

Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq Study Guide

**Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq by Riverbend
(blogger)**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Foreword, and Sunday, August 17, 2003.....	4
Friday, August 29, 2003.....	6
Tuesday, September 16, 2003.....	8
Sunday, October 5, 2003.....	10
Friday, October 31, 2003.....	13
Sunday, November 30, 2003.....	15
January through March 2004.....	17
Friday, February 20, 2004.....	19
April Through September, 2004.....	21
Saturday, May 15, 2004.....	23
Characters.....	25
Objects/Places.....	29
Themes.....	31
Style.....	34
Quotes.....	36
Topics for Discussion.....	37

Plot Summary

The book account of Baghdad Burning is unlike most other novels with characters, plot, and a significant resolution towards the end. The account of Baghdad Burning is in fact a collection of blog articles, comments, and diary entries by an anonymous Iraqi woman who called herself Riverbend.

Riverbend is seemingly young and only 24 at the time of the Second Gulf War and the subsequent Occupation and her entries reflect a young person's struggle to understand and survive what is happening around her as her country is literally blown apart by the opposing sides in the ongoing 'War Against Terror'. At times defiant and angry, whilst at others sympathetic, weary or heartbroken, Riverbend's account of this year covers the full range of human emotions and the individual entries weave together to form a narrative of sorts of what happened in the first year of the Occupation, but told from a civilian in Iraq, and not a 'sponsored' or 'sanctioned' nor 'embedded' journalist.

Riverbend starts her online blog talking about the installment of what she names 'the Puppet Council' (the GC, or the Governing Council of presidential candidates selected by the CPA, or Cpalition Provisional Authority). Her blog starts to analyse and respond to events in the news and attempt to decry the propaganda that she sees taking over her country. In amongst these highly intelligent and witty articles are accounts of her home life as a young woman in Baghdad, including all the small minutiae of life from the pre-Eid cleaning to sleeping on the roof and the making of traditional Iraqi food.

As her account continues, Riverbend sees her home city of Baghdad changing around her, swinging to a more fundamentalist interpretation of custom and she starts to be scared to go out of the house. Meanwhile friends, relatives and neighbours tell her of stories of kidnappings, accidental killings, and internments in the dreadful Abu Ghraib Prison.

As her narrative goes on, Riverbend responds to emails and criticism online, making the story very much an 'active' and almost a 'participatory' one, reflecting the immediate and often chaotic nature of the news and war journalism. Riverbend herself muses on the past and what the future has in store for her family and her country as History rolls itself out around her; from the political instability of the Governing Council to the uprising of Moqtadr Al-Sadr in the south. The American siege of Fallujeh and the terrible events at Abu Ghraib, Nick berg and the numerous high profile kidnappings. Throughout all of this Riverbend unerringly expresses an everyman and everywoman view from that of an ordinary Iraqi, and reflects, we must presume, what many civilians were thinking and fearing at the time of the occupation.

By the end of the narrative, Riverbend and her family has survived, but we can see that the war and the occupation has changed her and her family considerably. By the final few passages we meet a mature, weary woman whose honest dialogue forces us to ask questions about the meaning of the words Occupation, Liberation, and Civilian.



Foreword, and Sunday, August 17, 2003.

Foreword, and Sunday, August 17, 2003. Summary and Analysis

The beginning of the novelization of Riverbend's blog, Baghdad Burning, starts with a foreword by James Ridgeway, putting the events that occur in historical context. Ridgeway's account broadly talks about what happened during the Second Iraq War and the subsequent Coalition occupation, as well as historical facts of what events were catalogued 'behind the scenes' (such as Paul Wolfowitz becoming one of the 'architects for war').

The blog itself starts with Riverbend 'waking up' and describing what it is like to be awoken, suddenly or quietly, in an occupied country. From here her entries move on to describe the political current situation in Iraq: that the CPA (the Coalition Provisional Authority) have set up a rotating presidency of nine candidates; each who get to govern Iraq for a month at a time so that the Iraqi people might see their 'style' of leadership. Riverbend finds this chaos laughable, as all of the candidates appear to be corrupt, dishonest or fairly brutal.

During the next section, Riverbend talks about her new found ability - whilst on one of her rooftop talks with her brother 'E' she hears gunfire and manages to correctly diagnose it as Kalashnikov rifle fire. Her brother is impressed but sad to find out that his sister now has the ability that most Iraqi's have: to distinguish and observe the different sounds of conflict and assess their danger.

Riverbend's first few entries concerns 'setting the record straight' and setting up the whole picture of Iraq to an uninformed outsider. She moves on in her next account to discuss Al-Chalabi, one of the principle figures who was head of the INC (the Iraqi National Council outside of Iraq) who supported the Coalition case for toppling Saddam. She recounts how Chalabi is thought of as a figure of fun by most Iraqi's, mainly for the suspicion of dishonesty that hangs over his head (Chalabi the real figure has since been complicated in the massive fraud of a Jordanian Bank), and his unswerving loyalty to the Coalition cause. She goes on to mention how that Chalabi's gang of militia whom the INC recruited when they came into Iraq after the war set about hijacking cars (or 'confiscating' them for the INC) and then selling them across the Kurdish territories.

The very next day sees Riverbend describing how she feels in relation to the Americans. She describes how she does not hate them or wish there to be a civil war or an armed resistance, but numerous and many atrocities and annoyances make her angry such as 'friendly fire' and 'mistaken killing' to the roadside checkpoints, and their apparent lack of ability to create a secure situation for the ordinary Iraqi.

The next few entries talk about the welfare of women in Iraq, the state of the economy, and deeper look at the rotating presidential council. Riverbend recounts how it is now,



since the war, impossible for women to leave their homes unattended, as they could become the targets of fundamentalists or even abductions. The next post relates how this was never the state in the 'old' Iraq which was, nominally, secular (and so women had certain equalities and rights equal to that of men). During this account, Riverbend also decries the 'corporate invasion' of Iraq, where external companies are predominant in the rebuilding and reconstruction project. Riverbend tells the readers how, because of the First Gulf War and previous to that the civil war the overthrow of the monarchy, Iraq has actually got a wealth of talented engineers, builders and architects. They have had to develop their own highly skilful professions to rebuild their country and yet, none of this expertise is being put to use by the non-national companies.

Analysis:

The very first 'month' of Riverbend's blog of Baghdad Burning can be read as a very candid introduction to the modern occupation-era Iraq. It starts with 'waking up' and recounting what it is like to be awakened either immediately with the noise of gunfire or slowly with the fear of what has happened during the night or might happen during this new day. This start to the blog in itself can be viewed symbolically as the 'awakening' of the blog to the world, and gives the start of the blog an almost unreal, nightmarish-like quality as if the reader (and Riverbend) had suddenly woken into a dream of war and terror.

