



Playing Atari with Saddam Hussein

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At the start of 1991, eleven-year-old Ali Fadhil was consumed by his love for soccer, video games, and American television shows. Then, on January 17, Iraq's dictator Saddam Hussein went to war with thirty-four nations lead by the United States.

Over the next forty-three days, Ali and his family survived bombings, food shortages, and constant fear. Ali and his brothers played soccer on the abandoned streets of their Basra neighborhood, wondering when or if their medic father would return from the war front. Cinematic, accessible, and timely, this is the story of one ordinary kid's view of life during war.

Playing Atari with Saddam Hussein Details

Date : Published February 6th 2018 by HMH Books for Young Readers

ISBN :

Author : Jennifer Roy

Format : Kindle Edition 176 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Childrens, Middle Grade, War, Cultural

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Tirzah says

The unique title is what made me research this book. When I found out it was based on a true story of a boy who had survived Operation Desert Storm, I knew I had to read it. I haven't read any literature on that particular historical event and I was glad to see that this book was specifically geared towards the younger audience. I was a toddler during Desert Storm, but when the Second Persian Gulf War took place, I was old enough to be aware of the situation and remember it. Some children today may not be informed about Desert Storm and Saddam Hussein, so I think this book is a great way for teachers and/or parents to educate children. While there are heavy themes of war (i.e., bombing, shooting, reference to torture), it is told in a non-graphic tone that makes it appropriate for children approx. 3rd grade+ to handle (unless they are sensitive readers in which I suggest adults read it first). It was interesting to me as an adult and American to learn some of the Iraqi culture and be shown some first person accounts of how many innocent people suffered and died during this ruthless time. Besides the tragedy of war, there are shining moments of friendship and family bonds. Recommend for teachers and history buffs, young and old.

Ms. Jackson says

A possible theme is that sometimes it may be hard to see that someone else is struggling, especially if you are struggling too.

Hoover Public Library Kids and Teens says

Fadhil's childhood in Iraq forms the basis of this dramatic fictionalized account of life during Operation Desert Storm, the 43-day war that followed Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1991.

Chance Lee says

A cute map at the beginning taught me some geography, but this story isn't for me. I like books that weave the setting into the story. In this book, the setting is the story. The first two chapters are almost exclusively the narrator addressing the reader, telling us the context of the story. I wanted to read it long enough to see if the narrator thought his Atari game would save the initials he put into the high score board (it won't), but I couldn't.

Ms. Yingling says

E ARC from Edelweiss Above the Treeline

Ali lives in Basra, Iraq in 1991 with his family, including brothers Ahmed and Shirzad and young sister

Shireen. His mother is a math professor, his father is a dentist and army medic reservist, and the family lives a comfortable life complete with video games and American television programs. Ali has known war for much of his life, but when the US prepares to launch Dessert Storm attacks, he realizes how much more serious this war is. Since bridges have been bombed, food is scarce. More buildings are destroyed and people are killed. Ali's father goes missing, and the family is worried for his safety. While Ali is not a fan of school, he would rather be there than huddled at home while war rages around him. When there are rumors that a ground strike will be made soon, Ali considers finding a way to let the US soldiers know that he loves Superman and video games, but realizes it will have little effect. In an epilogue, we see Ali working at a translator for the US government during Hussein's trial, and notes at the end explain the true story on which the book is based.

Strengths: This was really well done-- first hand experiences from Mr. Fadhil, but told by an experienced middle grade writer so that the book is structured in an appealing and fast-paced way. I appreciated the inclusion of information about the different ethnic groups and their involvement, especially since Ali's father is Kurdish. There are plenty of details of ordinary life in Basra, and we get a lot of historical information about the war as well. Even the cover is fantastic. This is a great window into another time and place, and I can't wait to share it with my students!

Weaknesses: Ms. Roy does not write nearly enough books! I love her Yellow Star, as well as the Trading Faces series she wrote with her twin, Julia DeVillers.

