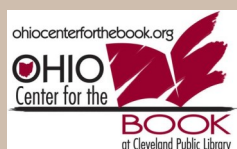


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Toolkit created by the Ohio Center for the Book Scholar-in-Residence, Valentino L. Zullo, Ph.D.



Get Graphic! Toolkit

The Arab of the Future

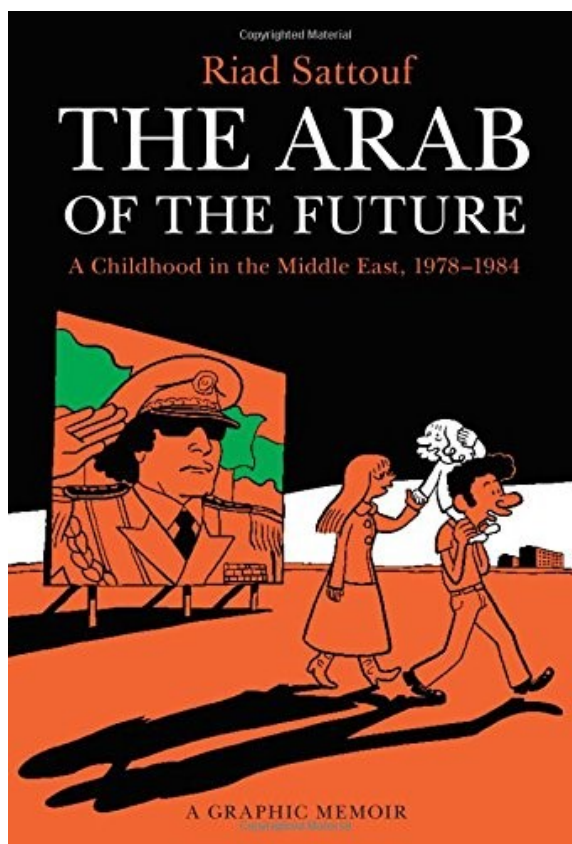
by Riad Sattouf

About the Comic

Riad Sattouf's memoir, *The Arab of the Future*, documents the life of a young boy whose identity is split between East and West with a father from Syria and a mother from France. Reflecting on his personal experiences, he explores the divide between cultures and his status as an outsider in both worlds.

While rightly critical of the destructive dictatorships of Muammar Gaddafi and Hafez Al-Assad, this is not a treatise on Eastern/Western politics nor the East/West divide. Sattouf documents the pain he witnesses around the world from the perspective of a child who does not understand the violence surrounding him. This is a story about the pain of being a child who must live with the choices of his parents (in many cases his father) and the helplessness of childhood. His story captures the pain of being born into a world that he does not yet understand yet will define him. Drawn from the perspective of the young Riad and narrated by the authorial voice of Sattouf, the comics reader bears witness to the author's early years. Without a voice in this volume, only images in his thoughts, we do not hear the voice of little Riad, but we learn from him about his experience in these early years through his reflective narration as an adult.

Like many other comics storytellers, his story focuses on family dynamics: a father driven by his ideology and a mother who appears to have lost agency in the relationship. Sattouf shows us that each unhappy family is indeed unhappy in its own way.



Who is Riad Sattouf?

Riad Sattouf is a cartoonist, comics creator, and film director. He currently resides in France and his work is published by of L'Association, one of the most important comics publishers in France which began in 1990 during a renaissance of French comics or *bande dessinée* (literally “drawn strips”). As a film director, Sattouf is known for the successful and award-winning work *Les Beaux Gosses* (*The French Kissers*). As a comics creator and cartoonist, he is best known for his multi-part memoir *The Arab of the Future* (*L'Arabe du Futur*) and his contribution to the satirical French weekly *Charlie Hebdo* where he published his on-going *La Vie Secrète des Jeunes* (*The Secret Life of Youth*) from 2004-2014. While Sattouf was born in France, he spent much of his life in different Arab countries because of his father, and it is this story he documents in his memoirs.

