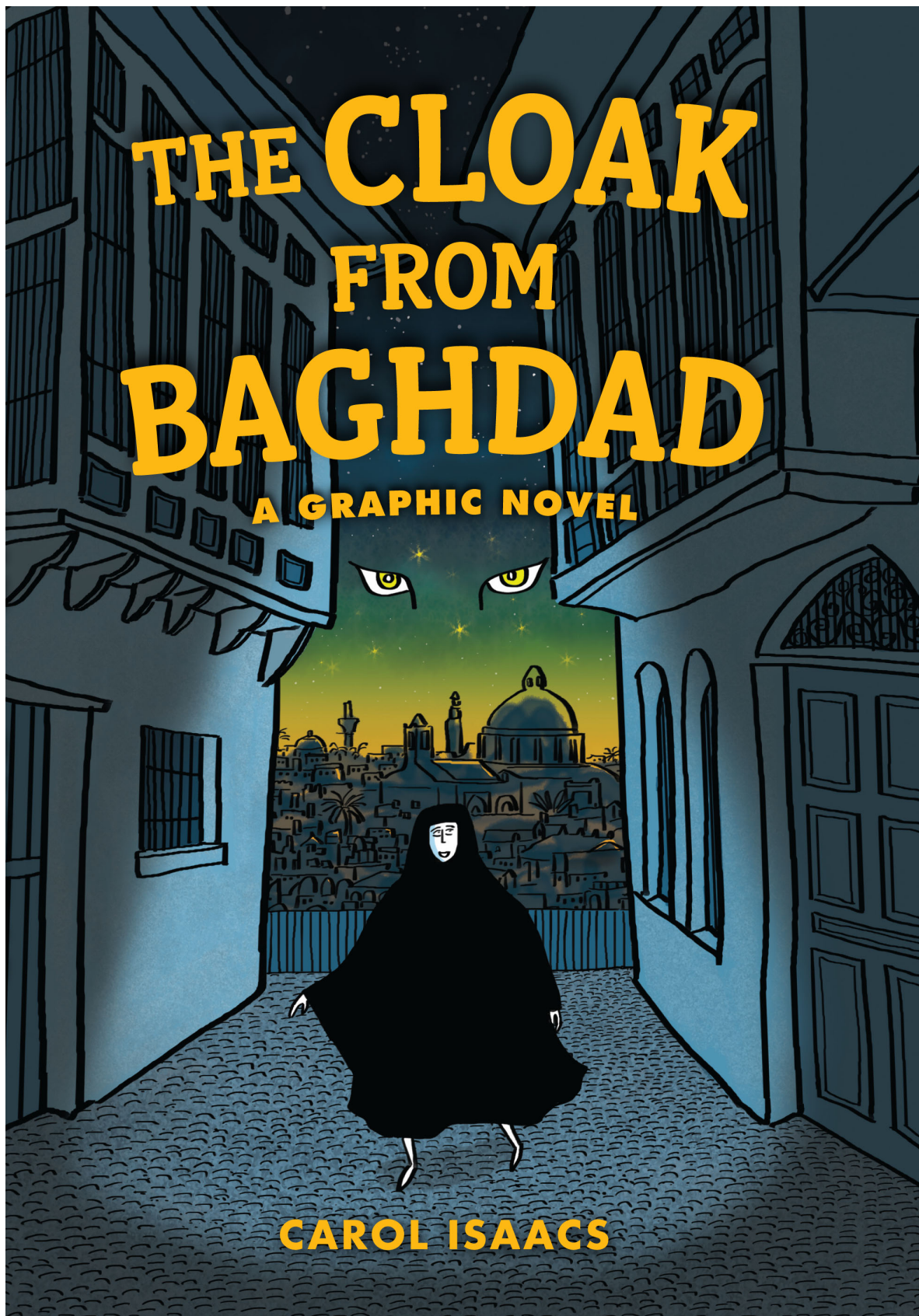


The Cloak From Baghdad: A Reading and Teaching Guide
Dr. Matt Reingold and Carol Isaacs



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 Cloak from Baghdad* is a graphic novel that tells the story of a lost homeland and a curious teenager who yearns to understand a home she has never visited. Transported by the power of her imagination to her family's ancestral home in the old Jewish quarter of Baghdad, Louise encounters the city's beauty and rich traditions and witnesses the presence of antisemitism. Accompanied by a wolf who trails after her, Louise explores the city, journeying through her family's 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 Louise 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 images. 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 Cloak From Baghdad*.

