



## The Fall of Baghdad

*Jon Lee Anderson*

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For every great historical event, seemingly, at least one reporter writes an eyewitness account of such power and literary weight that it becomes joined with its subject in our minds-George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* and the Spanish Civil War; John Hersey's *Hiroshima* and the dropping of the first atomic bomb; Philip Gourevitch's *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families: Stories of Rwanda* and the Rwandan genocide. Whatever else is written about the Iraqi people and the fall of Saddam, Jon Lee Anderson's *The Fall of Baghdad* is worthy of mention in this company. No subject has become more hotly politicized than the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime, and so a thick fog of propaganda, both from boosters of the war and its opponents, has obscured the reality of what the Iraqi people have endured and are enduring, under Saddam Hussein and now. For that reason alone, *The Fall of Baghdad* is a great and necessary book. Jon Lee Anderson has drawn on all of his reserves of stamina and personal bravery to create an astonishing portrait of humanity in extremis, a work of great wisdom, human empathy, and moral clarity. He follows a remarkable and diverse group of Iraqis over the course of this extraordinary time: from the all-pervasive fear that comes from living under Saddam's brutal, Orwellian rule to the surreal atmosphere of Baghdad before the invasion; to the invasion's commencement and the regime's death spiral down into its terrible endgame; to America's disastrously ill-conceived seizure of power and its fruits. In channeling a tragedy of epic dimensions through the stories of real people caught up in the whirlwind of history, Jon Lee Anderson has written a book of timeless significance.

## **The Fall of Baghdad Details**

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Author : Jon Lee Anderson

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## From Reader Review The Fall of Baghdad for online ebook

### S. says

not bad, not stunningly brilliant. a few evocative images / characterizations of Baghdad on the eve of battle. Anderson gets points for his topic / staying on through the fall of Baghdad, but he is not an absolute stunner in style or characterization.

actually the thing is, of course, in a few decades everyone will agree that the 2003 invasion was inevitabl. what they'll criticize is the west's non-involvement in the congo war , or the millions' dead "great war of africa." that is called THE IRONY OF HISTORY

(ironic because most liberals/leftists criticize bush's war; nobody is currently calling for greater intervention in africa)

big controversial prediction:

history's verdict will be that the 2003 invasion was a premonitory harbinger of the death of secularism.

mankind's faith in the secular, multicultural republic is being replaced by an increasing focus on religion and supernatural explanations for our irrational world. the highpoint of rationality was 1991.

but then... rationality was never really the point.

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### Szplug says

A book in a similar vein to that of Dexter Filkins' *The Forever War*, in that the author, immersed within the Iraqi capital city in those incredibly tense, strained, and ominous days prior to the unleashing of *Shock and Awe*—and how the newspapers *loved* to see that phrase so crisp and stark upon the printed page—quietly, thoughtfully, and non-partisanly provides a running account of the effect of this expectant state-of-affairs, and the subsequent ruinous aftermath of billowing smoke, cratered terrain, and shattered structures, upon an interesting and complex assemblage of the inter-riverine populace. Even with the privation caused by international sanctions and the iron-rule of the Baathist despot, the citizenry of this well-functioning city went about their lives with a stoic determination that one cannot help but admire. Not all of them hated Saddam, not all those who did wished to see him replaced by an American occupying force, and, most certainly, few of those who would soon be killed anticipated their shortened existence or might have considered it a fair price in exchange for the opportunity to build a functioning democratic nation. Anderson lets their stories—and his amidst them—unfold with a natural rhythm that stands out sharply against the synthetic energy of the the violent storms building and swirling their ravenous way towards this city in the crosshairs. Haunting, dolorous, and packed with a bounty of beautiful imagery and poignant unfolding, *The Fall of Baghdad* has to be considered a must-read amongst the dozens of books written about this post-millennial conflagration.

## Anh Ducharme says

Such a well written book. Lee intersperses compelling portraits of Iraqi citizens, Iraqi history and adeptly portrays the build up and ensuing conflict in Baghdad. It is a thoughtful and touching book. I would highly recommend it.

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## David P says

This is a significant book, recommended to anyone who tries to puzzle out the second Gulf War, which as of this month--December 2004--still goes on. It suggests no clear-cut solutions, but then again, no one at the present time has any. What you get is an eyewitness account by a reporter who covered Baghdad on the eve of the war and who stayed at his post throughout the take-over and its aftermath.