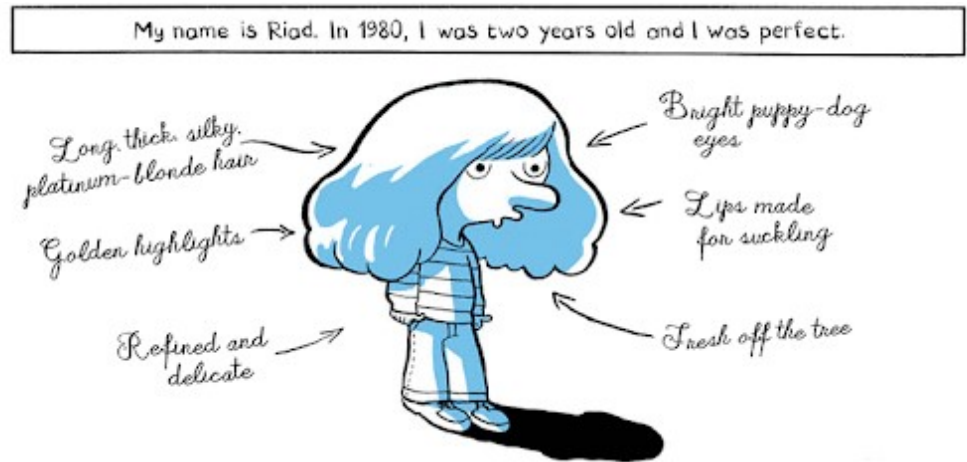


Figure 1, *The Arab of the Future*, p. 3.

Context: Pan-Arabism

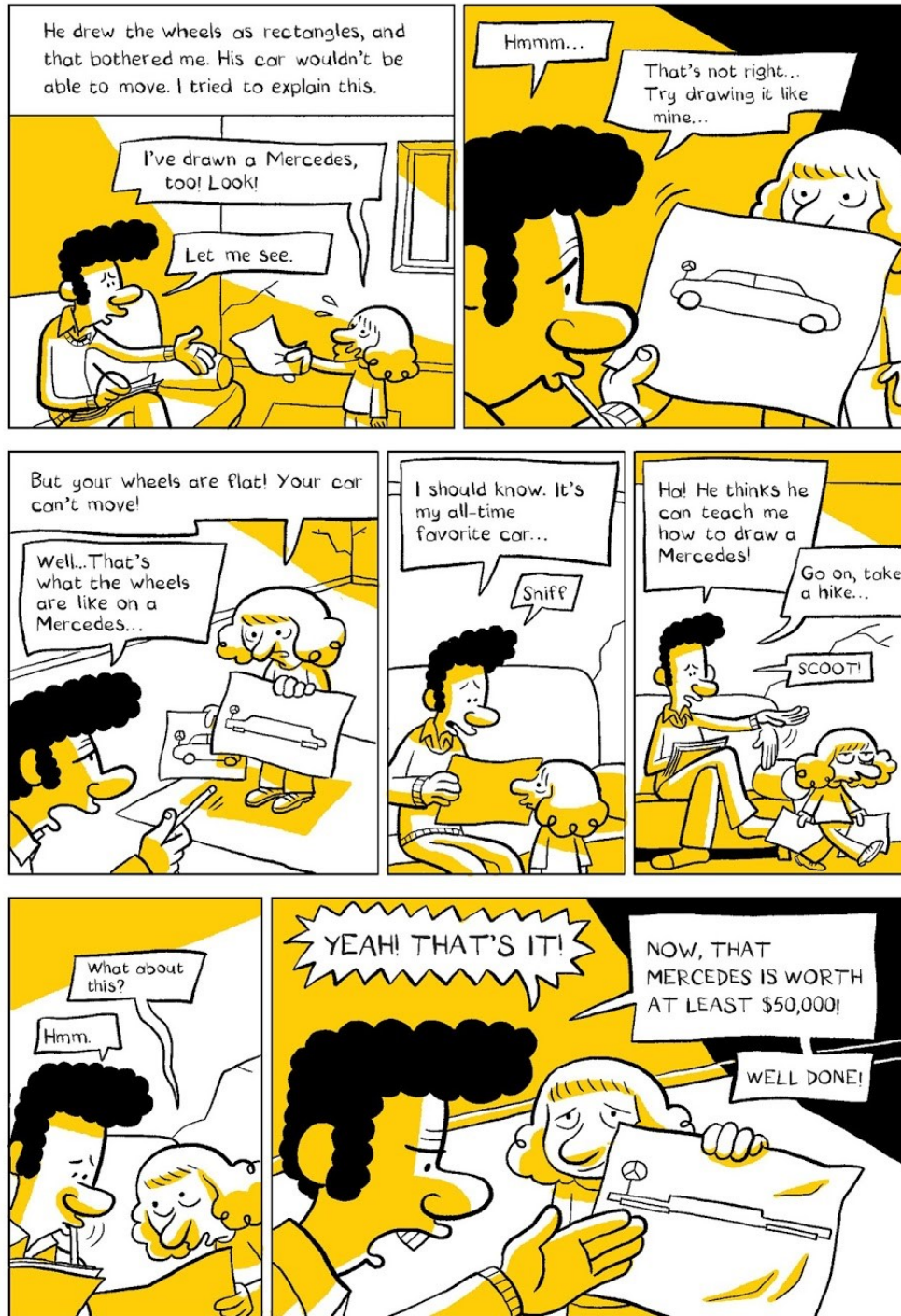
Riad Sattouf's father, Abdel-Razak Sattouf, believes in Pan-Arabism, an idea, that all of the countries of North Africa and Western Asia from the Atlantic Ocean to the Arabian Sea are comprised of one large state that is currently fragmented into individual countries. Proponents of Pan-Arabism also assert that Arab nations should take care of themselves, and they do not support Western political involvement or Western occupation. While Pan-Arabism is not defined as a nationalist ideal, it is closely connected to the concept of Pan-Arab nationalism, an ideology that defines all Arabs as being part of a single nation. While the concept of Pan-Arabism is less dominant across Middle Eastern countries and peoples today, for different reasons including changes in leadership, economics as well as differences between religious groups, it was a thought that molded much of Riad's father ideas. For this reason, it has importance here because it gives us insight into what led Abdel-Razak Sattouf back to Libya despite having been trained in France and offered prestigious positions in the West. Because of Sattouf's father's belief in Pan-Arabism and his interest in his own son growing up in the Middle East, Riad is imagined as "The Arab of the Future." In this story and across the many volumes of his multi-volume memoir, Riad Sattouf contends with the experience of being both of French and Libyan descent and having a father whose sustained commitment to the future of a Pan-Arab nation defined his childhood.

