Between two onslaughts of worlds, between two imposing systematic presences, the pleasure of the text is always possible, not as a respite, but as the incongruous—dissociated—passage from another language, like the exercise of a different physiology. (30)

Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*

I have taught Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* (2003) in my world literature survey course several times, largely because students have been more engaged with this work than any other that I have taught in my college career. A few class members who claimed they never willingly read an entire book told me that they could not put it down. Most students, in fact, chose to write their longer research essay on the novel, investigating its reception and cultural context in print and electronic sources. After our class ended, several asked me to recommend other novels with a Middle-Eastern setting. Since this core required course often fills up with students who do not read for pleasure, I find it heartening that some class members go on to seek out international authors on their own.

Given the novel’s success with American readers, its high favor among my students seems unsurprising. *The Kite Runner* held a spot on the *New York Times* bestseller list for 103 weeks (Bosman), and the word-of-mouth recommendations provided by book clubs and community reading programs further contributed to its success (Wyatt). Often, students have relatives or friends who have already read the novel. Although the assigned reading undoubtedly benefits from the buzz, teaching the novel posed unexpected challenges that ultimately reveal a tension between academic and popular approaches to literary texts. Whereas I seek to emphasize historical and cultural issues—particularly whether or not the novel exemplifies what some critics term “New Orientalism”—students want to talk about their identification with, or judgment of, principal characters, in addition to universal themes such as love, betrayal, and loss. Their deeply invested, emotive response resembles that of reading club participants. As their instructor, I want
to preserve their genuine appreciation of the novel, yet also have them understand the difficult, perhaps insurmountable, cultural differences described in the narrative itself. I have found that achieving both of these aims was possible only when we deepened our usual class discussions by reflecting on the relation between critical thinking and readerly pleasure. Widely available paratextual materials (such as book guides and discussion questions reprinted in the novel itself or available on the Web) helped us clarify distinctions between collective reading practices typical inside and outside of the classroom. This initial conversation helped students write more thoughtful and contextualized literary arguments, in which they reflected not only on the text itself, but also on their identities as Americans reading Afghani culture.

Most people assume that scholarly and book-club approaches to fiction are motivated by different ends. It was only when I incorporated such a popular contemporary work into the class that this disparity asserted itself sharply. In the class sessions devoted to the novel, my questions focused on the language of the text and highlighted ways in which race, ethnicity, class, nationality, and gender inform the story. In doing so, I sought to heighten students' awareness of how their own background shapes their beliefs and assumptions. As Catherine Fox puts it in her discussion of teaching, “whiteness,” and critical thinking, my approach promotes the latter as a “means of engaging in the self-reflexivity needed to question the truth of our positions” (204). In general, however, the framing of book discussions, such as those telecast on The Oprah Winfrey Show, is motivated by different concerns. Critics such as Timothy Aubry, Elizabeth Long, and Janice Radway have shown that readers in book groups seek works that can, as Aubry puts it, “change [their] lives,” and want guidance on how to manage social or personal challenges (“Beware” 353). For her part, Radway shows how Book-of-the-Month-club editors have conventionally distinguished books that fulfill this desire for personal meaning from the overly specialized and alienating fiction thought to be too “academic” for club members. In other words, book club members want stories with central characters to whom they can relate. Timothy Aubry usefully highlights one danger of such exclusive emphasis on sympathetic identification when he describes the Oprah Winfrey episode devoted to Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye. White women in that audience asserted that they identified with the young African-American heroine’s desire for blue eyes because they too have felt ugly and wanted to be more attractive. This mode of reading, he persuasively argues, can so universalize a character’s experience that we lose sight of the racial and class hierarchies of the community in which the story unfolds (“Beware” 360).