Her next sections seek to 'set the record straight' in relation to Iraq: what is really happening, and what it feels like to be an Iraqi citizen. She broadly introduces the theme of Women's rights by self-reflexively discussing her role as a woman in Iraq society, and her fears for the future (unfortunately to be proved true). She then introduces the major movers and shakers (or whom we can think about as characters) in the Occupation government; Bremer, Chalabi, and the rest of the rotating presidency of the Governing Council. Most of this information comes as news to the Western Reader, who will have merely been told by the media that there 'is now a Governing Council' not what confusion this institution is causing.

In a way the blog resembles a play as the different factions, groups and characters are introduced in the first month. Riverbend tries to clearly define her intentions and her allegiances (by stating that she does not hate Americans), but rather that she is faced with many numerous small acts of injustice and criminality on a daily basis, and that all of these are at odds with the propaganda being supported by the media, the CPA and the IGC respectively.



Friday, August 29, 2003.

Friday, August 29, 2003. Summary and Analysis

The next section of entries begins characteristically with shocking news; that the head of SCIRI (the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq) Al-Hakim was assassinated, and Riverbend tries to work out what this means for her community. SCIRI were an organisation that Riverbend feared would turn Iraq into a 'clone of Iran' with less secularism and more a more traditional religious approach to laws and the civil state, but, Riverbend still opposed the assassination. She wonders at the alleged complicity of his own militia group 'Badr's Brigade' - that the explosion might have actually been representative of an internal conflict within the group rather than the machinations of another militia, resistance, conspiracy or even Al-Qaeda.

Over the next few days, Riverbend manages to leave her house with her mother and her brother and uncle acting as bodyguards. She reveals how a normal twenty minute shopping trip now took forty-five minutes of checkpoints, delays, and agonising tensions as they assess each and every parked car and passing stranger to see if they will suddenly turn into an attacker, an abductor, or a one of the militiamen. When she returns from her trip she finds that Salam Pax, one of the most famous of the Iraqi bloggers, has left a post on his own blog talking about Al-Hakim's assassination, and Riverbend tries to respond with what she feels: that she is scared that this recent death is a sign of Baghdad and Iraq becoming ever more increasingly divided, both ethnically, racially and religiously. Now it is necessary to define oneself according to your origin and beliefs; a Shi'a, or Sunni, Turkomen or Christian or a Christian Palestinian... these distinctions, Riverbend predicts, will only serve to make the divisions worse and further segregate society rather than to unify it.

The situation in Iraq becomes more unstable over the next few entries as Riverbend describes bombings, assassinations and political visits. Donald Rumsfeld, the American Defence politician himself visits Iraq and claims that Baghdad is 'just like Chicago' (Riverbend is amazed at this piece of rhetoric, and counters his claim that it is just like Chicago if Rumsfeld was talking about the 1920's Chicago run by Al Capone and his armed gangs). Just after the anniversary of September eleventh, the new interim cabinet of the Iraqi Governing Council is sworn in; a representative group featuring Sunni, Shia, Christians, Kurds and Turkomen leaders. Despite the media applause for this event, Riverbend finds it strange that this new cabinet were not elected (voted for in an election), nor do they have a constitution to uphold (it not being written yet).

In the following entries, Riverbend switches her narrative from discussing the media and the political events of the country to recounting the story of Abu Ra'ad, a neighbour who had disappeared months before. The neighbourhood gathered together to help comfort the surviving wife and to try and find out what had happened to the young man. Was he shot by the Coalition or abducted? Was he a victim of one of the countless roadside bombs? Riverbend tells the readers how there are numerous unknown casualties of the



occupation - people who have died because of the roadside bombs or have had their cars hijacked or merely been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Simple graves are set up with a description of the body and the car that they drove by the roadsides so the families might one day track down their missing relatives, and now, one area that was previously 'dangerous' and now deemed 'secure' is open to the general public to travel through. Here a friend of the neighbourhood discovers a grave bearing the relevant details of Abu Ra'ad's make of car and general description. There is no way of finding out how or why he died, only that his car came under heavy fire and was burned.

The diary entries in the latter few days of August and early September is concerned with the rising criminality in Baghdad, and the apparent difference between the propaganda and the actual experience of life in the city.

Starting with the shocking news that the head of SCIRI (The Supreme Council for the Silamic Revolution in Iraq) had been assassinated (politically one of the last people that would be expected to be assassinated at this time, as they are ideologically more aligned with the anti-Coalition stance), Riverbend goes on to reveal how this has been described by the American media as an Al-Qaida plot, but locals on the ground believe it either to be infighting in the Governing Council or a disaffected member of SCIRI itself reacting against their organisation.

This theme of Propaganda is continued when Rumsfeld himself visits Iraq and claims that it is 'just like Chicago' in actual fact, Riverbend counters, it is nothing like Chicago as she uses the story of Abu Ra'ad, the disappeared to illustrate. What we see here happening is a rise in the efforts by the Coalition to strengthen the CPA and the occupation by putting a positive 'spin' on the reconstruction of Iraq, totally ignoring that actually, there are daily tragedies and mysterious killings that are tearing apart the lives of the people. We see from Riverbend's writing an almost - controlled chaos, one which is dangerous and threatening to break down into total civil war at any moment.

In a canny prescience of the later walls that were erected across Baghdad and 'the Awakening' ethnic militia groups of recent years that have been sanctioned by the Coalition, Riverbend warns that Iraq is splitting into sectarianism and division.



Tuesday, September 16, 2003.

Tuesday, September 16, 2003. Summary and Analysis

The period covering September to October of 2003, Iraq sees the assassination of Akila Al-Hashimi, the only woman on the governing council and a prominent advocate of secular women's rights in the new Iraq. Also at this time the Governing Council announces that they are suspending the two major news networks Al-Arabia and Al-Jazeera from broadcasting.

This 'month' of entries begins by Riverbend discussing 'the fairy' of Iraq: or the mysterious link between Al-Qaeda and nuclear weapons and the Saddam regime. Riverbend takes a sardonic tone that, just like any other fairytale creature, if anyone can find 'the fairy' they will receive a pot of gold. Moving on from this, Riverbend discusses girl power in the modern Iraq. Upon watching a programme entitled 'Women in Iraq' focussing on the freedoms that Iraqi women 'now have' [sic], the interviewers state that women can now enjoy a lot of freedoms thanks to the Coalition. Riverbend is disgusted at this propaganda, as entirely the reverse is true: women and girls are leaving their jobs and their education by the hundreds in Baghdad as they fear for their lives. Riverbend tells the tale of one family whose daughter and son were abducted for a ransom from the family by an armed gang, and it was only when one of the abductors took pity on her did the young siblings find the courage to flee into the city. Apparently there were tens of girls and children being held captive by these abductors in Iraq.

The next diary entry again switches to the personal. Where Riverbend is thinking about the rising criminality in the region. One of their neighbours, Abu-A was a retired army general whose house upon their street was raided by Coalition forces. 'E' and Riverbend took to the roof when they heard the helicopters and the approaching tanks, in time to see the Coalition troops break into Abu-A's house and drag outside his family (including his young daughter with nothing but a nightie on). This display is an absolute humiliation for the Iraqi, and one of their neighbours rushed forward with a blanket to help the girl, but the soldiers ordered him back with guns. Abu-A was taken away, only to be returned later as apparently without any threat or conspiracy.

