Rationale For Pride of Baghdad

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Pride of Baghdad
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Grade Level and Audience

Pride of Baghdad is recommended for mature high school literature classes. The novel would be an excellent supplementary text in social studies classes focusing on the Iraq war, as well as in a science class exploring animal behavior.

Plot Summary

Pride of Baghdad is a fictionalized version of a true story about a pride of lions who escape from the Baghdad Zoo at the onset of the Iraq war. The pride consists of four lions: Zill, the alpha male; Safa, a female who had lived in the wild; Noor, a revolution-spouting lioness; and her eager cub, Ali. As an allegory, each of the four lions represents different elements of Iraqi society. Zill seems too reticent to be the alpha male, the pride’s leader, but he proves himself later on as a fierce protector; Safa and Noor are often at odds on what freedom means, Safa, having experienced the relative lawlessness of the wild, satisfied with the status quo, while Noor advocates forceful change; and Ali is earnest, his primal instincts bursting through though he has only known life in the zoo.

The narrative shifts between sudden action and reflective interludes. The action starts immediately. After the first panel foreshadows the ominous plot, a black bird calling over and over again, “The sky is falling, the sky is falling,” three American jets screech across the sky. The adult lions are thunderstruck, while Ali is beside himself with excitement. The scene cuts to Noor plotting with an antelope to liberate the zoo. In her plan, the antelope will gore the keepers and take the keys, and then the monkeys will unlock the cages. The antelope balks, believing open cages will result in the massacre of his kind. The scene swings to Safa and Zill talking about hunting in the wild. Ali asks what hunting was like, a query Safa does not respond to, flashing back to a time when she was raped and assaulted (she lost an eye) by males from another territory. Ali asks Zill the same question, but Zill’s sole memory is of watching a sunset as if feasting on prey.

The plot accelerates. After dumping a donkey corpse into the lion’s environment, the keepers flee. The zoo is bombed, cages and buildings destroyed. Safa wants to stay in the zoo, choosing the known, even it is as a captive, over the unknown. When another explosion separates Zill and Ali, monkeys kidnap Ali. They carry him to their island where Safa intervenes. She kills a monkey, freeing Ali, realizing after such an action she will have to leave the zoo because the monkeys will now seek revenge. As they depart,
Noor keeps her word to the antelopes, allowing one to escape rather than killing it for much-needed food.

Outside the zoo, Safa and Ali encounter a turtle that recounts recent Iraqi history, including memories of the 1991 war when his family and many other turtles were drowned in an oil spill. In a warehouse, Ali finds a dead, bloodied human. The pride debates whether to eat the corpse or to remain loyal to the zoo keepers who fed and housed them. Safa, true to character, refuses to eat the human. Noor spies a small herd of white horses which they begin to stalk. An explosion spooks the horses. They sprint off with the pride in pursuit, drawing the lions deeper into the decimated city. Safa and Noor enter a palace where they discover a de-clawed, toothless lion. Safa argues that the keepers would not have treated an animal in this way. They confront a formerly captive bear that threatens to kill them. Safa and Noor attack but are stricken down. Zill arrives and rises to their defense, but the bear beats him down. They both fall hard to the ground. Ali, assuming Zill’s protector role, stampedes the horses which trample the bear.

The climax is abrupt. The pride climbs up to a roof to view the fireflies (tracers) they noticed from the streets. On the roof, in view of a sunset, Zill is shot by snipers. Safa, in defense, attacks but is mowed down. Shocked, Ali and Noor are killed in a hail of bullets.

Strengths and Unique Characteristics of the Work

_Pride of Baghdad_ is an allegory. First and foremost, the narrative can be understood on the surface level with minimum knowledge of recent Iraqi history. The novel pulls us into a place and time we have only read or heard about in the news. We are present and in danger when U.S planes bomb Baghdad and when U.S. troops advance into the city. The lions are creatures we do not want harmed. We flinch and cringe when they are in the middle of bombing. Where the news coverage of these events was screened, this novel puts a face on innocent victims.

On the allegorical level, the narrative comments on Iraqi society pre- and post-war. To comprehend this level, students will need to generate background knowledge of the different positions Iraqis took during and after the Saddam Hussein regime. The authors, however, leave interpretations open; there is no one group of people that Noor, Safa, Zill and Ali represent. The pride could also be representative of other societies, of other historical events, allowing for many possible allegorical readings.

_Pride of Baghdad_ provides a provocative perspective on the burning question, what is the nature of freedom? The four characters – representing different positions in relation to the concept of freedom – offer different answers to what it means to be captive, to be taken from one’s natural environment, to have one’s instincts restrained. Students will
energetically wrestle with comments such as Noor’s, "There's an old saying, Zill. Freedom can't be given, only earned."