Despite this danger of unreflective identification, my intention here is not to argue that the interpretive modes valued in the academy are correct and those valued in book clubs are somehow always misguided. In fact, the popularity of Winfrey's show and, more recently, of reading groups have proved a tremendous boon to the publishing industry. Winfrey's choices represent a wide range of ethnicities and nationalities, ranging from the exiled Iranian colonel in Andre Dubus III’s The House of Sand and Fog to the Haitian protagonist Sophie in Edwidge Dandicat's Breath, Eyes, Memory. Even though Winfrey did not choose to feature Hosseini’s novel on the show, the cultural diversity of her choices has done much to make the success of a novel like The Kite Runner possible.

When I include the novel in the course reading, the students and I benefit from its popularity because we can compare our responses to those of other Americans reading the book in collective settings. This approach makes sense because students researching the novel actually have a much easier time finding material from reading clubs, one-book programs, or reviews in the mainstream press than from the scholarly articles, which abound only for more canonical contemporary fiction I have taught in the course, such as Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior. Aubry writes about how Amazon.com reader reviews offer a similarly fertile site for examining reception. Although Aubry’s essay on The Kite Runner and American readers was published after my in-class experiment and thus did not inform my assignments, he employs a web-based and reception-oriented approach to the novel that is similar to mine. His innovative essay concludes that these reviews illustrate “the desires, values, and expectations that shape the
reception of ‘foreign’ fiction among Americans” (“Afghanistan” 25-26). Aubry ultimately argues that the collective compassion for Hosseini’s characters is problematic because readers see this “non-political response” as a “solution” for long-standing ethnic and national conflicts (“Afghanistan” 37). All in all, web materials provide a wealth of information on the marketing and reception of a novel.

Prefiguring Aubry’s approach, I also encouraged students to analyze web materials for what they highlight or leave unsaid. As homework, students responded to the following prompt:

Now that we have discussed the history of Afghanistan, the country’s major ethnic groups, and key images and character traits in the novel, write a two to three-page analysis of at least three reading guides or book club discussion questions available on the internet or reproduced at the end of our text. What do the questions and summaries encourage us to focus on? What do they leave out? If you were writing such a guide, would you set it up in the same way? Why or why not?

When students reported back to me on secondary sources related to the novel, I realized that book club materials approached the novel in a manner initially favored by many in the class; however, most discussion questions and study guides tend either to ignore issues of Afghani ethnic identity and regime change, or treat them in a sweeping and ahistorical manner.

For instance, one needs to have a basic understanding of Afghanistan’s history to understand the events of The Kite Runner. The way in which Penguin Group frames that context in its discussion questions for readers, though, makes acquiring this knowledge seem like a daunting task. For example, their question 11 is ”Discuss how the ever-changing politics of Afghanistan affect each of the characters in the novel” (“Book Clubs”). This topic implicitly contrasts Afghanistan’s recent history, which is “ever-changing,” with that of the United States, which is apparently unchanging. And since politics imbue so much of the novel’s action, it seems overly general to explain how regime change affects every character for the novel’s first 124 pages; such a question may acknowledge political realities, yet remains unwilling to really engage them.

Such an effacement of historical particularities can also be seen in About.com’s discussion questions for book clubs. An on-line website managed by The New York Times company, About.com mostly provides information produced by freelance writers identified as “guides” to particular areas on the website (“About.com: Media Kit”). Erin Callazo Miller, in charge of the About.com guide to best-sellers for book clubs, follows up a question about the domination of Afghani Hazaras by Pashtuns by asking readers “Can you think of any culture in the world without a history of oppression?” (“Hosseini”). Perhaps Miller wants readers to make connections or distinctions between oppression in their own culture’s past and that of Afghanistan, which is a useful starting point for discussion; that is, the closed nature of the question, aimed to elicit a yes/no response in its universalization of oppression, seems to normalize political domination.

