

# The Wolf of Baghdad: A Reading and Teaching Guide

Dr Matt Reingold and Carol Isaacs

'This isn't a book that you read. It's one where you actually fall inside.  
It's wonderful' Sandi Toksvig

# THE WOLF OF BAGHDAD

MEMOIR OF A LOST HOMELAND

THE  
GUARDIAN:  
BEST COMICS  
AND GRAPHIC  
NOVELS



CAROL ISAACS  
THE SURREAL McCOY

## Introduction

In the 1940s, a third of Baghdad's population was Jewish. Within a decade, nearly all 150,000 of the country's Jews had been expelled, killed or had chosen to escape. Carol Isaacs' *The Wolf of Baghdad* is a wordless graphic memoir of a lost homeland by an author homesick for a home she has never visited. Transported by the power of music to her ancestral home in the old Jewish quarter of Baghdad, Isaacs encounters its ghost-like inhabitants who are revealed as long-gone family members. Accompanied by a wolf who trails after her, Isaacs explores the city, journeying through their memories and her imagination. She at first sees successful integration, and cultural and social cohesion. Then the mood turns darker with the fading of this ancient community's fortunes. The wolf, an animal believed by Baghdadi Jews to protect people from harmful demons, sees that Jewish life in Iraq is over, and returns Isaacs safely back to London.

Like other works of literature, successfully using graphic novels in the classroom requires careful planning and deep understanding of the content and themes of the work. What can make graphic novels more difficult to use is their blend of visual and verbal texts, with many educators less comfortable teaching students how to 'read' visuals in order to draw meaning from the image. To that end, this reading guide is structured to help educators teach their students how to read graphic narratives. As well, background readings about the historical context of Isaacs' work and sample exercises are included to foster critical thinking about *The Wolf of Baghdad*.

Given *The Wolf of Baghdad's* subject matters of displacement, trauma, and exile, this guide has been designed primarily for readers over the age of 12. Exercises, activities, discussion prompts and readings can and should be modified based on the needs of individual learning communities.

## Reading graphic novels as literature

The first decades of the 21st century has seen a rapid growth in the number of graphic novels published each year, with the genre becoming increasingly mainstream. Alongside this development, educators and researchers have begun exploring best practices for how to meaningfully use these texts in the classroom because not every student knows how to read a graphic narrative. Graphic novels allow students to see what is happening and to be able to actually visualise what the people, places, and objects actually looked like.

Like other literary genres, comics and graphic novels have their own distinct language of terms and keywords. Knowing them is important because they help readers to identify what they are seeing on the page and by using the common language shared by comics' readers, everyone will be able to understand each other. On the following two pages, you will see some pages from *The Wolf of Baghdad* annotated with descriptive captions that explain some of the most common visuals readers will encounter in the graphic novel.