The next entry is almost a joking, sarcastic entry offering Iraq up for sale to the highest bidder. It has since become public knowledge that Paul Wolfowitz has banned companies from any country that wasn't involved in the invasion to be a part of the reconstruction (France, Germany, China etc). Riverbend describes how Haliburton have now secured the majority of the reconstruction contracts, and are completely overtaking the 'home-grown' industry, ignoring the fact that Iraq has many specialists and professionals in the oil industry, architectural engineering and the like.

Then the news comes that Al-Chalabi has suspended the two independent news networks during the first inaugural meetings and talks of the Governing Council. Alongside this comes the news of Akila Al-Hashimi's death from an assassination



attempt, and that of a huge funeral procession. With it, Riverbend wonders about the fate of women's civil liberties.

The final section of this 'month' Riverbend uses to talk about Iraqi culture, and in particular the system of sheikhs that exist in Iraq and elsewhere in the Arab world. Riverbend describes how a Sheikh can really be considered to be one of the 'heads of a family' and that extended family groups are commonplace (often mixing Sunni and Shi'a ethnicities as the family grows and spreads). Over these large groups the Sheikh's rule and his wife is similar to the 'First Lady' of the family. Riverbend has never met her Sheikh, but recounts how the Sheikh is the one whom you can turn to with almost any grievance of a family nature; be it an unhappy marriage, a family spat or a full blown feud. What brings this to light is the fact that the Coalition had tried to convene a council of Sheikh's to help them ease the process of the reconstruction, but seriously embarrassed the Sheikh's by not answering their questions or offering them anything in return. Not understanding that these were important people; the Coalition gave the impression that they were just trying to use their good graces to help in their efforts, and the Sheikh's all left the meeting.

Analysis:

In the month of September (featuring the anniversary of the Twin Tower bombings, and also the assassination of one of the leading women figures at that time in Iraq), Riverbend again focuses on the rise of criminality and the ineptitude that she sees in the way the Coalition Authority is trying to administer Iraq.

Through this month she slips into the satirical to advertise Iraq 'for sale' as she uses this technique to discuss the corporate take over of her country and the fact that Iraqi national companies and companies from outside of the Coalition are both at a serious disadvantage when trying to bid for projects to try and rebuild Iraq. The satirical gesture is a classic gesture used by reporters and journalists traditionally when they have no 'official' power or voice, and is reminiscent of Private Eye, The Onion and political comedy. This mood of satire is continued as Riverbend includes the article about the 'fairy' of Iraq, or the missing link between al-Qaida and Saddam Hussein which was nominally one of the reasons why the Coalition sought to go to war against Iraq in the first place (after the September eleventh bombings).

Running through this section we can almost see a clash of cultures as Riverbend switches between the management practices of Chalabi and his INC, and that of the traditional Iraqi culture. It feels like the propaganda and the Coalition 'line' (such as the existence of the 'fairly' link) is contrasted against Riverbend's account of the Sheikh's and traditional family life in Iraq. On the one hand we have a lot of media involvement and misrepresentation as Chalabi and the Governing Council try to proclaim what Iraq is really like, and what the people desire, whilst on the other hand Riverbend's account of the family and tribal society appears somehow clean, honest and honourable compared to the sound-bites and the political spin.



Sunday, October 5, 2003.

Sunday, October 5, 2003. Summary and Analysis

The month of October, for Riverbend, sees her blog coming under increasing attack by online criticism as her house also comes under the threat of a raid. Mass demonstrations start to occur around Baghdad as more and more of the ordinary people try to oppose what they see as the corrupt Governing Council and the scandal's coming out of Bremer's CPA (the Coalition Provisional Authority).

During the first three entries, Riverbend talks about the increasing Riots outside of the American Embassies and down town Baghdad, as people start to become angrier and angrier at the coalition occupation. The next day Riverbend, her mother and her male bodyguards go to the stores to buy stationary for the young girls in their neighbourhood to start school with. The girls eagerly fall upon their new school year, only to find that the school which they are about to attend almost has next to nothing in the way of supplies. A friendly father agrees to paint the classrooms, and every child must bring their own stool or chair to sit on. 'E' and the fathers have agreed that they will be guarding the school during the day and especially at the start and the end of the school day in case of raid's, shootings, or the armed criminal gangs.

A few nights later, the street on which Riverbend lives is threatened a raid by Coalition troops. Riverbend recounts how Iraqi families try to keep or hide about them all the gold and valuable jewellery that they have. It has become common for Iraqi families to put more faith in physical commodities such as jewellery, necklaces, rings, and anything gold than money. In this unstable time, the 'family treasures' will be far more valuable in case of an emergency then cash or bonds since their value can fluctuate wildly. As their street is filled with tanks and helicopters, Riverbend and her sisters are told to wear all of the family gold (as gold trinkets and the giving of gold is a common custom for birthdays, weddings and feasts) rather than hide it wear it is often looted by even the Coalition troops.

This focus on the life of everyday people in Iraq continues as Riverbend concentrates her next diary entry on the fate of the palm trees in Iraq. A lot of Palm trees used to be grown through Iraq and the suburbs of Baghdad; these provided wood, fuel, basket-weaving and of course dates (which are used in every conceivable way). An orchard of palm trees can be a families fortune and their investment in the future; whereas the Coalition troops only see the small groves as possible hiding spaces for snipers and bombs. Many lines and plantations of palm trees have been cut down and left to rot, enraging the farmers and the local people.

Alongside this comes the news that the Baghdad hotel has been bombed, as has the Red Cross Building, and the Red Cross have decided to pull out of Iraq as the Coalition cannot secure their smooth running in the country. Amidst all of this furore (which Riverbend documents, revealing how crucial the Red Cross have been in saving lives



and ensuring adequate rationing to starving people), Riverbend speaks on how it has come to light that the CPA has seemingly 'lost' four billion pounds in funds. These funds were supposedly used in the reconstruction effort, alongside the newly elected Governing Council, but that the figures have not added up and Bremer is being asked to report to Washington to discuss these findings.

In the final sections of this month, Riverbend herself and her blog comes under attack as other commentators claim that she is not really Iraqi or that she is merely a detractor from all of the good that the Coalition is doing. In particular is one blog called 'riverSbend' that appears, closely aping her own blog, but taking an entirely contradictory stance: supporting Bush and the Coalition where Riverbend opposes it, pointing out the necessity of cutting down trees where Riverbend talks about its travesty. There follows a few days where Riverbend has to point out to her general readership that this second blog is not in fact her, but friends have used their internet skills to reveal that it in fact belongs to a retired US Army officer living in Texas.

Analysis:

The month of October contains within it several interesting events; the financial scandal that is rocking Bremer's office at the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, and the fact that Riverbend's blog itself comes under direct criticism and apparent plagiarism.

