



The Arab of the Future: A Childhood in the Middle East, 1978-1984: A Graphic Memoir

Riad Sattouf

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The Arab of the Future, the #1 French best-seller, tells the unforgettable story of Riad Sattouf's childhood, spent in the shadows of 3 dictators—Muammar Gaddafi, Hafez al-Assad, and his father

In striking, virtuoso graphic style that captures both the immediacy of childhood and the fervor of political idealism, Riad Sattouf recounts his nomadic childhood growing up in rural France, Gaddafi's Libya, and Assad's Syria--but always under the roof of his father, a Syrian Pan-Arabist who drags his family along in his pursuit of grandiose dreams for the Arab nation.

Riad, delicate and wide-eyed, follows in the trail of his mismatched parents; his mother, a bookish French student, is as modest as his father is flamboyant. Venturing first to the Great Socialist People's Libyan Arab State and then joining the family tribe in Homs, Syria, they hold fast to the vision of the paradise that always lies just around the corner. And hold they do, though food is scarce, children kill dogs for sport, and with locks banned, the Sattoufs come home one day to discover another family occupying their apartment. The ultimate outsider, Riad, with his flowing blond hair, is called the ultimate insult... Jewish. And in no time at all, his father has come up with yet another grand plan, moving from building a new people to building his own great palace.

Brimming with life and dark humor, *The Arab of the Future* reveals the truth and texture of one eccentric family in an absurd Middle East, and also introduces a master cartoonist in a work destined to stand alongside *Maus* and *Persepolis*.

The Arab of the Future: A Childhood in the Middle East, 1978-1984: A Graphic Memoir Details

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From Reader Review The Arab of the Future: A Childhood in the Middle East, 1978-1984: A Graphic Memoir for online ebook

Ammar says

My first graphic novel of 2017. Riad Sattouf takes us on a magic carpet toward his childhood in France, Libya, and Syria. He draws his childhood in a cartoonish way under the shadow of Gaddafi, Hafez Assad, and his father.

We see the world through his eyes. The eyes of a blonde boy struggling with the Middle East and have no idea what is going on around him.

I enjoyed the drawings, the political interpretations and the way media is used in this memoir. The way he draws the news reels and the radio news and I could totally hear the anchors saying the news.

I can't wait to read volume two

Ken Moten says

"IT may perhaps be censured as an impertinent criticism, in a discourse of this nature, to find fault with words and names, that have obtained in the world: and yet possibly it may not be amiss to offer new ones, when the old are apt to lead men into mistakes, as this of paternal power probably has done, which seems so to place the power of parents over their children wholly in the father, as if the mother had no share in it; whereas, if we consult reason or revelation, we shall find, she hath an equal title. This may give one reason to ask, whether this might not be more properly called parental power? for whatever obligation nature and the right of generation lays on children, it must certainly bind them equal to both the concurrent causes of it. And accordingly we see the positive law of God every where joins them together, without distinction, when it commands the obedience of children, Honour thy father and thy mother, Exod. xx. 12. Whosoever curseth his father or his mother, Lev. xx. 9. Ye shall fear every man his mother and his father, Lev. xix. 3. Children, obey your parents, &c. Eph. vi. 1. is the style of the Old and New Testament." - "Of Paternal Power," Second Treatise of Government, John Locke

This book is the start of a graphic novel that has filled the void I had ever since I finished One Hundred Years of Solitude. It is the first book in a saga documenting the childhood of the author Riad Sattouf. The blurb that advertises this book best sums it up better than I can: "***The Arab of the Future, the #1 French best-seller, tells the unforgettable story of Riad Sattouf's childhood, spent in the shadows of 3 dictators—Muammar Gaddafi, Hafez al-Assad, and his father .***" This book as much as it is a tale of childhood is a story of living under Arab strongmen, of which the father is the most dominant.