What I really think: This seemed a bit pro-American, but there are some passages that describe how much Ali loves Iraq, just not the Iraq during war time. Now, I really need to see a book by an Iraqi who felt less positively about the US!

Mississippi Library Commission says

When Ali was eleven, all he wanted to do was play soccer and video games. He had as normal a life as can be expected growing up in Saddam Hussein's Iraq, although he was bullied some for being half-Kurdish. Then, the country he most admires, the United States, is suddenly embroiled in a war with his country. Extremely well-written and impossible to put down, this book is perfect for middle schoolers that like reading about regular kids in exceptional times.

Brittany says

This book is a wonderful and quick read for a younger audience that would like to learn more about world events through the eyes of a peer. Ali, is telling the story of 1991 events with Iraq and Kuwait and later caught up to more relevant issues with Saddam. It was written to keep the attention of a younger reader while still educating them about what daily life was like during war.

The MAIN negative point I have with this book is the title. i think it is kind of misleading and doesn't make a TON of sense with the content. I guess that main take away is that Ali is obsessed with Superman comics and video games and has many daydreams about playing them with Saddam as his target, but still that was a reach for the title.

I still recommend it as a quick and enjoyable read. It was great to have a middle grade Iraqi perspective on such a huge event in history.

Mischenko says

Playing Atari with Saddam Hussein is inspired by the true story of Ali Fadhil, a boy living in Basra, Iraq during the first Gulf War in 1991. Ali was like other children and went to school, loved to play football, read comics and play video games, but what set him apart from others was that he had a myriad of things to worry about, including a war right on his doorstep. Rather than living a life of peace, Ali had to deal with living in a safe room with his siblings and parents in fear of bombs. He had to endure food and water shortages and wonder about whether or not his father would make it back home. With all this anger and frustration inside due to all that's happening, he has to refrain from expressing his true thoughts, because if you're caught speaking against Saddam Hussein, you risk being killed. It was nightmarish and somehow he still managed to find some optimism in his life.

"I have fighting blood in my veins. I may not be able to directly fight with my fists or a gun but I have...I have..."

Heart.

"I love my country. I love my family. I love life."

It's declared that the book is slightly fictionalized and I'm unsure exactly which parts of the narrative are fiction, but I can say that all of it felt authentic to me in every way. I can still remember sitting in front of the television as this war was heavily televised for all to see. It was enough to cause anxiety to those living on the outside of the war, let alone what the people must've been experiencing living in Iraq under the rule of Saddam Hussein and smack dab in the heart of the war. There was no way out for them and they didn't ask for the war, they were against it.

"I hate Saddam," my sister, Shireen, says loudly. "He's ruining my life."

The circumstances and experiences that Ali and his family must endure are eye-opening and I think this is an excellent book for middle-schoolers to get a sense of what life is like in war. It's written well and told from Ali's point of view so readers will discern his feelings and emotions throughout the book. I loved some of the educational references which shed light on the different religions and groups to help readers understand the differences with their cultures, histories, and belief systems. Of course, I also enjoyed reading about Ali's love for stuffed grape leaves and baklava because these were foods I grew up with in my own childhood due to my Syrian ancestry. I too experienced a love for Atari as Ali was just a few years younger than me so there was even a little nostalgia here. A post-script and epilogue which reveal fourteen years later during Saddam's trial and where Ali Fadhil is today ties up everything nicely. With that said, there was an upsetting event or two in the book that might be a bit too much for sensitive readers (one that includes public executions), but it's short-lived.

Overall, this book kept me engaged. There's so much discussion to be had after reading it and it definitely belongs in every middle-school classroom. After reading this with my kids, they now have a better understanding of life in war, what it's like living under a dictator like Saddam Hussein, and about Operation Desert Storm in general. My rating is 5*****.

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Sarah says

This book is amazing. I very much recommend it for adult readers, and I would hesitate to have a middle grader read it if they are anything like me. I'm around the same age as the authors, and reading this boy's perspective on living under such horrific rule that we all watched from the safety of the USA made me just sick. This story is inspiring and scary and amazing. A must read.