There is an interesting contrast here between the politics of the region (through the figure of Bremer and the actions of the Governing Council) and the demonstrations of people on the streets of Baghdad. Riverbend reveals that the situation within Iraq is far more complicated than it is made out by the media interviews and the headlines in the newspapers, as everyday Iraqi's are subject to kidnappings, abuse and even looting by the criminal gangs springing up in Baghdad (and even some theft by the Coalition troops). In a situation such as the Iraq occupation which has now become 'history' for the world, we see that there are actually many different versions of that 'history' lives and experienced by the people of Iraq. The anonymous figure of Riverbend is documenting those 'other histories' and we see that this brings her into a direct confrontation with other bloggers and online commentators.

Whilst the novel of Baghdad Burning is in part a historical memoir, it can also be seen in this way as a participatory document, one in which the anonymous authoress reacts to the actions around her, and in particular the actions of the comments and the online community. This facet makes Baghdad Burning a fascinating document as it chronicles not only Riverbend's feelings, but also what people were thinking about her. and how that in turn effected her own record accordingly.

When Riverbend receives the dubious honour of imitation (even if it is an imitation used to detract from everything she is trying to say), we can see that Riverbend, alongside Salam Pax are engaged in a struggle to tell the real story of Baghdad. History itself is being written, and bloggers such as Riverbend and Pax are engaged in that struggle to define what gets remembered. Two examples of this could be; at the start of the war the Coalition did not want to refer to their time in Iraq as 'an Occupation' but rather 'the



reconstruction' (bloggers such as Riverbend and Salam Pax helped redefine this so that the word 'occupation' came to be more regularly used), or also the differences of perspectives of Palm Trees (where the Coalition forces see them as possible threats, whilst the Baghdadi's see them as a necessary resource). These two events speak of a clash of interpretation which is still occurring today over the events following the Iraqi Wars, and in the future the strongest voice will be regarded as 'historical fact'.



Friday, October 31, 2003.

Friday, October 31, 2003. Summary and Analysis

The month of October for Riverbend includes the month-long festival of Ramadhan and the increasing hostilities of Operation Iron Hammer.

Her entries in this section begins by Riverbend talking about the start of the Ramadhan festivity, or the holy month in which many Muslim's fast during the hours daylight, only to break their fast when the sun has set. This period is supposed to mark an intense spiritual time for the practising Muslim, one which heightens their appreciation of their faith, themselves and the divinity. It is also customary to concentrate on family, community and friends, and many Muslims choose to travel to their close relations to break their fast. In Riverbend's blog she starts by explaining Ramadhan and the glorious feasts that she would normally be able to enjoy, but ends by commenting that this Ramadhan there is less food, and little chance that they will be able to see many of their relatives because of the evening curfew still in place across Baghdad.

The next few days however, does present some visitors to the Riverbend household. Over the next entry we hear the story of one of the Baghdad campuses at which the friend and E both attend. Apparently, amidst the increased hostilities there has also been a change in the security protocols of those guarding the campus. An armed fight almost broke out as private militia men demanded to inspect all of the students entering and leaving the campus, and the scuffle was about to turn into a gunfight until the Iraqi Police and the Dean of the University showed up to try and calm the situation. Riverbend is amazed how everything, everywhere is still in chaos and her next entry, examining the Puppet Council, reflects this. Bremer has been summoned back again to Washington amidst rumours of his dismissal or resignation, because the Governing Council is appearing to be corrupt, or at least inept in their duties. Half of the rotating nine presidential candidates never appear for their steering committee meetings, and leave the country regularly (despite the current Coalition crack down). Riverbend analyses the problems as that most of the Governing Council have already set up their homes, families and businesses outside of Iraq, and thus have to be away for a large part of their time. Her opinion (and one that we suspect is widespread) is that people wish for 'home grown' political candidates; or people who did not leave Iraq during the hard years and suffered alongside their people under the Saddam regime.

The military crackdown (Operation Iron Hammer) continues, and Riverbend reports that the Coalition have been bombing houses in Tikrit (a fact which she finds astounding, as Tikrit is a very small, residential town). At one point during the month of Ramadhan the Riverbend family hear missiles and helicopters as the military operations sweep near them and overhead. Riverbend's mother warns Riverbend and 'E' not to go out onto the rooftops as that would attract unwanted attention, and that the helicopters could mistake them for insurgents, resistance or terrorists.



Finally, towards the end of the month some of the first celebrations of Eid arrive, which Riverbend describes and enjoys. Eid is the feast at the end of Ramadhan, especially devoted to the gathering of families and friends. This year the Riverbend family goes to a neighbour to give them their support as the neighbour is a young woman who has lost her husband. It is customary during Eid for the family to receive and give gifts of food to their neighbours, and, in a surprisingly 'normal' section of the blog Riverbend accounts how her household and her mother are spurred into action by their neighbour Umma Maha (whom they call Martha Stewart). Uma Maha is the matriarchal figure of their street, whose house is always the tidiest, her driveway always the cleanest. In a desperate effort to look good and not incur disapproval, Riverbend and her mother are sent on a cleaning rampage, turning their house upside down as they try to 'keep up appearances' during these times of no electricity, no water, and little food.

At the very end of the chapter, Riverbend talks about the strangeness of this whole situation, particularly as the occupation around them only seems to be becoming more and more unstable. She recounts the tale of two teenage girls who are found dead, both shot whilst out collecting wood (and her neighbours claim that they were killed by Coalition forces who had mistaken them for 'terrorists').

There are two significant layers of meaning to this section of diary entries. One is the presentation of a Muslim beliefs and the other of the strangeness of domestic life during Occupation.

During these diary entries, we see Riverbend and her family practising Ramadhan, the month long fast that is a requirement for every Muslim as one of the central pillars of their faith. By placing this practice, her beliefs and also explaining how Ramadhan is performed and appreciated in an everyday Muslim household; Riverbend is trying to bridge the gap of understanding between her readers and herself. For many westerner's Iraqi culture and even Muslim identity is still viewed as something 'Other' and little is known about it (especially during this time of separatism and suspicion). In the way that Riverbend presents one of the central tenets of Muslim belief; the practice of Ramadhan, Riverbend effectively allows the reader to understand a little more about the Muslim religion and about Iraqi culture in particular.

The second interesting layer to this month is the contrast between her domestic life and that of the Occupation. The authoress depicts here many very intimate, familial scenes featuring her family as the main characters in what should be a sort of domestic bliss. The truth of the matter is all too apparent when we see how difficult her daily life is with the constant threat of electricity shortages, running out of food, the danger from helicopters, Coalition, criminals or roadside bombs. This is reinforced by the fact that the usual happy time of Eid, when families, friends, and whole communities come together to celebrate, the Riverbend family can only go out to visit a grieving friend who has lost her husband to the war.



Sunday, November 30, 2003.

Sunday, November 30, 2003. Summary and Analysis

The month of December sees for Riverbend the muted Iraqi celebration of Christmas, and the capture of Saddam Hussein, the dictator of Iraq previous to the Second Gulf War.

