

# The Honey Thief

## Study Notes

Robert Hillman



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Written by the author, Robert Hillman, *The Honey Thief* Study Notes provide an extensive and valuable addition to any study of the text. The material is designed to introduce a broad background to the life, culture, religious and social conditions from which Najaf Mazari came, as a member of the Hazara tribe in Afghanistan.

The chapter breakdowns provide a succinct summary of each chapter, and a series of interesting and thought-provoking questions and discussion points for classroom activities.

## ABOUT THE TEXT

### A book of tales

Each of the stories in *The Honey Thief* can be read as an independent tale, complete in itself. At the same time, all of the stories are connected by their cultural and historical background, their setting in Afghanistan, and the themes that run through them. All but a few of the main characters are of the Hazara ethnic minority of Afghanistan and, as the events of their lives unfold, they provide a dramatised history of the Hazara people.

The stories are largely works of fiction, rendered in the style of Middle Eastern folktales. Even in stories that feature real historical figures, the authors have taken an imaginative approach. In the oral tradition of the folktales from which the stories are derived, details are added by the storyteller according to his or her personality and skill. It is expected that a tale told by one person will differ from that told by another. In fact, the audience would be disappointed if tales were told in an unvarying way. However, it must be emphasised that the authors' imaginative license respects limitations. The culture and history of Afghanistan and the Hazara people in general remain intact, acting as the foundation for the construction of the stories. Historical figures, such as Abdul Khaliq, Abdul Ali Mazari and Mohammad Nadir Shah, lived and died in the way they are said to in the tales.

Another feature of the oral tradition preserved by the authors of *The Honey Thief* is that of the moral. Tales are told not simply to entertain; they must also edify. It is the moral of the story and the skill with which it is revealed that wins the greatest applause from the audience. The tales of *The Honey Thief* express the convictions and values of the Hazara people after centuries of hardship and persecution, and also after centuries of devotion to the Shi'a Islamic faith.

## **The oral tradition**

The oldest stories in the world are those that were first told verbally. The written transmission of stories, even among the educated, is a relatively new innovation in human history. In the Middle East and Central Asia, the tradition of oral storytelling goes back a long way, before the broad conversion of most countries in the region to Islam (650–750 CE), most notably in Persia. Under the influence of Islam, many old stories were adapted to suit the narrative of the new, monotheistic faith without abandoning their original characteristics. Even in folktales that have survived to the present day, magical interventions by pre-Islamic deities are still to be found.

The old stories of the oral tradition fulfilled three important functions:

- They preserved episodes and events in the history of a tribe or people.
- They endorsed the power of certain deities honoured by a tribe (or, in the case of tales told in the post-Islamic era, the power of a sole God and the piety and blessedness of his followers).
- They celebrated a tribe's customs and social protocols.

In the story titled 'The Music School', the arrival in a small town of a master musician who is thought to be mad provides an example of the first function; Abbas' quiet acceptance of the guiding hand of God in 'The Beekeeper's Journey' is an example of the second function; and in 'The Behsudi Dowry', the customs and social protocols of the Hazara are highlighted.

Stories told in the oral tradition also had to engage the audience, not merely instruct them. Among the Hazara of Afghanistan, rival master storytellers will often engage in a type of duel, usually held around a fire in winter, with one master attempting to trump another with his or her story. It is rarely the gaudiest or even the goriest story that wins the day, but rather the story in which instruction arises naturally from the drama of the narrative. In fashioning the drama of the story and reinforcing its appeal, the master will introduce heroes and villains, demons and saints, beasts (both mythical

and real), and a cast of characters in situations that are very familiar to the audience (e.g. mothers who worry about the marriage prospects of their daughters; fathers who attempt to teach their sons the benefits of hard work and thrift; thieves and charlatans who come to a bad end; pious men and women who win favour in the eyes of God etc). The storyteller's success will depend on how fully the audience identifies with the hopes, ambitions, triumphs and disasters of the characters in the story.

A masterpiece of the ancient storyteller's art is *A Thousand and One Nights*, an omnibus of tales brought together with a central, framing device in which Scheherazade, the wife of Shahryar, the king, tells stories designed to beguile her husband. The king's experience has led him to distrust the faithfulness of women and so he keeps a wife for only one night, kills her in the morning and then remarries. However, Scheherazade's skill in storytelling is so great that when she leaves each story unfinished, the king has to allow her to live another night if he is to hear the end of the tale. One thousand and one nights pass in this way, concluding with the king pardoning Scheherazade. The stories in *A Thousand and One Nights* are drawn principally from the oral traditions of Persia, India and Afghanistan. Many of these original stories were adapted over time to provide the foundation for folktales and epics that have become standards in the West. Homer's *The Odyssey* is thought to have derived from the *A Thousand and One Nights* tale of Sinbad the Sailor and fairytales such as 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears' and 'Rapunzel' may also have their origins in the omnibus.

## **THEMES**

The dominant theme of the stories in *The Honey Thief* is that of forgiveness and its necessity. Although Afghanistan has been a land of conflict for most of its history, the desire for peace is expressed in story after story, always with the suggestion that forgiveness is the gateway to fruitful resolution. In some stories, such as 'The Behsudi Dowry', the willingness to forgive a wrong comes readily; in others, such as 'The Beekeeper's Journey', forgiveness is a tense moral struggle.

Loyalty is another important theme. Loyalty to one's family is a cardinal rule in Afghanistan, where the concept of family extends to all relatives, no matter how distant, and then to the tribe and the broader category of one's ethnic group, such as the Hazara. In 'The Music School', the musician, Karim Zand, an Iranian, comes to live in the poorest village of the Hazara as a loyal tribute to his dead wife, who was a Hazara. Examples of loyalty are found in 'The Wolf is the Most Intelligent of Creatures', in which the boy, Abbas, maintains an undying loyalty to his grandfather, who in turn is loyal to him. However, loyalty may sometimes exact a terrible cost. In 'The Death of Abdul Khaliq', a young Hazara assassinates the king in a misguided expression of loyalty to his people, whom the king had persecuted. Abdul Khaliq and a number of family members are publicly executed as punishment.

A third theme is the fortitude of the Hazara people. In 'The Snow Leopard', the hunter, Mohammad Hussein Anwari, returns from the high mountains of the Hindu Kush to his home-city of Herat when he fears that his family may be under threat. Barely pausing, he charges down the mountain on his mission of rescue. In 'The Russian', Abbas accepts the unrelenting hardship of a journey across the desert while nursing a wounded Russian soldier.

The joy of creativity features as a theme in many of the stories. In the title story of the collection, 'The Honey Thief', the beekeeper, Ahmad Hussein, speaks of his beloved bees as if they were the artists of the natural world. His search for the right location to place his hives is an expression of delight in the artist-bees. In 'The Music School', Abdullah, mute since birth, hears a voice in Karim Zand's music that he strives to make his own.

Relishing the simple things in life is a theme, too. The beauty of the Afghan landscape is spoken of again and again. In many stories, the preparation of food and its taste

is celebrated and, in 'Thoughts on Growing and Eating', Najaf Mazari speaks lovingly of the produce of Afghanistan and of the dishes enjoyed by the Hazara people.

Finally, the giving of gifts is a theme present in almost every story. In 'The Wolf is the Most Intelligent of Creatures', Esmail's stories are his gift to Abbas; in 'The Behsudi Dowry', Hameed offers his books as a gift to 'Proud Nadia'; and in 'The Snow Leopard', Rousal Ali's offer to accompany Abraham to the mountains in search of the elusive beast is a gift in itself. What underlies the giving of gifts is the impulse of generosity, which is a time-honoured tradition in Afghanistan. The suggestion that gift-giving gives rise to such impulses stands in opposition to the feuding and brutality that pits clan against clan.