When we think of dictators it is easy to think of them as these eternally corrupt supernaturally-powered demons. This book endeavors to show the truth--most dictators are flawed, weak men who happened to be at the right place at the right time. We see the cults of personality that Gaddafi and the elder al-Assad have cultivated, but one gets the feeling that if things had been switched they could have easily turned out to be Abdul-Razak Sattouf. "Abu-Riad", is a hypocritical, bigoted, cowardly man who somehow lucked-on a beautiful wife and started a family. He is close to the worse possible man you want to support a family, but

because he moves them into his hometown in Syria, he has a more powerful authority over them than he had in France or even Libya. The book is as much about him as his son. Riad himself is just a child coming of age and trying to get a grip on all the changes going on around him. The author narration is impartial and very monotone, even his personal opinions on his past are very direct with not much hyperbole. The Sattouf's extended family are very similar to Arcadio's in certain respects.

I cannot wait to read the next book and see how this kid became the man he is more well known for. The fact that this book deals with a country that is now daily news and that the generation that was the author's age in the book now make up the generation (at least, the older one) that is fighting the civil war in Syria, makes this an important look at the factors that would cause that war.

*Abu Riad: "The Summer's nearly over...You can't spend your whole life on vacation! **The Arab of the future** goes to school."*

Matthew Quann says

The Arab of the Future is bound to draw comparisons to its predecessors in the field of graphic novels. It is an expansive memoir of Riad Sattouf's childhood spent bouncing between Libya, Syria and France, following his expatriate father. Comparisons have already been drawn between this graphic novel and *Persepolis*, another comic about a childhood in the middle east, but I found that *The Arab of the Future* packs a more potent punch. The story here is told from Sattouf's perspective as he begins to develop as a child in a world that is very different from the one in which I grew up. By virtue of having Riad's narrative counterpart being a child, the graphic novel is predominantly focused on his father.

Born and raised in Syria, Riad's father remembers his home country's landscape and values with an idyllic sheen of nostalgia. Of course, as he returns to the land of his youth with his family, Abdul finds everything to not be as he remembered. As the family moves back and forth between countries, the tension between his father's education and upbringing come into subtle conflict throughout the story. Rather than have the conflict boil down into a concise and unidirectional argument, Sattouf opts for a more complex view of both his childhood and his father's politics. Abdul is a conflicted man full of contradiction, but that helps to make him seem as if he could walk off the page and into real life. For that, the story is much more rewarding in that Riad Sattouf's seems fully realized, much like Art Spiegelman's father in *Maus*.

Sattouf's art tends towards the more cartoony, but depicts his characters with convincing facial expressions and beautifully rendered landscapes. What's more, the graphic novel shifts in its single-palette colour depending on which country in which the story is taking place. So, for France we see a blue background, while Syria is pink/red. The colours are well chosen as they complement the proceedings of the story, as well as help to convey atmosphere when appropriate.

All in all, this is an exceptionally strong graphic novel that is of major relevance to today's political climate. I came away with a richer understanding of the culture and conflict in the Syria and Libya, but was at no point bogged down by huge passages of exposition. For fans of Spiegelman, Sacco, and Gene Luen Yang, you'll find a lot to love in this beautiful graphic novel.

Petra Eggs says

[The text on bookshelves and profiles of Goodreads now is like that, it just plain takes the enjoyment away when you have to concentrate on the font. *Edit* I now have Stylebot and Font Changer so GR is in nice colours with good fonts and not one single thing, ad or feature I don't want to see. (hide spoiler)]

Marc says

Another graphic novel of autobiographical slant (after 'Maus' and 'Persepolis'). In this book Riad Sattouf presents his earliest youth (partly spent in France, Libya and Syria) and we tend to see everything through his innocent eyes, giving the story a neutral look, but clearly it is 'steered' by the writer Sattouf. This ambiguity is the real strength of this story, I think. Both in Libya (where the 'modernization' of Gaddafi rolls over the country) and in Syria (where the Assad dictatorship is some dark, threatening force) the signs of 'backwardness' are highlighted: the chaos, the corruption, the filth in the public domain, weird traditionalist customs, anti-Semitism, the suffocating influence of religion, etc. Remarkably, Sattouf puts almost only negative elements in the spotlight, with the exception perhaps of the strength of family ties (and the warmth emanating from some of those family members). Does Sattouf express himself here an anti-Arabist? You would almost think so, were it not that he also clearly portrays French Brittany (the home of his mother) as backward.