Riverbend's blog starts by discussing her previous entry: the death of two young teenage girls who had been shot dead whilst collecting firewood. It appears that there are now two separate accounts of what happened: one from the girls brother, stating that the US Coalition soldiers had shot at them and another account from the Coalition, saying that the soldiers had found the body of one of the girls and had given chase to some other, Iraqi men who apparently had attacked and killed the girls. No one has ever been caught.

The next entry discusses a book that Riverbend had been reading about the fictitious case for Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction. The book is written by Immad Khadduri, one of the nuclear physicists who worked for Saddam on their weapons project. He claims in his book and in his reports that Iraq had been interested in the prospect of nuclear weaponry prior to the first Gulf War (when Bush Senior and his coalition attacked Iraq in 1990-1), but that the war and the subsequent weapons inspectors put an effective end to it. Khadduri claims that the nuclear physicists claimed to Saddam that their work was progressing, in a mere attempt to placate the dictator. Khadduri also claims that Chalabi (the head of the INC) and that Khidir Hamza, an Iraqi physicist who 'turned' to the CIA actually had nothing to do with the nuclear programme, and so their case against Saddam was fault at best.

Over the next few days, Riverbend reveals that the CPA, the Coalition Provisional Authority has announced that the armed militia gangs of each of the nine presidential candidates are to be unarmed, and select members retrained and invited to join a super elite, paramilitary style security force. Riverbend is overjoyed that at last the gangs devoted to SCIRI, or Badir's Brigade are going to be disarmed, and unable to continue their unscrupulous activities. However she recounts the response of one of her uncles who simply snorts and claims that in a month all of the militia men will be back, but the next time they will be wearing suits and badges.

What follows immediately after this decision is a number of large demonstrations in the centre of Iraq. Riverbend is amused to see that the demonstrations are clearly sending out a mixed message, as each political group claims ownership of the demonstrations. The parties of the Governing Council and SCIRI promote a 'No Terror' demonstration, whilst the majority of the civilian demonstrations occupy an anti-occupation stance. All of the demonstrations were thrown together by the CPA into one large group, almost as if either message was unimportant to the Coalition.



A few days after, Saddam Hussein is captured by the Coalition and the atmosphere across Baghdad changes from civil unrest to outright violence. Riverbend wonders if indeed there will be a civil uprising or a civil war, a prospect she always thought would be impossible as explosions, snipers and bombs start to thunder across Baghdad almost non-stop. No one seems to know what is happening or why, or even what it signifies - whether it is an insurgent force attacking the Coalition or Al-Qaida fighters using the capture of Saddam, or even a part of the Operation Iron Hammer. Riverbend believes that this is really one of the scariest times that she has seen since the actual war.

Christmas itself is a muted affair, made joyful only by a rare phone call from family outside of Iraq. Whilst most Iraqi's do not celebrate the full Christian significance of Christmas, they see it as a way to enhance community and celebrate their family (although this year there are less and less Christmas decorations on show as this would be a sign to fundamentalists that they might be a Christian household).

We see the author continuing her earlier symbolism of the War versus the Private Life, as Riverbend attempts to celebrate Christmas amidst Operation Iron Hammer. What was once a happy festival (although not as large as that partaken of in Britain), is surrounded by fear that too much of an extravagant 'display' of Christmas will be taken as a 'display' of Christianity, and thus will make the household in danger of persecution.

We also see in this month almost a direct correlation between the political events and scandals and the everyday life of Riverbend. Just as, politically, Iraq seems about to explode into civil war, the Riverbend household become affected by it; hearing explosions and helicopters almost overhead.

What is most striking about the events of this chapter is the way in which the everyday routine of Riverbend's life has almost nothing to do with the politics of her country, and yet her family is deeply effected by their outcome. Just as demonstrations threaten a civil uprising, Riverbend still has to do the cleaning, make sure that there is water in the tank and Kerosene in the heater.



January through March 2004.

January through March 2004. Summary and Analysis

The New Year for Riverbend and Iraq brings with it a new wave of bombings and attacks by insurgency forces, and for Riverbend herself, a family crisis as one of her relatives is abducted and held hostage. During these early months of the year a few important constitutional reforms start occurring, as the political power of the Governing Council begins to fade and the US is forced to ask the UN to step in and help the situation in Iraq.

Riverbend's blog begins in January with the advent of the New Year, which, she remarks feels almost the same as the old year, but perhaps worse. The electricity is short, and their local community turns on its generator so at least, from 10pm they have some power to watch the New Year celebrations elsewhere around the world. As they watch the television the thud of missiles and explosions gets louder and louder as the Coalition forces fight the 'insurgents' and Riverbend thinks that this is a dark omen for the start of the next year.

Over the next few days, it is announced that the Governing Council, under extreme pressure from the Ayatollah Sistani (the most well-respected cleric in Iraq), has drafted a new bill of rights and offered reforms to the constitutions. They are considering federalising the country; giving the Kurdish regions its own autonomous state, an idea that Riverbend (along with Salam Pax) finds ridiculous. It appears that the Governing Council and Coalition Provisional Authority have agreed to look at the constitution of the Kurdish regions in return for a change to Family Law for Iraqi households (implementing Shari'a Law for women and household rights). Riverbend is dismayed and outraged, as a conservative interpretation of Shari'a law would mean that women have no direct inheritance rights, could be married by their parents to an appropriate consort, and would have to modestly veiled at all times in polite society. Riverbend and other women's groups see this as a backward step and a cowardly agreement between the Governing Council and the conservative Shiite elements in Iraq. Riverbend uses the next few posts to discuss this issue, revealing that the common fear is that in return for more Kurdish autonomy, the Shiite members of the council have pushed for Shari'a law to be implemented, and this remains a decision which seems about to go through into law.

This political unrest is met by civil unrest as as many as 100 000 Shiite and Sunni demonstrators take to the streets of Baghdad against the occupation and the Coalition forces. Kofi Annan is invited by the American's to intervene in a situation that looks dangerously close to civil war.

Just after the 'Big Eid' (a larger day long celebration after Ramadhan), the Riverbend family has a more personal crisis. They go to visit their family across town, and many of Riverbend's relatives are there; or as many as can make it in these troubled times.



Riverbend is aware that they are constantly under threat as many of the family have to return home before the curfew. After their celebrations a cousin's husband, 'A' takes his mother and father home, about to return to pick up his wife. He never returns. The next morning one of 'A's business partners arrives at the house, claiming to have been contacted by a gang of kidnappers, who have 'A' and are demanding fifteen thousand dollars to return him. It takes a day for the family to empty their savings, sell cars and clothes and the agreed drop off is made, which allows to be returned to them later that day. The family is relieved but terrified as 'A' is unharmed save for a few bruises.

A few days later, it is February 15th, which does not signify romance and St Valentine's Day but rather, instead, the Amiriyah Shelter Massacre of 1991. Riverbend reveals how she went on a pilgrimage to this now famous site where around four hundred women and children were killed by two US missiles who thought the bomb shelter was being used for a military purpose. This place is now a shrine for all of those who died, and at the close of this chapter Riverbend recalls the words of the Geneva Convention, which states that if any civilian building is in doubt to its use, then it must be regarded as a civilian building (and thus shouldn't be a military target).