It is quite a story, a view of the war from the Iraqi side. True, most people the author interacted with were a select group, educated and open to westerners. Some were government functionaries, and the reader senses how ambiguous was their support of Saddam, how much a function of the web of fear and informers on which the regime subsisted (one is tempted to compare here with Soviet Russia). Others were doctors and intellectuals, or represented special interests, or tried to stay close to the American correspondent to help ensure the survival of their own households. But one also gets glimpses of the rest of Iraq society--of the great uneducated underemployed underclass and its religious fanatics, at a time when wild rumors replaced solid information. No wonder the future of Iraq sees so dismal.

All of these stand on one side of a great divide, the less familiar side, while on the other are Americans with their arms, dollars and cell phones, a great military power which crushed Iraq into a state of disorder, then allowed the disorder to persist and worsen. It seems remarkable how many informal ties did the author forge with Iraqis of diverse backgrounds--and at the same time, it seems no less remarkable (considering the great US effort invested in the war) how few such ties seemed to have been created between Iraqis and their military conquerors.

The price for that lapse is still being paid. Few now question that a great military achievement was undone by the social upheaval that followed--by the failure to replace an old corrupt regime with, at the very least, an effective temporary order. Instead came a brief pause, during which people like Jon Lee Anderson freely roamed around the country, gathered impressions and talked to people, while the regular economy stagnated and while factions organized, gathering supporters, arms and explosives. In hindsight it seems now that even retaining the old army, police and government (except for its top leadership) may have been a better policy.

The book leads its reader through that dark confused transition, a mood which the author conveys very well. By now this deterioration is far gone, and maybe nothing can prevent a full-scale civil war, possibly followed by another oppressive dictatorship. There are lessons to be learned here, and while it may be too late to apply them to Iraq, they may still guide us in other erupting trouble spots, in the Moslem world, in Africa and Asia, maybe even parts of Latin America. Lessons about the importance of maintaining a civic framework, of the instability brought by the wide availability of weapons and explosives, especially in poor overpopulated societies, at times when marginal livelihoods are disrupted by fighting. Unfortunately, those very same ingredients already exist in too many other places!

And yet, as the book shows, the author also found in Iraq well-educated, well-motivated, creative and sincere

people. It may be a sign of worse things to follow, but as the book ends, in the middle of 2004, many have given up and have fled the country.

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### **Charlene says**

i definitely recommend this one. another viewpoint into the "shock and awe" bs, written by someone who was there. and had been there to be able to describe the before and after.

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### **Elizabeth Eva says**

A strong start and then it lagged, and was dogged by the author's obsession with a Saddam insider he befriended and the author's own questionable behavior as he put himself and his Iraqi fixers in precarious positions.

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### **Mubeen Irfan says**

We have all heard of the Iraq war and how it has proved to be the mother of all modern terror in world. There are numerous books which debate this thesis, this book isn't one of them.

Jon Lee is a veteran journalist who has done something different than debating the pros and cons of American invasion of Iraq. He has written a memoir about the city itself, the city of Baghdad, which is also the birthplace of human civilization. The writer was in and out of Baghdad before, during and after the invasion of Iraq and has written down a memoir of what the city went through as the shadows of war were looming large on the city and when those dark clouds actually descended on the city.

I am sure we all know about WMDs that weren't there. Again, the writer doesn't talk about those WMDs because that would have meant arguing the merits of this war which he is shying away from, rightly so. His time in Baghdad was with an average Baghdadi resident who hated Saddam due to torture inflicted on him or his family by Saddam and as part of his job he also sat in the drawing rooms of people close to regime, the Baath party members and ministers. He saw war from their perspective. Reading the book you feel how a superpower like USA could be so naive to think that ordinary Iraqis would stand up to welcome them for giving them freedom. It almost felt like that there was no groundwork to war.

If I were to put it in a nutshell: Iraqis wanted Saddam out but they didn't want the Americans in. Someone should have put on the drawing board how to achieve that but that's an ideal world and we aren't living in one.

This is an absolutely amazing book and one which I came across by chance. Full 5 stars.