Amy says

I had no idea what to expect with this book and ended up really enjoying it. I read it for the February #yabookchat discussion on Twitter. It tells the story of Ali Fadhil, the co-author of the book, who was a boy in Iraq during Desert Storm. This is his retelling of what it was like for those 40 days, and then his work as a translator during Saddam Hussein's trials later. My only drawback: it did read like a co-authored biographical work, meaning that some points were choppy/disjointed since it was a recounting of memories instead of being a completely fictionalized and stylized piece of literature.

Overall, I would recommend this book to my students. I think it is a good piece of historical fiction, especially since it is about a time period that many of the popular historical fiction doesn't cover (i.e.-it's not a Holocaust/WWII book). For my students, 1991 is a LONG TIME AGO, even though it doesn't seem that way to me.

Alicia says

While I was generally annoyed by how the actual atari playing was a plot point at the very beginning and very end of the story with nothing added throughout, I understand that the point was merely to showcase the things that were given up during war time only to be picked back up afterward.

This is the story of Ali's family, living in Basra, south of Baghdad and just next to Kuwait after Hussain decided to take Kuwait for himself and American along with other nations decided to fight back against it. Ali has always had a fascination with American cultures, which is evidenced in his love of superhero comics, but I also adored the relationships among the family members, particularly Ali's math professor mother and in light of their father's disappearance fairly quickly after the war begins (he's a government dentist).

It's fast-paced with a very abrupt ending SPOILER . It's a wonderful story that gives a lot of direct and easy-to-understand history of Iraq, Kuwait, religion (Ali's father is Kurdish), education in the Middle East, but just as wonderfully, food, culture, and the love of futbol!

Kris says

I plan on recommending this one widely as a middle grade historical fiction option. Ali's experiences growing up during the first Gulf War were very real and engaging. Lining up for rations, playing soccer in the empty streets, reading comic books again and again, sleeping on the floor of a safe room, being careful of bullies whose father's are well-connected politically; these were all daily realities. This narrative was based closely on the co-author Ali Fadhil's life and the story absolutely rings true without a lot of emphasis on

large messages but rather on a child's view of war. The last chapter that details Ali's role as a translator during Saddam Hussein's trial made for a fascinating finish.

Elisabeth says

I'm a big fan of realistic historical fiction and this book for middle school kids jumps right up there with my top favorites. I'm curious as to how much of this book is actually fiction and not fictionalized, but either way, I found it simply un-put-downable. I was in high school during the first Iraq war and I remember it fairly well. My friends and I were fascinated by it, in a naively idealistic, we-are-the-saviors-of-the-world kind of way. To read about the war from the perspective of a kid who was just a few years younger than me at the time was mind blowing. *Playing Atari* is very well written with tons of intimate details about everyday life in Iraq, at least as everyday you can get during a war. I felt like Ali's thoughts, reactions, and feelings were incredibly genuine and will give kids reading the story a unique perspective on life in the Middle East. There are a few intense scenes, so this may not be appropriate for more immature middle schoolers.

Wendy MacKnight says

Love historical middle grade, and this book, about the 1991 Iraq War, does not disappoint. Excellent read.

Scottsdale Public Library says

I was close to the age of Jennifer Roy's protagonist during Operation Desert Storm, so it was interesting to experience the war from a young Iraqi's perspective. Based on events from Ali Fadhil's childhood, we meet Ali and his family in the city of Basra during the war: schools are closed, food is dispersed in rations, and citizens are just trying to make it through each day. Yet Ali and his friends are still kids, coming together to play ball, making a game of scavenging through war debris, and dreaming of life shown on American TV shows. A life where they would be safe. In one passage, a newscaster describes how the bombings in Iraq show up in night vision cameras as glowing dots against greenish skies. I remember those scenes vividly being displayed during news segments, and being compared by some to video games. But from the perspective of those living in cities being bombed, the comparisons were insulting. This is a good book for young kids to read, to understand that fears and interests can be universal among different cultures. -Sara Z.