In a closely related move, these same reading guides describe the relationship between the wealthy Pashtun masters, Baba and Amir, to their Hazara servants, Ali and Hassan, purely in terms of the master/servant relationship (“Book Clubs”). Students agreed that this description overly simplifies their relationship and does not take into account why so many Hazaras work as servants in Afghanistan. A stunned Amir discovers why when he comes across a book detailing the history of Hassan’s people, one that his Sunni majority schoolteachers never mentioned. He learns that since the nineteenth century the Pastuns drove the Shia Hazras from their land, burned their homes, and sold their women. Amir had been able to see his servant as foreign, even subhuman, before this point because Hassan’s people seemingly played no role worth mentioning in Afghanistan’s past and present. Exclusively describing power relations in the familiar Western terms of master and servant—seemingly ahistorical roles—ironically reproduces the erasure of history that Hosseini critiques in the scene of Amir’s self-education.
The way the guides downplay the history of ethnic conflict that informs the boys’ friendship became a central point in class discussion. For instance, several class members maintained that they would never have betrayed Hassan if they were in the alley in which Assef assaults him: they said that even if they were afraid to fight Assef and his thugs, they would have run for help, at the very least. The cowardice he displays here explains the class members’ emotional investment in Amir’s atonement for his betrayal. Amir’s justification for his inaction, though, “He was just a Hazara, wasn’t he?” (Hosseini 77), brings us back to the ethnic hierarchies that inform his relationship with Hassan. In this case, I tried to get them to think about how Hosseini does not want us to see Amir as any child in any friendship; he wants us to consider the cultural prejudice that manifests itself in Amir’s private thoughts.

Overall, then, the interpretive frames set up by these paratexts tend to encourage familiar, sympathetic identification with the novel’s central characters at the expense of recognizing the significant ways in which Amir, Baba, Hassan, and Ali may not be familiar to many Western readers, my students in particular, because most of them hail from primarily white, homogenous communities. For example, discussion questions never ask readers to think about how Amir becomes a devoutly practicing Muslim by the end of the novel. Nor do they highlight the ways Baba criticizes American culture from an Afghani perspective. When Californian shop owners demand to see his ID to accept his check, even though he has been buying their fruit for months, he screams at them, overturns a magazine rack, and breaks a jar of beef jerky. “What kind of a country is this?” he bellows, “No one trusts anyone!” (Hosseini 128). In Afghanistan, he purchased loaves of bread according to the notches the merchant made on a stick, for which he paid at the end of the month. Baba’s outburst makes the impersonality of American commercial exchange seem strange, unfamiliar, and thus open to appraisal, which fosters the self-reflexivity Fox sees as central to critical thinking.

This is not to say, though, that all students responded to the assignment by privileging critical thinking over empathic identification. In response to the question about setting up one’s own reading guide, a respondent noted that the on-line questions make sense because book-club conversation and in-class reading are fundamentally different. Club members may be friends or acquaintances and want to avoid politically sensitive topics that could damage their relationship. They might lack the time or inclination to construct a historically informed reading as well. Rather, these questions encourage participants to talk about what they thought or felt during the reading experience, especially about their empathy or disgust with particular characters. We then contrasted this with what happens in many world-literature classes, which tend to analyze specific passages, consider structure and genre, and discuss contexts historical, political, and cultural.

Other students acknowledged these contrasts between talking about a book with friends and reading for a college course, yet they nonetheless felt that the guides disregarded or oversimplified important aspects of Afghani culture and history. Their conviction that the novel creates a more complex portrait of the country than the guides became especially important when we discussed recent denunciation of the novel by academic and professional book critics. This group of writers censures the “New Orientalism” manifest in novels and memoirs about the Middle East such as The Kite Runner, Reading Lolita in Tehran, and The Bookseller of Kabul. In her book Jasmine and the Stars: Reading More than Lolita in Tehran, Fatemeh Keshavarz maintains that these works encourage phobia about the Islamic world, emphasizing blind religiosity, political cruelty, and women’s repression as they glorify the Western world. In that sense, they reinforce the crude stereotypes Edward Said first interrogated in his critique of European and American Orientalism in 1978. Whereas Keshavarz does not analyze The Kite Runner in depth in her book, but rather mentions it in passing, Matthew Thomas Miller does: he singles out Hosseini’s novel when he claims that its depiction of the Taliban villains “systematically dehumanizes and reduces an entire culture to the actions of its extremists.” In a similar vein, Meghan O’Rourke asserts that an overly simplistic, “facile moralizing” mars the story.
Having students contend with these judgments moves them beyond a merely appreciative mode and makes them defend Hosseini against charges of stereotyping and one-dimensionality, which means that they have to show how the Middle Eastern culture of the novel is complex. Alternatively, some students came to agree that the New Orientalism critique has merit, especially in the almost cartoonish portrayal of the adult Assef’s transformation from a child who rapes Hassan and admires Hitler to a high-ranking Taliban leader who sexually abuses children. Engaging with the debate about whether *The Kite Runner* exemplifies New Orientalism makes students think about whether their love of the book really entails an uncritical glorification of American values, or something else, and if so, what? Overall, I am advocating what Gerald Graff has called “teaching the conflicts”—situating a work within a larger conversation and then having the students locate and defend their perspectives within that argument. Since they have already seen how solely discussing their enthusiasm for the book or engagement with the characters may be fine in a book club but inadequate in an academic setting, I have not had to contend with the sort of “This is my opinion, which is therefore unquestionable” response I have encountered in the past.