Given *The Cloak From Baghdad*'s subject matters of displacement, trauma, and exile, this guide has been designed primarily for educators whose learners are between the ages of 9-12. 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 visualize 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 Cloak From 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.

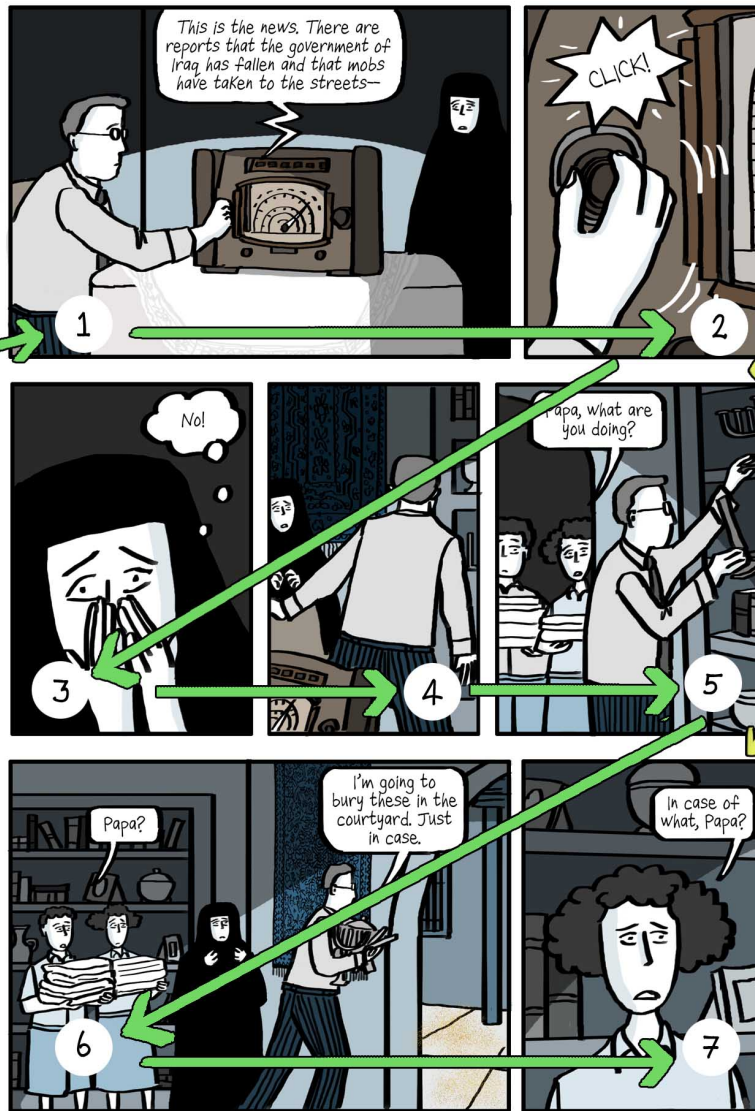
Panels are read from left to right and top to bottom.

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

Thought bubbles show what a character thinks to themselves.

Speech bubbles show what a character says out loud.

