Possibly one of the earliest examples of our theme, rites of passage or coming of age, occurs in the book of Genesis. You recall the story of how with just the bite of an apple, Adam and Eve moved from their state of innocence to knowledge of good and evil, and how, afterwards, nothing was ever the same again.

Surely one of the greatest of themes in literature is this one. We sometimes call it a “rite of passage,” especially if it is associated with some sort of ritual, like a young woman in Afghanistan preparing for her arranged marriage, as we saw in The Bookseller of Kabul, or a young boy preparing for his first wild animal hunt or first deer hunt, or even the first time a soldier kills another human being, as in one of our stories for today. We sometimes call this theme a “coming of age” experience. Variations on this theme are also known as the passage from innocence to experience, from ignorance to knowledge or understanding. Some of our favorite stories evoke this theme: Old Yeller, for example, or To Kill a Mockingbird come immediately to mind. A first encounter with the death of someone—or something—we love, or a first glimpse at the cruelty of prejudice and hatred may be the event or experience that serves to move us from our state of innocence to a state of knowledge. Or the experience of our first love, and love lost.

This experience is something about which we can say, as do the narrators in our two reading selections today, that the experience has forever changed us.

For example, Amir, Khaled Hosseini’s narrator in The Kite Runner, begins his story by saying, on page one, which we read last time, “I became what I am today at the
age of twelve, on a frigid overcast day in the winter of 1975. I remember the precise moment, crouching behind a crumbling mud wall, peeking into the alley near the frozen creek. That was a long time ago, but it’s wrong what they say about the past, I’ve learned, about how you can bury it. Because the past claws its way out. Looking back now, I realize I have been peeking into that deserted alley for the last twenty-six years.”

We now know what that life-altering moment, that coming of age moment consisted of for that young boy who would be haunted from that moment forward for his betrayal of his friend who was so much more than a friend.

Our first-person narrator, Bonaparte, from the Frank O’Connor short story “Guests of the Nation,” also remembers the “precise moment” when his life was altered forever, when he passed from the idealism and confidence of a young man who thought he knew what life was all about to the abyss of uncertainty when he realizes he doesn’t really understand much at all. He, too, takes part in a traumatic event—again a “first time” which transfers him from a state of relative innocence or ignorance to a state of knowledge of good and evil, and it is a state he unwillingly enters on the night he, Noble, and Jeremiah Donovan turn against their “guests,” the Englishmen Belcher and Hawkins: “Then, by God, in the very doorway, she fell on her knees and began praying, and after looking at her for a minute or two Noble did the same by the fireplace. I pushed my way out past her and left them at it. I stood at the door, watching the stars and listening to the shrieking of the birds dying out over the bogs. It is so strange what you feel at times like that that you can’t describe it. Noble says he saw everything ten times the size, as though there were nothing in the whole world but that little patch of bog with the two Englishmen stiffening into it, but with me it was as if the patch of bog where the
Englishmen were a million miles away, and even Noble and the old woman, mumbling behind me, and the birds and the bloody stars were all far away, and I was somehow very small and very lost and lonely like a child astray in the snow. And anything that happened to me afterwards, I never felt the same about again.”

So it seems that no matter what culture, nor what era, nor what geographic location, people all over this small world we share have in common this phenomenon: we are shaped by our experiences, but we are impacted most profoundly by those experiences that can be considered “rites of passage” or “coming of age” or “loss of innocence” episodes; those first time events about which we can say, “and anything that happened to me afterwards, I never felt quite the same again.”

It seems to me also that while the positive “rites of passage” (that first hunting trip; that first date; that first blush of love) impact and change us in positive ways, it is those darker, more sinister “first” experiences we have that comprise the passage from innocence to knowledge. Certainly this is the case in both our reading selections.

O’Connor’s story stops with Bonaparte’s expression of how profoundly he has been altered by that wartime execution of two people who felt more like his “chums” then his enemies. But interestingly, Hosseini’s story begins with his first-person narrator proclaiming the depth of that sea change on the day he watched silently as Hassan was brutalized, and then maintained that silence through the years. Much of the novel, as you may have guessed by now, chronicles Amir’s search for redemption, his yearning to undo what was done, or rather, what he failed to do, many years earlier.

What makes a theme like this one—“rites of passage” or “coming of age,” the passage from innocence to experience—so enduring and powerful, I believe, is the
universality and truth of the theme. I believe that like Bonaparte and like Amir, most, if not all people, undergo such events—those life-altering experiences. And not just once or twice in our lives, but often many, many times. Take a moment to think about a time when you may have experienced such an event. Write down one or two on the paper you have. Sometimes these experiences are so painful to remember, or so private, we can’t even bring ourselves to confront them, so if you don’t want to record anything, that’s fine. What are some of your thoughts on this?

I’m no psychologist, I’m not really an expert on much of anything. But I believe that with regard to these sorts of experiences, we have in our lifetime many such experiences when we move from one level of awareness or understanding to another. I believe we are constantly “coming of age” throughout our lives. Often these are “firsts”—the first loss of someone we deeply love, the first moment of realization or understanding of truths that really matter, such as a deep awareness of our own failings, or even our own abilities, or having our eyes open to realities in the world around us, or the world that occurred in the years before our times. How do we pass through these levels? The act of growing older brings this awareness whether we seek it or not: getting married, having and raising children, pursuit of a career, getting divorced, or becoming a widow or widower, retirement, caregiving for parents—all those things bring us face to face, sometimes with joy, sometimes with regret, with “coming of age” experiences. We can’t avoid or escape them, it seems to me. All we can do is deal with them, come to terms with them, hopefully grow from them, and not be destroyed by them.

I’ve thought a lot about how different people approach such an experience after the fact. Remember—while we don’t know anything about what happens in later years to
the narrator, Bonapart, his last words suggest an acceptance of what he had done, a realization of the fact that he had been somehow transformed—“I never felt the same about again”—but no real indication he would have battled to change things or to right the order that had been shattered with the gunshots. In fact, his story suggests to me an approach to those life-altering events that has much in common with the message of this song by Wynona Judd, “Flies On the Butter,” or “You Can’t Go Home Again.” Listen to the incredible voice of this singer and envision the world she describes, a world to which you can never return:

“Flies on the Butter”

A different approach to the experiences that shape us is the one guiding Hosseini’s story: a story in which Amir can never be at peace with the events that have shaped who he is some twenty-six years after the fact. In the first chapter, Amir tells us of a phone call from Pakistan, from his father’s old friend, Rahim Khan: “I sat on a park bench near a willow tree. I thought about something Rahim Khan said just before he hung up, almost as an afterthought. There is a way to be good again.” Even though he can never change what happened, maybe there is “a way to be good again,” one more chance at redemption.

As far-fetched as it may seem at first, I want you to listen now to this Bruce Springsteen song, “Thunder Road” and see if you agree that in its central message, the song reflects Amir’s hope and yearning to try to set things right, very much in contrast to the approach of the Wynona song:

“Thunder Road”
We have heard what I think are two great songs with contrasting takes on the question of our ability to go back, to go home, to re-gain what we left behind or what we lost, to redeem the past. And I think each of them is absolutely true, sometimes, and absolutely wrong, sometimes. As for the issue of how we are shaped by the past, by our “coming of age” experiences, by the people whom we come to know and love, this final song, “For Good,” from the Stephen Schwarz musical *Wicked* best captures for me yet another truth—and I think it’s a universal truth, common to all people in all cultures—about how we come to terms with the people and events who have come before us, creating the experiences that shape us, one way or another:

“For Good”