

Khaled Hosseini, Keigo Higashino, and Zoe Ferraris:

Social Concealment, Personal Revelation, and Community Guilt

JOHN C. HAWLEY¹

Santa Clara University

ABSTRACT

Detective novels, while generally considered to be pulp fiction and therefore worthy of less academic attention, nonetheless lay bare the reader's interest in getting to the so-called truth. Even the inclusion of "red herrings" and false leads serves to entice a deeper commitment to proving the existence of what "really" happened. They are, therefore, escapist in the sense that they tease readers to reject the underpinnings of deconstruction and post structuralism and allow, at least for the limited duration of the reading, a comforting illusion that there are larger truths that an actual "self" can discern and pin down. This need for structural stability and personal agency carries over into more literary works, though the desire there is generally expressed in the dramatic arc of Freytag's Pyramid: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and dénouement.

Keywords: Confession, Secrecy, Guilt, Truth, Empathy

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I propose to discuss three popular contemporary novels: *The Kite Runner*, by Khaled Hosseini, generally analyzed as "high" literature with complex characterization, nuanced themes, and lasting importance; and *The Devotion of Suspect X*, by Keigo Higashino (2011),² and *Kingdom of Strangers*, by Zoe Ferraris (2012), which are well-written "beach

¹ Department of English, Santa Clara University, 500 El Camino Real, Santa Clara, CA 95053, U.S.A. Email: jhawley@scu.edu

² "South Korean filmmaker Thomas Kim has set up his office in Mumbai to produce digital software for Indian television. Sujoy Ghosh's Te3n was adapted from *Montage* which was produced by Kim and now he is making a web series for Amazon Prime called *Suspect X* which is an adaptation from Japanese author Keigo Higashino's book *The Devotion of Suspect X*. Three films on the novel have already been made in Japanese, Korean and Chinese and now the web series is on its way. Interestingly, Ekta Kapoor had also planned to make a film based

reading” with less pretention to comparisons with canonical literature. We sometimes speak of literature being “serious” because of the depths to which it takes us. “The metaphor of ‘depth’”, writes Peter Brooks, “—see, for instance, the phrase ‘depth psychology’—is a metaphor only, but highly indicative of the sense of something behind the surface, needing excavation. . . . That which is within is at the same time the most important and the most difficult to articulate” (2000: 102). Two of these novels are police procedurals. *Kingdom of Strangers* is the hunt for a serial killer outside Jeddah, Saudi Arabia; *The Devotion of Suspect X* is the hunt for a killer in Japan or, as one reviewer puts it, “The mystery is not who did it, but how it was covered up” (Georgescu, 2013: 318)—the reader, though not the police inspector, knows from the start who the killer is, and gradually learns how someone has helped the killer skillfully cover her tracks. *The Kite Runner*, on the other hand, is something of a Cain and Abel story in which Cain gradually comes to terms with his guilt, and seeks to make amends. Although the three satisfy their readers’ expectations for the genres in which they are written, their authors manipulate “guilt” for decidedly different purposes.

I would like to demonstrate the unavoidable preoccupation with the analysis of personal confession as “true,” or as falling somewhere in the category of “truthiness,” as revealing its place on the spectrum of personal freedom and social obligation and thereby demonstrating its inherent destabilizing potential, and as demonstrating the uneasy role of secrecy, silence, and privacy for the “confessing animal” that must be known but can never be *fully* known.³ Though Foucault (1998) was principally discussing the role of confessing activity on the secular plane, its initial referent remains religious, as described, for example, by Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer. “In confession,” he writes,

the break-through to community takes place. Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous is his isolation. Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light. In the darkness of the unexpressed it poi-

on the book and reportedly, acquired the movie rights of the same. Saif Ali Khan was to be in the film directed by Sujoy Ghosh, but now with the web series happening we wonder what Ekta’s plans will be.” (*DNA*)

³ “Insofar as confession can be used to produce and inscribe individuals in discourse – that is to say, by virtue of its ontologically productive capacity – it seems legitimate to claim, as Foucault does, that ‘western man has become a confessing animal’ (McLoughlin).

