**he opening of the kite runner**

**Barbara Bleiman introduces a novel which simply and movingly tells a story of lost innocence across three decades and two continents.**

**The opening**

December 2001

I became what I am at the age of 12, on a frigid overcast day in the winter of 1975. I remember the precise moment, crouching behind a crumbling mud wall, peeking into the alley near the frozen creek. That was a long time ago, but it’s wrong what they say about the past, I’ve learned, about how you can bury it. Because the past claws its way out. Looking back now, I realise I have been peeking into that deserted alley for the last twenty-six years.

One day last summer, my friend Rahim Khan called from Pakistan. He asked me to come see him. Standing in the kitchen with the receiver to my ear, I knew it wasn’t just Rahim Khan on the line. It was my past of unatoned sins. After I hung up, I went for a walk along Spreckels Lake on the northern edge of Golden Gate Park. The early-afternoon sun sparkled on the water where dozens of miniature boats sailed, propelled by a crisp breeze. Then I glanced up and saw a pair of kites, red with long blue tails, soaring in the sky. They danced high above the trees on the west end of the park, over the windmills, floating side by side like a pair of eyes looking down on San Francisco, the city I now call home. And suddenly Hassan’s voice whispered in my head: For you a thousand times over. Hassan the harelipped kite runner.

I sat on a park bench near a willow tree. I thought about something Rahim Khan said just before he hung up, almost as an afterthought. There is a way to be good again. I looked up at those twin kites, I thought about Hassan, thought about Baba, Ali, Kabul. I thought of the life I had lived until the winter 1975 came along and changed everything. And made me what I am today.

Khaled Hosseini

**The contract**

In his book How Novels Work, critic John Mullan says:

The novel, that most accessible, democratic of literary forms, must establish its contract with its reader. It may be helped or hindered by all sorts of extraneous influences, cover design, encrustrations of quotation from admiring reviewers, and the like. But it must also make its own way in the world.

The idea of the writer establishing a contract with the reader is an interesting one. It suggests that the opening is a promise of something – ‘I hereby promise that in this novel you will find the following…’ The promise is not only one about genre, subject matter or type of character but also an expectation of narrative voice, structure and style. Of course, some modern novels, in a deliberate flouting of conventions, consciously unsettle and confuse the reader, with false expectations and surprises. But even then, there is a contract, albeit of a different kind, a signal to the reader of what’s in store – ‘Don’t expect a conventional read – I’m expecting a bit more from you than that!’

**A conventional opening?**

The opening to The Kite Runner makes its contract with the reader in a fairly conventional way, promising us things we may recognise from other books of a similar genre. The chapter starts with a date ‘December 2001’. A quick flick through the book reveals a different date (and place) in Chapter 11, ‘Fremont, California. 1980s’ and the opening sentence of the novel starts:

I became what I am today at the age of twelve, on a frigid overcast day in the winter of 1975.

Here we have three timescales: that of an adult reflecting back, in 2001, on a critical set of events in his childhood and on a later period of his early adult life. We may recognise this as characteristic of the ‘rites-of-passage’ novel, a narrative which recounts the experiences of a child protagonist, who ‘grows up’ through the events of the novel, becoming an adult who has been shaped by these formative experiences. The first person narrator of The Kite Runner gives heavy and portentous weight to that ‘frigid overcast day’, referring to ‘the precise moment’ when something happened as he ‘peek[ed]’ into an alley many years earlier, something that he concludes at the end of the first chapter ‘made me what I am today’. A phonecall from a friend in 2001 takes him back to this period and his ‘past of unatoned sins’ and the reader’s curiosity is aroused, as we become aware that the book will reveal to us what these sins are. Half-way through the book, the present timescale of 2001 takes over as events in the adult narrator’s life take him back into the world of his childhood.

**Establishing trust**

The first person narrator of this opening chapter speaks to us confidentially, seemingly without guile and without the intention of holding anything back. He tells us straight of his own ‘sins’. He establishes trust with the reader. One might compare this with some other first person narrators, who are less trustworthy and authoritative about their own stories, such as the notoriously slippery narrator of Ford Madox Ford’s The Good Soldier, or the half-comprehending narrator of Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby.

The opening of The Kite Runner promises us different timescales but also different places. We have two worlds – that of a childhood in Afghanistan and a present in San Francisco, ‘the city I now call home.’ Proper names, introduced baldly:

I thought about Hassan. Thought about Baba. Ali. Kabul

evoke the Afghan setting simply, without explanation. The two worlds and two periods are tied together by the central symbol of the book, the idea of the kite and kite-runner. In a conventional device for shifting from the present to past memories, Hosseini makes the witnessing of kites flying in Golden Gate Park the spark for memories of childhood events, allowing him to take the reader back to the times when he and his friend Hassan were partners in the local kite-running competitions in Kabul. Hosseini makes the symbol work for him in other ways. The kites are a ‘pair’; they are ‘twin kites’; they are like ‘eyes’ looking down on him. The identification of the kites with himself and Hassan, as twins or a pair, introduces to us the idea of this central close relationship and the ‘eyes’ are a reminder of the guilt that the narrator feels, at this stage unexplained but associated with the kites and the relationship.

**Simplicity and poise**

The final paragraph of the opening chapter sets us up for the shift to those childhood events. The narrator’s memories of the past are stirred and Chapter 2 takes us straight into them, as we might have expected it would:

When we were children, Hassan and I used to climb the poplar trees…

The Daily Telegraph review of The Kite Runner remarks that it is told with ‘simplicity and poise’ and the Independent talks of ‘the tones of memory and nostalgia [...] reminiscent of those classic European novellas of innocence bruised by experience.’ Another review from Globe and Mail Canada comments that ‘There is no display in Hosseini’s writing, only expression.’ We can see all of this in the first chapter. Hosseini is working within a ‘classic’ genre – the rites-of-passage novel – offering us much of what we might expect from that genre rather than drawing our attention to the telling in ways that make us question it. The lack of ‘display’ is regarded by the Canadian reviewer as a strength, something that is ‘a lesson for all budding novelists’. While the style and form may be a particularly poised version of a traditional form, what marks out The Kite Runner as being different is its use of the ‘classic European’ rites-of-passage narrative to tell a story that has its heart in Afghanistan and is part of a quite different modern tradition of post-colonial writing. The ‘hare-lipped’ boy who is introduced in the opening chapter, the idea of the alley and the hard-and-fast concepts of guilt and wrongdoing, the effects of which last into adult life, prepare us for a moral universe that is perhaps more absolute and certain than that of many of the more self-conscious and experimental narrative writers of our times. The opening chapter makes a contract with the reader letting us know that we are in for a delicately drawn, emotionally engaging experience, rather than a difficult, demanding or tricksy read.

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