## **FACTS ABOUT AFGHANISTAN**

### **Geography**

#### **The mountains and plains**

Afghanistan is a mountainous land with the peaks of the Hindu Kush running from the northeast to the southwest. The highest peak of the Hindu Kush is Nowshak, which is close to the border with Tajikistan and rises to 7,492 metres. You will find this towering mountain mentioned on p.185 in 'The Beekeeper's Journey'. Many of the summits of Afghanistan's higher peaks are covered in snow all year round. In 'The Snow Leopard', Abraham and Mohammad Hussein Anwari climb the mountains in the geographical centre of Afghanistan and look northeast towards the highest peaks. The mountains yield to the great plateau of the southwest, which make up a quarter of Afghanistan. Some of the plateau is fertile, but much of it is too arid to support regular crops. The most fertile land in Afghanistan is found in the northern plains by the borders with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The great city of the north, Mazar-e-Sharif, lies at the heart of this fertile region.

## The rivers

Afghanistan is not a land of rivers. Many small streams flow only at certain times of the year. Yet the spring thaw of mountain snow still provides enough water for Afghanistan's population and to maintain a system of irrigation. Afghans are masters at making the most of what water is available and they grow up knowing where to look for natural springs, of which there are many. In 'The Richest Man in Afghanistan', Jawad Noroosi is said to have a gift for finding water; many Afghans believe that certain people can smell water underground. In 'The Behsudi Dowry', the channels that carry water to the Behsudi orchards are fed by natural springs.

The Helmand is the principal river of the country, stretching 1,400 kilometres from the mountains of the Hindu Kush, southwest to Oruzgan Province, then through Helmand Province, and finally turning west to drain in the marshes of Nimruz Province and across the border in Iran. The second great river, the Oxus, forms part of Afghanistan's northern border. It is this river that Najaf Mazari refers to in 'Thoughts on Growing and Eating' when he speaks of the greenery and beauty that can be found in northern Afghanistan (p.247).

## History

### A land of tribes

In 'Hazara', the first story in *The Honey Thief*, Najaf Mazari says:

I was born in Afghanistan, but I only came to know where my country belonged in the world when I left it (p.1).

Many Afghans, even to this day, think of a particular region of Afghanistan as their native land, rather than the entire country. The area traditionally occupied by Najaf's ethnic group, the Hazara, is the mountainous central region known as the Hazarajat, which is mentioned in a number of the stories that make up the collection. Other

ethnic groups, such as the Tajiks, the Pashtuns and the Uzbeks, have historically dominated other regions.

Over the centuries, the various ethnic groups have fought each other to maintain a hold on their traditional heartlands. Some ethnic groups are larger than others and have controlled the more prosperous regions by sheer weight of numbers. The Hazara, as the smallest of the four major ethnic groups, found security in the mountains as these were the least coveted by the other groups. However, over the centuries, the waxing and waning of fortunes on the battlefield has seen the dispersal of members of the various ethnic groups. These days, the Hazara can be found in all parts of Afghanistan, just as the Tajiks can be found in the Hazarajat and the Uzbeks in the traditional Pashtun regions in the south of the country. Still, many Hazaras think of the Hazarajat, rather than Afghanistan, as the native land of the Hazara.

### **Invasions**

Afghanistan has been plagued by more than just inter-tribal fighting throughout its history. Due to its geographical position in Central Asia, lying between Iran and China with India to the south, Afghanistan has been a corridor taken by armies marching southwards from North Asia and eastwards from the Aegean and the Middle East. The mountains of the Hindu Kush and the Himalayas made it inconvenient for these armies to take any route other than the Afghan corridor, sticking to the northern plains. In addition, ambitious kings and emperors in countries bordering Afghanistan regularly seized parts or all of the country in their quest for domination of Central Asia. Over the centuries, Afghans have been obliged to keep their weapons ready to defend what little they could still call their own.

Afghanistan's geographical location made it indispensable to the British and the Russians in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As Russia's imperial power grew, the British, with their dominion over India threatened, saw a great strategic advantage

in having Afghanistan as a buffer state between the southern advance of the Russians and British India. The Russians, on the other hand, saw Afghanistan as a bulwark against any northern advance from India by the British. It became important to the British to win the favour of Afghan rulers; the Russians felt the same. Other European powers sometimes lent support to either the British or the Russians to secure their own interests. The tensions of these years are outlined in 'The Life of Abdul Khaliq', the fourth story in *The Honey Thief*. It is important to note that neither the Russians nor the British wholly succeeded in subduing the Afghans and, often enough, it was the Afghans who profited by playing one of the great powers against the other. However, whether it was experiencing a period of British ascendancy or of Russian influence, Afghanistan remained a battleground. Dangerous instability persisted well into the late twentieth century, when the armed forces of the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in support of a communist government in Kabul. The Soviet invasion of 1979, lasting ten years, was a disastrous affair that led to the deaths of millions of Afghans and many thousands of Soviet military personnel. The ninth story in *The Honey Thief*, 'The Beekeeper's Journey', and the tenth story, 'The Russian', are both set during the Russian occupation.

It is thought that the failure of the Soviet invasion and its prohibitive financial cost helped to bring about the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is also thought that the decision of the Soviets to invade Afghanistan had its roots in Russia's centuries-long struggle to dominate the country. It might be said that the collapse of the Soviet Union is another example of how Afghanistan always emerges as the winner when great powers seek to subdue it.

### **The Taliban, September 11 and present-day Afghanistan**

During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979–1989), the major ethnic groups joined forces in the struggle to defeat the invaders. The forces resisting the Soviets called themselves *mujaheddin*, or 'soldiers of God'. The *mujaheddin* of one ethnic

group were prepared to co-operate with those of another ethnic group, but such alliances were only ever considered temporary. When the Soviet forces withdrew, the ethnic militias returned to their much older struggle with each other.

The years of civil war lasted into the 1990s, by which time armed conflict had been raging in Afghanistan for more than twenty years as a result of violent opposition to the communist government, armed resistance to the Soviet invasion and civil war between ethnic militias. Exhaustion from the wars provided a platform for the onslaught of a new force in Afghan politics, a force of guerrilla fighters who called themselves the Taliban. *Talib* is an Arabic word that means 'student'; *taliban* is the collective noun, meaning 'students aligned together'. The Taliban were not, in fact, students. The origins of the Taliban movement can be traced back to certain Islamic schools in Pakistan. Students were radicalised in these schools between the 1950s and the 1980s, and encouraged to take up arms in support of a severe fundamentalist ideology. The single-minded determination of the Taliban fighters allowed them to sweep the *mujaheddin* forces aside and, ultimately, seize control of Afghanistan. As rulers, the Taliban was as ruthless as it had been on the battlefield. The leaders of the movement enacted the strictest laws regarding worship, attire and political expression in the Islamic world. The Taliban leaders also harboured the Islamist political activist Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda movement, assisting him in the planning and execution of the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York City on 11 September 2001.

It had long been known to Western intelligence that Osama bin Laden had based himself in Afghanistan and, in the days following the destruction of the World Trade Centre, the US government renewed demands for the Taliban leaders to hand over Osama bin Laden to them for criminal prosecution; the Taliban refused the demand. A coalition of countries, headed by the US, attacked Afghanistan in October 2001 and, after months of intensive bombing, with the Taliban in full retreat, Afghanistan fell.