*sons the whole being of a person. This can happen even in the midst of a pious community. In confession the light of the Gospel breaks into the darkness and seclusion of the heart. The sin must be brought into the light. The unexpressed must be openly spoken and acknowledged. All that is secret and hidden is made manifest. It is a hard struggle until the sin is openly admitted. But God breaks gates of brass and bars of iron. (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 1993: 112)*

In this age of “reality” television, Bonhoeffer’s homiletic encouragement to confess one’s sinfulness sounds oddly confident in the power of transformation and even salvation through the mechanism of crass self-promotion and a bread-and-circuses social control. Indeed, one observer of the contemporary scene puts it this way:

If secret confession, to priests and psychiatrists, had a really good record of accomplishment, we should be glad enough to be spared the embarrassment of having the ‘ordinary’ people in our lives know who we are. But that record is not good; and, reluctantly, many people are today experimenting with open confession of one kind or another. When you stop to think of it, secret confession is a contradiction in terms—secrecy is what makes confession necessary. And it is not surprising that the attempt to cope with unresolved personal guilt by means of continued furtiveness does not work out very well. (Mowrer, qtd in Martin, 1975:526)

Facebook’s popularity suggests a human need for ongoing, persistent contact with others, regardless of the superficial nature of the events about which one connects.⁴ Nonetheless, in 2018, a drama played out involving Facebook and Cambridge Analytica, symbolizing the compelling Janus-face of two apparently contradictory but widespread human urges: on the one hand, to be fully known and accepted *in toto* by those who know our deepest secrets and, on the other hand, to maintain privacy and independence from the prying eyes of society, with its cold indictment of one’s human frailties.

⁴ “Self-disclosure on Facebook moderates the relationship between stressful life events and mental health. Facebook disclosure was also positively associated with enacted social support on Facebook, which led to increased perceived social support, enhanced life satisfaction, and reduced depression. SNSs [social network sites], therefore, serve as a promising avenue for delivering health care and intervention. “ (Zhang 1)

Thomas Friedman, the ever-observant columnist for the New York Times, writes that “Today, falling walls and spreading webs. . . are becoming the biggest threat to the success of liberty” (Friedman 2018), and he endorses Dov Seidman’s conclusion that “the same amazing technology that enables people to forge deeper relationships, foster closer communities and give everyone a voice can also breed isolation, embolden racists, and empower digital bullies and nefarious actors” (Seidman, quoted in Friedman). This tension between revelation and concealment, once one notices it, reveals itself as an unavoidable structural element in most narrative development, suggesting that such psychological tension, manipulated with varying degrees of sophistication by authors, remains crucial for creative expression and is one of the most intoxicating reasons that we pick up a novel. On some level, they are all escapist; but one might also argue that on other levels they are pretending to open a window onto something less superficial, something “deeper.” Peter Brooks writes that “the literature of Antiquity often gives the sense of taking place on a single plane (like a bas-relief) as Erich Auerbach famously argued,” but “confessional literature gives the impression of depth and recess, delving into the subject’s past and into the subject’s deepest and most hidden thoughts and wishes, in order to account for the individual self” (Troubling Confessions, 2000: 102).

From an artist’s point of view, where does beauty carve out a niche amid the violence and personal debasement at the heart of the stories under discussion in this essay—that is, how do we consistently find ways to make art from human suffering? Susann Heenen-Wolff and Adeline Fohn (2014), discussing the Jewish “hidden children” of the Second World War, write that what happened to them is “paradigmatic of other situations, such as the genocide in Rwanda, in which the need to construct some form of social cohesion brings in its wake a denial of the trauma to which some people were subjected” (87). Going forward, “acknowledgement of trauma through a social kind of sharing is a necessary condition for activating the healing process” (112). The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission knew that publicly testifying to one’s ordeal, or confessing one’s complicity in what was done to others, are both necessary components of that healing process. I would argue that, if this is necessary for those who have suffered the trauma, then the creation of that “social cohesion” may be partially enabled by vicarious identification with the “other,” whether that other is the victim or the victimizer, and that the reading of fiction, even pulp fiction, may serve as a laboratory for that strengthening of empathy.