An interesting story, in which the confrontation of different cultures seems to be the central theme. But there is one element that really bothered me: just like with 'Maus', the (Syrian) father of Riad plays the main role. Sattouf draws him as a very ambiguous figure: as a family man, who is very fond of Riad, but also as a man who, as the story progresses more and more distances himself from the modernity he has learned in France during his study time; a convinced pan-arabist also, who defends the harsh conditions in the Arab countries (all dictatorships) as self-evident own forms of modernity, and explains away the shocking things with which they are confronted (the backwardness). He even gradually becomes a cliché-macho-arab himself, snubbing his wife and children. Not so beautiful, that image of the father, and also very contrasting with the paleness of the mother who undergoes everything. Certainly the subdued behavior of women in general is absolutely the weakest element in this graphic novel.

Jon(athan) Nakapalau says

As a young boy Riad leaves rural France and is relocated in Libya and Syria as his father tries to connect with Pan-Arabist undercurrents in the region. Observant and filled with the type of 'shock of culture' that so often is not considered relevant when trying to understand national identification. This book gives us a micro-view of complex and continuing barriers when identifying normative behavior from differing cultural perspectives.

Sam Quixote says

This is the first part of Riad Sattouf's childhood memoirs, The Arab of the Future, and it is superb! With a Syrian father and French mother, the small family travels across Europe as his father gets work as an

associate professor in Tripoli, Libya, during Gaddafi's reign, before briefly jumping to Brittany, France, and ending up in nightmarish Syria under Hafez al- Assad.

Sattouf doesn't do anything particularly special with his style of storytelling, either literally or visually, he just tells it straightforwardly but he does it so well. He's a natural storyteller who's perfectly suited to the comics medium and that makes reading this such a joy.

As you would expect, it's mostly focused on Riad and his family but we also learn what life was like in these countries at the time as well. For example Libya under Gaddafi where housing was free to all - like a bizarre game of finders keepers, you found somewhere that was empty and moved in! - and the basic foods that were doled out to everyone because supermarkets didn't exist. It was a third world country and, reading the excerpts from Gaddafi's Green Book here, it's easy to see why conditions were so bad when this lunatic was running the show!

Riad's father, Abdul-Razak, is the star of this book. Riad writes him as a complex but real person. The only educated member of his Syrian family, he comes across as charming, funny, eccentric, bull-headed, tragic, conflicted, and strict. He certainly seems to come down on Riad quite heavily for not being able to read or wanting to learn despite his son being 3 years old at the time! Once the narrative shifts to Syria though you understand why his father is this way - THIS is where he grew up? Woah.

Libya looked bad but Syria is far, far worse. It's interesting to see Arab culture from the inside where men and women live in the same houses but occupy different rooms - the women eat the men's leftovers at dinner. What a country though - roving street gangs of kids attacking anything in sight, people literally living in dirt, garbage being sold in the market, no working street lights or even paved roads or pavement.

Be warned: there is graphic abuse of animals in this book. A donkey is beaten and a puppy is tortured and killed for entertainment. That was difficult to read - anyone who hurts animals for fun is sick. There are some countries I know I'll never visit in my life and Syria is definitely one of them. If you didn't see kids joyriding their dads' cars, it'd be like time-travelling back to the Middle Ages!

There are lots of wonderful little details sprinkled throughout that add so much to the narrative: Riad's Syrian uncle visiting them in Brittany but being afraid of the sea so he kept his back to it all the time, and Riad's lecherous French grandfather who used Riad to try picking up ladies, are just two of them.