A provisional government that was widely representative of Afghanistan's ethnic diversity was installed and took on the task of creating a new constitution for the country. In 2004, a nationwide ballot brought to power the country's first ever democratically elected government based on universal suffrage, headed by Hamid Karzai in the office of president. The Taliban, however, considered their eviction from Afghanistan in 2001–2002 to be a strategic retreat and have returned over the past eight years to establish strong bases in a number of provinces. A coalition of military forces from more than twenty countries continues to resist the return of the Taliban. The past decade has seen billions of dollars in aid and development projects invested in Afghanistan, but despite great growth in building and infrastructure, Afghanistan remains among the poorest states in the world, still torn apart by war and plagued by corruption.

## **History of the Hazara**

### **Origins**

The origins of the Hazara remain a subject of debate. The most popular theory suggests that the present-day Hazara are the descendants of the Mongolian armies that first swept into Afghanistan in 1220 CE under the great Genghis Khan. Indeed, DNA evidence does support this theory up to a point, for many Hazara share the genetic footprint of the people of the Mongolian plains and exhibit strikingly similar physical features. However, it is also possible that the Hazara forebears migrated to Afghanistan independently of the Mongol armies. Inter-tribal marriage over the centuries would have blurred the distinction between the Hazara and other Mongolian ethnicities, too. Rival theories of the origins of the Hazara make the claim that the Hazara are more related to the Turkomans of Central Asia and perhaps to migratory tribes from the Black Sea region than to Mongolians. The debate is largely political. If it were established that the Hazara are predominantly Mongolian in origin, that argument would reinforce prejudices against the Hazara based on their 'foreign-ness'.

It is not uncommon for Hazara politicians to dismiss the theory of Mongolian origin in order to claim that the Hazara have as much right to be called true Afghans as any other ethnic group.

### **Oppression**

What is not in dispute is that over the centuries the Hazara have been the most victimised of Afghanistan's ethnic groups. One of the more evident reasons for this abuse can be found in the politics of religion. The Hazara are overwhelmingly of the minority Shi'a branch of the Islamic faith, while the great majority of other Afghans are of the Sunni branch. The historical antagonism between these two branches of Islam has led to deadly confrontations for many centuries. This antagonism largely explains the oppression of the Hazara in Sunni-dominated Afghanistan.

The oppression of the Hazara has taken the form of massacres enacted by the ruling elites of Afghanistan, as made evident in the fourth and fifth stories of *The Honey Thief*, 'The Life of Abdul Khaliq' and 'The Death of Abdul Khaliq'. Over the past 150 years, the Hazara have been dispersed so broadly both inside and outside Afghanistan that they may be said to have become a diaspora. Hazara immigrants are now found in many countries of Central Asia and beyond, including a number of Western countries.

In present-day Afghanistan, the Hazara remain a victimised minority, although big advances have been made in Hazara participation in government. The most significant advances were made during the lifetime of the great Hazara political and military leader, Abdul Ali Mazari (1946–1995), founder of the Hezbi Wahdat party that won reforms in the treatment of the Hazara and representation in government. However, Abdul Ali Mazari and the Hazara in general made powerful enemies within the Taliban. Abdul Ali Mazari was murdered by the Taliban in 1995 and the Hazara suffered badly under Taliban rule (1996–2001). The resurgence of the Taliban in the first decade of the twenty-first century continues to menace the gains made by the Hazara in recent years.

## Religion

### The meaning of 'Muslim'

The followers of the Islamic faith are called 'Muslims', an Arabic word that means 'one who surrenders'. The word 'Islam' is also Arabic and means 'I submit'. Practising Muslims view the embrace of the Islamic faith as an act of submission or surrender to the higher power of God, or Allah.

### Sunni and Shi'a Muslims

The great majority of Muslims follow one or the other of the two main branches of the faith – Sunni and Shi'a. In all but a few areas, the beliefs of Sunni and Shi'a Muslims are identical. Each accepts the Prophet Mohammed (570–632 CE, by the Western calendar) as the messenger of God. The dispute between the two branches concerns the acceptance of Mohammed's cousin and son-in-law, Ali, as his successor as leader of the faith. Shi'a Muslims accept Ali as the rightful successor; Sunni Muslims believe that Abu-Bakr, Mohammed's father-in-law, was the true successor.

### Observance

There are very few doctrinal differences between the Sunni and Shi'a branches. Most Sunnis accept that prayers should be offered to God five times a day, accompanied by a washing ritual known as *wu'du*. Some Shi'a Muslims believe that the offering of prayers three times a day is sufficient to show devotion. Other variations in belief are just as minor as this. It must also be remembered that observance among Muslims, both Sunni and Shi'a, can vary greatly according to temperament. Some Muslims do not pray at all; others pray once or twice a day. Observance of dress codes among Muslim women also varies widely. Some women dress according to a very strict code; others feel free to please themselves in matters of attire. The world population of Muslims is estimated to be between 1.2 and 1.6 billion and, within that number, the degree of observance ranges from zero to full and complete.

## Islam in Afghanistan

Afghanistan is predominantly an Islamic country, with a small number of Jews, Hindus and Sikhs. Most Afghans align themselves with the two main branches of the Islamic faith – Sunni and Shi'a. An overwhelming majority of Afghans are Sunni, mirroring the Sunni majority in the broader Islamic world. The Hazara are a part of the minority Shi'a branch; all but a few of the Hazara are Shi'a.

The country's official name under the current constitution is the 'Islamic Republic of Afghanistan', suggesting that the state wishes to declare the great importance of Islam in its governance. Freedom of worship is nevertheless guaranteed under the constitution and it is illegal to discriminate against anyone on the basis of religion.

## CHAPTER SUMMARIES AND DISCUSSION POINTS

### 1 'Hazara'

#### Main characters

**Najaf Mazari** narrator

The oldest social group in the world is thought to be that of the clan, or the tribe, which predates the nuclear family grouping of mother, father and children. In this first chapter, which functions as an introduction to the stories in the collection, Najaf Mazari speaks intimately to the reader of what it means to him to belong to the tribe called the Hazara. 'A tribe is a world' (p.3), he says. In later stories, it is revealed that the Hazara ethnic group actually comprises a number of tribes – as many as twenty-five, all closely related by experience, shared customs and their Shi'a faith. When he meets another Hazara, Najaf says:

We will greet each other in a different way to the way we greet people who are not of our tribe. We will be both excited and shy at the one time. Excited because we are brothers, shy because without even knowing my name, the man I am talking to can see deep into my heart (p.3).

Najaf explains that the bond between one Hazara and another has its foundation in the fact that all Hazaras listened to the same stories as they grew up. The suggestion is that shared stories create a common narrative for the Hazara people, situating them all in one, continuous tale.

Najaf also touches on the vitality of the oral tradition, of a history learned directly from a storyteller.

In the city where I now live, all the stories are in books ... I am not sure that these stories still pierce the flesh of those who hear them and make a life for themselves in the listener's heart (p.3).

Najaf is suggesting that there is a greater intimacy in hearing the stories that make up the history of one's people when the listener is facing the storyteller.

This first chapter opens with Najaf no longer living in his homeland of Afghanistan and ends with him telling the reader that he is a man whose experience spans two cultures: that of the unnamed land in which he now lives and that of the Hazara people. He has mastered his new culture in the 'land of television sets' (p.1), but his deepest allegiance is to his native culture. 'When I sleep, I dream like a Hazara' (p.6), he says. With this statement, Najaf leaves the reader prepared for the tales of the Hazara that follow; the tales that made Najaf the man he is.

### Discussion points

- What reasons might Afghans who are not Hazara have for resenting the Hazara people?
- When Najaf says, 'A tribe is a world' (p.3), what is he suggesting about the intimacy of belonging to a tribe?
- What sort of bond might be created between the members of a tribe by listening to the same stories?
- How are the old stories of the Hazara people related to Najaf's own experiences in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries?