# How to Read Comics 1

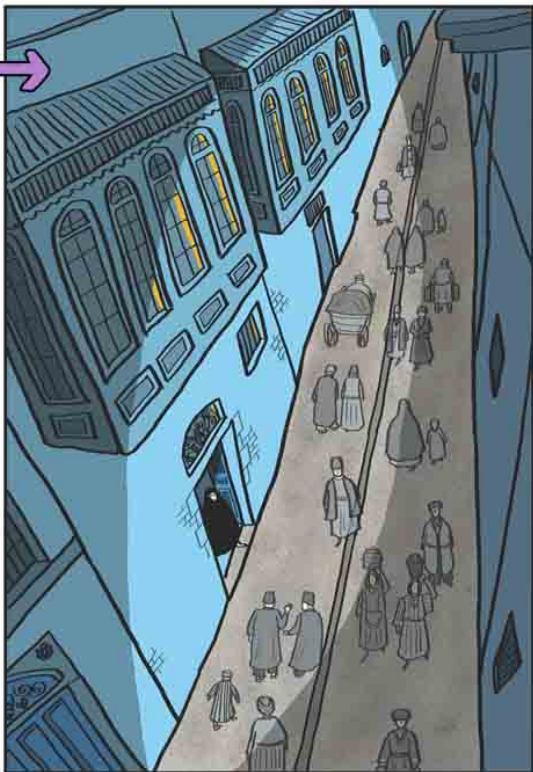
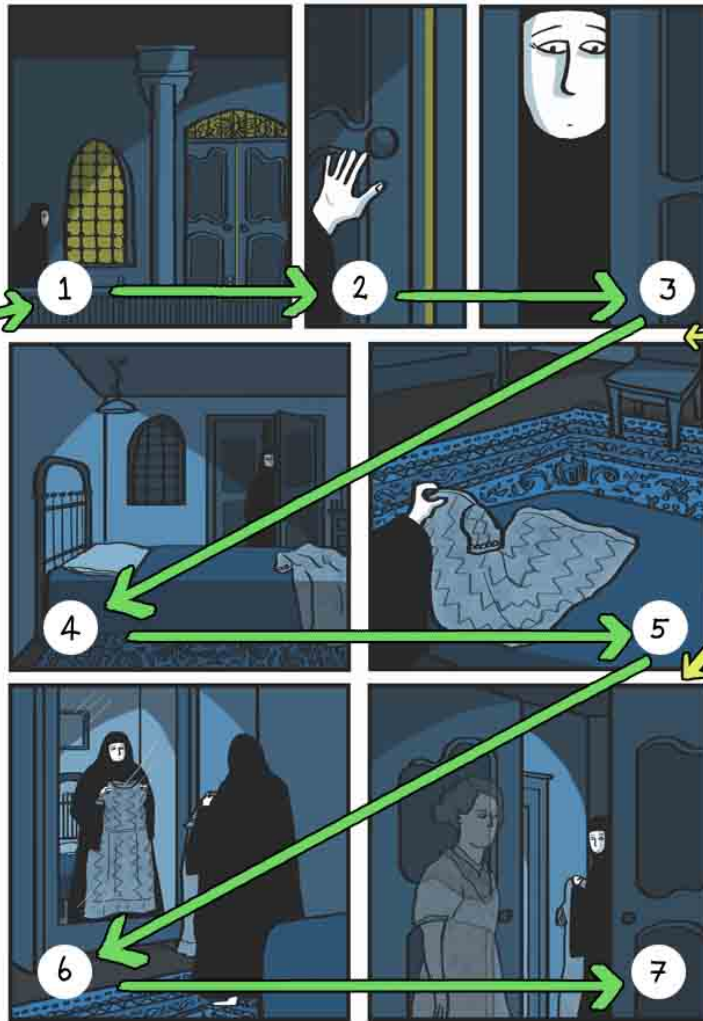
**Panels** are frames that each contain one section of the action.

Panels are read from left to right and top to bottom.

**Gutters** are spaces between panels where the reader needs to imagine the action from one panel to the next.

**Splash panels** are large images that take up most or all of the page. Often used to establish a mood or a location.

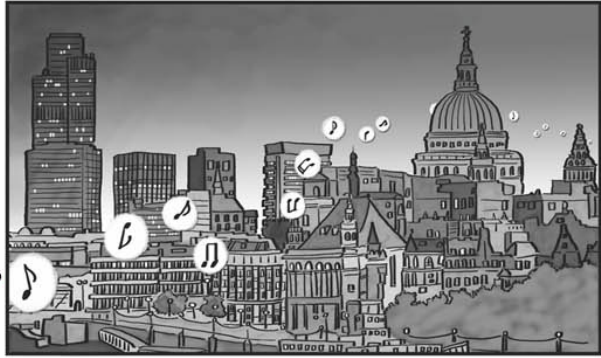
Panels can be any shape or size. These choices are made to reflect mood and pace




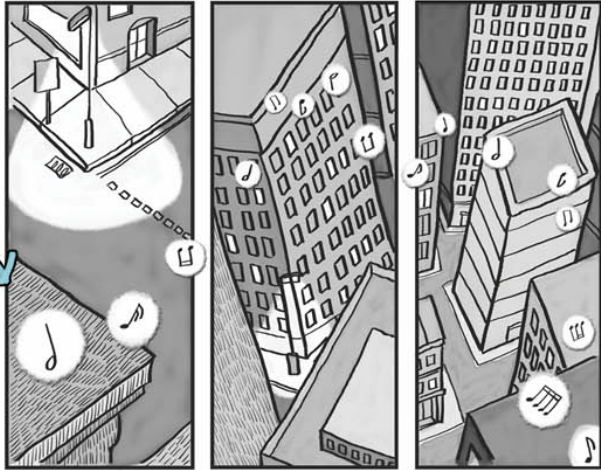
The Wolf of Baghdad ©The Surreal McCoy/Carol Isaacs

# How to Read Comics 2

Sound effects are drawn as visual representations, making this the only medium where the audience sees sound without hearing it.



As *The Wolf of Baghdad* contains no dialogue, the testimonies of Isaacs' own family drive the narrative instead.



