

Audrey Keranen
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Dear Mr. Hosseini,

Iowa is not flat. I can't remember how many times I was told this before I moved to my adopted home state. When my family migrated to Iowa from Washington D.C. nine years ago, friends jokingly reminded us to trade in our car for a tractor. A classmate told me that people in Iowa didn't have pets—they had pigs. My second-grade teacher even rolled out the map and pointed at Iowa with her yardstick.

“This is Iowa,” she said authoritatively. “It is the number one producer of corn in the nation!”

True, Iowa has its cornfields, pig farms, and John Deeres, but these stereotypes don't determine what Iowa is all about. The people here are diverse, well-traveled, and urbane; they don't fit the images portrayed by “Iowa jokes.” Once I realized that none of the stereotypes about Iowa were true, I became wary of other falsehoods as well. I thought I could sight out stereotypes like a big game hunter, but it turns out I was wrong.

Since September 11th, 2001, America's perception of the Middle East has changed for the worst. When young people today hear the word “Afghanistan,” certain images may come to mind: the Taliban, Osama bin Laden, veiled women, Muslim extremists. The list goes on. I'll admit I felt embarrassed once I began your novel, The Kite Runner, and realized that I was guilty of holding stereotypes as well. The majority of my knowledge of the Middle East had come from Michael Moore and Aladdin, two sources that failed me by chapter two. The more I read about the Afghanistan of Amir's past and present, the more I realized it was I who had been veiled all along.

Your novel tantalized my senses. I could almost smell the kabob at the bazaar, hear the haggling voices in the Afghan flea market, and feel the slice of Amir's kite string against my fingers. This rendition of Afghanistan, much richer than anything proliferated by the American media, is what swept me into your book. I became lost in the Kabul of Amir's childhood.

Even after finishing your novel, my fascination with Afghan culture didn't fade. Other books were forgotten in the dusty recesses of my mind, but yours demanded my attention. The agonizingly beautiful description of pre- and post-Taliban Afghanistan enticed me. I was heartbroken to see the Afghanistan of the 1970s lose its flavor as the Taliban drove in with their tanks and pickup trucks. Your portrayal of Afghanistan as a battleground for the United States, Russia, and the Taliban further changed my view of Afghanistan. I no longer view it along stereotypical lines and have begun to associate this country with its population and culture, not the actions of a select few.

My epiphany only fascinated me further. I rifled through the shelves of my library, looking for nonfiction books about the Middle East. I nosed through geographical

atlases, sneezing on the musty pages. I finally struck gold while browsing through the brochures by the library entrance. One struck me in particular: it was an advertisement for a summer institute on Middle Eastern culture. Within a week I had sent out an application. A few months later, I was accepted.

Mr. Hosseini, if it hadn't been for your novel, I would not be where I am today. Your book was eye-opening, to use a cliché with all possible seriousness, and it awoke me to other opportunities. At the summer institute, I was able to visit a mosque, examine artifacts, pluck at instruments, and sample foods from the other side of the world. I would never have attempted to do any of these things had your novel not haunted me for months after turning the last page.

It took a second reading of your book for me to grasp its magnitude and relevance. Our world is a changing place; the vicissitudes of life will outpace us if we do not strive to understand other countries and cultures before it is too late. Amir turned his back on Hassan, but we cannot allow ourselves to do the same to other nations. I have become motivated to learn about other countries whose fates are inextricably tied to ours. Someday, I would like to be the one who can encourage nations to set aside their differences and, in the words of Rahim Khan, find "a way to be good again."

I am inspired, Mr. Hosseini, by this expanded world view that pulls me further than the borders of my state. I think it is fitting to express my gratitude using some words from Hassan:

Thank you a thousand times over.

Audrey Keranen

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