The Arab of the Future is a fantastic memoir that's both informative and enjoyable and full of great scenes and unique personalities. I loved reading it and can't recommend it highly enough - really looking forward to picking up the recently released second volume!

Tatiana says

Very funny, when it isn't totally terrifying.

I will never understand why the author's mom went along with all her husband's crazy ideas though.

Elizabeth A says

Something you might not know about me, is that as a kid born and raised in Kenya, I was a huge fan of Muammar Gaddafi. Huge. He was one of the African leaders who created the hope that we would end Imperialism and all its vices in Africa. Well, things did not quite go as planned, but, I think it is important to not gloss over the things we believed in our childhood, as they affect how we develop our world views as adults.

This graphic memoir is set in France, Libya and Syria, and we learn about the childhood of the author and his family as they navigate various cultures, religions, and political landscapes. The author's father is a Sunni Arab who married a French woman, and like many immigrants, he is a contradiction that many people find hard to understand. His father is quite Western and modern in some ways, but also retains much of the values and prejudices he acquired as a child, and like all kids born into cultures not of their parents, the author grapples with these contradictions.

The art is quite basic and sketchy, but I loved the way the author uses color in his panels. I really enjoyed the exploration of different cultures/religions/environments from the point of view of a child, but filtered through adult eyes. This is a rather straightforward memoir, but it is the honest look at these situations that suck the reader in, and reminds us of how much that happens to children is really because of parental whims, and how much our family histories influence the adults we become.

It is not often that we get an insider look into the lives of ordinary people from these parts of the world, and I hope the author's other works will also be translated into English. I highly recommend this one.

Trish says

This memoir in the form of a graphic novel by Riad Sattouf is positively terrifying. It only takes an evening to read, and I can guarantee you will not want to put it down.

A cartoonist and former contributor to *Charlie Hebdo*, Sattouf now has a weekly column in France's *L'Obs*. This graphic memoir is translated from the French by Sam Taylor and published in 2015 by Metropolitan Books, and tells of Sattouf's early childhood in France, Libya, and Syria.

The memoir is terrifying for what it tells us of the consciousness of a Sunni Arab man and his extended family, as well as the conditions in the cities of Tripoli and Homs. Sattouf engages our sympathies immediately by starting out his descriptions from the eyes of a blond two-year-old, who we might expect to be perplexed wherever he was, being new to the world. But this turns out to be the perfect vehicle for presenting the things he sees, hears, smells, and experiences with a disingenuous honesty (though, I must admit, the consciousness of a child). It is as disarming as it is damning. We laugh and cringe at the same time.

Sattouf is choosing what to tell us about his upbringing with the consciousness of an adult. He shows the peculiarities of early education in France, and Syria. Both have failures, as a system. It's a wonder we survive at all, but less surprising that we exhibit the flaws we do. He has a finely honed skill for cutting away the extraneous, and revealing the kernel of his experience. He makes it laughable, but at heart, it is also terrifying.

Riad's Syrian father, Abdul-Razak, is the first of his family to read and is (therefore?) considered a great scholar in Syria. He is sent to study history at the Sorbonne and manages to wed an unworldly French student, Clementine, who is studying in Paris. Clementine is from a small village in Brittany and when they both graduate, Abdul-Razak accepts a position teaching in Tripoli, Libya. You have got to read this to enjoy it. I don't want to spoil your fun. It sounds just about what you might expect with Qaddafi in charge, only even worse than you could imagine.

The family returns briefly to France, and then pack themselves off to Abdul-Razak's home village outside of Homs, Syria. By this time Riad has a new dark-haired brother, but his own hair is still blond. He is teased (and beaten up) mercilessly in Homs, where the children harass him with expletives while calling him "Jew." Conditions of everyday life in the 1970's in Syria sound positively crushing in this period Hafez al-Assad, Bashar al-Assad's father, was in charge. Riad's family was Sunni; Assad was Alawite. Segregation by religion, by *sect* shouldn't surprise me, but the extent and result of it is stomach-roiling. Riad's dear father, Abdul-Razak doesn't sound more enlightened, for all his education.

