



Escape from Baghdad!

Saad Hossain

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Welcome to Baghdad during the US invasion. A desperate American military has created a power vacuum that needs to be filled. Religious fanatics, mercenaries, occultists, and soldiers are all vying for power. So how do regular folks try to get by?

If you're Dagr and Kinza, a former economics professor and a streetwise hoodlum, you turn to dealing in the black market. But everything is about to change, because they have inherited a very important prisoner: the star torturer of Hussein's recently collapsed regime, Captain Hamid, who promises them untold riches if they smuggle him out of Baghdad.

With the heat on and nothing left for them in Baghdad, they enlist the help of Private Hoffman, their partner in crime and a U.S. Marine. In the chaos of a city without rule, getting out of Baghdad is no easy task and when they become embroiled in a mystery surrounding an ancient watch that doesn't tell time, nothing will ever be the same. With a satiric eye firmly cast on the absurdity of human violence, *Escape from Baghdad!* features shades of *Catch-22* and *Three Kings* while giving voice, ribald humor, and firepower to to people often referred to as "collateral damage."

Escape from Baghdad! Details

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Author : Saad Hossain

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From Reader Review *Escape from Baghdad!* for online ebook

K.J. Charles says

Okay, this was amazing. Kind of a gonzo novel set in post-collapse Iraq, with gunmen on the streets, the US military charging about, and everything gone to shit. Dagr is an ex university professor turned arms dealer with his friend Kinza, who has basically slipped several gears entirely. They team up with an ex torturer of Saddam's guard and an idiot savant drugged up US soldier in a kind of flailing search for treasure. Only not. This is not a very summarisable book tbh.

It's brutal (the violence isn't *too* explicit except at one point which honestly made me feel queasy but there's a lot of it and it's pervasive); it's savagely satirical about the whole situation and the US troops; it's got a fantasy element about hidden cults and lost knowledge and eternal life and djinn; mostly it's about people responding to an utterly irrational situation with equal irrationality. The heroes have all suffered appalling losses and the real horror of the situation is the backdrop to the baroque and bizarre plot events.

It's super savage and raw and weird and high-octane and very funny at points, and also actually really human and moving. Not my usual reading matter, but I absolutely loved it.

Book Riot Community says

I loved this book an unreasonable amount! Two black marketeer friends in Baghdad (one a former professor and the other a career criminal) come into possession of one of the area's notorious torturers. While trying to decide what to do with him – kill him? sell him to his enemies? set him free? – he proposes a different plan: He has a map that will lead them to a stash of gold, which he will share with his captors, in exchange for his life. They agree, because mad cash, yo. On their journey to find riches, they will cross paths with self-serving American soldiers looking to make few bucks, mad scientists, a secret underground library with a half-wild librarian, deadly militia, and possible immortals from an ancient religious sect. A madcap black comedy that doesn't downplay the dangers, desperation, and at times, preposterousness, of living in a war zone, this one is not to be missed. — Liberty Hardy

from The Best Books We Read In March: <http://bookriot.com/2015/04/01/riot-r...>

David Yoon says

Dagr is a former economics professor and Kinza is a street thug who have captured Saddam Hussein's head torturer who teases a hidden bunker in Mosul filled with riches. Set during the American occupation of Iraq, the promise of riches sets this trio on a path that leads them to blood-soaked mayhem, ancient cults, mythical forces and an American soldier that's either insanely brilliant or patently idiotic.

This is a country sitting on millennia of history that has shaped it well before American soldiers left their bootprints in the sand. It is a chaotic, monstrous, absurd, tragic and frankly hilarious pulpy yarn. It left me breathless in its viciousness and surprised me constantly with each new development.

Saba Imtiaz says

There is an all-consuming, almost feral quality to *Escape from Baghdad*, one that lends itself almost perfectly to its setting. After all, this is a novel set in a post-invasion Baghdad where — almost like a tableau — a war is being played out between a loose nexus of militias, remnants of the Baathist regime and the United States' forces.