'Our cousin was a member of the Jewish Underground. One day they came to arrest her and took her to prison.'

Claire Isaacs, née Hay

138



139

One of the pressure points in reading graphic novels, especially amongst readers less familiar with the genre, is how to read the images for meaning. Often, readers rely on the dialogue and captions to understand the narrative and spend less time on the images. As a wordless graphic narrative, *The Wolf of Baghdad* is well-suited for helping students develop comics-literacy because the story is primarily reliant on reading the visuals. Paying attention to facial expressions can help unlock a panel's meaning. For example, even without words for guidance, readers can observe how Isaacs first experiences surprise followed by happiness in the first set of images below (*fig.1*). Conversely, the combination of a teardrop, downcast eyes, arched eyebrows, and a frown in the second image all convey feelings of sadness (*fig.2*). The more attuned the reader is to these visual cues, the easier it will be to parse the text and understand Isaacs' intentions. As your students are reading, encourage them to verbalise - orally or in writing - what they are seeing happening and what they think the characters are *feeling*.



fig.1



fig.2

## Preparing to read *The Wolf of Baghdad*

*The Wolf of Baghdad* begins and ends in Isaacs' London apartment but the majority of the graphic novel is set in Baghdad in the years following the country's independence from the British in 1931. As Isaacs documents, Jews living in Baghdad in the 1930s were active and integrated members of the city, participating in its rich culture and contributing to its economy. Jewish life in Baghdad began in the mid-700s CE and the city had been the home to Jewish communities for over 1200 years. [The Museum of the Jewish People](#) has published an accessible article that traces the community's rich history, documenting the Jews' successes and challenges of living as a large minority population in a predominantly Muslim city.

For all intents and purposes, Jewish life in the city would come to an end in 1941 with the outbreak of the *Farhud* on June 1-2. The Nazi-inspired violent uprising destroyed any and all semblance of normalcy, led to the exodus of almost all Iraqi Jews by the early 1950s and signalled the end of over a millennium's worth of history. Isaacs' depiction of the *Farhud* powerfully captures the destruction of life and property alongside the shock felt by Jews who did not anticipate Nazism making inroads into their community. Israeli historian [Esther Meir-Glitzenstein](#) has authored a detailed analysis of the *Farhud*, tying it into geopolitical factors that extended well beyond Baghdad even as its impact was most acutely felt by Baghdadi Jews. She writes that in the years following the *Farhud*, non-Jewish Arabs "repressed and mentioned the *Farhud* only vaguely" in order to downplay the significance of the event. Therefore, one of *The Wolf of Baghdad's* most significant contributions is in its depiction of this lesser-known event in Jewish history through Isaacs' refusal to allow the event to be forgotten.

## Exercises

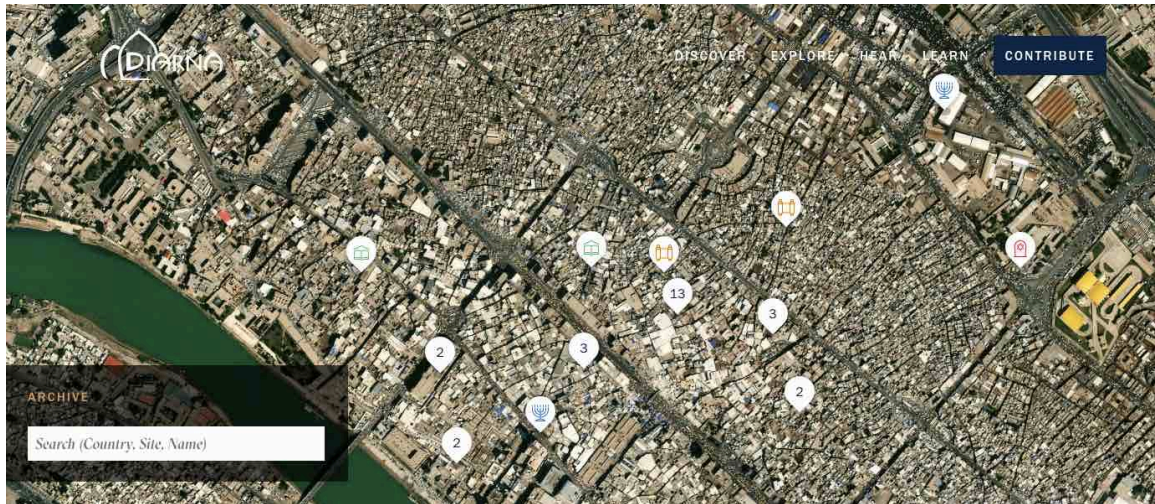
In this section, educators can find nine different exercises that can be used when teaching and studying *The Wolf of Baghdad*. They should not be read as lesson plans; instead, they are ideas and prompts that educators can weave into their lesson and unit plans. Each exercise focuses on a different aspect of the text and tries to foster new lines of inquiry into studying the graphic novel. We have also tried to offer suggestions for different ways that students can demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of *The Wolf of Baghdad*. We encourage educators to modify these exercises to best suit their classroom goals and the needs of their own learners.