The events of the start of 2004 echo what has gone on before, but this other layers of complexity are added to the plot: Riverbend's family is now itself, directly affected by the breaking down of social order.

The country that Riverbend grew up in, Saddam's era Iraq which had many faults, is now almost all washed away as it seems that her world is about to change forever. Riverbend sees the introduction of Shariyah law in place of Family law by the Governing Council, and the muted plans for a federalised Iraq - an idea that she detests because she feels that it will lead to separatism, segregation and ethnic division. This fear is seen now a prescient one, as that is precisely the sort of situation that we now have within Iraq today.

Previous to this point, all of the changes to Iraq life we could almost explain away as if Iraq was one day going to return to peace and stability, and Riverbend would be able to enjoy the freedoms and rights that she wants. Her continuing switch of narrative from the political propaganda to the domestic life gave us the illusion that the domestic was 'the real narrative', also 'the safe narrative' and that, like all good happy endings Riverbend would one day awaken from this nightmare. Now that dream seems impossible as her own family life is torn apart by the mindless criminality that has taken over her home city.



Friday, February 20, 2004.

Friday, February 20, 2004. Summary and Analysis

During the latter part of February and into April, Riverbend's blog concerns itself mostly with the inconsistencies between the Western media and the real events happening inside Iraq, and also the apparent ineffectual nature of the Governing Council.

Riverbend's blog starts by reporting on an American article detailing how some Arab backers were supporting the Republican party and the Bush presidency. Riverbend derides the article as wilfully naïve, as half of the named backers are not ethnically 'Arab' and they cannot represent the opinions of the common Iraqi civilian.

After this, Riverbend's next comment piece talks about the bias that the Fox media network, the Murdoch Empire and CNN has towards the occupation, whereas the 'free networks' such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabia are regularly criticised for being anti-American and pro-insurgency. Riverbend wonders what 'anti-Americanism' actually means, when the free press is not allowed to operate within Iraq itself.

The middle section of this part of the narrative sees the Ashoura tragedy, two massive explosions in Karbala which kill many adherents of the religious celebrations of Ashoura (a day of public recognition of shame and honesty). The bombings were so terrible that sympathy and supportive demonstrations sprang up around the country and in Baghdad and it seemed, for a scant few days that Sunni and Shia were coming together to mourn their collective tragedy and repel the insurgent forces from their communities.

After the Ashoura tragedy, Riverbend blogs how Sistani, one of the most revered Shia clerics of Iraq has started becoming more and more vocal, and arguing with the Coalition Provisional Authority over the Transitional Law. The whole process becomes held up by the diplomatic and political wranglings between the groups whilst, on the ground the situations for the teachers, doctors and everyday people gets worse. In one such account a friend of E's come to visit, and reports that almost all of the University's are closed down as the guards who have been employed by the Univeristy are also Sistani supporters - perhaps even members of his militia, and so can effectively close down the universities when Sistani wants a 'day of opposition' to the Transitional Law Document being drafted. Elsewhere, Riverbend hears of friends who had been nurses or doctors or professors seeking to leave the country to go to Saudi Arabia or Jordan as their safety cannot be ensured. The assassinations of doctors and of lecturer's are becoming increasingly commonplace as one faction or another sees in them an enemy for their own agenda's. Riverbend is at first angry when she hears of this, that the moderates, the intellectuals and the professionals are leaving Iraq and creating a 'brain drain' as she fears Iraq is being left to the extremists, the fundamentalists and the soldiers to fight it out.



Before the end of this section, Riverbend decides to go shopping for a friend who needs some suitcases to leave the country. She goes with her brother to the shops and is surprised how much power she sees that Sistani now has in her neighbourhood. Everywhere there are posters of Sistani and more and more women are now wearing head coverings and Burkha's. She feels decidedly out of place as she has decided to not wear a head covering, and feels ever more uneasy as she receives hard stares and worried glances from the men and women around her.

In the last entry of this section, entitled 'Tales From Abu Ghraib' we hear a shocking account from a young girl who is visiting a friend of theirs who was taken, with her family into that infamous prison. Apparently the Coalition forces came to her house in the south of Iraq, insisting that her brothers were part of Al-Qaeda, and they took her and her family away. They didn't believe her when she said that her father had died of a stroke several years before, and her and her family were separated. After some beatings (and nothing else), she was allowed to go, but her mother and her brothers remain inside. She travelled to her friend's house in Iraq because her friend's husband was a lawyer who may be able to help.

This section of the narrative shows one of the few times when Iraq really had a chance to solidify itself into a democracy. The terrible Ashoura tragedy as Riverbend pointed out, had the positive impact of bringing the country together to mourn its loss on one of its holiest of days, but this chance was missed by the Coalition Provisional Authority and the Governing Council by their continual lack of reaction to the events happening around them. Alongside this, we see Riverbend analyse that the massive brain drain happening within Iraq was effectively taking out of the country a lot of the people who would have been involved in its reconstruction; the doctors, educators, lawyers and potential politicians. As we see the Governing Council itself becoming ever more divided and sectarian (and the Coalition Provisional Authority unable to do anything about it), the country itself starts to suffer as its institutions, its security forces and its militia themselves become little more than the armed supporters of different factions.

The ongoing sectarianism of her country Riverbend witnesses first hand in her entry entitled 'Sistanistan' where she sees the influence of the Ayatollah Sistani spreading through areas of Baghdad and the cultural norms changing alongside it (she feels unsafe not choosing to wear a head covering).

The final entry 'Tales from Abu Ghraib' is an awful moment of foreboding in the narrative, as the reader will probably be aware of the scandal of the Abu Ghraib prison. The personal connection that Riverbend has with the prison (even though it is fleeting) is enough to suddenly make the events of the Iraq War and the news reports take on an air of sudden, terrifying reality and emotional immediacy.



April Through September, 2004.

April Through September, 2004. Summary and Analysis

The early spring of 2004 sees an immense increase in the hostilities in Iraq, featuring the shelling of Fallujeh and the holy city of Najaf by Coalition forces in response to the murder and mutilation of four American contractors in Fallujeh. Riverbend tries to reconcile herself with what is happening in her country as Iraq looks set to implode.

Riverbend starts this section of blogging by reacting to the events in Najaf; which started as a demonstrating in the holy city by Moqtada Al-Sadr's supporters and ended with fourteen demonstrators shot dead. The 'firebrand cleric' Al-Sadr is a younger Shia conservative who calls for an insurgency in the south of Iraq against the shootings, and Najaf erupts into urban warfare. In the next blog entry Riverbend tries to imagine what is happening as the news is released that four American contractors have been killed and paraded through the streets and the American's have closed all access to and from the city. Rumours escape that a shelling has begun of the city and guerilla warfare. Riverbend wonders about the concept of fairness, at how she deplores the murder of the contractors, but can also see the violence erupting because of the hundreds of thousands of Iraqi's who have died (both civilian and insurgent). Riverbend hears that every mosque across Baghdad; from Sunni to Shia are now calling for Jihad and intafadah, making Fallujeh into a holy war.