Saad Z. Hossain's debut novel navigates these actors and acts spectacularly. *Escape from Baghdad!* is one of those wondrous books that will appeal to readers who may be stuck in a genre or style. Hossain takes the best of literary genres — sci-fi, magical realism, historical fiction — using everything from djinns trapped in jars to medical mysteries involving storied figures from the past.

more here: <http://www.asianage.com/books/elusive...>

Mark says

This is such a good book. With characters as iconic and idiosyncratic as any in *Catch 22* and *MASH*. It's action-packed, compelling, weird, funny, and it provides a completely new view of the US invasion of Iraq. I highly recommend it.

Nicole says

I love that this book starts out as an interesting and darkly hilarious book about mercenaries trying to leave Baghdad and moves into a centuries-old conspiracy and the quest to uncover it. There are so many good one-liners in here, just thrown into the plot, and characters who you can get behind, even though they aren't the kind of people you'd normally want to root for.

Martin says

I read Lavie Tidhar's post about this book, and got a copy for myself. I'm very glad I did. EFB is one of those wonderfully unclassifiable books that I love. (So many books are described as 'famous title meets famous title'.) The only book that came to mind after reading this was *Alif the Unseen* by G Willow Wilson, and that's just because they both had middle eastern fantasy elements. *Escape from Baghdad* is grittier than Ms. Wilson's novel however.

Anyway, a great read. It captures a part of the madness that I am all too certain was/is Baghdad after the invasion. It's action packed, with bits of gallows humor, and characters who grow throughout the course of the book. It also has some good historical conspiracy thrown in, which I always enjoy. If the summary on the back of the book agrees with you, I highly recommend *Escape from Baghdad*.

Nadia says

This book is really trying to be clever and referential but it just fell flat for me and it doesn't really start improving until too late in the plot.

The Druze references made me uncomfortable, tbh, I feel like if they were looking for an obscure to Iraq (and the author and audience anyways) culture for a relic to base the magical realistic aspects of the story on they easily could have used a dead culture or religion instead of one that is still around and practiced.

The most curious thing to me about this book is the fact that it exists. Iraq fiction (or non-fiction) have never sold well in the US and this book does not fit the mold of American liberal books and movies set in the Iraq war. It also isn't an obnoxious nationalistic propaganda story set in Iraq (like say Valley of the Wolves.) It is probably not accurate to call it an apolitical book but it is not polemic either and (afaik) a lot of its influences seem to be American. So I do wonder about the audience for this book, do Middle East war stories have readers in South Asia?

FWIW if anyone is curious I compiled a list of my favourite Iraq books here.

Sue says

Thanks to Goodreads and the author for giving me this book. This action/fantasy book was a quick read - at times it was hard to put this book down. I particularly liked the glossary at the end of the book.

Karen says

Hoo boy. This is a heck of a ride through occupied Baghdad, following the fortunes of black-marketers Dagr and Kinza. Every description I've read says this book is about their acquisition of a known torturer for Saddam, Captain Hamid--but actually the story turns very quickly to other matters and Hamid simply becomes a grudging third member of their party. Hamid promises them access to hidden treasure, but that search only takes them through a few pages before they're diverted into the pursuit of a serial killer known as the Lion of of Akkad. When they cross paths with a secretive, millennia-old religious sect known as the Druze, things get even stranger.

I loved many things about this book. The writing is great--darkly comic, engaging, gripping, fast-paced, and literate. Hossain convinced me that he understands the complex and confusing history and culture of Baghdad, Iraq, and the Middle East--not to mention the web of American interests now overlaid there. The characters were distinctive and memorable, and the story was satisfying and surprising. I loved the elements of the supernatural, as well as the Dan Brown-esque nods to secret societies, hidden devices, and ancient conspiracies.

Unnamed Press is a small indie that seems to be doing great things. I wish they'd copyedited just a little more closely--there was a section of the book that was laid out incorrectly on the page--but overall this is a great title and I'm grateful to them for bringing it out. Hossain left room for a sequel, and I'd definitely read it (to see poor Dagr get a little happiness, among other things.)

Stig Edvartsen says

This book is a perfect script for the Cohen brothers. More quirk than you can shade an idiosyncratic stick at.

Nick says

Read this. Read it now. It makes me envious, determined to write another book. It would also be a spectacular movie if someone only had the balls for it. Telling, comic, violent, appalling, realist, magical, deranged, bleak, superb. If Jeanette Winterson and Hunter Thompson got high, got kidnapped by ISIL, lived in a warzone for a few years and escaped with the aid of a very angry Umberto Eco, and then wrote about it, you might get something like this.