1. Unlike her family and community members whose voices fill the pages of *The Wolf of Baghdad*, Isaacs has never actually visited Baghdad. Her illustrations of Baghdad were made based on internet research, archival and family photographs and, surprisingly, the assistance of contemporary Baghdadis who provided her with images of Baghdad since her family left.

*The Wolf of Baghdad* recreates the physical geography of 1930s Jewish Baghdad, allowing readers to travel to the 1930s and visit the Jewish quarter before and after the *Farhud*. Imaginary travel of this nature can also be done online and an organisation called Diarna hosts one of the most impressive and interactive digital travel exhibits. Through the use of digital mapping technology, scholarship, field research, and multimedia documentation, Diarna is a "geo-museum of North African and Middle Eastern Jewish Life that is working to preserve the

physical remnants of Jewish history throughout the region.”

Using [Diarna](#)'s interactive map, students can take their own tour of Baghdad, visiting the great synagogues and historic marketplaces. Depending on the age, digital fluency, and abilities of the learners, teachers can make use of the Diarna map in different ways.



*Aerial view of Baghdad, courtesy of Diarna*

This could include:

- a. Providing students with a travel itinerary where they must visit certain locations and answer questions about the site.
  - b. Having students create a travel brochure or vlog where they lead guests through the city based on set requirements.
  - c. Facilitating a more unstructured experience where students begin in different quadrants of the city and then ‘wander’ the streets and then report their findings to their classmates.
2. One of the novel features of *The Wolf of Baghdad* is how Isaacs has tried to immerse the reader into the cultural milieu of 1940s Baghdad. This includes the beautiful splash page of Baghdad’s marketplace, the drawings of Middle Eastern instruments like the oud, and even the abaya that is worn by Isaacs when she is living in Iraq.

While an understanding of these cultural features is not required in order to understand *The Wolf of Baghdad*, a reader’s knowledge of Iraqi culture allows for a richer and more immersive experience. To that end, teachers can have groups of students research aspects of Baghdadi culture and share their knowledge with their classmates. Topics could include music, clothing, food, hospitality customs, economic life, religious practices, etc. Where appropriate, students should be encouraged to bring the topic to life by sharing the sounds, smells, and sights of the city with their peers. For example, when learning about Iraqi spices and produce, dates and figs can be brought into class. Equally, if students teach their classmates about Middle Eastern music, sound clips of the oud and other instruments could be played.

3. Even though *The Wolf of Baghdad* does not include captions, text boxes, or speech bubbles, that doesn't mean that sound and expression does not happen. Learning to read the soundless pages unlocks layers and nuances of the text. One way that educators can help students do this is to ask them to write dialogue and text to the panels. This not only assesses reader comprehension, it also enables readers to enter into the text and to become a part of the creative process.

Included below (*fig. 1*) is a sample page that Isaacs has prepared but students and teachers can choose any page from the text that calls out to them. Inserting dialogue into the text can be used by educators in a number of ways. This includes:

a. Assessing student comprehension and reading of the visual language of comics. By inserting dialogue and written text directly into the panels, educators can determine whether and to what degree students have demonstrated an understanding of the non-verbal graphic narrative.

b. Using the opportunity to discuss how different panels can be understood or interpreted differently and how certain panels in the text may contain multiple meanings. This understanding can then be tied to a wider conversation about the relationship between reader and text and how analysis is a complex yet worthwhile part of the study of literature and history.



fig. 1



4. One of the recurring motifs in *The Wolf of Baghdad* is photographs, with illustrated photos appearing throughout the graphic novel. In their first appearance, Isaacs sees a photograph of a troupe of musicians (*fig. 1*). Later, she is illustrated looking at a photograph of her family (*fig. 2*). The common link between the photographs is that in both, all of the people's faces lack identifying features.