The next few days, as violence erupts throughout Iraq in response to Fallujeh, Riverbend documents that it also marks the 'celebration' of Nation Day, when the occupation started. Riverbend doesn't blog about the current Nation Day but instead remembers what it was like when, back then the 'shock and awe' tactic by the Coalition brought Baghdad to its knees and her family was scared for its life. She recounts her personal situation as her mother tried to tell her how to cope after her death (if she should die during the war and/or occupation).

The last few entries recounts the awful images that break into the world's press as the abuse in Abu Ghraib is made public. Riverbend is disgusted at the American forces, and disgusted at her Governing Council who seem unable or unwilling to say anything about the event. The pictures seem to stun her blog and all of Baghdad into silence as, for days Riverbend recounts that she cannot even begin to write about how this makes her feel. Riverbend's final blog account in this section just simply asks the American's and the Coalition forces to leave, as the humiliation and the shame is too much for her and her Iraq to bear.

In this section, the first half of the end of the book, we see events spiral out of control for Riverbend and for Iraq as a whole. Riverbend's blog seems to take on the characteristic's of her country itself as she is shocked and made angry by the events that she is helpless to stop.

In this section, we again see the interweaving themes of Propaganda versus Information, and of War, Liberation and Occupation as we see Riverbend react to the events of Fallujeh and Abu Ghraib. We can imagine that her voice has now become that of the everyman and everywoman of Iraq (indeed, perhaps the world) as she speaks about the feelings of numbness, fear and outrage at what is happening.

The importance of a narrative like Baghdad Burning becomes ever more important in these final sections as we can use it to see all of the smaller, more human stories that are sometimes hidden by the mainstream historical narrative. Riverbend reports on the refugees from Fallujeh, and what it is like to see them arriving at the houses of relatives in their neighbourhood, and what it feels like to be constantly surrounded by bombs. In its emotional impact, the 'voice' of Riverbend carries with the weight of humanity and conscience as she talks about shelling and preparing for one's own death in the face of the fighting forces (neither side of which she fully supports).

It is also interesting to note how, Riverbend's blog still remains a very human story, full of human emotion and human frailties as she reveals her feelings of anger and vehemence against the Americans at Abu Ghraib.



Saturday, May 15, 2004.

Saturday, May 15, 2004. Summary and Analysis

In the last few diary entries of Riverbend's blog of Baghdad Burning, we see Riverbend's reaction to the horrible news of Nick Berg's death, the ongoing hostilities in the Holy City of Najaf, and the institution of an Iraqi government (replacing the Governing council).

Riverbend's very first diary entry records her reaction to the journalist Nick Berg's death, who was beheaded by an extremist group in Iraq. Riverbend feels awful and humiliated herself as she denounces the group; claiming that they cannot be Islamic or even Muslim.

Over the next month, Riverbend recounts how Chalabi has finally been brought under investigation by the Iraqi Supreme Court for his alleged money laundering, and association to kidnapping through his militia. Riverbend is cynically grateful, and completely unsurprised that Chalabi has finally been investigated and charged. Rather, she believes it is more likely that America and Bremer have cut their ties with Chalabi after it has turned out that his information about Iraq and its supposed Weapons of Mass Destruction have turned out to be false.

Almost a month later, another blog entry comes from Riverbend, talking about the intense heat of Baghdad, and the unprecedented heatwave that the country is now experiencing. The Iraqi people now have a new Interim Government to replace the Governing Council, many of who have actually come from inside Iraq but, unfortunately in Riverbend's view, mostly chosen by the Governing Council or have strong ties to one of the political parties that formed the first Governing Council. Riverbend sees no real change about to happen for Iraq and her community, but still applauds this first step towards a democracy. Her post describes mostly what the current situation in Iraq is; that the streets feel generally safer (apart from Najaf), but that the kidnappings have increased exponentially (and in particular they target foreign visitors to Iraq).

In the last few entries that make up the collection of this book, Riverbend muses thoughtfully on the events of the past couple of years, since the terror attacks of September Eleventh and the World Trade Centre Bombing. She urges everyone to watch a film by the documentary film maker Michael Moore and recounts that everyday, there is a 'September Eleventh' for Iraq.

The last few entries of Baghdad Burning present a different picture of the young narrator Riverbend. The Riverbend that emerges here appears stifled, tired and very weary of the whole occupation, the 'liberation' and the endless political changes that do not seem to arrive anywhere.



Riverbend's entries echo the physical situation that she is in as the oppressive summer of Iraq beats down upon her home and, sluggishly, her entries become slower and fewer and further apart. It almost seems as though the events of the war and in particular everything from Abu Ghraib to Nick Berg, Najaf, and Fallujeh have worn down the narrator's voice as the simplest and most immediate truth is simply that the killing must stop.



Characters

RiverBend

Riverbend is the narrator, author, and main protagonist in the novel of Baghdad Burning, a selection of entries from her blog of the same name that appeared online from August 2003 to September 2007. An anonymous writer, very little is known of her as a person in the book, writing as she has to under pseudonym for fear of reprisals and persecution for her outspoken views. What facts do emerge is that she lives somewhere in or near Baghdad during the time of the occupation of Iraq by American coalition forces, is 25, and a highly intelligent and gifted writer. Riverbend apparently was a computer programmer before the war, and graduated from Baghdad University before the bombs started falling and Saddam Hussein started mobilising for the second Gulf War in 2001.

Riverbend has a daily struggle to survive over the threats of 'friendly fire' from the coalition forces, randomised terror attacks from resistance and other partisan forces, as well as the greater threats of detention, criminal attacks (abductions), water shortages, power cuts and food scarcity.

During the course of the book, Riverbend discusses the worsening situation in Iraq, the ongoing political confusion, whilst trying to maintain her lifestyle and traditions. Riverbend lives at home with her family (since losing her job as she was female), and attempts to enter into the events of the year (Ramadhan, Eid, Christmas, New Year) as best as she is able, but finds the constant disruptions to her family life frustrating and almost impossible to bear. What emerges most importantly for the character is her devotion to her family and to the everyman and everywoman of Iraq amidst these difficulties. As she attempts to lead a normal life Riverbend is struck by memories and associations of other events during both the first and second Gulf war and seeks to recount what has happened in an attempt to understand what is going to happen for her and her family right now.

E.

'E' is Riverbend's younger brother who is tasked with trying to support the family and, as one of the few males acts as an escort and bodyguard throughout much of the book. 'E' comes across in the book as a competent, very loyal and passionate young man whose dry wit and cynical humour supports his sister through much of what they face together. 'E' joins Riverbend many times on the roof of their building as there they discuss the events of the day, the ongoing threat and try to peer out into the gloom of night to detect which part of Baghdad is being affected by the constant explosions and gunfire. 'E' has to take on the role of a protective brother, often wearing a simple handgun and being the first to rush towards the window or door if strange noises are heard in their street, and the first to seek to protect his sister, mother and the rest of his family. It is from 'E' that most of the news of what is happening in the rest of Iraq gets into the Riverbend



household, as he is more able to travel and roam the city on his chores than any of the endangered women.