The novel affords a study in how dialogue shapes characters. Although not always naturalistic, the dialogue defines the characters. Zill’s level-headedness, Noor’s fiery revolutionary rhetoric, Safa’s world-weariness, and Ali’s eagerness all come through in their speeches.

The novel helps to break down stereotypes. In wartime, citizens of the opposition are demonized or ignored. In *Pride of Baghdad*, the keepers, Iraqis, though we never meet any up close, are depicted sympathetically until the scene in the palace which sets the contrast between the people and the brutal rulers. Iraqi people are human; Uday Hussein, who maintained his own private zoo, was brutal.

**Possible Objections**

Many readers will find the flashback to when Safa was raped and assaulted difficult to view. Other disturbing images – a giraffe with its head exploded by a mortar shell, images of a tortured lion and bear, and the pride being riddled by gunfire – will upset readers of any age. Because the main characters are animals, the kind of characters you might meet in a children’s book or Disney film, readers may be particularly troubled by the violence.

Some readers may also perceive that the novel presents the American invasion in a negative light. American soldiers are responsible for the deaths of the innocent lions. Though American soldiers killed the lions, those soldiers are shown to be distressed by what they had to do, underscoring the complexity of such events.

**Ideas for Implementation**

To start, have students collect anthropomorphic tales. Ask students to answer in discussion or in writing the question, Why tell stories from the point of view of animals? Using the criterion that these tales cast light on our humanity or inhumanity, compare/contrast these tales (e.g. compare/contrast “The Lion King” with *Pride of Baghdad*). In these tales, what do we learn about being human?

Also before reading, ask students to read the articles about the event the novel is based upon (see references below). The articles have the journalistic minimum, the who, what, where, when, and why of the event. Ask students to make predictions about how the
writer and artist will fill out this story. What will the lions do from the time they escape the zoo until their deaths?

As a project that begins before reading and could serve as an assessment of the reading, ask students to write an allegory in which a coterie of animals escape into their city or their school. First, ask them to create categories of people in their town, focusing on the different ways that these groups perceive the town and its residents, e.g. how the business community views teenagers. Pick an animal that represents each category. In the course of the narrative—which could be done in comics style--what do these animals show the reader about the town, what do these animals learn?

Images are at least as important to the narrative as dialogue. During reading, then, ask students to look closely at the drawings, keeping a list of details, especially of those found in panels without dialogue, that accentuate the themes the writer and artist are developing.

After reading, conduct four corner debates on statements such as, "There's an old saying, Zill. Freedom can't be given, only earned" and the lions die as free animals. In four corner debates, students start in one of the four corners of the room according to whether they strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with the statement. One of the goals of the debate is to coax others into your corner.

Ideas for Thematic Braidings

In a world literature class Pride of Baghdad would fit well into a unit featuring Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart. Set in pre-colonial Africa, Things Fall Apart also shows what happens to a society in the face of a violent clash with an outside culture.

As a representation of what can happen to civilians, Pride of Baghdad would make a tight thematic weave with any novel about war. In particular, it could be braided with The Things They Carry by Tim O’Brien, several stories in the novel exploring the effects of violence on both combatants and non-combatants. The study of one particular story, “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,” read in light of Pride of Baghdad, could be understood to a deeper degree as a depiction of what happens to people when societal order breaks down.

Novels such as Watership Down, Animal Farm, the Redwall series, and Tales of Despereaux, would be enhanced in braiding with Pride of Baghdad. One possible thematic inquiry could answer the question, why tell stories with animals in human situations? What do these stories tell us about ourselves?
Awards

Best Graphic Novel, 2006, IGN.com

Editor’s Pick, Library Journal, January 2, 2006

Reviews

“…an engaging and well-meaning read” – Andrew D. Arnold, Time.com

“it deserves the plaudits for its exploration of the price of freedom, the nature of tyranny, and the effect that both can have on the civilian mindset in a country like Iraq” – David Wallace. Comics Bulletin

“…simply, lavishly drawn, and devastating….Stunning” – Publisher’s Weekly

“…in the hands of Vaughan the story becomes a piece of unforgettable modern literature and is well deserving of the designation of “classic” – Chris Wilson, The Graphic Classroom

Resources/References


MySpace

Facebook: Pride of Baghdad


3. [http://graphicclassroom.blogspot.com/2008/05/pride-of-baghdad.html](http://graphicclassroom.blogspot.com/2008/05/pride-of-baghdad.html)


THIS RATIONALE AND 107 MORE ARE AVAILABLE ON CD-ROM. VISIT [HTTP://WWW.MAUPINHOUSE.COM](http://WWW.MAUPINHOUSE.COM)