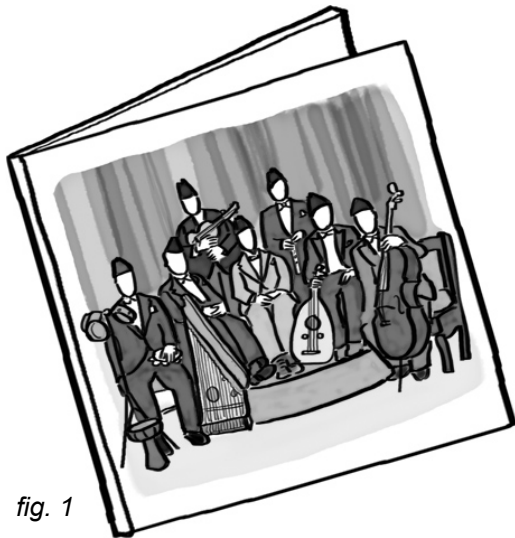


fig. 1



fig. 2

As Isaacs immerses herself into her ancestral community, the photographs undergo a transformation, with figures now drawn accurately and depicting people as they really appeared. Finally, in the immediate aftermath of the *Farhud*, Isaacs is once again illustrated looking at photographs (*fig. 3*). Now, however, the figures are entirely shaded in black to symbolise how the subjects no longer live in Iraq and their history has been erased. As she realises what has happened to the photographs, Isaacs illustrates herself crying. Symbolically, the use of photographs represents Isaacs' difficulty comprehending her own history, with the shifting nature of the photographs highlighting the ways that she comes closer to understanding the past, only to realise that the past can never be fully understood.

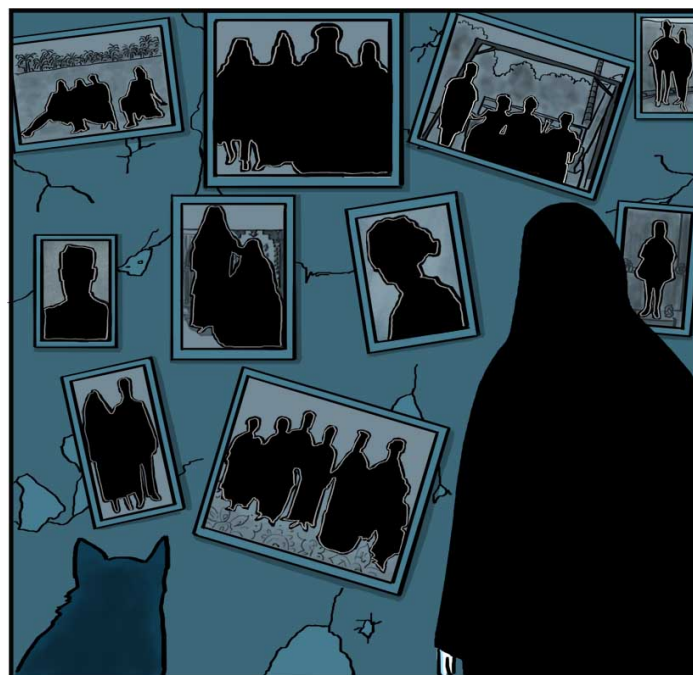


fig. 3

Isaacs' use of photographs can be a springboard for engaging students' critical thinking about non-verbal expression. First, educators can ask students to find examples of each of the 3 types of photographs and to explain what the symbolism of each artistic choice may be. Students can then be encouraged to consider what Isaacs' larger artistic statement is with her use of photographs.

Interestingly, Isaacs is not the only *Mizrahi*, or Judeo-Arab, graphic novelist to make use of illustrations of photographs in a provocative way. The Israeli cartoonist Asaf Hanuka has similarly used them to interrogate his own *Mizrahi* heritage and how his ancestors experienced traumas leaving Iraq and establishing their lives in Israel. Titled "Beginning, Middle, End", the 9 panel cartoon (fig. 4) offers readers additional ways of thinking about the challenges of accessing the past for those living in the present through the use of empty picture frames.

**BEGINNING, MIDDLE, END**



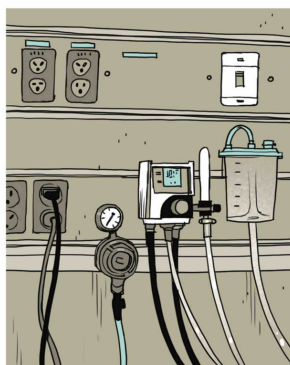
MY GRANDMOTHER PASSED AWAY THURSDAY AT MIDNIGHT. I GOT THE NEWS FRIDAY MORNING.