- Najaf says, 'I am alike to many people ... But when I sleep ... I dream like a Hazara' (p.6). Why would Najaf 'dream like a Hazara' when he lives in a big, modern city, thousands of kilometres from Afghanistan?

## 2 'The Wolf is the Most Intelligent of Creatures'

### Main characters

**Abbas Behishti** a boy of twelve years

**Naid** a young man of Abbas' village; a carpenter and house-builder

**Esmail Behishti** the very old grandfather of Abbas

**Abdur Rahman** Emir (chief or ruler) of Afghanistan from 1880 to 1901

**Jafar Ali** the eldest son of Esmail Behishti and father of Abbas

**Sayed Ali** an orchardist of Abbas' village

Abbas is a boy of twelve living with his family, including his grandfather Esmail, in the Hazarajat, the age-old domain of the Hazara in the mountainous central region of Afghanistan. It is Abbas' task to guard the family's sheep and goats in the hilly pastures above the village. Abbas is devoted to his grandfather and relishes the magical stories Esmail tells him of animals that converse with humans, among other wonders. The bond between Abbas and his grandfather, which is at the heart of the story, brings into play the theme of loyalty. What is suggested in the relationship between Abbas and Esmail is that love lies not in what you say, but in what you do. Abbas and Esmail are loyal to each other and are a delight to one another; that is the essential expression of their love.

The joy of creativity is also an important theme in the story. Esmail's tales are designed to please Abbas. Esmail's reputation as a man of wisdom means far less to him than the playful stories he fashions. It is as if all of the events of Esmail's life – events that include episodes of violence and killing, and also of great courage – are reduced to nothing more than tales of bravado and folly in order to conjure delight in the boy. When Esmail finds an old wolf up in the pastures and proves to Abbas that it

is the most intelligent of creatures, the boy is amazed. He sees that the wolf and Esmail understand each other, and that the wolf, at the end of his life, struggles with the burden of age just as Esmail does. The death of the wolf occurs at the same time as the death of Abbas' grandfather and Abbas is left with his grief. In subsequent stories, Esmail's values become those of Abbas, like gifts from beyond the grave. The theme of the 'gift' is enacted all through the story.

### Discussion points

- The old man, Esmail, is sought out by people in the village for advice 'on disputes between families, on marriages, on children who were growing up wild' (p.9). Who fulfils the function of the 'wise man' or 'wise woman' among Australians, who come from many backgrounds? Who might fulfil Esmail's function among indigenous Australians?
- Discuss the advice that Esmail gives to Naid, who consults him about his choice of a wife.
- When Abbas questions his grandfather about the rifle that he owned as a young man, Esmail eventually ends the conversation by saying, 'Of that we don't speak' (p.15). In your opinion, what is it that Esmail is referring to when he says he will not speak of it and why does he refuse to discuss it?
- Discuss the wolf's behaviour when a gun is aimed at him and when a stone is about to be thrown at him. Does the wolf's behaviour prove Esmail to be right when he says it is intelligent? Have you seen other animals behave in intelligent ways?
- When Abbas sees that the wolf has died, he immediately understands that Esmail has also passed away. Why is this? How does the narrative draw a connection between Esmail and the wolf?

### 3 'The Honey Thief'

#### Main characters

**Abbas Behishti** the boy from the second story, still aged twelve      **Ahmad Hussein** a master beekeeper

This story again features Abbas Behishti from 'The Wolf is the Most Intelligent of Creatures'. It is only months after the death of Abbas' grandfather when the boy is taken on as an apprentice beekeeper (a *perwerrish dahenda*) by a master of the trade, Ahmad Hussein. It transpires that Ahmad Hussein was himself an apprentice to Abbas' grandfather, Esmail Behishti, a renowned beekeeper in his time. Ahmad Hussein sees that the boy is still grieving for his grandfather. In his kindness, he makes the boy's education in the art of beekeeping a type of therapy, teaching him all the secrets of the bees. Abbas' grief abates little by little as he immerses himself in learning. The theme of gift-giving and of using generosity (in this case as a healing agent) becomes apparent. At the end of the story, Abbas speaks of the tales he heard from his grandfather and is surprised to hear Ahmad Hussein say that he was once told the same tales by the same storyteller. Both Abbas and Ahmad Hussein have inherited Esmail Behishti's magical tales and his art.

#### Discussion points

- What features of character and reputation are shared by Esmail Behishti in 'The Wolf is the Most Intelligent of Creatures' and Ahmad Hussein in 'The Honey Thief'?
- In Afghanistan, beekeeping takes time and patience. Do you think that the beekeeping methods of Ahmad Hussein would be employed in a modern, industrial economy, such as Australia's?
- Abbas' fascination with the honey-making machine reminds us of certain interests of his that are mentioned in the 'The Wolf is the Most Intelligent of Creatures'. What are those interests?

- Although Esmail Behishti has been dead for several months, he still dominates 'The Honey Thief'. Discuss the ways in which Esmail is brought into the story and the purpose of including him.

#### 4 'The Life of Abdul Khaliq' and 5 'The Death of Abdul Khaliq'

##### Main characters

**Abdul Khaliq** a Hazara boy of eighteen

**Amanullah Khan** Emir of Afghanistan

**Abdur Rahman** Emir of Afghanistan

from 1919–1929

from 1880–1901

**Mohammad Nadir Shah** Emir of

**Habibullah Khan** Emir of Afghanistan

Afghanistan from 1929–1933

from 1901–1919

Abdul Khaliq is a renowned historical figure among the Hazara. Documents that relate to his life provide us with his year of birth; details of his education; a description of his physical appearance; the names of his family members and acquaintances; records of his role in the assassination of the emir of Afghanistan, Mohammad Nadir Shah, on 8 November 1933; and an eyewitness account of his execution in Kabul two weeks later. Other historical documents provide information about the life of Mohammad Nadir Shah and the dynasty of rulers to which he belonged. The two stories draw on all the reliable information relating to Abdul Khaliq's life and on records of the persecution of the Hazara people. On this foundation of documented evidence, the authors of *The Honey Thief* have fashioned a dramatised narrative of a dark episode in Afghan history. The two stories that deal with the life and death of Abdul Khaliq include the most sustained account in the book of the long suffering of the Hazara:

By a process that began with mass murder, the Hazara became an underclass, the poorest people in Afghanistan, and it was thought to be their own fault (p.56).

In the first of the two stories, 'The Life of Abdul Khaliq', the succession of rulers who persecuted the Hazara is profiled, the foundations of that persecution are revealed

and episodes of violent suppression are outlined. When Abdul Khaliq enters the story, he is seen to have emerged from this long, violent history as an avenger. The theme of loyalty, which produces positive outcomes in most of the stories in this collection, is here seen to have another, darker side – one that is more related to the revenge culture that has plagued Afghanistan for centuries.

At a certain point, the narrative sets aside the details of persecution and follows Abdul Khaliq through the final weeks leading up to the assassination of Mohammad Nadir Shah. He is represented as a dreamer, not fully aware of the enormity of what he is planning. As the story unfolds, he seems unable to appreciate the likely consequences of killing the emir for himself and his family. It is as if he has been selected by destiny to strike a blow for the Hazara people and it is destiny that controls him.

His dreamy smile is not a disguise hiding fear and anxiety. His dreamy smile hides nothing at all. It is almost as if the deed would be enacted all by itself even if he fell asleep before the King's visit and did not wake up until the day after. In his sleep, he would find his way to the assembly. In his sleep he would he would take the pistol from his right sleeve and with his left hand fire at the King's heart (p.66).

With the day of the assassination approaching, he isolates himself more and more from the world around him and fires the fatal shots at Mohammad Nadir Shah in a state of detachment.