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

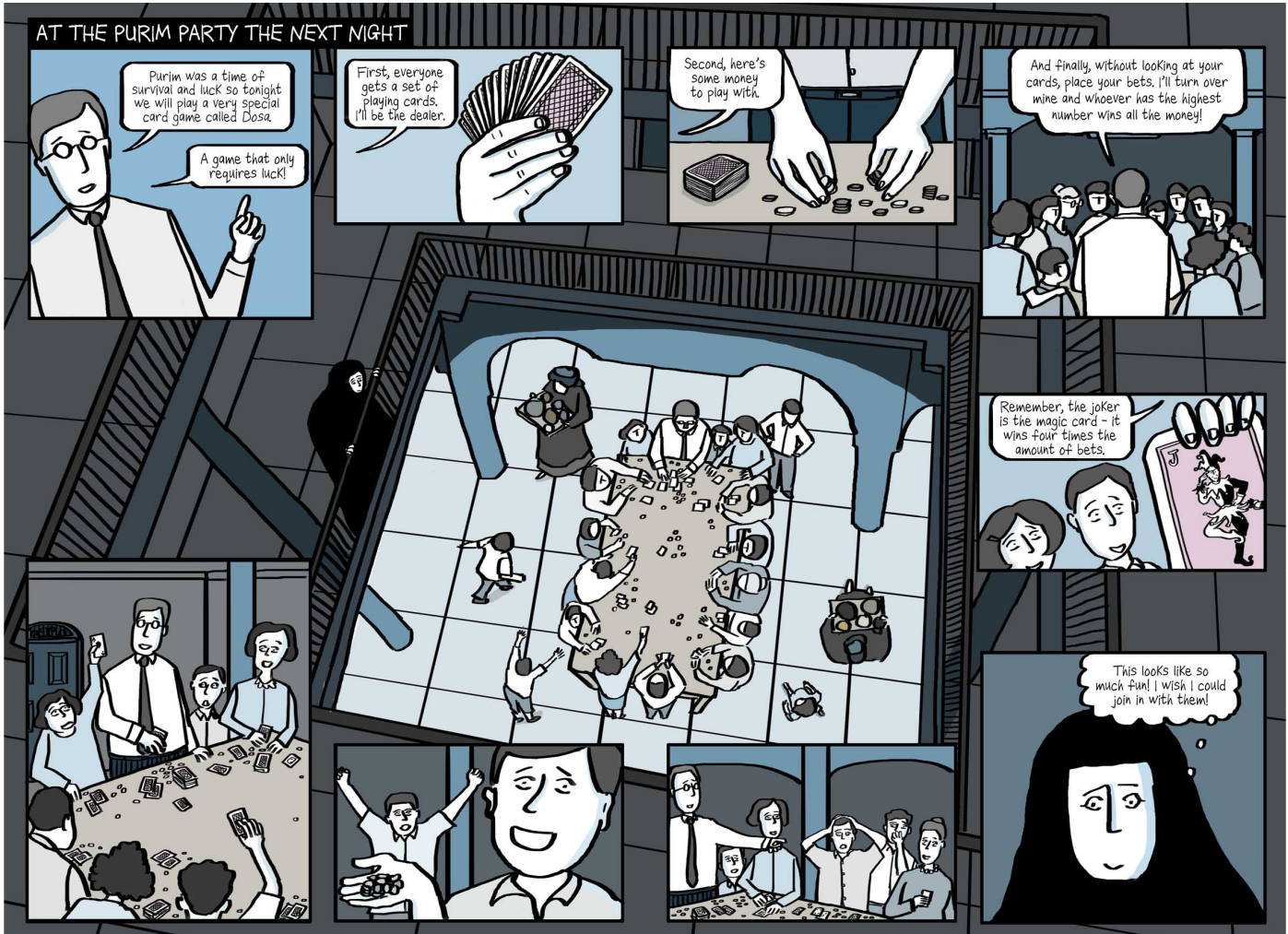
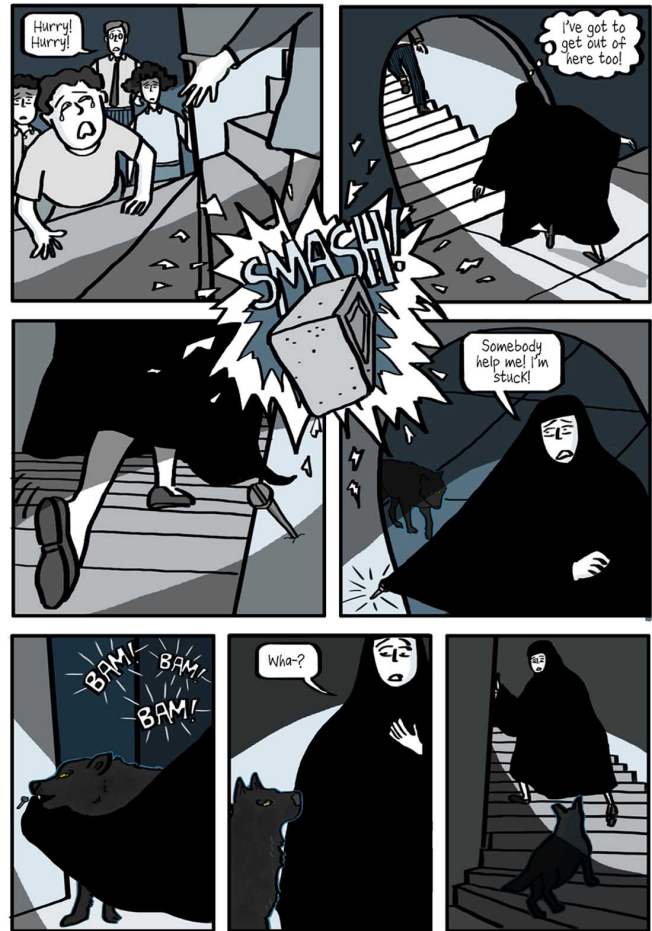