SHE WAS HOSPITALIZED A WEEK AGO WITH A LUNG INFECTION. DESPITE MEDICATION, HER BODY COULDN'T STAND UP TO THE STRESS.



I REMEMBER HOW ON SATURDAY MORNINGS SHE USED TO MAKE US ALMOND MILK AND TELL US NEVER-ENDING TALES ABOUT A LION AND A WITCH.



BY HER BEDSIDE AT THE HOSPITAL MY MOTHER SPOKE TO HER IN ARABIC AND MY GRANDMOTHER POINTED UP TOWARDS THE CEILING, OR PERHAPS TOWARDS HEAVEN.



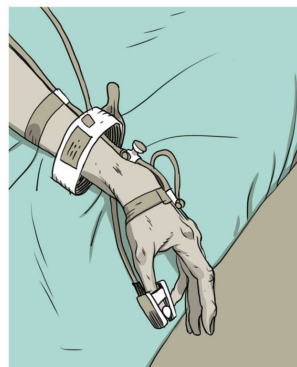
SHE IMMIGRATED TO ISRAEL FROM IRAQ WITH HER FAMILY IN THE 1950S, BUT SHE NEVER REALLY BECAME A TRUE ISRAELI.



THE EARLY YEARS WERE HARD. THERE WAS NO MONEY FOR CLOTHES AND BARELY ENOUGH FOR FOOD. LATER THEY MOVED TO A HOUSING PROJECT AND EVERYTHING TURNED OUT ALRIGHT IN THE END.



AT THE SHIVAH (7-DAY MOURNING PERIOD), WE LOOKED AT OLD PICTURES AND REMINISCED ABOUT RAHMAT GAN AND LOS ANGELES. I LOOKED FOR A PHOTO FROM WHEN SHE WAS YOUNG.



BUT THE EARLIEST ONE I COULD FIND WAS FROM ISRAEL, AFTER SHE IMMIGRATED.



SHE DIED ON A THURSDAY AT MIDNIGHT. NO ONE KNOWS EXACTLY WHEN SHE WAS BORN.

fig. 4

"Beginning, Middle, End" from Asaf Hanuka, *The Realist*, Los Angeles: Archaia, 2015

Much like contemporary social media and digital photography filters, what Isaacs and Hanuka are doing is manipulating the photograph in order to impress upon it new meaning. Educators can make use of the four types of filters - clear, blurry, fully darkened, empty - to have students make text-to-self connections by considering their own family histories and expressing how they relate to the past. This can be done by reworking photographs of their ancestors (living or dead), their parents, and even themselves from when they were much younger. Editing photographs by using digital or fine art tools can let students assess how they feel connected or disconnected from their own pasts, with students being encouraged to use one of the four styles employed by Isaacs and Hanuka or even making their own filters which might more accurately reflect how they relate to their history. Students should then be encouraged to compare their own connections to the past with Isaacs and Hanuka.

5. In a section at the end of the graphic novel that details how she made *The Wolf of Baghdad*, Isaacs explains the wolf myth to the reader. She outlines the belief held by Iraqis that a wolf's tooth could be used to ward off evil spirits. As well, some Iraqi women would pin a decorated tooth to a baby's crib or clothing to protect the newborn child from danger.

The wolf's inclusion in the graphic novel is therefore reflective of a purposeful choice made by Isaacs to more fully embrace Iraqi-Jewish traditions and beliefs. The wolf that accompanies Isaacs around Baghdad has both symbolic and literal value. It symbolises the connection that Isaacs is forming with her ancestral heritage and its customs. But given the belief that wolves were protectors of vulnerable people, its presence recognises Isaacs' own vulnerability in a foreign city that is about to experience trauma. The use of the wolf also challenges Western readers to reject their own assumptions of what it means to come across a wolf in literature because Isaacs' wolf is not the Big Bad Wolf that populates children's fairy tales.

Alongside her explanations of the wolf, a beautiful illustration is provided of an outline of the wolf with an image of Baghdad filling in the shape (*fig. 1*). This illustration blends together the iconography of the Jewish community's protective animal and the physical location where they resided. Educators can challenge their students to consider what their protective spirit would look like and how they would depict themselves alongside it.