'The Death of Abdul Khaliq' takes the reader through the young man's short period of imprisonment and gives a detailed account of the day of his execution outside the Dehmazang fortress in Kabul. Abdul Khaliq remains in a dazed or detached state while listening to the interrogators describe the punishment that awaits him without any display of emotion. The idea of Abdul Khaliq as a tool of destiny is repeated.

... Abdul Khaliq ceases to be a boy in chains seated on a wooden bench in a prison cell and becomes the embodiment of the Hazara people. He hears barely a word said to him ... When he killed Mohammad Nadir Shah, he was killing a symbol. Now he himself has become a symbol. He is the Hazara of the ages, abused, attacked, imprisoned in chains, without any rights in his own country (p.70).

In describing the deaths of the people who were executed alongside Abdul Khaliq – his close relatives, his teachers, his classmates – the story is emphasising the barbarity of the system that judged and sentenced him, and also the shocking repercussions of revenge. Abdul Khaliq revenges himself and the Hazara people on Afghanistan's rulers for years of persecution; the rulers revenge themselves on Abdul Khaliq and the Hazara people at a public execution. Nothing of any benefit to anyone has been gained by revenge. Although the story is sympathetic to Abdul Khaliq and his cause, it does not condone the killing of the emir. Instead, it emphasises that revenge is a cycle, with the avenger becoming the target of a future act of vengeance.

The theme of loyalty is complemented in these two stories by that of fortitude. The assassination of Mohammad Nadir Shah is an anomaly in the long suffering of the Hazara people. The two stories make clear how unusual it is for the Hazara to provoke retaliation by the rulers of Afghanistan in an act of direct, political protest.

### Discussion points

- The ancient homeland of the Hazara is known as the Hazarajat. The area is largely confined to Afghanistan's tall central mountain range. Do the stories suggest reasons for this?
- With reference to the notes on 'Geography' and 'History' in this guide, discuss the reasons for the frequent invasions of Afghanistan over the centuries.
- In what way did the rulers of Afghanistan exploit the division between the Sunni and Shi'a Islamic faiths?
- The two stories speak of the motives of young men and women who undertake 'suicide' missions. Discuss the motives for these missions, according to the story.
- Justice and punishment are not the same as revenge. Would we say that those who prosecute Abdul Khaliq are more interested in justice or vengeance? How do the events that follow Abdul Khaliq's arrest support one view or the other?

- Do the two stories suggest either approval or disapproval of the assassination? Discuss this question with reference to what might be called the ‘collateral damage’ of the assassination.

## 6 ‘The Music School’

### Main characters

**Karim Zand** a musician

**Ali Reza** Abdullah’s uncle; an orchardist

**Abdullah** a boy of fourteen when the story begins

**Leila** a girl of Abdullah’s village; a fruit-seller

Mystery surrounds the sudden appearance of a stranger in a poor village of the Hazarajat. Karim Zand, a master musician from Iran, has taken up residence in an abandoned house with a bag of lentils and another of turnips. Karim Zand shuns the villagers, instead spending all of his time indoors playing the *rubab*, an ancient stringed instrument of the Middle East. The villagers are entranced by the music that comes from the isolated house, none more so than Abdullah, a boy of fourteen who has been mute since birth. Abdullah hears, in the music of the *rubab*, a voice that he imagines adopting for his own, taking the place of spoken language. The boy approaches Karim Zand, nicknamed ‘Red Beard’ and the ‘madman’, and hands him a note asking for *rubab* lessons. Karim Zand dismisses the boy angrily, but with persistence, Abdullah wins Karim Zand over and is taught not the *rubab* but the *tula*, a type of recorder. Karim Zand is a demanding teacher and warns Abdullah that he must not play the *tula* in public until he has mastered the instrument completely. During the years of his apprenticeship, Abdullah learns the secret in his teacher’s heart, the grief that first brought him to the village. As the years pass, Abdullah finds himself facing a dilemma. He has fallen in love with Leila, a girl in the village, and yearns to woo her with the *tula*. However, to do so would mean breaking his promise to Karim Zand. Torn between love and duty, he finally chooses love. To his surprise and delight, Karim Zand not only forgives him, but rewards him.

The 'gift' theme is prominent in 'The Music School'. Abdullah's ambition and persistence win him the gift of music from Karim Zand; it is a gift that transforms his life. At the end of the story, Abdullah's makes the painful decision to reveal his mastery of the *tula* to Leila and expects that his disobedience will alienate Karim Zand. Instead, the master musician offers him another gift – forgiveness.

So that you know all your life, ... remember what I tell you now: God is patient with the obedient, but he treasures the disobedient (p.106).

### Discussion points

- In what ways does the musician Karim Zand arouse suspicion when he comes to the Hazara village? Would a musician arriving alone in an Australian country town arouse suspicion in the same way?
- When the mute boy, Abdullah, hears the music of the *rubab*, his lips begin to move. The people of the village say, 'One madman is talking to another!'(p.86). Discuss Abdullah's reaction to the music. Why do his lips move?
- Karim Zand sets a challenge for Abdullah, commanding him to pick up the *tula* in a way that seems impossible. What is Karim Zand's purpose in setting this challenge? Does he achieve his purpose?
- Karim Zand says, 'It is not beauty we seek with the *tula*. It is only the truth' (p.93). Discuss what Karim Zand means.
- Abdullah is told a story by Karim Zand about a king, his wife and the wife's music teacher. What does Karim Zand want Abdullah to understand from this story?
- Discuss Abdullah's dilemma in not being able to play the *tula* for Leila. What might he be able to achieve if he could play for Leila? What does he fear could happen to his relationship with Karim Zand if he does play?
- When Abdullah breaks his vow to Karim Zand and plays the *tula* in public before the end of his apprenticeship, why is the teacher not angry? What does Karim Zand mean when he says, 'God is patient with the obedient, but he treasures the disobedient' (p.106)?

## 7 'The Snow Leopard'

### Main characters

**Abraham Lew** an English academic in his early thirties

**Mohammad Hussein Anwari** a guide; once a professional hunter

**Rousal Ali Anwari** Mohammad

Hussein's son; a young man in his twenties

**Sophie Lew** Abraham's wife

*Dobara khashisk* is a Dari term that means 'try again'. 'Dobara' becomes the nickname of an English academic and photographer, Abraham Lew, who travels to Afghanistan in the 1980s to take pictures of snow leopards. His first visit is a failure, for none of the locals whom he consults has ever seen a snow leopard. After three wasted months, he promises to 'try again' (p.109) the following spring, thus earning himself the nickname.

When he returns the following year, Dobara has taught himself some of the Dari language. After further delays, he is able to hire a guide, Mohammad Hussein Anwari, a former hunter who, among other animals, shot snow leopards. Though he is shocked, Dobara employs Mohammad Hussein to take him into the mountains in search of the fabled creature. Dobara is struck by the stamina, stoicism and skill of his guide. Unfortunately, their search ends prematurely when Mohammad Hussein is compelled to return to his home town of Herat, fearing that it is under attack by the invading Russian army. Mohammad Hussein dies at the hands of the Russians in Herat. Years later, when the Russians have been defeated and have left Afghanistan, the hunter's son, Rousal Ali, contacts Dobara by letter and offers to complete the quest that his father began. Rousal Ali is a novice compared to his father and, although the two men soon establish a firm friendship, their search for the snow leopards is not successful – or so it appears.