How to Read Comics 2

Sounds - like glass breaking and banging on the door - immerse the reader in the story and remind them that the world they are reading about is not silent.

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

Artists vary panel placement and reading order to highlight important scenes. Here, the reader's eye is drawn across the double page, reading the panels in a clockwise fashion.



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. Teachers should encourage students to slow down their reading and look closely at the images, since in a graphic novel the illustrations often communicate important parts of the story that are not explained in the text alone. *The Cloak From Baghdad* is well-suited for helping students develop comics-literacy because of Isaacs' effective use of facial expressions that help tell the story and 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 verbalize - orally or in writing - what they see happening and what they think the characters are *feeling*.



fig.1



fig.2

Preparing to read *The Cloak From Baghdad*

The Cloak From Baghdad begins and ends with Louise in London 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 Louise sees, 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 signaled 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 Cloak From Baghdad's* most significant contributions is that it introduces this lesser-known event in Jewish history to younger readers so that the Farhud will not be forgotten.

Teaching the Holocaust in Age-Appropriate Ways

The Cloak From Baghdad introduces readers to Jewish life in Baghdad in the years leading up to World War II and the Holocaust. Teaching about the Holocaust can be difficult for educators who work with learners of all ages, but especially for learners whose ages range from 9-12. These learners are curious about the world, have a great many questions and are smart and old enough to know when they haven't been told a whole story. They are also not yet old enough to be taught all of the details about the Holocaust nor should they be shown graphic imagery from the period. Educators must be careful, sensitive, and have a clear plan in place for how they will teach about the Holocaust in their classrooms.

The [Azrieli Foundation](#) suggests that all teaching about the Holocaust should include clear definitions of the Holocaust. It defines the Holocaust as

Nazi Germany's attempt to annihilate the Jewish population of Europe. Adolf Hitler, leader of the Nazi Party, saw Jews as the primary enemy of the "Aryan" race and believed that Germany would become powerful only by ridding itself of Jews. Starting in 1933, Nazi Germany took measures to humiliate, isolate and persecute Jews. With the outbreak of World War II in September 1939, Nazi policies and violence extended to each country occupied by Germany. During the war, the Nazis and their collaborators began systematically killing Jews and other target groups. By the time World War II ended in 1945, six million Jews had been murdered in the Holocaust.