The greatest benefit of discussing these arguments, however, is that students did need to think about themselves as American readers in a more explicit, even painful, manner than they did in relation to other works we read. For instance, numerous students disliked the chapter in which Amir travels from America to Afghanistan and seeks to rescue Hassan’s son Sohrab from Assef’s sexual enslavement. Although Amir does free the boy, he does not overpower his childhood enemy. Rather, young Sohrab wounds Assef with his slingshot, which enables the boy’s escape with Amir. Students claimed that the scene would have been far more emotionally satisfying if Amir, not Sohrab, overcame Assef. Instead, the villain injures Amir badly. Students also felt that it would simply make more narrative sense for Amir to “take out” Assef since the man acts as Amir’s nemesis in the first half of the novel. After we read Thomas’s critique of Hosseini’s novel, however, many students reconsidered their unhappiness with this scene. Thomas maintains that “this adventurous and engrossing story neatly functions as an allegorized version of the colonial/neo-colonial/imperial imperative of ‘intervening’ in ‘dark’ countries in order to save the sub-human Others who would be otherwise simply lost in their own ignorance and brutality.” Unsurprisingly, students strongly resisted thinking about their response to this scene as desire for an American rescue fantasy. By the time they wrote their papers, however, several students cited this passage as evidence that, although some readers may want to view it as a simple allegory of the West rescuing the Middle East, Hosseini does forestall such a narrative desire in this climactic scene. When writing about this scene in particular, undergraduates explicitly framed their responses as those of American readers.

Admittedly, I cannot “teach the conflicts” for every work in a survey course that already covers too much, too quickly. Nor can I devote the whole reading schedule to these more popular works—given the curriculum of my department, we should be reading more canonical international authors as well. I do think, though, that including at least one best-selling work, the kind often taken up by book clubs, provides a valuable opportunity to think about the richness of cultural differences, how people discuss world literature in different settings, and how national identity and history inform that reading.

To return to Barthes’s meditation on the pleasure of the text, students’ enjoyable reading experiences need not be a mere respite from how I encourage them to read the novel or how Penguin frames students’ interpretation. I imagine a different physiology in which the pleasure of the text and critical thinking co-exist in a rewarding tension, whether students agree with the New Orientalism critique or not. I am not suggesting here that students preserved their initial pleasure in unaltered form; they needed to think about the ideological implications of their position. After analyzing book club materials and contending with challenging criticism of the novel, students wrote papers that had far more self-reflexive and critically-engaging moments than those I usually receive in a world literature class. Taken together, their reading experience, the novel itself, and
the exploration of New Orientalism resulted in better writing. Ironically, international authors who explicitly critique American imperialism have not elicited this self-questioning from my students, perhaps because they never experience pleasure in reading these works nor feel strongly connected to characters in the first place. Page-turners like The Kite Runner have the potential to ignite an appreciation for world literature in non-readers at the same time as they encourage students and instructor alike to think about their identities as American readers in and out of the classroom.

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Works Cited


