

Writer as identity thief

Khaled Hosseini connects a vivid cast of characters in his latest novel

And the Mountains Echoed, by Khaled Hosseini (Viking/Penguin Canada, 416 pages, \$30)

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Midway through Khaled Hosseini's new novel, an Afghan poet living in Paris in the 1970s gives a rare but less than candid interview to a literary journal. She's hiding a secret: Three decades before, left barren after surgery, she had bought a 3-year-old girl from a poor family in a remote Afghan village, the illegal deal brokered by the girl's uncle in Kabul, the woman's chauffeur. Three years later, "mother" and "daughter" moved to Paris, the girl none the wiser.

True to her art, the writer is an identity thief.

"I see the creative process as a necessarily thievish undertaking," the poet, Nila Wahdati, tells her interviewer, alluding to her guilty secret. "Dig beneath a beautiful piece of writing ... and you will find all manner of dishonour. Creating means vandalizing the lives of other people, turning them into unwilling and unwitting participants. You steal their desires, their dreams, pocket their flaws, their suffering. You take what does not belong to you. You do this knowingly."

I do not know who inspired Hosseini to write *And the Mountains Echoed*, his third novel, but it teems with characters whose stories seem to have been appropriated from close to home - all kinds of home. Once again, the internationally bestselling, Afghan-born, Paris-and California-raised author of *The Kite Runner* (2003) and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) sounds the themes of family origin, loyalty and betrayal that echo through Afghanistan and life in exile.

And he begins, as before, with children, drawing the title from the concluding lines of William Blake's "lovely poem" (as he calls it in the acknowledgments)



Nurse's Song: "The little ones leaped, and shouted, and laugh'd / And all the hills echoed."

Except these Afghan mountains will soon ring with pain. It's the late 1940s in a imaginary, dusty place called Shadbagh, and a vicious act of sibling rivalry is about to play out, setting everything in motion.

Masooma, a girl whose beauty is so stunning it "interrupted conversations mid-sentence, smokers mid-drag," is sitting high up in a tree with her twin sister, Parwana, who's plain and jealous of all the attention. Parwana suddenly decides to make her sister lose her balance. The fall cripples Masooma. Guilt-racked, Parwana winds up as Ma-sooma's caretaker, her life now "one long unspoken apology."

Time passes, and Parwana marries a widower, Saboor, a taciturn man nursing a broken heart for the death of his infant son. She helps raise his daughter, a lovely child named Pari whom everyone adores and to whom Abdullah, Pari's brother seven years her senior, is "as much father ... as sibling." Then life changes. Uncle Nabi shows up one day from Kabul driving in a fancy car with Nila in the back. Nila is captivated by little Pari, and eventually whisks her away.

As the action jumps back and forth over time and geography, narrated from different angles by different protagonists in Afghanistan and Paris and eventually modern-day Greece and California, the fate of all these people and the many others whose lives they touch is detailed in a way that is as mesmerizing as it is destabilizing. Not just their actions but their memories propel the story forward and amplify small gestures into universal truths.

Theirs are lives of "boomeranging parallels," as one pivotal character, a Greek plastic surgeon named Markos, puts it. Or as Uncle Nabi says: "I suspect the truth is that we are waiting, all of us, against insurmountable odds, for something extraordinary to happen to us." And indeed, extraordinary things do happen in the novel: maimings, abandonment, suicide, unexpected family reunions, reversals of fortune, love in unexpected places.

Hosseini connects his characters through their shared sense of rootlessness and uncertainty. Growing up in France, Pari feels like a stranger to herself: "I sensed only an absence," she later recalls. "A vague pain without a source. I was like the patient who cannot explain to the doctor where it hurts, only that it does." Markos, too, feels marooned on the Greek island where he was raised, "an exile in my own home," and eventually settles in Kabul to do volunteer work.

Other characters congregate there, too, looking for answers and opportunity. Idris and Timur, for instance, are cousins whose families fled during the Soviet

invasion and who settled in California; "Tim" is successful and self-aggrandizing ("a man who wrote his own press kit"), while Idris is the sensitive doctor who promises to airlift a disfigured child from Kabul for an operation back in the States. Guess which brother - huckster or humanitarian - gets the glory?

There are other vividly drawn characters as well, most of them battling a grinding loneliness. There's Adel, 12, the only son of a powerful drug lord, who "lived in a mansion but in a shrunken world" behind 12-foot-high walls topped with barbed wire. There's Thalia, an enigmatic girl who becomes Markos's lifelong friend despite his initial disgust at her physical deformity. (Her face has been torn apart by a neighbour's pit bull, and made worse by a botched operation.)

In Hosseini's fatalistic universe, personal qualities seem predestined. Madaline, the flamboyant childhood friend of Markos's mother, for example, "was one of those people whose elegance came effortlessly as though it were a genetic skill, like the ability to curl your tongue into the shape of a tube." In Paris, teenage Pari moons over her mother's lover, Ju-lien, "him and his beautiful face, which seemed to come with its own private lighting."

The book gets bogged down a bit in France, and mistakes with the French language pile up: "grand-père" (wrong accent), "quande-même," "Eric. Eric! Ecoute moi." (no accents, no hyphen). And as any Montrealer knows, when you want to signal a change in conversation, you start your sentence with a decisive "Bon," not "Ah, bon."

Hosseini's prose is not always up to snuff, either. As clean and psychologically true as it is most of the time, in its weaker moments it can sound rather saccharine, like this Harlequin-style exchange near the end between two long-lost relatives: "'But we have found each other, no?'" she says, her voice cracking with emotion. 'I feel happy. I have found a part of myself that was lost.' She squeezes my hand. 'And I found you' Her words tug at my childhood longings."

Ugh.

Despite the novel's overall complexity, there's something a little too neat about how Hosseini tries to resolve its issues, undoing the knots of family ties as surely as he set them.

Wrongs are righted, justice is done, love found. Such, perhaps, is the deterministic vision the author has of humanity - a humanity he knows intimately as a man with his feet in several cultures, an artist who, like the poet Nila, "steals" what material he can from what he knows.

Mostly, that's all well and good. It's also, no doubt, why Hosseini is such a successful and beloved writer (38 million books sold, top of the New York Times bestseller lists, published in 57 languages in 70 countries). It may owe to his rather unusual personal history: son of an Afghan diplomat, stranded in Paris after the Soviets invaded his country in 1979, exiled to northern California, a med student and internist before he finally took up the pen. When life throws you curves that way, you might seek design too.

"We were interlocked, I sensed, through some unseen order in a way I couldn't wholly understand, linked beyond our names, beyond familial ties, as if, together, we completed a puzzle," one character remarks near the end of the book, hearing Pari's secret history and keen to know more. "I felt certain that if I listened closely enough to her story, I would discover something revealed about myself."

That seems to be Hosseini's quasi-biblical point: Through words, the dark glass that obscured the past becomes clear and we see each other face to face. Our identity is revealed to be remarkably resilient, even after we think it's been taken away from us, and we learn to no longer be afraid of thieves - literary or otherwise. A good writer takes what belongs to all of us, holds on to it a while, then gives it back.

For an illustrated guide to the book, go to the interactive site echoproject.ca.

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