David Agranoff says

This is a novel about a subject and setting overdue for exploration in genre novels. The Iraq war has rarely been a topic in sci-fi or horror. The best example I can think of is John Shirley's Constantine tie-in novel Warlord. I have been waiting for someone to tackle the GW Bush lead Iraq invasion in genre fiction for awhile. EFB is set in the chaos about a year after the march 2003 invasion of the country looking for the phantom menace of Weapons of Mass Destruction. This sets a stage for a violent, chaotic crazy story that plays against the war torn city pretty straight at first, but in the second act stuff gets weird fantasy wise.

Probably the best thing about this novel is that it is not told from the point of view of a U.S. soldier, the two lead characters Dagr and Kinza are locals whose lives were majorly disrupted by the invasion. There is one US soldier character - Hoffman is an interesting one, but the majority of the story is seen through local eyes. This is something I liked as most of the media portrayal of Iraq that this country gets is from US soldier's point of view.

Dagr and Kinza are doing what they can to survive, and in the process they discover a man in hiding that is wanted by both sides. They find him as a means to get out of the city. There is more to this man, who has an ancient history and once they make their way across the city things get weird. Crazy Alchemists, immortals, magic time pieces are all involved but overall pretty subtle. I enjoyed this novel but it is played mostly straight. I actually would have liked it to be a little more crazy.

This is my first novel by an author from Bangladesh. It seems like it was well researched and felt like Hossain understood the city, but again what do I know. I also didn't laugh as much as I expected from the blurbs on the cover. The humor didn't work for me, but the characters and setting did. I didn't LOVE this book but I enjoyed and really respect what it accomplished. I certainly would read this author again.

Faatin says

Excellent writing and "world building"...

even though the "world" is essentially ours. this is the story of 3-7 characters through whose eyes we see the current political/economic/war situation in Iraq, but really through the corners of their eyes when it's not misted over with blood. don't be surprised if you start rooting for the most bloodthirsty of them all: I did! in the words of a dear friend, this is a great story about a bunch of men blowing shit up and going on a magical quest. it's also very very very funny. even the darned Glossary made me chuckle.

Nate D says

I've been reading some pretty good pulp lately, and here's another notable, if imperfect example. Notable for the sheer breathless frenzy of the plotting, which seems apt for a book set in amid the maelstrom of U.S.-destabilized Gulf War 2.0 Baghdad circa George W. Bush's second term or so, where life attempts to creep on against constant violence and loss. Drugged out paranoid American soldiers hunting for mythic WMDs, secretive ancient powers in search of much realer mythic artifacts from the pre-Mongol Middle Eastern Enlightenment period, black marketeers (our "heros") attempting to smuggle a wanted ranking Ba'athist for personal gain, fanatics in search opportunities to die for god, doctors prying into the secrets of the genome, a mysterious serial killer, witches, alchemists, ex-intelligence officers, and beautiful poisoners all swirl through a story of truly bizarre ambition. At worst, it risks a kind of Dan Brown / Clive Cussler (I read an embarrassing amount of Cussler as a tween) appropriation of history and culture as plot hooks in service of dubious action sequences, but it's fortunately wilder and better written (in its madcap offhanded way) than either. And the at times disturbingly blaise atrocities that spill out unexpectedly give a sense of the stakes here -- to whatever extend Hossain is able to spin his sources into ridiculous adventures, he's laughing into the void of a truly destroyed nation, building something out of the debris with a black, bitter glee. Dan Brown never grew in canines like these. Last caveats: even I am aware that the Druze are a real (and even politically represented) sect in Lebanon, so the ends their history are turned to here seem a little questionable -- I suppose they're more mysterious and exotic in modern Iraq. And: after all this build up, the endless shoot-out of the finale seemed a bit of a stupid waste of good plotting. Especially because Hossain seems at great pains to leave his characters some space for appearances in the presumed sequel rather than actually realize the full story potential. I'm actually relieved that instead of that, he's since switched gears into a new novel about Bangladesh. Which I would totally read -- interested to see how he may evolve as a writer, despite these reservations.