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### **Lori says**

A good, intimate intro into just how ugly all sides of this war have been.

### **Aaron Shields says**

War is awful. All involved people are impacted drastically. Anderson's portrayal was powerful, and harrowing. I get his political bent as well, but it still got old that the majority of his portrayals of American troops involved them either being cruel, saying stupid stuff, or a combination of both. I'm sure he encountered American troops who did their job well, and weren't terrorizing Iraqi citizens while doing it. But I must have missed those depictions. Or maybe they didn't happen when he was in Iraq?

Either way, solid book. Author has stones for reporting from the front lines.

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### **Casae says**

Wanna know about the wars we're fighting, but all the info seems too messy and opaque. Try this book, has an easy nonfiction novel reading style. A quick read and you'll realize that you now know more about the Iraq War than you thought you'd ever be able to get from one book.

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### **Megha says**

I have read many books on the Iraq occupation, but one book that gave accounts without bias, reporting incidents as seen, was this book by Jon Lee Anderson. Though Anderson is an American, not once in the book his perspective seems biased.

One thing that sets the book apart from others is the fact that when the war broke, while hundreds of journalist either moved out or were forcefully pulled out of Iraq, Anderson, due to last moment complication, had to stay back in war zone. While America was bombing, he walked around the streets freely, safely, something he says was not possible post American occupation.

Another good thing about this book is, Anderson had friends and acquaintance from all sections of society, politicians, doctors, artists, rich, poor, US returned Shia politition, even Mukhabarat, the secret police of Saddam. He doesnt not crack poor jokes at the Iraqi situation, not judge the people, nor point fingers or preach, something I have seen in other books.

There is one thing that I felt could have deemed the book whole- An account from Muqtada Al Sadr/Mahdi Army. But otherwise this book is best I have read on the subject.

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### **Hai Quan says**

The propaganda arm of the Mafia Bosses , namely most if not all owners of the mass media, from newspapers , magazines, televisions,broadcasting stations to publishers of books have done a very effective job to blind all people from the true pictures of every newsworthy events .

In all wars, they gave you only the pictures they want you to see.Particularly in the American invasion of

Iraq, they shamelessly lied to all people of the world about how the American "liberators" were "welcomed" by the Iraqis .

It seems to me almost all reporters are right wing rednecks. Regardless of their backgrounds, they are all molded by the same kind of mass media mentioned above from the very early age .It is little wonder why they are all {or almost all} turned out to be who they are :Blind , unthinking robots for the unseen MASTERS , the rich boys mentioned above, who owned them, hired and fired them , who told them what and how to write.

One small example : They are all crowing about how "evil" were "terrorists" , how noble and good was the "war on terror" , just like a bunch of robots with G. W. Bush Jr. hiding behind a curtain pulling the strings.They , these robots possessed unseeing eyes, unthinking brains ( in fact there was no brains) , unfeeling hearts ( actually there was no hearts to speak about )

Robots they were, because they did not see that the biggest, most fearsome terrorist was G W Bush Jr, and what kind of the terror he had wreaked upon the Iraqis ? , well,just ask any Iraqi, regardless of age, political and religious affiliations.They will tell you !

So it is rather heartening to find among these robots a reporter who is a breathing and thinking human being ! And not just any human being, he is a man with ideal, with conviction, with conscience , with honesty and courage , the courage to go against the mainstream---- when the mainstream is faulted with slave-and-master mentality, lies, dishonesty,bigot, stupidity,shamelessness, for-money-only-and-to hell-with-the -truth attitude---to tell the truth as he had seen it.

From his narration the readers can see most Iraqi loathed and hated the American invaders as much as they hated Saddam Hussein and for easy to understand reasons. Instead of summarizing them, I will quote some of the most prominent incidents reported by the author to highlight the HATE the Iraqi harbored toward the invaders.

" I know Saddam Hussein very well, and I know he will fight until the last minute of the war.I TOO AM PREPARED TO DIE, BECAUSE I AM NOT PREPARED TO ACCEPT AMERICAN OCCUPIERS IN MY COUNTRY" ( Muhammad Morhaffer al-Adhami,a Baarhist Party deputy and the dean of political science at Baghdad University } - page 87

Here is another gem : I will quote , with unimportant details omitted, the report found on page 330 :

" As the (American) soldiers fanned out on the streets,a loud commotion erupted, Iraqi men and boys had crowded around in front of a small kebab house.....the (Iraqi) shopkeeper was standing about two feet away from the ( American ) man ( military officer) and APPEARED TO OPENLY DEFYING HIM. HE WORE AN EXPRESSION OF CONTEMPT , and he was speaking in rough English and pointing challengingly to the hand-bills in the officer's hands.