Questions for Discussion

1. Drawn from the perspective of a child, Sattouf's art style is deceptively simple although he depicts images of suffering and pain. How does his seemingly simplistic art style affect the ways we process the pain and suffering he depicts? How do the simple lines and colors intensify the feelings we have about the experiences drawn?
2. Sattouf perhaps offers the greatest insight into his father by his relationship to animals as he often sees them not as living beings but always talks about them as objects to be eaten. How does Sattouf use these moments to capture his father's psychology? What do we learn about his father and his relationship to others?
3. Sattouf's mother often appears as suffering, a victim to her husband's decisions as she finds herself in a situation in which she did not want to be (from the perspective of the author). How does the depiction of the mother's story help us to understand the author and his thoughts about women in the West and in the East?
4. While Abdel-Rezaq, Sattouf's father, is not a practicing Muslim, he still feels connected to his Sunni Muslim heritage, likely because of the Pan-Arab beliefs he holds. How does his religion continue to dominate his beliefs even though he is secular?
5. Sattouf's father is depicted as a bigot toward Europeans and a racist towards Africans and Israelis. His Pan-Arab nationalism is used as a defense against relationships with others. How does Sattouf ask us to think about the difference between pride and supremacy through the actions of his father?
6. Riad, the child, speaks few words in this first volume until the end. Rather, he often thinks in images while allowing the adult narrator to tell the story. How does the adult narrative voice affect how we think about the child? How do the two narrative tracks affect our reading experience? What do we gain from each?
7. This story is one about witnessing violence from the perspective of a child. There are many scenes where the children act out violence, demonstrating how easily they are affected by what is happening around them. What does Sattouf want us to think about witnessing violence and the display of violence in comics?
8. Sattouf appears to contrast the imagination of children with the delusion of his father. As Sattouf is a young child, he will think in images, imagining a face for God, for example. This fantasy, though, is contrasted with his father's delusions about reality, such as the fact that Assad does not really live in a big complex. What ideas does Sattouf ask us to think about here about imagination vs. delusion?