I am reminded of Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* in which Dawkins writes of early childhood inculcation into any religion as one of the most damaging things that can happen to the impressionable mind. One cannot help but agree when one sees what it has done in cultures all over the world. In this part of the world hatreds last for millennia, perhaps due largely to childhood inculcation. Riad's father buys him a plastic revolver as a toy. "All boys like weapons," he says. Does it follow, I wonder, that all who like weapons are still boys?

What Riad captures in this work is the deeply ingrained and insufficiently informed nature of the racism and sectarianism in each of the countries in which he has lived. He also captures realistically grim pictures of living conditions in each country, as well as the good bits: in France, we see an education system that seems to work well for enrollees; in Libya, we see ancient ruins by the sea that evoke history better than many other ruins; in Syria, we see the memories of a school-aged Abdul-Razak bring him back to a simple life. But each is a comfortable deception that people feel comfortable telling themselves. Family ties were more important than whether your relatives were good people or not, and obligation takes the place of generosity.

Riad's drawing skill is such that one can envision the environment quite clearly. It is better than a photograph since Riad can add the elements he wishes to emphasize. In the *New York Times* review of this title, as well as that in the *New Yorker* magazine, called "Drawing Blood", we learn that Riad has a few more installments planned for this series, and I look forward eagerly to other adventures as he grows older. He has a viewpoint that is not all sarcasm. He so far has spared his mother, who comes across as a bewildered alien in a hostile environment.

Riad's work has the sting of criticism, but since he presents it through the eyes of a child, adult readers are meant to add their own gloss, knowing what we do about the perceptions of a child. Let's see what he comes up with next, enjoying this and making up our minds later about whether he oversteps the mark.

David Schaafsma says

The first volume of a memoir by filmmaker and former *Charlie Hebdo* cartoonist Sattouf, about growing up in France--where his Sunni father met his French mother--and Libya and Syria. The artwork is terrific. Cartoony, it took me a little bit to get into the style, but it is highly accomplished work. The story features

cute big nosed blonde young Sattouf, his mother, and principally his crazy racist academic father. We get glimpses into the poverty and chaos of Syria and Libya and the contrasts between middle eastern and French lifestyles and cultures of that time.

There's commentary of course on the politicians and politics of this era, though it is not heavily political, as we see all these issues through his wild dad's eyes, which we can't really trust. And maybe we see some critique of these views through his mother's reactions, which are maybe a little bit like most of our reactions, a little shocked but mostly amused. We are not led to believe much of anything about the political views of Sattouf. Yet. First volume, and Sattouf is a kid here.

As a memoir it is accomplished artwork. There's some disturbing things in it. A family story in three countries. But if one were to compare it to the technically complex narratives of *Maus* and *Persepolis* and *Fun Home*, *The Arab of the Future* (AOF) (okay, could we have a better title, please?) is pretty straightforward, a kind of travelogue with light commentary. But those titles above set a pretty high bar for memoir work, and AOF is right up there. Translated into more than 18 languages thus far, it is an international sensation. And it is just the first volume, so we'll see where Sattouf takes us. I'm in. I'd say 4.5 would be closer to my rating for this, and I expect it will just get better and more complex.

Yann says

L'arabe du futur est un roman graphique dessiné par Riad Sattouf, un auteur de père syrien et de mère française, dans lequel il raconte son enfance pendant les années 1980. Il a fait parti de l'Association, avec entre autres Marjane Satrapi, Johan Sfar ou Trondheim. On pense immédiatement à *Persépolis*.