"What is this?" the shopkeeper shouted "I don't want this. Go away!Why are you here ?".He turned and said something in Arabic to his friends ,who laughed and leered at the psy ops ( psychological warfare operations) man.

Looking confused,psy ops asked his interpreter : "What's he saying?".

Before he could answer, the shopkeeper ,coming closer ,said in English:"You should leave.Go away.I hate you "

Turning his back ,psy ops said , "I hate you too", and walked off.

..... The Iraqi was jabbing crudely at the American's face with a finger. I noticed for the first time that the psy ops man's tongue was pierced.

The Iraqi shouted ,in English:"What is this? Are you a man?"

The psy ops man, smiling, replied : " Sure, I am a man "

"No!" retorted the Iraqi,who turned and said something in Arabic to his friends,who laughed and yelled things at the American.

Psy ops began to turn away.

"No, don't turn away!" the Iraqi shouted at him."Aren't you a man?"

Psy ops turned back to him.He wore an uncertain look.

"Only women do this," the man yelled, sneering and POKING HIM AGAIN IN THE MOUTH WITH HIS FINGER.

Psy ops stared at the man for a moment, and then he told his translator "Tell him it's for eating pussy".He grinned and waggled his tongue lewdly at the shopkeeper.

.....

Whew ! Can you imagine ?

.....

Here are some other gems :

.....Soon an old (Iraqi) man's shrieking voice could be heard over the loudspeakers. Salih ( the author's translator) translated for me.Imam Harith Dhari began with a story about a recent outrage,one of many that he said were being committed by the U. S. military forces.It had to do with a village where the American had conducted house-to-house searches."They even search the women" screamed the imam.Then he bellowed out : " Iraqis!.Do you agree with this ?"

"NO" , came the resounding cry from the assemblage.

The imam went on:"Iraqis are losing their patience ! We warn the occupiers: Our patience will soon be over.And if they continue to insult the dignity of Iraqis, they will see something new from the resistance!" (P 342)

.....There were perhaps five or six thousand men, who chanted, "Down with colonialism, " "God is great".and "Down with the occupiers".....One of the imams yelled out : "We will confront the occupiers from the north of Iraq to the south , from Basra and Baghdad ,Ramadi and Fallujah !" At the mention of Fallujah, which had the emblematic of the anti-American resistance, there was A HUGE CHORUS FROM THE CROWD OF ;"LONG LIVE THE FALLUJAH" (P 343)

.....One day , over lunch at his home ,Ali, a Sunni businessman,expressed his views candidly:"The suicide bombers mostly come from outside Iraq, but I 'll tell you, as Iraqis, when we hear that one of these people has killed American, we ARE HAPPY.WE ARE ALL HAPPY .Anyone who says differently is LYING to you" (p 345)

.....One of them,who called himself Abu Abdullah,speaking in perfectly comprehensible English,said to me:"The Americans should leave,that's all we need.There won't be any terrorist operations when they go.We don't need America to fix this country or to build this country.Just to leave,my friend." (p 345)

.....

What will you call a local person who collaborate with foreign troops who invade his country ? We all call this person TRAITOR, but judging from the behavior of the American soldiers in the story quoted above, and the universal hate of the local people toward the "liberators" , I would like to call the collaborators with foreign invaders INSECTS. Why ? TRAITOR seemed just not enough to fully describe the despicable act of betraying your country for the money, food, clothing , fame and power the invaders use to buy his collaboration for their act of robbing his motherland 's sacred sovereignty, the dignity and the self-respect of not only himself but of his people, the brutal wholesale , indiscriminate massacre of unarmed local civilians by the foreign troops to subdue their resistance.

In short, the TRAITORS should be called INSECTS, and be treated accordingly by the nationalists who defend the honor and independence of their beloved fatherland.

From the definition above, we can see there are only a small number of Iraqi traitors, the majority of Iraqi are fervent patriots.