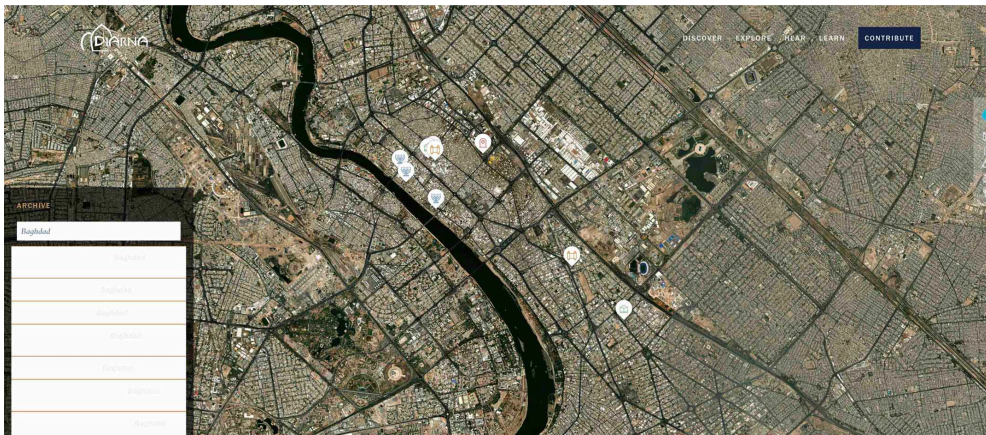
Content should be age-appropriate and teachers should be transparent with students and explain that the subject is difficult to learn about. Jewish voices, perspectives, and texts should be used to guide students' learning. This includes creative texts like art, poetry, and music. Doing so ensures that the focus remains on the victims and not on the perpetrators. Themes such as hiding, escape, rescue, and resistance should be taught as should Jewish life from before the war. Students should learn about the rich and vibrant religious and cultural lives that Jews had in their countries of origin before the Holocaust began.

Unlike Carol Isaacs' previous graphic novel for adults *The Wolf of Baghdad*, *The Cloak From Baghdad* does not include graphic imagery of the Farhud, the violent attack on Baghdadi Jews in 1941. Educators will find in it clear references to the Holocaust and its impact on Louise's family but as a book designed for a younger audience, it was important for Isaacs to work with an experienced children's book editor to get the tone right so that the Holocaust is introduced in a responsible and age-appropriate way. It allows learners to delve into the themes of hiding, escape, and rescue without overwhelming them. Isaacs' focus on the Holocaust's impact in Iraq introduces students to less-heard Holocaust perspectives. The focus on the Jewish experience before, during, and after the war provides educators with ample opportunity to help their students understand the historical context of life for Jews in Baghdad and the many ways that they lived as part of Baghdadi society.

Exercises

In this section, educators can find nine different exercises that can be used when teaching and studying *The Cloak From 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 Cloak from Baghdad*. We encourage educators to modify these exercises to best suit their classroom goals and the needs of their own learners.

1. To illustrate the city of Baghdad in *The Cloak From Baghdad*, Carol Isaacs used archival and family photographs and, surprisingly, the assistance of contemporary Baghdadis who provided her with images of Baghdad since her family left. *The Cloak From 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 organization 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.



Tigris river, The Cloak From Baghdad

2. One of the novel features of *The Cloak From 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 Iraqi instruments like the oud, and even the abaya that is worn by Louise when she is living in Iraq. Familiarity with Iraqi culture allows for a richer and more immersive experience. Teachers can assign topics about Iraqi culture to groups of students and they can share what they learn 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 Iraqi music, sound clips of the oud and other instruments could be played.