Son père décide d'emmener la famille en Libye, puis en Syrie. C'est l'occasion de faire un portrait à la fois tendre et mais sans concession de son père, fervent partisan du nationalisme arabe, rempli d'espoirs et de rêves, mais aussi plein de préjugés contre l'"Autre", extrêmement raciste et revanchard, de culture Méditerranéenne, attachant une grande importance à la force et la virilité, mais aussi aux traditions, tout en aspirant au changement; un homme pétri de contradictions, qu'il aime tout en regardant ses défauts en face.

C'est aussi l'occasion de partager son regard d'enfant sur ses souvenirs, et de découvrir en parallèle la France, la Libye et la Syrie. Comme j'ai aussi hérité d'une double culture, je n'ai pas eu de mal à comprendre l'ambivalence de son regard, car on est plus à même de faire la part des choses entre les influences que l'on reçoit. J'ai donc particulièrement apprécié ce livre, et j'attends la suite avec impatience.

Book Riot Community says

I've been itching for a good comic book and this one delivered. Part of a trilogy originally in French, the book is a graphic memoir of Riad's life. The son of a Syrian father and a French mother, he spends his early years between Libya, Syria and France as he encounters the absurdities of life in the Middle East. Gorgeously illustrated.

—Kareem Shaheen

Didi says

L'Arabe du Futur is an excellent recounting of the first 6 years of Riad Sattouf's life. We follow his family from France to Libya and to Syria. We are introduced to the difficulties of life in Libya and Syria and all of the cultural differences and the challenges for Riad to fit in and to speak Arabic. The absurdities and horrors of life living in these countries will make you laugh, outraged, and sorrowful. Sattouf tells the story with blatant honesty. There are many times when you won't believe it and you'll just shake your head in awe. It was interesting and I enjoyed discovering these countries from the 'real' inside. However on the downside, I didn't appreciate that his mother's character figured on most of the pages and didn't say much. She was totally underdeveloped which I felt wasn't very realistic, considering some of the tight spots they were living in. The story essentially revolves around Riad and his father. So I assume his silent mother was done on purpose but I'm not really sure why. Even so, I am looking forward to reading part 2, which I hope won't take too long to be released. It's definitely worthwhile reading.

Jan Philipzig says

Like Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, Riad Sattouf's *The Arab of the Future* (yep, weird title!) is as much a memoir as it is an attempt to come to terms with a father of the... um... uh... challenging variety. Sattouf's cartooning is more fluid, relaxed, and humorous than that of his American colleagues, though, almost jazzy. It communicates openness, flexibility, and empathy – qualities we could use more of in Muslim-Western relations these days. And these Muslim-Western relations are at the very core of this memoir by former *Charlie Hebdo* cartoonist Riad Sattouf, as the book traces the author's varied childhood experiences in France (where Riad was born to a French mother and an Arab Sunni father), Libya, and Syria.

The flood of rich, detailed, authentic, often completely unexpected observations is both disturbing and mesmerizing, thanks in part to the clever narrative strategy of presenting them from a vague through-the-eyes-of-a-child-yet-filtered-through-adult-awareness perspective that does not appear to have any agenda whatsoever: it appears to do little more than taking in all kinds of weirdness with wide-open eyes, though ultimately, of course, it does provide a critique of both Arab-Muslim and Western attitudes and lifestyles. The thing is: the results don't feel pedantic or manipulative in the slightest, and this is crucial to the appeal of the story. Just following the father around is an experience unlike any I've ever had: I mean, I never know what this guy is going to do or say next, because his belief system and his values seem so all-over-the-place to me... and yet, somehow, magically, he feels like a perfectly organic human being. Which is what makes all the strangeness and madness and uncertainty so compelling!

The Arab of the Future is the first book by Riad Sattouf to be translated into English, and thus quite a discovery for those of us who don't speak French. I am very much looking forward to both the second part of this memoir and many more comics by Sattouf that are hopefully already being translated into English and other languages as I am typing this. Truly outstanding stuff, a must-read for fans of alternative comics!