I read all these three novels not as typical “confessional” literature, though each offers a blend of confession and its avoidance. I propose to examine what readers learn of the individual self in situations of long-evaded personal exposure, sometimes abated by an entire society’s complicit blindness to guilt or the ‘true’ self. Afghanistan, Japan, and Saudi Arabia are markedly different societies, and the protagonists of these stories, male and female, find a “voice,” or are forced to “speak” in quite various circumstances. Viewing any society as a neutral surface, imagining the mass of humanity that emerges from subways in any city at the start of any workday, and picturing ourselves as a member of one of these anonymous groups, it is curious to recall the many members of those groups who sped underground, surrounded by others perhaps very much like themselves, but who did their best to avoid contact of any sort during that trip, sometimes by burying themselves in a novel. What does it take to have an individual become visible, to step forward and become silhouetted against that anonymous social backdrop; conversely, how does one avoid detection? Through whose agency, and to whose benefit, does the anonymous step forward into the light?

2. FEMALE REVELATION IN *KINGDOM OF STRANGERS*: “*THEY DIDN’T LET FEMALE OFFICERS OWN GUNS OR DRIVE CARS OR EVEN RIDE BICYCLES*” (259).

The story at the heart of this detective novel is a ghoulish series of dismemberments of women—their bodies buried in the Saudi Arabian desert in the shape of letters to spell out a text from the Qu’ran (“Verily, we have created all things in proportion” –or “in order” [258]). At least one third of the residents of Saudi Arabia are migrants; many are domestic workers who are treated as servants and frequently discriminated against (cf. Human Rights Watch). The “kingdom of strangers” of the title refers to this strikingly high percentage of workers in Saudi who are migrants (and who are the killer’s victims), and Ferraris indicts Saudi society for these many crimes.

But the author has a larger revelation in mind than the confession of a serial killer: she is allowing the inequities of the rigid gender separation of Saudi society to step forward and speak. Thus, the kingdom of strangers is also arguably the two sharply demarcated worlds of men and women, each living side by side but rarely lifting the many veils that separate them. In fact, despite the several interesting characters in the book, the central figure is really “woman,” whether Saudi or foreign. The central violence is not the dismemberment by the serial killer; it is the oppression and erasure of *all* women connected in a desperate web of deception and purdah in the society Ferraris (who resides in San Francisco, but once lived in

Saudi Arabia) describes with devastating effect. In fact, the capture and conviction of the killer is dispatched in a surprisingly few pages near the book's end, as if this was not really what Ferraris wanted to attend to. She then surprisingly concludes with a marriage, as in a classic comedy, in which a conservative male has a conversion to a more liberal view of his fiancée; she had been an assistant to the male detectives who solved the crime and he shared the same concerns that the male detectives did when they considered her doing "their" work: "It bothered him to think of her keeping all of this hidden, but what bothered him more was the realization that she didn't trust him. That she had been concealing her activities at work. That she feared his judgment" (270). But the ending, after all the exposition of the inequities of Saudi society, seems hard to accept as anything other than ironic:

Was he crazy? He'd spent so many years wanting to be married, wanting a wife of his own, children, in-laws, . . . This was a doorway to the world he had never been allowed to enter until now, the world of a woman's voice, her body, her touch. . . . and he told himself that this was what he wanted. . . . She laughed nervously. He squeezed her fingers. They let the sound wash over them as they stood staring, happy and frightened, blinded by the glittering lights. (358-359)

The dynamic at work in such societies is well-described by Christopher Grey and Jana Costas (2016) building on the writings of Max Weber, Elias Canetti, Georg Simmel, Erving Goffman, Michael Taussig, and Eviator Zerubavel observes that "Public secrecy creates a boundary between what is acceptable to talk about and what needs to remain ignored. This serves to cope with social prohibitions, avoid potential embarrassments, yet also to uphold the existing social order" (40). Meanwhile, the artificial boundaries encourage men to be unfaithful to their wives while chastising them for the smallest infringement of prudish codes, and lead the women, such as Katya, the book's protagonist, to have dreams like the following:

It thrilled her to be naked. Naked and outdoors. She thought of all the things she admired about herself: the lovely curve of her hip, the protrusion of her ass, the biceps that were both firm and delicate. It felt as if all her life she had wanted to be seen in her entirety, wearing skin-tight clothing or nothing at all, every curve of her not just showing but seen, admired. It was the worst of sins, this vain pride, but she allowed herself to revel in every moment of it. She woke up happy and embarrassed. (239)

Ferraris has chosen a most appropriate vehicle—murder detection in a very conservative Bedouin society—to convince her readers of the devastating personal effects of “covering,” meaning “actively blocking access to that information supposed to be kept secret by providing other (often contrary) information, for example, through disguising, fabricating, feigning (that is, misrepresenting information), or disinforming outsiders” (42). Her male investigators avoid seeking the help of the female characters, whom they treat as interlopers in a man’s world of crime detection. One of the obvious outsiders is the American woman brought in to advise local detectives on the characteristics of serial killers, but more persistently Ferraris underscores the outsider status of all woman in such a society, even those who reveal themselves as the most clever at solving the crime. “Secrecy,” Grey and Costas (2016) write, “emerges not as a binary between knowledge and ignorance, or silence and speech, but as a spectrum of more-or-less concealed knowledge” (43). This secrecy plays out in various subplots, including one that threatens to totally up-end the main investigation: one of the principal detectives has been carrying on an affair with a South Asian migrant who has gone missing. He tries to investigate her disappearance while covering up his affair, lest he be revealed as an adulterer and therefore subject to beheading. Behind the literal veils are plenty of other secrets, including the pre-marital pregnancy of one of the apparently most devout young women.

The reader is intrigued by the contortions through which Ferraris puts her various investigators as they put these arbitrary social barriers between them and the solution to the crimes at the heart of the story. It gradually becomes clear that secrecy, extended to the degree of national neurosis, is the real topic for this novelist. As Chilson (2014) notes, “secrecy, above all, separates. . . . Even if somehow outsiders learn a secret, refusing to speak with them about it creates social distance between the concealer and those from whom they conceal. . . . In addition to creating social distance it also creates conceptual distance. Labeling an idea, practice, or object as secret conceptually sets it apart from that which is not secret” (xi). The persecuted foreigners are ignored by the majority who are happy to employ them or enslave them; they just disappear in the novel, with no one there to observe their absence from society. But similarly, Saudi men and women remain invisible to each other, and do all they can to maintain that invisibility. They are, in effect, strangers not only to each other, but also to themselves.

Since the novel is written for western readers, one might accuse Ferraris of orientalism, ‘othering’ Saudis more than is justified. But Brooks’s (2000) study of confessions (judicial and otherwise) suggests how unmodern the Saudi world is: he writes of “the story of the autobiographical impulse in literature, and its rise to dominance” (103), but that concept seems

foreign, indeed, to the World Ferraris describes in her work. One can't imagine the exposure of the individual to social scrutiny that is implied in telling one's own story in a public forum that has typified our own age. In the west, such a Rousseauvian autobiographical impulse is strongly encouraged. Building on Foucault, Brooks observes that "the modern subject is held responsible for the discourse of his or her own identity and personality, and we tend to regard that discourse as privileged information. We may question it, we may find it self-glorifying or self-excusing, we may search for errors of fact in it, yet we regard it in its own terms—precisely, as a confession—true to the self in ways that other discourses never can be. . . . We are held responsible for what we say about ourselves" (110-111).

3. FALSE CONFESSION AND WILLFUL BLINDNESS IN *THE DEVOTION OF SUSPECT X*: "AS LONG AS THEY COULDN'T PROVE ISHIGAMI'S CONFESSION FALSE, IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO STOP THE LEGAL PROCEEDINGS" (296).