Interviews & Additional Questions

- Leah Mirakhor, "The Future Is Here: An Interview with Riad Sattouf, *Author of The Arab of the Future*," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, January 31, 2017. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/future-interview-riad-sattouf-author-arab-future/> (Shortened url: <https://bit.ly/3eCa3cu>)
 - In this interview, Sattouf reflects on his father's sense of grandiosity and how it affected him as a child. He reflects back on the moment he draws the car (Fig. 2) and he states, "He didn't really make efforts for other people, other than himself. When he was drawing the wheels of the car, it was obvious for me that the car had round wheels. At two years old, I knew. I remember the scene perfectly. He was drawing the wheels [he draws in my notebook — the wheels are square] and it was obvious to me that a car couldn't move like this. And he was very angry, telling me, "Oh, you're trying to teach me how to draw a Mercedes? The wheels are like this!" At two years old, I knew I was better than him at this. When parents think they are divine, it's very funny to observe."
 - How does Sattouf's depiction of his father's rigid mind ask us to think about parent-child relations beyond the Middle East?
- Beat Staff, "Interview: Riad Sattouf on Growing Up Between the Lines of France and Syria in *The Arab of the Future*," *The Comics Beat*, December 21, 2016. <https://www.comicsbeat.com/interview-riad-sattouf-on-growing-up-between-the-lines-of-france-and-syria-in-the-arab-of-the-future/> (Shortened url: <https://bit.ly/3lbOdhb>)
 - Sattouf reflects on the perspective he offers in his comic, documenting from a child's perspective, of which he says, "I like the point of view of children because it's a point of view without judgement—or very few judgements. It's a very innocent and naive point of view. I like to show the adult world from the child's point of view because it reveals a lot of absurdity and a lot of paradox and craziness that when we are adults we don't often realize."
 - How does Sattouf's perspective affect our experience of the story? How does it affect how we see the adults in these different situations? What does it tell us about how children experience relationships with adults?
- Aidan Flax-Clark, "'Charlie Hebdo' Cartoonist Riad Sattouf Discusses His Memoir '*The Arab of the Future*,'" *Vice*, December 2, 2015. https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/xd7mna/talking-with-french-syrian-cartoonist-riad-sattouf-about-his-best-selling-graphic-memoir-the-arab-of-the-future (Shortened url: <https://bit.ly/2Oq9TdE>)
 - Reflecting on the use of color, Sattouf notes that the countries in which he lived and visited seemed to have their own overwhelming color. He states in the interview, "When I started to remember, I realized that the different places had colors in my memory. For example, in Libya there was a lot of sand everywhere. It was very hot and yellow. In France, it was in Brittany, so it was the sea. In Syria, it was the red of the soil. Clay. If you stay in a room that is red for one hour, and then you go out, the world will seem green. You invert the dominant colors. And I wanted that to happen with the scenery. That when you changed from one country to the other, you would feel disoriented."
 - How does the use of color affect the reading of the stories in the different countries?

Figure 2 *The Arab of the Future*, p. 27.

