

Study Guide: *Santa Claus in Baghdad*

Before viewing the film, students may consider the following questions, which will provide a deeper context for the film.

Mapping Iraq

On a blank outline map of the Middle East, find and label Iraq and its neighboring countries. Using an atlas or online resources (for example, the outline map and resources suggested at <http://geography.about.com/library/maps/bliraq.htm>), add to your map the major cities, rivers, mountainous areas and other geographical features of Iraq.

Iraq's Contributions

One of the characters in the film teaches his students about Iraq's literary and cultural history. Research and discuss the following questions:

When was Baghdad's Golden Age, and what was the House of Wisdom?

What are some contributions that scholars in Iraq at that time made in science and mathematics?

Arabic scholars preserved, through their translations, the scientific legacy of ancient Greece, India, and Persia. What effect do you think this might have had on the Renaissance in Europe?

Read *The Walking Drum* by Louis L'Amour (excerpts may be selected by the teacher). This historical novel gives an excellent background picture of Arab influence in 10th century Europe.

Historical, Economic and Social Context of the Film

There are many online guides for educators on Iraq, which can help students understand the background context of the film. The film *Santa Claus in Baghdad* is set around the year 2000 and shows the effects of the strict economic sanctions imposed on Iraq by the United Nations following Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the subsequent Gulf War. Using the resources listed, gather information and discuss the following questions:

- What kind of government did Iraq have at the time the story takes place?
- What were the causes of the Gulf War of 1991? Who were the participants?
- Why were "sanctions" imposed upon Iraq, and what sorts of products did they prohibit entering the country?
- How did the sanctions affect most of the people in Iraq? What sorts of things were unavailable, in short supply or extremely expensive under the sanctions regime?
- One of the ways Iraqis reacted to these conditions was to leave the country. How many Iraqis left? Where did they go?

Helpful for understanding Iraq around the time of these events is the educator's primer produced by PBS and Frontline on the Gulf War, available at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/teach/gulfguide/gweducator.html>. This guide includes background information, a timeline, and classroom activities tied to Frontline programs.

Iraq: Resources for the Classroom

Marta Colburn, then Director of Education of Mercy Corps (a relief organization), produced this three-page handout for educators teaching grades 6-12 listing books, videos, curriculum, and documents on Iraq. <http://www.world-affairs.org/globalclassroom/curriculum/IraqResources.pdf>

Choices: Supplemental Resources on Iraq

The Choices curriculum project at Brown University has produced a curriculum on Iraq available for purchase. In addition, there are supplemental resources available for download at http://www.choices.edu/resources/supplemental_iraq.php.

"Iraq and Sanctions," produced by Talal S. Hattar.

This lesson plan includes a brief history of the sanctions and discusses the impact of the sanctions from different points of view.

http://www.outreachworld.org/Files/Curriculum/iraq_lesson.pdf.

Encouraging Empathy: Further Pre-viewing Discussion

Can you imagine circumstances in which your family might choose to give up a highly cherished family treasure (perhaps something that belonged to your grandparents or great-grandparents)? How would having to give up such an item make you feel?

Has anyone in your family had to sacrifice something that was important for a family member?

If you were going to a remote place with your family and could take only one suitcase with you, what are some of the essentials you would pack?

Furthering Empathy:

Post-Viewing Discussion Questions from the Author, Elsa Marston

Cliques and Leadership

Have you ever observed--or been part of--a situation at school where one person, like Hala, was the acknowledged center of a clique? In your view, did she or he deserve that leadership role? What makes a good leader?

Law and Ethics

Omar, Amal's uncle, is a U.S. citizen. By bringing gifts of clothing and medicine with him, he is violating United States regulations restricting imports into Iraq. If you were in his shoes, would you have made the same decision? Why or why not?

Libraries

For thousands of years, Iraq has been known for writing and books. Just before the U.S./British attack on Iraq in 2003, a dramatic incident involving books occurred in Basra, one of Iraq's major cities. The woman in charge of the public library, with her neighbors' help, managed to save about three-quarters of the library's 40,000 volumes, which would otherwise all have been destroyed in the fighting and subsequent fires. Two books for children have been written about her: Jeanette Winter's *The Librarian of Basra* (picture book, Harcourt, 2004) and *Alia's Mission: Saving the Books of Iraq* by Mark Alan Stamaty (graphic novel, Alfred A. Knopf, 2004). If you had to choose which public facilities should be protected first in the face of a disaster, what priority would you give to libraries?

Kahlil Gibran

As a child, Kahlil Gibran emigrated from Lebanon to Boston with his mother in the late nineteenth century. He later moved to New York and became a successful writer, especially well known for his book *The Prophet*. (All Gibran's works are online at <http://leb.net/~mira/>.) Find the poem "Freedom" (from *The Prophet*) which is quoted in the film. How might this poem have resonated for people living in Iraq under Saddam Hussein's regime?

Sacrifice

The themes of giving and sacrifice in *Santa Claus in Baghdad* echo those of the well-known O Henry short story *The Gift of the Magi* (online as a Project Gutenberg e-text at http://www.auburn.edu/~vestmon/Gift_of_the_Magi.html). Amal and Mr. Karim also quote parts of Gibran's poem "Giving." How do you think this poem reflects the choices of the various characters in the film? (You can read the full poem at <http://leb.net/~mira/>.) How are the themes of giving and sacrifice treated in *Santa Claus in Baghdad*, *Gift of the Magi*, and Gibran's "Giving?" Have you, like Amal and her father, ever had to give up something very precious for a cause that seemed "the greater good"?

Why do you think Amal's father gave Bilaal the little car even after the boy's bad behavior at the family gathering? What would you have done?

Women in Iraq

You will notice in the film that some women wear a hijab (headcovering), and there are a variety of different styles ranging from a full black scarf and cloak to a light scarf. Many other women dress much like American women and do not cover their hair at all. Amal and the other girls attend a good school, and Amal's mother plays the violin. How do these

pictures of Iraqi women and girls fit with the common stereotype of Arab women as secluded, passive and oppressed?

Translations and Transformations

The author of the short story “Santa Claus in Baghdad” (the title story in the collection *Santa Claus in Baghdad*, published by Indiana University Press, 2008) and the filmmaker Raouf Zaki worked together on this project. Read the original short story and the screenplay (contained on the DVD of the film), and compare them to the final film. What are some of the significant changes that Zaki made in translating the story to film? Why do you think he decided on these additions and cuts?

The film was made largely in the filmmaker’s studio and other locations in Framingham, Massachusetts, although the opening scene and the background of the market scene were shot in Cairo, Egypt. How did the filmmaker recreate Baghdad (watch the Making of the Film clips in the DVD’s “extras”)?

Looking at the transformations of the text and the process of making the film, what choices or compromises do you think Zaki and Marston had to make? Do you think the film looks like an accurate representation of Iraq? Are there specific places where you would have made the film differently?

Further Research

Did you see anything in *Santa Claus in Baghdad* that you found confusing or hard to believe, or that you would like to know more about? How would you check on the accuracy of what you saw or find out more about it? What sources could you use, and what might be their advantages and limitations?

Study guide by Sandra Hegstad, Elsa Marston and Barbara Petzen.