Veteran spy novelist John LeCarré begins his 2017 novel, *A Legacy of Spies*, as follows:

In any interrogation, denial is the tipping point. Never mind the courtesies that went before. From the moment of denial, things are never going to be the same. At the secret policeman level, denial is likely to provoke instant reprisal, not least because the average secret policeman is more stupid than his subject. The sophisticated interrogator, on the other hand, finding the door slammed in his face, does not immediately try to kick it in. He prefers to regroup and advance on his target from a different angle. (LeCarré, 1)

This observation of the interrogators and the cat-and-mouse game that clever spies can spin out, sometimes successfully, nicely summarizes the dramatic structure of Higashino's tale of a false confession that is used to save a woman and her daughter from a conviction for a crime they did in fact commit: the killing of the woman's estranged husband (though in self-defense). The victim is Togashi, who is knocked unconscious by his daughter, Misako, and then garroted by his ex-wife, Yasuko. It sounds garish, but it was in response to Togashi's discovery of the whereabouts of Yasuko and her daughter, who had fled from him before, and to his violent attack on the two women and threat to never leave them alone again. The intrigue becomes more interesting, though, when their next-door neighbour, a mathematics teacher with a crush on Yasuko, decides to cover up the crime and confuse the investigating officers. Ishigami reasons as follows: "*I have to protect them*, thought Ishigami. He would never be this close to so beautiful a woman ever again in his life. He was sure of that. He had to summon

every last bit of his strength and knowledge to prevent any calamity from happening to her” (36). And so he sets in motion an elaborate diversion, while providing the two women with a fool-proof alibi. His plot seems to be working, even though he is up against an old college friend, a brilliant physicist who knows Ishigami’s ability to plan many steps ahead of any proposed investigation.

Ultimately, though, it collapses when Yasuko decides she cannot live without confessing what she has done: “It was so hard to hide the truth. Would she ever really be able to be happy, with something so dark hidden inside? She would have to live the rest of her life with this guilt, never knowing true peace. *But maybe*, Yasuko thought, *enduring that guilt is a way of doing penance*” (288). Ishigami turns that reasoning on its head. If Yasuko’s impulse is to be fully known, his is to completely cover what is going on inside. She considers his sacrifice for her: “She had never encountered such deep devotion. She hadn’t even thought it existed. Yet Ishigami had it, hidden away beneath that expressionless mask of a face—the kind of passion unfathomable to the average person” (287-288).

But he sees it all quite differently. As a mathematician he is content to live in his head, working on a mental problem for years and years, and never certain that he will reach a conclusion. Incarceration will not change much for him, since the external world is almost a distraction from the important life that is going on behind that “mask.”

Who cared if he wasn’t allowed to leave his room? As long as he had paper and something to write with, he could work on his math problems. Even if the authorities were to bind his hands and feet, he could explore new proofs in his head. They could take away his sight, or his hearing, but they could not touch his brain. Confinement was like a limitless garden of paradise for him. How short a lifetime is, he thought, compared to the time it will take humankind to find all the rich veins of mathematical ore where they lie sleeping and tease them forth into the world. Nor, he reflected, did he need anyone to acknowledge his work. (289-290)

The plot might seem to be a perfect exemplification of one of Peter Brooks’s observations that “the institutionalization of confession as a means of legal conviction nonetheless must always make us uncomfortable, since the state in search of a confession plays on the consolatory aspect of confession as a means to entrap for disciplinary purposes” (112). But

when one has made the life of the mind so important that one's embodied life becomes a neurotically private and artificial work of performance art, a false confession like Ishigami's unsurprisingly is used by him to cover the actual murder he has committed to cement the false confession. In a country notable for its *shōji* and implied compact to not see or hear what one actually sees or hears, and with some of Asia's oldest data protection laws (Lovells), Keigo Higashino's provocative twist on the *shoji* his protagonist erects around his interaction with the world suggests the dangers of warding off one's guilt by mocking the very idea of confession. Obsession of any sort clouds one's vision.

Clever though he is, Ishigami meets his match in his old college friend and intellectual rival, physicist Yukawa. He surprises one of the detectives by injecting the notion of intuition into the proceedings:

Yukawa slowly turned around to face Kusanagi. "That's what you think as a detective. I asked whether you believe him. I don't care about your investigation."