'The Snow Leopard' is the first story in the collection to offer a comparison of cultures. The Englishman, Abraham, is a representative of the advanced, technology-based culture of the West. He arrives in the Hazara village with state-of-the-art photographic equipment and a head full of preconceptions. His approach to creatures such as the snow leopard is that of the conservationist, one who has never considered that people in a primitive and impoverished land, such as Afghanistan, may perceive a valuable animal in quite a different way. The fact that Mohammad Hussein has, in the past, hunted and killed snow leopards appalls Abraham. He soon realises that the hunter has a far greater knowledge of the snow leopard than he and is far better equipped to locate it: Abraham's physical strength is sorely tested on the trek into the mountains, while for Mohammad Hussein the climb towards the snow-capped peaks is no challenge at all.

As his guide, Mohammad Hussein also offers Abraham a lesson. On the verge of locating the elusive snow leopard, Mohammad Hussein abandons the search to make a dash home to Herat when he fears his family is in danger. Abraham's immediate reaction to the lost opportunity is profound disappointment. He is undergoing an education without realising it, learning more about loyalty and the deep commitment to family than he knew before. The fruits of his learning are realised only years after his first abandoned trek into the mountains, when he returns to Afghanistan with Mohammad Hussein's son, Rousal Ali.

In 'The Snow Leopard', the themes of loyalty and gift-giving are at their most poignant. It is Rousal Ali's loyalty to his father and the desire to honour his memory that leads him to establish contact with Abraham Lew and, at the conclusion of the story, Mohammad Hussein seems to reach out from beyond the grave to bestow on Abraham the gift the Englishman had sought all those years earlier.

### **Discussion points**

- The people of the village visited by Abraham Lew are more interested in technology and buildings than snow leopards. Why?
- When Abraham returns to the village, he has grown a beard and he can speak Dari, the first language of Afghanistan. What do these two changes suggest about his approach to Hazara culture?
- Snow leopards are a threatened species, yet Mohammad Hussein, the hunter, has in the past killed them for profit. What difference does this highlight in the respective cultures of Mohammad Hussein and Abraham?
- Mohammad Hussein says that snow leopards hate human beings. Discuss the reason he gives for this hatred, with reference also to the hunter's warning to Abraham that the mountain hates human beings and wants to kill them.
- Life in the mountains is harsh, yet the Hazara have become masters of surviving there. Why do the Hazara choose to live in the mountains? What does the story suggest about the similarities between the Hazara and the snow leopard when it comes to living in the mountains?
- Discuss the theme of loyalty in 'The Snow Leopard', with reference to Mohammad Hussein's return to Herat and his refusal to leave Abraham alone on the mountain.
- When Abraham returns to the mountains with Rousal Ali, they hear voices and laughter outside their tent. Discuss the significance of this, with reference to the theme of gift-giving and considering the appearance of a snow leopard in Abraham's photograph.

## 8 'The Behsudi Dowry'

### Main characters

**Hameed Behsudi** a young man of twenty years

**Ahmed Behsudi** Hameed's father

**Zainab Behsudi** Hameed's mother

**the chestnut seller** unnamed

**the Baluchi merchant** unnamed

**Nadia Khalaj ('Proud Nadia')** a young woman of twenty years

**Najaf Khalaj** Nadia's father

**Iram Khalaj** Nadia's mother

The hapless Hameed Behsudi is the youngest of Ahmed Behsudi's five children. Try as he might, he cannot help causing trouble. Although Hameed means no harm, his accident-prone nature makes him the bane of his parents' lives. He accidentally kills the family's rooster; sets fire to a tree in his father's orchard; and causes a horse to kick his older brother. However, the greatest disaster occurs when four books come into Hameed's hands – novels from America, including *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, in two languages, English and Dari. The four novels become Hameed's property in a roundabout way, but the trouble they cause is very direct. As he reads the Dari text, he becomes so absorbed in a form of literature practically unknown in Hazara culture that he neglects his care of the orchard and thieves strip some of the apricot trees.

Ahmed Behsudi, despairing of his son's foolishness, hopes to see him married, believing that married life may make the young man more responsible – but who would wish to marry him? As it happens, a family in a neighbouring village has a daughter of marriageable age – a renowned beauty by the name of Nadia, whose pride and bad temper have chased away many suitors. Ahmed Behsudi offers a dowry to the father of 'Proud Nadia' if a marriage can be arranged between their children. To offer a dowry is a humiliation for Ahmed Behsudi – it is usually the bride's family that provides a dowry. However, he puts his pride aside for the sake of his son. Nadia spurns Hameed at first, calling him a fool and a blockhead, but she becomes curious about the book Hameed brings with him – *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Hameed reads to her from the book and Nadia is entranced – so entranced that, after a few days, she controls her temper and says she will marry Hameed. The problem is that Hameed has no great desire to marry. Nadia, in a rage at this first rejection ever, again scorns Hameed, but repents when her mother tells her what it means to be a wife:

You are charmed by this boy's books of America ... The stories are one thing. Marriage is a thousand things. Better that you should love your husband in a thousand ways (p.165).

Nadia overcomes her pride; Hameed's indifference changes to love.

### Discussion points

- What do the questions and answers on p.140 reveal about the history of the Hazara in Afghanistan?
- Hameed Behsudi is enchanted when he comes into possession of the four American novels. Discuss the reasons for his fascination, with reference to the statements, 'a book was of no use to anyone' (p.146) and 'the type of books called "novels" in English hardly exist in Hazara culture' (p.149).
- 'Ahmed Behsudi only discovered in that moment that he loved the boy Hameed. He loved him because he was difficult to love' (p.154). Discuss this apparent paradox.
- Nadia is proud and disdainful. The story invites the reader to think of Nadia's pride as a handicap. Can too much pride be a handicap in life?
- When Nadia overcomes her disdain in order to keep enjoying the story of Huckleberry Finn, her mother gives her some advice (p.164). Discuss this advice, with reference to the various cultures found in Australia. Would this advice be given in all cultures?
- 'Love is the struggle before the smile' (p.167). What does Nadia's mother mean by this?
- Discuss the whole story with reference to the theme of gift-giving.

## 9 'The Beekeeper's Journey'

### Main characters

**Abbas Behishti** a beekeeper from Sangan

**Ahmad Hussein** a master beekeeper; he taught Abbas about beekeeping

**Esmail Behishti** Abbas' grandfather; he taught Ahmad Hussein about beekeeping

**Abdul Ali Mazari** a famous Hazara political leader

**Konrad** a boy of seventeen or eighteen; part Hazara, part German

**Khalid Naseri** an old Hazara expatriate

**Barbara Naseri** the wife of Khalid Naseri

Abbas Behishti, who featured in two earlier stories ('The Wolf is the Most Intelligent of Creatures' and 'The Honey Thief'), returns in 'The Beekeeper's Journey'. He is now a grown man with a wife and children, and has blossomed into a master beekeeper. One day, he is visited by his old teacher, Ahmad Hussein, who is acting as a messenger for Abdul Ali Mazari, the great Hazara political leader, also known as Baba ('Father') Mazari. Ahmad Hussein tells Abbas that he has been summoned north to meet with Baba Mazari. With great reluctance, Abbas goes north, fearing that Baba Mazari will want him to fight against the Russians. However, Baba Mazari has another mission in mind. He tells Abbas how his grandfather, Esmail Behishti, had endured terrible torture many decades past, when soldiers of Zahir Shah came to his village looking for rebellious Hazaras. The torture was the result of treachery by Khalid Naseri, who escaped first to Pakistan and then to America, where he grew wealthy over the years. Khalid Naseri's guilt compels him to send regular donations back to the Hazarajat to help with medical attention and education for young Hazaras. Now, Khalid Naseri is dying and has returned to Afghanistan seeking forgiveness for his betrayal of Esmail Behishti. As Esmail's closest living relative, it is Abbas who is being asked to forgive the dying Khalid Naseri. Knowing what he now knows, can Abbas forgive him? It was, after all, his beloved grandfather who was betrayed and tortured. Abbas says he will at least visit