Hurry, get yourself a copy of this book immediately if you have not done so !!!  
(All capitalized letters are mine)

More later

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## **Matt says**

This is a great book. I went for it because I'd read his "Guerillas" and noticed the top-shelf plaudits from everywhere, bringing up the usual hyperbolic comparisons with Orwell, etc.

It's not that Anderson's book isn't excellent. It's really, REALLY great. I just get picky when people start throwing around the greats every time they like something. Probably because I have a tendency to do so, too.

Anyway- Anderson writes extremely well: lucidly and evenly paced, with that slight tinge of English restraint and understatement. The prose is open, simple, sparkingly clear without flourish or exaggeration. It melts off the page. You read it quickly, but in a really good way.

Interesting:

He describes all the people he encounters with minimal physical description (and with repeating the exact same adjectives for each person, which gets annoying) but somehow you get a fuller picture of them as people through their language and phrasing and the way they walk and what they're actually doing as Anderson follows them around. Somehow he's able to make you feel that you've met them, you care about their well-being (and when the subject is Iraq, you're going to be in for some heartache) and are happy to see them re-appear pages later. As I write this it strikes me that this is a pretty huge literary accomplishment.

Politically: it's no nonsense- he doesn't take sides (I have no idea what his opinion was or is on the war, pro

or con, though he does seem vaguely left leaning) and pretty much gently criticizes the extremes on either side.

What he focuses on is the story of ordinary Iraqi people living through the build up and shortly after the invasion.

This approach isn't exactly unheard of but it's so valuable because most of the books one's going to read about Iraq in America are likely to be of the "How Bush Failed", "Twilight Of The West" variety....which is all the good, but still. Anybody remember the Iraqi people? Or even try to?

And they come out as, well, fellow human beings. One of the best profiles is of one of Saddam's portrait artists, a former doctor, someone whom Saddam apparently had deep respect for who wasn't political or a sycophant. They would walk together in the palace garden and ask each other questions, as anyone would. Saddam told his goons to lay off of his family and the artist held his nose and did some tacky portraiture at Saddam's behest. He ducks the question of "how could you be friends with a dictator" because of having actually known Saddam as an actual person. He mumbles something vapid and heartwarmingly evasive about everyone having a good side and a bad side. Very interesting to have heard this story which I'm doing no justice to whatsoever. Point is, he's still a monster but someone saw him as a human kind of monster. Which is-sort of- what we read books to experience, right?

Interestingly, as much as there's the expected Saddam hatred many people do seem to have a certain dazed fondness for him. It's more of a the devil you know being better than the devil you don't. I once heard that millions came out for Stalin's funeral (which could very well have been at gunpoint or exaggerated or something) and if any part of that is true then the subsequent sad insight into human nature is displayed again here.

Ultimately, the reader gets the feeling that the Iraqi people aren't exactly sure what to make of the whole thing- which means they're like 90% of reasonable humans everywhere. It's a mess. A tragic, desperate, veritiginous situation on both the local and global scale. Moving, complex, tragic and endlessly interesting.

Anderson takes the measure of things, and we are very much in his debt. If you're looking for a good Iraq book and want to avoid any kind of polemic, just stroll around the desert for a while and watch war slowly creep in, this book will fit beautifully.

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## **Jake says**

I suppose the one silver lining to the inexplicable laziness of U.S. journalism in the run up to the Iraq War is that a wealth of critical and poignant reporting came out of the war itself. This book is joined by *Assassin's Gate*, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City*, *The Forever War*, *The Good Soldiers*, and *Night Draws Near* in the canon of American "Iraq books" that seem likely to endure. Anderson's book is unique among the group in that Anderson was living in Baghdad before, and concludes his book shortly after, the American invasion in 2003. Anderson is a courageous reporter, and the fact that I read this book ten years after it was published did not in any way diminish its portentousness.

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## **Pablo says**

Un relato interesante, pero excesivamente largo, no tanto sobre la caída de Bagdad como sugiere el título, sino sobre la experiencia y el trabajo de un periodista de guerra. No es un libro para quien

espere un relato histórico o divulgativo de aquella guerra. Lo más fascinante me ha resultado la ambigua figura de Ala Bashir, el artista y médico personal de Hussein.

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