Scholarship & Additional Questions

- Mihaela Precup, “‘I think we’re maybe more or less safe here’: Violence and Solidarity During the Lebanese Civil War in Zeina Abirached’s *A Game for Swallows*.” *Context of Violence in Comics*, edited by Ian Hague, Ian Horton, and Nina Mickwitz, xx.
 - Precup considers the way that Sattouf’s Western upbringings informs his story. She writes, “Sattouf’s comics employ a contemporary Western perspective that is often highly critical of the Arab communities he lives in, and builds a sympathetic portrait of his bewildered French mother, whose facial features often mirror exhaustion and anger at the prevalent sexism and random violence of the worlds that have become her home. Still, there are instants of authentic affection between little Riad and some of his relatives, and the father remains a somewhat likeable—although deeply absurd—figure because of his vaguely reasoned bumbling optimism” (67-68).
 - While this is his personal memoir, how does Sattouf’s critical eye toward the Middle East affect the reading of his story?
- Vera J. Camden, “The Thought Bubble and Its Vicissitudes in Contemporary Comics,” *American Imago* 77, no. 3 (Fall 2020): 603-638.
 - In an essay on the thought bubble, Camden explores the way that Sattouf utilizes the grammar of comics to capture thought that exists outside of verbal language. She writes, “The cartoonist Riad Sattouf also captures, in his way, the power of the thought bubble as a pre-linguistic tool in his memoir *Arab of the Future*. The ways that Sattouf depicts the inner life of his younger self partakes of a political trauma, while at the same time captures a psychological dimension of familial trauma in the midst of cruelty and chaos as the young boy Riad is displaced into an alien and dangerous landscape. We witness his three-year-old appetite and his innocence captured in a thought bubble. His desire is preverbal and so the thought—the image of cake—is rendered amidst the mother’s despair over the world her child is now inhabiting. The thought bubble says more than mere text can say: the child remains a child and his thoughts remain basic and appetitive” (629-630).
 - Sattouf’s work is notable for its ability to depict from the perspective of a child. How does he use thought bubbles and other formalistic components of comics to capture the experience of the child and their feelings and thoughts that exists outside of verbal language?
- Chris Reyns-Chikuma and Houssem Ben Lazreg, “Marjane Satrapi and the Graphic Novels from and about the Middle East,” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (2017): 758-775.
 - Reyns-Chikuma and Lazreg are critical of the ways that Sattouf portrays the Middle Eastern people and landscape for the Western reader. They write, “Sattouf portrays life in Arab lands as dominated by one sense: smell. He repeatedly refers to someone or some place’s stench: Libyans waiting in lines, the grandmother’s neighbors, the Syrian flight attendants, the “mouldy smell” of food, and the constant omnipresent smell of filth in the streets (18, 73, 84, 145). The situations described seem to have been selected for their weirdness and cruelty and to make the (French-Western) readers laugh. It is not that bad things did not exist in these dictatorships, but this graphic novel lacks much positive aspects or perspectives, empathy, and/or contextual explanations; therefore, it tends to reinforce stereotyping rather than understanding” (770).
 - While many are critical of Sattouf’s representation of the Middle East, what remains is the fact that what he tells us is his personal experience. How do we negotiate with the fact that we perhaps want a story which aims for empathy for people in the Middle East (as with *Persepolis*), but it does not? Should we expect an author to change the stories they tell if they do not cultivate empathy for the other? As lamentable as it may be that the father and the family are not the people we want them to be, is it a disservice to the reader for Sattouf to have made them more likeable even if that were not true?

Figure 3 *The Arab of the Future*, p. 58.

Further Supplemental Materials

Additional resources to supplement this toolkit:

- Louisiana Channel, “[Riad Sattouf Interview: On ‘The Arab of the Future’](https://youtu.be/lwNWe4ITvaU)” (<https://youtu.be/lwNWe4ITvaU>).
- NPR Fresh Air, “‘Arab of the Future’ Chronicles the Challenges of a Cross-Cultural Childhood.” (<https://www.npr.org/2015/11/09/455303187/arab-of-the-future-chronicles-the-challenges-of-a-cross-cultural-childhood>) (Shortened url: <https://n.pr/3rJ9kdn>)
- BBC Newsnight, “[French Cartoonist Riad Sattouf - BBC Newsnight](https://youtu.be/EGRjXm40ylc)” (<https://youtu.be/EGRjXm40ylc>).
- Nadja Vancauwenberghe, “[Graphic Syria: An interview with Riad Sattouf.](https://www.exberliner.com/features/people/riad-sattouf/)” *Exberliner*, September 17, 2015 (<https://www.exberliner.com/features/people/riad-sattouf/>).
- Adam Shatz, “[Drawing Blood: A French Graphic Novelist’s Shocking Memoir of the Middle East.](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/10/19/drawing-blood)” *The New Yorker*, October 12, 2015 (<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/10/19/drawing-blood>) (Shortened url: <https://bit.ly/30DFmeS>)

Further Reading

If you are interested in other works by Riad Sattouf:

- *The Arab of the Future 2: A Childhood in the Middle East, 1984-1985* (Metropolitan Books, 2016)
- *The Arab of the Future 3: A Childhood in the Middle East, 1985-1987* (Metropolitan Books, 2018)
- *The Arab of the Future 4: A Graphic Memoir of a Childhood in the Middle East, 1987-1992* (Metropolitan Books, 2019)

If you are interested in other comics about Middle East history:

- *Zahra’s Paradise* by Amir and Khalil (First Second, 2011)
- *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi (Pantheon, 2007)
- *Rolling Blackouts: Dispatches from Turkey, Syria, and Iraq* (Drawn & Quarterly, 2016)

If you are interested in other stories documenting political trauma:

- *Maus* by Art Spiegelman (Pantheon, 1996)
- *The Best We Could Do* by Thi Bui (Abrams ComicArts, 2017)
- *Palestine* by Joe Sacco (Fantagraphics, 2001)