*fig. 1*

Since the graphic novel is likely being studied in a literature, history, or religion class and not a fine arts class, the purpose of this exercise should not be to produce art that is of a similar quality to Isaacs. Therefore, students should be told that they are not primarily being evaluated for the quality of their artwork but for the quality of their ideas and concepts. An artist statement where students explain their choices should also be included with student submissions. This statement serves two purposes. First, it provides students whose work did not turn out well an opportunity to explain what the viewer is supposed to see. Second, and more importantly, it allows students to share their concepts, intentions, and thought processes with the viewer. Doing so allows educators to better understand their learners and also allows students to ensure that they have made purposeful choices throughout the creative process.

6. In an interview about *The Wolf of Baghdad*, Isaacs shared: “The Finns have a word, *kaukokaipuu*, which means a feeling of homesickness for a place you’ve never been to. I’ve been living in two places all my life; the England I was born in, and the lost world of my Iraqi-Jewish family’s roots.” In addition to studying Baghdad’s physical landscape in order to bring the city to life, the primary way that Isaacs tells her story is through the interviews that she conducts with her family and with members of her extended community.

Interviewing is a complex task where interviewers need to come prepared for the conversation but also be prepared to be flexible enough to allow the dialogue to flow naturally and wind in different directions. When done well, it can provide the interviewer with invaluable information about an interviewee’s experiences and feelings and also leave the interviewee feeling good about having shared their story.

Using *The Wolf of Baghdad* as a jumping off point, educators can task students with conducting interviews of their own family members in order to better understand themselves, their ethnic, national, and religious points of origin, and how they became who they are today.

To help get students’ minds on preparing thoughtful interview questions, they can be first asked to work backwards by using the answers provided by Isaacs’ interviewees to determine the questions she might have asked. This will help students better appreciate the types of questions that can be asked in order to open up dialogue and learn from the past. While educators would be wise to allow students some flexibility in their interviews and not ask that they follow a rigid script, educators should review individual students’ questions in order to ensure that open-ended questions are being asked and that they are not of an overly invasive or insensitive nature.

Once the students have conducted their interviews, these can be used to craft individual life stories, visual diagrams, maps that trace a family’s journey or any other creative way that would allow students to share how the interview has contributed to an expanding sense of self-awareness and understanding.

7. One of the most beautiful illustrations in *The Wolf of Baghdad* is of a family tree. In Isaacs' version (fig. 1), she illustrates her ancestors and family members in the branches and leaves of date palm trees as a ghostly apparition of herself looms in the background.



fig. 1

*The Wolf of Baghdad* ©The Surreal McCoy/Carol Isaacs

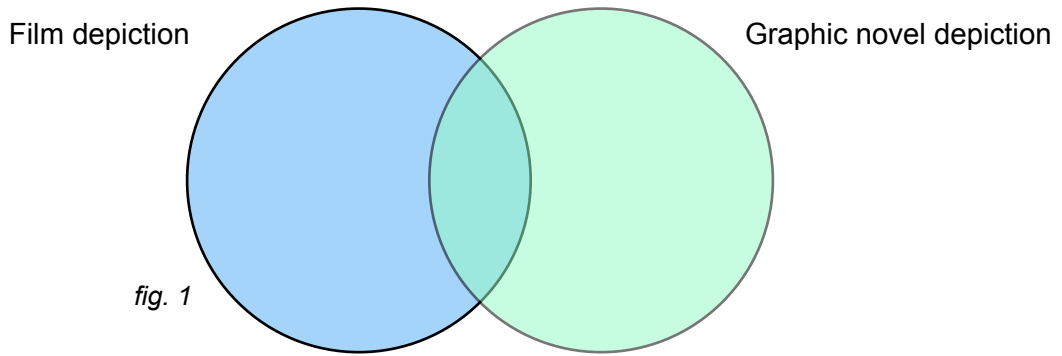
Historically, the date palm is a national symbol of Iraq, with the country's millions of trees producing over 600 different varieties of the fruit. Isaacs' choice to use the date palm as the base for her family tree therefore makes sense within the context of her family's Iraqi history. Equally, by illustrating herself close to the tree but not on it, she positions herself as both connected and disconnected to her past. By dint of being of Iraqi origin, she is part of her family's lineage, but by not having experienced life in Baghdad and the traumas her family endured, she is also not a part of it.

Educators can make use of Isaacs' creative family tree to encourage students to think about and create their own family trees. If the palm tree is the metaphor that serves as the base for Isaacs' family, what is the metaphor that serves as the base for students' family trees? As well, where do they place themselves on the tree? How does their positioning of self on their tree signify their own understanding of their place in their family history?