Kusanagi nodded and sighed. "To be honest, it doesn't feel right. There are no holes in his story. It all makes sense. . . . Aren't scientists supposed to shelve their doubts in the face of logical arguments. . . . I thought you were all about facts over feelings."

Yukawa shook his head—a barely perceptible movement—then came to sit down across from Kusanagi. "The last time I met Ishigami, he presented me with a mathematical conundrum," he said. "It's a famous one, the P=NP problem. Basically, it asks whether it's more difficult to think of the solution to a problem yourself or to ascertain if someone else's answer to the same problem is correct. . . . There are some things in life that we have to accept as truth, even though we don't want to believe them. . . . "He's chosen this, he said at last. He's chosen to spend the rest of his days in prison." (251-253)

Yukawa later explains Ishigami's logic to Yasuko, the woman Ishigami is attempting to save:

"I want you to know that you know nothing of the truth."

"That's true. I'm not lying. But why did you have to tell me that?"

“Don’t you find it odd that you haven’t had to lie? That the police have gone so easy on you? See, Ishigami put it together so you would only have to tell the truth. . . . His entire plan was constructed around that commitment. . . . That’s why he cut off his own path of retreat—so he would never be able to turn back once things were put into motion.” (270-271)

In an odd coincidence, reminiscent of the migrant household workers that were the serial killers targets in *Kingdom of Strangers*, the individual whom Ishigami chooses to kill as part of his plot of deception is a homeless man that he had passed on his way to work every morning. Ishigami “would kill someone else and then make the corpse look like Shinji Togashi”; as Yukawa explains, “It’s not unusual in their world [that of the homeless] for people to just go missing” (274). Shinji/ shoji—not quite homonyms, perhaps, but subliminally effective as paper-thin barriers to the truth.

4. GUILT AND REFORMATION IN *THE KITE RUNNER*: “*THERE IS A WAY TO BE GOOD AGAIN*” (168).

John LeCarré offers a good entry point into this emotionally charged novel. In an interview for National Public Radio he offers this interesting exchange with Terry Gross:

Terry Gross: Was it ever hard for you to figure out who your authentic self was?

LeCarré: Writing did that for me. . . . I think the—the incentive to write and the environment of the secret world, this—this theatre of human behavior that had been—been offered to me, it was really like a sort of coming home. Not coming home into the secret world, but coming home recognizing the chance that had been given to me. And I felt that I could make out of this extraordinary little—this microcosm of human behavior something that applied to all of us because we, all of us, deceive ourselves and other people in our daily lives in small, harmless ways, sometimes harmful ways. We deceive our bosses in small, harmful ways or harmless ways. Everybody lives in some kind of condition of secrecy, out of politeness to a great extent. If you’re living with somebody, you swallow your emotions and you control yourself and you watch yourself in order to make the relationship work. And the other person is doing the same stuff. And I think, therefore, that there was for me always a universality in the secret world that I could—I could exploit and write about and apply to the general human condition in which we live. (Gross, 18)

Is LeCarré answering Gross's question? Is he explaining how he figured out who his "authentic self" is? Or is he implicitly denying Gross's premise that there actually exists an authentic self to be discerned, suggesting instead a more deconstructive idea that demonstrates how inaccessible a "self" must remain, and how one can never imagine there is some "true" center to the onion that is the personality?

In any case, the points he is raising regarding self-deception and the well-practiced methods most of us use to maintain an acceptable face for the world are a fitting backdrop against which Hosseini's protagonist (Amir) comes to terms with his own complicity in the death of his half-brother. It becomes clear early on in this melancholy reminiscence of childhood in Afghanistan, observed from the comfort of Silicon Valley in full adulthood that Hosseini is engaged in a recuperative act of detective work: whatever became of the companion, Hassan, whom he sacrificed 26 years earlier to ethnic violence?