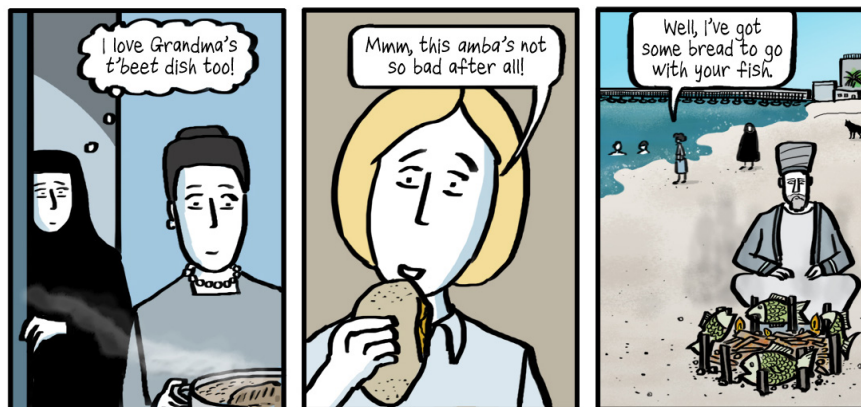


Fig.1 food (l-r): t'beet, amba & samak masgouf from *The Cloak From Baghdad*

3. Food plays an important role for the characters in *The Cloak From Baghdad* (fig.1). The foods that Louise eats distinguish her from her classmates in school but it also connects her with her family across time and space when she finds herself transported back to Baghdad. Good food not only tastes good but it connects us to the people around us and provides us with rich memories. When we write down the recipes for these foods, we are able to remember who we are, wherever we are.

In this activity, students will create a class cookbook that includes recipes and illustrations of themselves preparing and eating food that reminds them of home.

- A. Working in partners, students should find three different scenes where characters are illustrated eating/talking about/smelling food. For each scene, students should describe what the characters are eating, and identify the feelings the characters have in that moment. Students should be encouraged to pay attention to both the words and illustrations in the panels.
- B. The teacher should lead a classroom discussion where students share what they found. Emphasis should be placed on the feelings that the characters have towards their communities and its foods.
- C. The teacher should then transition the discussion towards the students' own experiences and ask what foods students associate with home and with their own communities.
- D. The teacher will then explain that the class will be making a class cookbook about the foods from their homes. Students should be asked what a cookbook looks like and what it includes. Answers should be written on the board and include things like photographs, a narrative, ingredient list, and directions.
- E. Each student will be responsible for one food in the cookbook. To ensure that everyone doesn't choose a dessert, the teacher should do a sign-up of different types of foods. When thinking of foods, students should be asked to think about foods that remind them of home or that are special for holidays or are connected to countries or communities where they or their families have lived.
- F. Recipe pages should include:
 - I. Ingredient list
 - II. Instructions
 - III. An explanation of why the food is important to the student, when it is eaten, and why they like it
 - IV. A description of a memory connected to the dish or a reflection on a family member associated with the food

- V. Two illustrations - one of the student preparing the food and one of the student eating the food
- G. Once all of the recipes are submitted, the teacher should create a title page and write an introduction.
- H. The recipe book can be shared as a digital file to parents or photocopied for each student.



4. At the end of *The Cloak From Baghdad*, Louise explains the wolf myth to her classmates. She outlines the belief held by Iraqi Jews that a wolf's tooth could be used to ward off evil spirits. As well, some Iraqi Jewish 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 spotlights Iraqi-Jewish traditions and beliefs. The wolf that accompanies Louise around Baghdad has both symbolic and literal value. It symbolizes the connection that Louise is forming with her ancestral heritage and its customs. But given the belief that wolves were protectors of vulnerable people, its presence recognizes Louise's 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 about what it means to come across a wolf in literature because Louise's wolf is not the Big Bad Wolf that populates children's fairy tales.

Educators can challenge their students to illustrate an item, animal, or natural object they would choose to accompany them on a journey. Students should be encouraged to think metaphorically and not only think about practical objects like a map or a flashlight. 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' art. 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.

5. In an interview, Carol Isaacs once said: “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.” To create her graphic novels, Isaacs interviewed Jewish Iraqis about their lives and experiences before they left the country.

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.

Like Louise who asked her grandmother questions about life in Baghdad, students can conduct 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.

Encourage students to ask open-ended questions that go beyond “yes” or “no” answers. You might model questions like “Can you tell me about...,” “What was it like when...,” or “How did you feel about...” Remind students that they should listen carefully and ask follow-up questions to dig deeper.

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.



Isaacs family, Baghdad, 1927

6. Pictures play an important role in helping characters in *The Cloak From Baghdad* better understand their loved ones’ experiences and better understand themselves. Students can bring to class photographs (or copies of photographs) of their ancestors and the homes they once lived in. Using a large map of the world and pushpins, students can mark where their families come from in order to make a class collage that celebrates the diversity of their family backgrounds.

