracious man of thirty-eight, detailed for me his decision to leave Pakistan after many years of exile and return home. He chronicled the hard day-to-day challenges his family now faces—the lack of clean water, work, the lack of a nearby school or clinic. I watched his daughters play with a scrawny chicken and the only toy they owned—a small, plastic Winnie the Pooh that squeaked when pressed. I marveled at this man's resilience. And I wondered how I would fare if I'd been in his shoes and faced his dilemmas.

The family was, for me, emblematic of the hardships faced by those Afghans who have returned home after decades of war to restart their lives. I could only wonder where life would take them, in that dusty plain, detached seemingly from all civilization, trying to eek a living, relying on very little other than their own resolve and will. The sisters broke my heart. As we were leaving, I gave Saliha an apple that I had packed for lunch. She walked over to her little sister and gave it to her. I always kept that image—the simple kindness of the gesture, the devotion—in my head whenever I wrote scenes between Abdullah and his sister, Pari, in *And the Mountains Echoed*.

**What has inspired you on your return trips to Afghanistan?**

I am forever inspired by the stout sense of optimism, hope, and resilience that I find among the Afghan people whenever I visit. This is particularly remarkable considering the rather devastating track record of the last thirty-plus years. Certainly there exist in Afghanistan plenty of reasons to despair—violence, poverty, unemployment, corruption, displacement, lack of basic social services. Yet many polls taken in Afghanistan demonstrate that Afghans feel hopeful about their future and are determined to help rebuild their country, even as they acknowledge the enormous challenges that lie before them. Going to Afghanistan for me is always like receiving a hypodermic injection of perspective.

**And what has most upset you?**

The spread of violence to previously safe areas in Afghanistan is quite distressing. In 2007, I was able to travel by car from Kabul to the northern Afghan cities of Kunduz and Mazar-i-Sharif. The roads connecting Kabul to those cities have now become unsafe and the city of Kunduz, particularly, has seen a dramatic rise in suicide bombings and other forms of public attacks. The

unavailability of basic social services (water, schools, jobs, shelter, etc.) to large sections of the population is also a great disappointment, and is a major “push factor” in the decisions many Afghans make to cross the border illegally into neighboring countries to find a cheap labor market. Part of this is understandable, as Afghanistan was one of the world's poorest nations even prior to the Soviet invasion, and the task of rebuilding it is a Herculean one. But part of the responsibility also falls on the inability of the central government to meet the needs of its people. The absence of effective governance is all too palpable in many regions that I have visited, and the government's shortcomings—coupled with a public perception of pervasive institutional graft—are a source of enduring disappointment to the average Afghan citizen.

**Obama has committed to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan in 2014. What do you think the future portends for the country?**

I think the next few years will be a time of uncertainty and anxiety in Afghanistan, probably marked by continued political instability and spikes of violence, even as the country moves slowly and gradually toward some form of peace negotiations with the insurgents. The path to peace promises to be a treacherous one, as there is no clear leadership structure on the Taliban side, and the conditions each party will bring to the table are likely to create, at least for some time, a series of impasses. This is not to mention that foreign neighboring powers will have their own stakes and agendas in the process and are likely to exert their influence to ensure an outcome favorable to their own interests.

All this said, I am still cautiously optimistic that peace is a possibility in Afghanistan. Though I do fear—with the withdrawal of the West—a return to the chaos and ethnic civil wars of the 1990s, I am also hopeful that important lessons have been learned from that catastrophe and that the various factions have come to see the dividends of peace. Of course, outside parties have to observe and respect Afghanistan's sovereignty and allow Afghans to attain their own peace. My main hope is that when the peace negotiations do unfold, they are inclusive, and legitimate representatives of Afghan society are allowed to participate. This includes women. Women must be part of the reconciliation process and their interests must be protected at all costs. The agreement should not compromise human rights or relinquish the freedoms that Afghans, particularly urban women, have painstakingly secured over the last decade. The agreement must be just and reflect the genuine aspirations and will of the Afghan people.

To learn more about how you can help  
refugee families returning to Afghanistan  
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*The Khaled Hosseini Foundation*

[www.KhaledHosseiniFoundation.org](http://www.KhaledHosseiniFoundation.org)