the dying Khalid Naseri in the city of Charikar, where the one-time exile lies sick in bed. Charikar is a thousand kilometres away from the lands of the Hazara and Abbas must travel there as a passenger on a motorcycle driven by Konrad, a young half-Hazara, half-German boy who has come to Afghanistan from Germany to fight the Russians. On the long journey overland to Charikar, Abbas and Konrad develop a friendship that sees them through hardship and distress. At one point, they come upon a bus that has been destroyed by a Russian rocket, leaving many people dead. Abbas insists on digging a grave for each of the dead and saying a prayer at each burial. Konrad willingly helps. When they reach Charikar, Abbas hears the confession of Khalid Naseri and is asked if he can forgive the betrayal. Abbas makes no promises, but agrees to a final request by Khalid Naseri: to bury beside Esmail Behishti's grave the baseball used in the 1969 World Series, won by the New York Mets, and a pennant commemorating the victory, signed by the Mets' players. He explains that in his years of exile in America he became a passionate baseball fan and supporter of the Mets, and that the two mementos are his dearest possessions. Abbas agrees to do as Khalid Naseri asks, but the question of forgiveness is left unresolved when he dies.

### Discussion points

- What role has Abbas Behishti's grandfather, Esmail, played in his reluctance to take up arms?
- Baba Mazari has great authority over the Hazara people, yet when he summons Abbas to his house, he asks only if Abbas can forgive Khalid Naseri. He does not order him to do so. Why does Baba Mazari leave the matter of forgiveness up to Abbas when he could simply demand it of him?
- Konrad tells Abbas that he is an atheist (p.188), something that Abbas finds difficult to understand. Why is it so difficult for Abbas to understand the concept of a universe with no God? What does this suggest about his Hazara culture?
- Discuss Abbas' fascination with the science of the vacuum flask. How is his fascination consistent with other episodes in 'The Wolf is the Most Intelligent of Creatures', 'The Honey Thief' and even in this story?

- Abbas says that he must bury all of the dead on the bus that was destroyed. What does this suggest about his character and his faith?
- Khalid Naseri says to Abbas, 'I did not ask you to come here to forgive me ... I asked you to come because you loved Esmail Behishti' (p.196). Discuss what this means and what it might mean about the character of Khalid Naseri.
- 'The Beekeeper's Journey' combines the themes of loyalty, forgiveness and gift-giving. Discuss the ways in which the story employs each of these themes.

## 10 'The Russian'

### Main characters

**Abbas Behishti** a beekeeper from Sangan

**Esmail Behishti** Abbas' grandfather

**Abdul Ali Mazari** a famous Hazara political leader

**Konrad** a boy of seventeen or eighteen; part Hazara, part German

**Khalid Naseri** an old Hazara expatriate

**Barbara Naseri** the wife of Khalid Naseri

**Lev** a young Russian soldier of nineteen

After the death of Khalid Naseri in the city of Charikar, Abbas and Konrad begin the return journey by motorcycle to the village of Baba Mazari. Before long, they run into a pair of bandits who rob them of their petrol. The bandits have captured a Russian soldier, not much more than a boy, whom they intend to sell to the *mujaheddin*. The bandits also kidnap Konrad, probably with the intention of selling him, too. As the bandits attempt to make their escape in a truck, a Russian helicopter appears and fires a rocket at the vehicle, killing the bandits and Konrad. The Russian boy, Lev, survives, but is badly wounded. It becomes Abbas' task to care for the boy and take him to Baba Mazari so that he might be returned to his comrades. Relying on his skill in treating wounds and his knowledge of medicinal plants, Abbas nurses Lev back to health. In doing so, he discovers that the boy is a heroin addict. Eventually, Lev is sufficiently restored to travel on the back of the motorcycle and so Abbas returns to Baba Mazari's village with him. He tells Baba Mazari the story of his visit to Khalid

Nasari, the death of Konrad and his encounter with the bandits. He asks Baba Mazari to spare Lev's life and return him to his comrades. Abbas returns to his own village and to his wife and children. He has not yet decided whether he will forgive Khalid Nasari, but at his grandfather's grave he digs a hole and buries the baseball and pennant, according to Khalid Nasari's wishes.

### Discussion points

- As Abbas prepares to bury Lev, he worries that he knows no Christian prayers to help the boy's soul make its way to the Christian God. 'He thought he would ask our God to commend the boy's soul to the God of the Christians' (p.208). What does this tell us about Abbas' religious beliefs?
- Abbas' knowledge of medicinal plants allows him to treat Lev's wounds. Why would it be important in Afghanistan for people to know the healing properties of plants? Among the cultures found in Australia, are there some that have knowledge of natural healing agents?
- Discuss Abbas' thoughts on war and tribal jealousies, found on p.211.
- Abbas knows that many of the Russian soldiers in Afghanistan rely on drugs and alcohol to get them through the day. What does this reliance suggest about the Russian mission in Afghanistan? Refer also to other episodes in this story and in 'The Beekeeper's Journey' regarding Russian atrocities in Afghanistan.
- At the end of the story, are we meant to believe that Abbas has forgiven Khalid Nasari? In what way might Baba Mazari's return of Lev to his own people affect Abbas' decision regarding Khalid Nasari?

## 11 'The Richest Man in Afghanistan'

### Main characters

**Jawad Noroosi** a boy of seventeen

**Jawad's mother** the 'Woman Messiah'

**Jawad's father** the *mullah* (teacher or leader) of his wife's new religion

**Baba Khadem** an old man of Sangam

In a small village among the Sangan Hills of western Afghanistan, a seventeen-year-old boy by the name of Jawad Noroosi lives with his mother and father. Jawad's parents are not like other parents. His mother has anointed herself the 'messiah' of a new religion of moon worshippers and his father acts as the *mullah* of this new religion. Jawad's mother claims that she can command blackbirds to fly as high as geese and return with apples made of gold. The people of the village spurn the 'Woman Messiah' and, one day, Jawad's mother and father abandon the village, leaving Jawad behind with nothing but a 'moonstone' as a keepsake. The heartbroken boy is adopted by Baba Khadem, an old man of the village who pities him. It soon becomes apparent that Jawad, rather than his mother, is the gifted member of the family. Whatever task he turns his hand to results in spectacular good fortune: he finds precious stones when he digs a well; he grows vegetables of prodigious size when he plants a few seeds in stony soil. This good fortune makes him the object of envy among the villagers and, finally, Jawad leaves his village to search for the only treasure he truly desires – a reunion with his mother and father. When he eventually finds his parents in the city of Kandahar, he is just in time to save their lives. The story concludes with Jawad's mother renouncing her claims to magical powers and with Jawad feeling that the only good fortune that he ever valued was the good fortune of finding his parents once more.

### Discussion points

- In this story, the theme of gift-giving is explored. One of Jawad's 'gifts' is that of being a hard worker. How does this gift compare with his gift of finding gemstones and gold? Are some gifts more valuable than others?
- A number of incidents in the story suggest that wealth can be a greater burden than poverty. Discuss these incidents, with reference to the values that Jawad holds dear.
- At the end of the story, Jawad tells his parents, 'Our gift ... will be this: that we have no gifts but the life God has given us, and each other' (p.239). Discuss with reference to the lessons learned by Jawad's mother.