7. Two of the central themes of *The Cloak From Baghdad* are to treat vulnerable people with kindness and to treat others as you would want to be treated. The themes can be seen in how Flora welcomes Naima into her friend group, how Kamal stands up for Eli and Flora, how Abu Kamal saves Flora's entire family or how Louise's classmates express interest in her family history. In each of these settings, choosing to do what is right is a difficult decision for the characters because they stand to lose something or be harmed in the process.

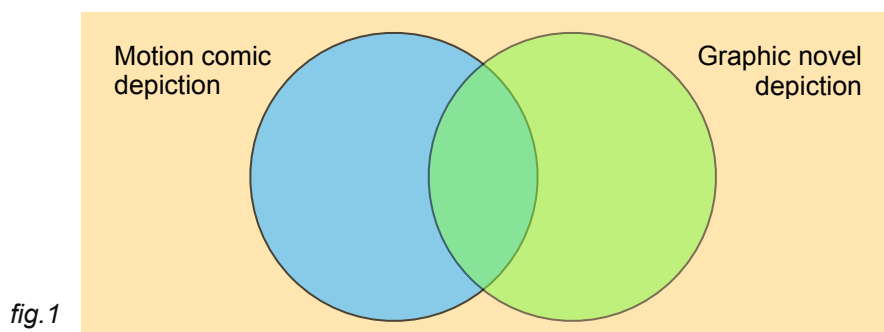
Working with a partner, students can explore different characters' challenges. They can keep track of their learning by filling in a table like the one included below. The teacher should then facilitate a class discussion. The goal should not just be for students to see that doing the right thing is the right thing. Instead, it should be that doing the right thing involves risk-taking, integrity, and a strong moral compass. By considering the different characters' circumstances, students can better appreciate the challenge - and the imperative - of making moral decisions and standing up for those most in need of help.

	What is happening in the story? (i.e. what is the context?)	What are the risks to the characters if no one stands up for them?	What are the risks to the characters if they stand up for others?	What decision does the character make?	What is the outcome and impact of the decision?
Flora welcoming Naima into her friend group					
Kamal standing up for Eli and Flora					
Abu Kamal saving Flora's family					
Louise's classmates participating in her presentation					

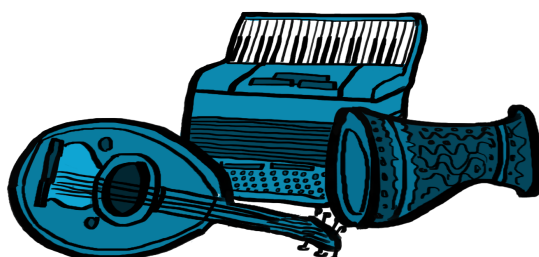
8. A short excerpt from *The Cloak From Baghdad* has been adapted as a three minute motion comic which can be accessed [here](#) on Youtube. A relatively new genre, motion comics are a form of animation combining elements of print comic books and animation. Panels appear on screen one by one accompanied 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.

After watching the motion comic in class, educators can lead a discussion in class about the two representations. Debates about whether a movie or a book is 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 down and speeds up different scenes. 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 story. 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 realize that each type of media has what to offer in deepening their ability to try to comprehend the story.



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 compilation of traditional Iraqi-Jewish tunes. The instruments that feature in the soundtrack are darbouka, oud, cello, violin, accordion, qanun and ney. Using the illustrations of the instruments found on page 60 and the internet, students can identify where each instrument is played in the motion comic. Once the different instruments have been identified, the teacher can lead a discussion about the tone, mood, and style of the music and how it complements the images on the screen.



About the authors



[Dr. Matt Reingold](#) works at Rosov Consulting as Senior Project Lead. He is a scholar of Jewish graphic narratives and Jewish education and has taught about representations of *Mizrahi* history in graphic novels to educators around the world. He is the author of four books, two edited collections 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 Cloak From Baghdad* (published by Kar-Ben Publishers) is an adaptation of her first graphic memoir *The Wolf of Baghdad* which was one of the Guardian's best graphic novels of 2020. She is also a musician and film maker, commissioned by UK Jewish Film to make two short documentaries: *Growing Up Mizrahi* (2023) and *Torn* (2024).



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