Of the three novels under discussion, this is the one most clearly aligned with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's call for living an authentic life. As one Christian writer controversially argues, "The problem is *guilt*. Depression, anxiety, hostility, fear, tension and, in more serious cases, psychosis are really ailments of the conscience—symptoms that result from violating the conscience's promptings and refusing to live honestly and responsibly" (Martin, 1975, 525). Martin's views are echoed by Wilkes (2014), who concludes that "In [Bonhoeffer's] 'The Best Physician' address we come to understand that in [his] view confession of sin may also lead to physical revival through the psychosomatic process of the healing of the body as a result of confession. Healing and salvation are linguistically, theologically, and existentially intertwined in Bonhoeffer's thought" (Wilkes, 67-68).

These insights eventually prove to be true for the protagonist in *The Kite Runner*, but they are especially striking because of the undeniable physical results brought about by Amir's entry into guilt, involving abduction, male-on-male rape, betrayal by Amir, the acceptance of false accusations of guilt by Hassan, murder, and attempted suicide. Amir's family are Pashtun, but Hassan's are from the minority Hazara. Amir's complicity in the evil around him is compounded by Hassan's generosity toward this man who, we learn, is actually his half-brother. Brooks writes that, in Dante's *Divina Commedia*, "the sinners must speak for themselves, in their own confessional discourses" (97), but that is a long time coming for Amir. Learning the full history of what happened when he abandoned his friend in their childhood,

“Amir is filled with shock and horror. . . . ‘I’m thirty-eight years old and I’ve just found out my whole life is one big fucking lie!’” (195).

In the closing chapters of the book, as happily-married Amir seeks to adopt now-dead Hassan’s son, Sohrab, Amir recognizes the effects of his unacknowledged guilt playing out in an eerie repetition in Sohrab’s fate.

. . . in America, you don’t reveal the ending of the movie, and if you do, you will be scorned and made to apologize profusely for having committed the sin of Spoiling the End. In Afghanistan, the ending was all that mattered. . . . If someone were to ask me today whether the story of Hassan, Sohrab, and me ends with happiness, I wouldn’t know what to say. Does anybody’s? After all, life is not a Hindi movie. (311-312)

Indeed, the ending tries to assert the possibility of hope, with Amir symbolically taking on the role of kite runner than had belonged to Sohrab’s father. But Sohrab, now traumatized and mute, can only muster an enigmatic half-smile in response. In this novel, there is no Bollywood dance number to clear away the vestiges of guilt, even after it has been acknowledged.

The narrative is shot through with flashbacks, serving as structural reminders that guilt reasserts itself and in fact deepens upon further reflection. Midway through the novel, Amir runs a film in his head that he never saw in real life:

I kept thinking of that day in 1974, in the hospital room, just after Hassan’s harelip surgery. Baba, Rahim Khan, Ali, and I had huddled around Hassan’s bed, watched him examine his new lip in a handheld mirror. Now everyone in that room was either dead or dying. Except for me.

Then I saw something else: a man dressed in a herringbone vest pressing the muzzle of his Kalashnikov to the back of Hassan’s head. The blast echoes through the street of my father’s house. Hassan slumps to the asphalt, his life of unrequited loyalty drifting from him like the windblown kites he used to chase. (192)

This, then, is as close to the “authentic self” as Hosseini’s protagonist comes, and his narrative account of how he got there, seemingly a happy and self-confident man in Silicon

Valley, reminds readers that one never knows what truths lie behind the passive, perhaps pensive, facades of those around us on the train.

5. CONCLUSION

Critics and readers alike tout the reading of fiction as a safe and enriching vehicle to vicariously live many lives and, in the process, perhaps nurture our capacity for empathy. On that latter score—the nurturing of empathy—there has been significant controversy (see, for example, studies by Peter Bazalgette, Seán Williams, and others). As a testing laboratory for the exploration of what humans will accept as truthful, though, there will be less controversy. Similarly, the psychology of covering the truth in entire social systems can be well-displayed in fiction that offers an external (perhaps a bit naïve) “reading” of those systems. This essay has looked at three recent novels to suggest the complex interaction between confession, secrecy, and guilt to question the stability of what we may too comfortably accept as true.

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