8. In addition to being a graphic novel, *The Wolf of Baghdad* has also been adapted as a motion comic. A relatively new genre, motion comics are a form of animation combining elements of print comic books and animation. Panels appear on screen one by one accompanied by a musical soundtrack. Even though the images and text are the same in both formats, the inclusion of audio and cinematic techniques creates a wholly different viewing experience from the one that readers have. A clip from the motion comic of *The Wolf of Baghdad* can be found [here](#) and it corresponds to pages 122-129 from the print edition. These pages show the lead-up to the *Farhud* and how the Muslim leader Amin al-Husseini worked to spread Nazism across the Middle East.

After watching the scene in class and having students reread the corresponding pages in the graphic novel, educators can lead a discussion in class about the two representations. Debates about whether a movie or a book was better are often pointless because literature and film are such different forms of media. Instead, a more nuanced way of thinking about two texts is to consider what each form of media offers that cannot be gained otherwise. An advantage of the film is its deliberate pacing which slows the scene down; this may mitigate the challenges posed by speedy and careless reading that misses key details. For example, in the scenes depicting al-Husseini on page 128, the film draws attention to the negative space between panels that Isaacs uses to fashion a Nazi swastika. Conversely, the soundlessness of the graphic novel allows readers to better be able to employ their own imagination to read the text how they want; turning it into a film that controls tempo takes away some of the reader's freedom to make the text their own.

Educators could have their students create a Venn diagram (*fig. 1*) about what each depiction offers to help increase their understanding and way of thinking about the *Farhud*. Structuring it in this way discourages conversation or debate about whether the film is better or the book is better; instead, it leads students to realise that each type of media has what to offer in deepening their ability to try to comprehend the incomprehensible tragedy that befell Baghdad's Jews.



9. A further way that educators can engage with the motion comic is by exploring the music that accompanies the visuals. Playing in the background is a traditional Iraqi-Jewish folk song called *Balini-b Balwa* (He Plagued Me With a Plague). Originally composed as a love song between two people, Isaacs' use of the song is ironic, signifying the Jews' sadness of seeing a community and city they loved so much be destroyed by Nazism and antisemitism.

Educators can use the song - both the instrumentals and the lyrics (included below) to deepen students' thinking about the relationship between what they are watching transpire on the screen and what they are hearing. Like the artistic choices that Isaacs makes throughout *The Wolf of Baghdad*, the decision to use a song whose lyrics do not directly reflect the visuals should be understood as a purposeful choice. Students should be encouraged to consider what ways do they reflect and refract each other and what might the intention have been to join together these very different texts.

Additionally, by drawing upon their previous study of Jewish music (see exercise #2 above), students can also consider the song's use of instruments and vocals in order to better appreciate the richness of Iraqi-Jewish culture.

***Balini-b Balwa* (He Plagued Me With a Plague)**

He plagued me with a plague, oh my eyes  
 He plagued me with a plague  
 By God I don't want him  
 He plagued me with a plague  
 Every day I say, today - or tomorrow - they will come  
 And I'll give the bringer of good news  
 A kiss from the eyes How can I sleep at night  
 With you on my mind?  
 Even the fish in the water  
 Weep at my condition  
 All night the rowing boats go by  
 And from the winds and the waves  
 God will protect you

(Translation courtesy of and copyright Sara Manasseh)

## About the authors



[Dr Matt Reingold](#) is a Jewish educator who has been teaching in the Jewish History and Jewish Thought departments at TanenbaumCHAT in Toronto, Canada since 2008. He is also a scholar of Jewish graphic narratives and Jewish education. He is the author of three books and numerous articles about comics, cartoons, and education.

[Carol Isaacs](#) is a UK-based cartoonist also known as The Surreal McCoy. Her work is published in many places, including the New Yorker, Sunday Times and Private Eye. *The Wolf of Baghdad* is her first graphic memoir and was listed by the Guardian as one of the best graphic novels of 2020. She is also a musician (Sinead O'Connor, Indigo Girls) and plays Arabic accordion on the soundtrack of the animated version\* of *The Wolf of Baghdad*.



\*This is a motion comic, where the book comes to life on screen, panel by panel. It has a music soundtrack of Iraqi and JudeoArabic repertoire, both religious and secular tunes, some written by Iraqi-Jewish composers of the 1930s. This 46-minute film could also be incorporated into classroom teaching or discussion groups. It has been rated PG12 by the British Board of Film Classification. Please contact Carol Isaacs for more details.

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