## 12 'The Cookbook of the Master Poisoner Ghorooob-e-astab of Mashad' and 13 'Thoughts on Growing and Eating'

### Main characters

**Najaf Mazari** narrator

**Thunderclap** leader of the bodyguards

**Ghorooob-e-astab** a master poisoner of Mashad, Persia; also called 'Nightfall'

for Mirwais Hotak, Emir of Kandahar

These two stories are related in their focus on the preparation of traditional Afghan dishes. 'The Cookbook of the Master Poisoner Ghorooob-e-astab of Mashad' tells the story of a professional poisoner of the eighteenth century who devises a means to increase his income by concocting fanciful recipes, which he sells as antidotes to his own poisons. One of Ghorooob-e-astab's cunning recipes is included in the story. In 'Thoughts on Growing and Eating', Najaf Mazari speaks of the primitive conditions under which food is grown in Afghanistan and of the feudal system of land ownership that leaves most of the country's arable land in the hands of a very small number of people. At the same time, Najaf celebrates the flavour and variety of Afghan produce and provides recipes for classic Afghan dishes.

### Discussion points

- Ghorooob-e-astab is a professional assassin who kills with poison. What aspects of his craft suggest that this story is written 'tongue-in-cheek'?
- The recipe for *khoresht aaloo* satirises the way in which cooking programs on Western television raise the preparation of food to an art form. Discuss the recipe, with reference to its satirical features and to the following quotation from 'Thoughts on Growing and Eating': 'In the West, cooking is spoken of as an art ... it is different amongst the people of my faith ...' (p.251).
- Discuss 'Thoughts on Growing and Eating' with reference to the fortitude of the Hazara people and the joys of the simple things in life.

## ESSAY TOPICS ON SPECIFIC STORIES

The essay topics below are designed to rouse your interest in different aspects of the book. Do not feel compelled to fully agree or disagree with the topic statements. Take your own approach, employing the statements to fashion your response. Support your commentary with examples and quotations from the stories.

- ‘The culture that we grow up with will do more to form the adults we become than anything we experience later in life.’ Write a response to this statement with reference to Najaf Mazari’s comments in ‘Hazara’ and your own observations on the topic.
- The bond between the old man (Esmail) and the old wolf in ‘The Wolf is the Most Intelligent of Creatures’ is one of respect, and respect is at the core of everything the old man teaches the boy, Abbas. What does ‘respect’ mean to you? In what ways does Esmail show his respect for other people and for nature?
- ‘Our real education is imparted by the people we meet.’ In ‘The Honey Thief’, what does Abbas learn from Ahmad Hussein? What part do the bees play in Abbas’ education? Respond to this topic with reference to both the story and to the people in your own life from whom you have learned valuable lessons.
- The history of Afghanistan that is related in ‘The Life of Abdul Khaliq’ makes the country seem an especially violent place. Are there similarities between the history of Afghanistan and that of Australia? You may wish to make reference in your comments to the experiences of Australia’s indigenous peoples.
- ‘Although there is cause for Abdul Khaliq to crave “justice”, the story told in “The Death of Abdul Khaliq” does not encourage the reader to believe that his attempt to right old wrongs was a success in any way.’ Do you agree?
- ‘God is patient with the obedient, but he treasures the disobedient’ (p.106). How would you interpret these words from ‘The Music School’? In what way might they fit in with Karim Zand’s philosophy, which is expressed elsewhere in the story?

- ‘The snow leopard is a wild creature ... If he could, he would kill you, because he hates you. He hates your shape, he hates your smell, he hates the sound of your voice’ (p.112). In ‘The Snow Leopard’, the hunter and the Englishman have different views about snow leopards. What do these views reveal about the respective cultures of the two men?
- ‘In “The Behsudi Dowry”, Nadia brings to her marriage to Hameed a new-found ability to love, but at the cost of her individuality.’ Do you agree?
- ‘Abbas was a boy in “The Wolf is the Most Intelligent of Creatures” and in “The Honey Thief”. As a man in “The Beekeeper’s Journey” his values and beliefs remain consistent with those he learned as a boy.’ Is this true? Give your views with reference to the three stories mentioned above.
- ‘Abbas’ experience with the wounded soldier in “The Russian” helps him in his struggle to forgive the man who betrayed his grandfather.’ *Does Abbas actually forgive Khalid Naseri? In what way might his difficulties with the Russian soldier have prepared him for his decision?*
- ‘The story told in “The Richest Man in Afghanistan” has no message to convey. It is a comedy – pure and simple.’ Do you agree? Are there any episodes in the story that might contradict this statement?
- The recipe in ‘The Cookbook of the Master Poisoner Ghorroob-e-astab of Mashad’ and the story titled ‘Thoughts on Growing and Eating’ suggest that eating in Afghanistan is accompanied by rituals. With reference to three or more stories in the collection, show how the preparation and serving of food expresses aspects of Hazara culture.

### **ESSAY TOPICS ON THE COLLECTION AS A WHOLE**

- ‘It would be difficult for readers in a modern country such as Australia to find anything relevant to their experience from such a primitive land as Afghanistan.’ Discuss with reference to at least three of the stories in the collection.

- 'Religion plays an important role in the lives of the characters in these stories, but superstitions play just as big a role.' Do you agree? Comment on any distinctions between superstition and religious faith that you can find in the stories. You might also take the opportunity to reflect (in writing) on the things that distinguish a mature system of faith (such as Islam or Christianity, among others) from superstition.
- 'Forgiveness is the greatest gift and the most expensive.' Discuss with reference to at least three of the stories in the collection.
- 'The culture of the Hazara might sustain them in Afghanistan, but it would not equip them to survive in a developed Western country.' Look at features of Hazara culture in at least three of the stories in the collection, then address the claim made in the statement.

### **CREATIVE WRITING TASKS**

- Write a folktale of your own, employing the guidelines set out below.

A folktale is usually structured in the following way:

- 1 a main character (a person who is about to experience a crisis) is introduced
- 2 life before the crisis is shown
- 3 the crisis occurs
- 4 the main character's experience during the crisis is related
- 5 the crisis is resolved
- 6 life after the crisis is resolved.

The time frame of a folktale is usually over months or years rather than a single day or a number of days. Folktales also provide a moral – a lesson in living. Before you write your folktale, check if the raw idea for your story can answer these six questions: What was life like for your main character before the crisis? What was the crisis? What was life like during the crisis? How was the crisis overcome? What was life like afterwards? What was learned?

Consider the way in which these elements feature in 'The Music School', the sixth story of *The Honey Thief* :

- 1 The main character is Abdullah.
- 2 Before the crisis, the mute boy Abdullah persuades Karim Zand to teach him how to play the *tula*. Karim Zand agrees on the condition that Abdullah does not play the *tula* in public until four years have passed
- 3 Abdullah falls in love with Leila. He wants to play the *tula* for her to show his love, but the four years have not passed. This is the crisis: Abdullah must either betray his master, Karim Zand, or betray his love for Leila.
- 4 During the crisis, Abdullah grapples with the dilemma and suffers for it each day.
- 5 He decides finally to play the *tula* for Leila before he loses her forever. This is the resolution of the crisis.
- 6 After the crisis, Abdullah finds that he made the right choice and that Karim Zand forgives him. What is the moral of the story? It is that love demands daring and that the worst betrayal is the betrayal of love.

Another way to begin a folktale is to think of the moral first, then fashion the story to illustrate the moral. For example, the moral might be: 'Honesty is the best policy' or 'The pen is mightier than the sword' or 'Love conquers all' etc. If you go online and google 'Proverbs and sayings' you will find a great many morals that can be used as the foundation of a folktale.

- Write a brief continuation of one of the folktales in the collection. For example, how might the story told in 'The Russian' be continued in the same style? Abbas' son might ask more questions of his father when they are at Esmail's grave, or you might construct a scene in which Abbas promises his wife that he will never leave the family again. Another example would be telling the story of how Barbara Naseri, in 'The Russian', met Khalid Naseri or how she feels about forgiveness. All of the stories in the collection

present opportunities for you to try your hand at developing a character or a situation in the folk style.