Al Chalabi

Al Chalabi is one of the first of the Presidential heads of the Iraqi Governing Council, invited to become one of the nations leader's by Bremer and the Bush administration after the second Gulf War. Al Chalabi was a politician and a native of Iraq before leaving the country under Saddam's regime, and purportedly (according to Riverbend in Baghdad Burning) losing hundreds of thousands of pounds from the Jordanian economy whilst he worked there in exile. Al Chalabi is invited back into Iraq to become one of the nine hopeful presidential candidates because of his efforts to set up the Iraqi National Conference (the INC) from Britain during the Saddam years.

Al Chalabi was first championed (particularly by The Washington Post) as a serious figure for democratic reform for Iraq, and some speculation at the start of the war pointed to the idea of Bush directly instigating Chalabi in place of Saddam. It was certainly true that Chalabi's efforts at toppling the Saddam regime were instrumental and vital to the American Coalition forces in their 'liberation' of Iraq. What followed for Chalabi was a gradual revealing (over years) of his many less than scrupulous dealings with banks, Hezbollah and militant figures which have caused Chalabi now to become a suspect figure.

In Baghdad Burning, Chalabi is presented as an apologist for an American occupationj of Iraq by Riverbend, and often shown as a figure of fun as Riverbend recounts tales of Chalabi appearing on the sanctioned news networks, fanatically supporting President Bush's every decision.

L. Paul Bremer (or just 'Bremer')

L. Paul Bremer was the Head of the CPA, or the Coalition Provisional Authority from 2003 to 2004, during the time which Riverbend was writing her blog.

Bremer was the most senior American diplomat in Iraq during the time of Baghdad Burning, and, acting as head of Coalition Provisional Authority was tasked with the transference of power over to a provisional Iraqi-national government and trying to institute 'free and fair' elections. During this year Paul Bremer took many decisions which are still questioned today, some quarters calling him a hero of liberty and democracy, other's questions his close ties with the Republican neo-conservative ethos and his ability to impartial as a civil governor. During this time as the Head of the CPA, Bremer set up the rotating Presidency (where nine candidates were each given a month to be 'President' of Iraq in the lead up to a possible election, and was in charge of the 'de-Ba'athification' project (or the removal from office of the previous major political party, the Ba'athists).



In the blog of Baghdad Burning, Riverbend paints Bremer as a far away figure, as close as President Bush himself could ever be, worriedly making decisions on behalf of Washington about the fate of millions of Iraqi's before flying back to America to report to his masters. Riverbend is sceptical and cynical about Bremer, but not unduly cruel we can see, as her blog bears no real spite or malice towards the senior diplomat, but rather paints him as an elusive bureaucrat who is, in many ways like an unseen, unknown supernatural figure: making life shattering decisions without ever really interacting with the everyday people of Iraq.

Bush

President Bush of the United States of America is not so much a character in the book per se, but rather a shadowy figure who constantly hovers in the background. Occasionally, during his pronouncements or his rare visits to Iraq Riverbend will talk directly about Bush the man and his actions in the events of the blog, but more often Bush will be referred to in passing, or comments and questions will be posed speaking directly to Bush himself as if he would be reading the book and the blog.

Instead, Bush is used by Riverbend as, at the same time a scary ghost (whose decisions miles away can suddenly affect millions of lives) and as a figure of fun like a clown, whose caricatures and jokes litter the book. At times, when a question is posed directly to President Bush we get the sense of Bush being an unknown reader, a member of the audience of the blog to whom Riverbend is addressing. In this way the book of Baghdad Burning becomes more like a piece of performance like a play as the narrator 'speaks out' to the shadowy readers in the audience (Bush, Bremer, Chalabi, you and me).

Salam Pax

Salam Pax is a fellow Iraqi blogger who is reported, quoted, and talked about during the course of the narrative of Baghdad Burning.

Regarded as one of the first and the most well-known of Iraqi bloggers, Salam Pax wrote from inside Baghdad from before, during and after the second Gulf War, originally as a way to contact an old Jordanian friend, Raed. What followed for Pax was a period when he could become one of the leading 'citizen-journalists' of the times, with the eyes of the international online press upon him. Salam Pax used his blog to discuss the Iraq War, its implications and its daily events, and in so doing inspired and seemingly became friends with our author Riverbend. Salam Pax is now chief communications officer for UNICEF.

During the novel, Riverbend quotes and replies to Salam Pax through her posts, and together her and a few others set up the joint network called Iraqi bloggers, which showcased a number of Iraqi-national bloggers from both inside and outside the country during the years of the occupation.



Umm Maha 'Martha Stewart'

Umm Maha, called the 'Martha Stewart' of the street is a respectable neighbour of Riverbend's who emerges almost as a comic figure during the blog of Baghdad Burning. In the story she represents the ordinary and the commonplace life of Baghdad, in contrast to the chaos of the war and the occupation.

L. & A.

'L' (her name kept anonymous for obvious reasons) is a cousin of Riverbend, whom she goes to see shortly after Eid and the month of Ramadhan, as part of her religious and familial duty to support her family. Whilst they are staying there, her husband 'A' becomes a victim of an abduction, and is not returned until enough money is raised to release him.

The Ayatollah of Iraq, Al-Sistani

Sistani, the most well respected cleric of the Muslim faith in Iraq emerges during the story as a political figure who seeks to intervene between the Governing Council, the Coalition Provisional Authority, and the people of Iraq.

Moqtada Al-Sadr

Widely called 'the firebrand cleric' Al-Sadr was one of the greatest thorns in the CPA's side during the years of the occupation, as he preached a violent uprising against the Coalition forces. The Americans once declared that he was wanted 'dead or alive.'



Objects/Places

Baghdad

The city of Baghdad was and remains the capital city of Iraq and originally the seat of Saddam Hussein's power. Lying roughly near the middle of Iraq, Baghdad sees the largest brunt of the 'shock and awe' campaign. Riverbend and her family live in a quiet residential neighbourhood in the city of Baghdad, and most of the events of Baghdad Burning feature the changing tensions and threats that the people of Baghdad face.

Najaf

The Holy City of Najaf is one of the holiest places in Iraq and to Muslim's worldwide. It lies to the south of Baghdad and is one of the places where some of the most intense fighting takes place during the period known as the 'insurgency.'

Fallujeh

The city of Fallujeh, to the south of Iraq is where the young 'firebrand cleric' Moqtada Al-Sadr first calls for a holy uprising against the occupying Americans and it is here, that at one of his demonstrations the occupying forces shoot at demonstrators. These events spiral into chaos as some of the militants in turn murder and mutilate four American contractors and the American Coalition lays seige to the city, killing hundreds of civilians.

Abu Ghraib Prison

Abu Ghraib prison used to be one of Saddam Hussein's worst prison institutions, where his regime conducted its worst atrocities and it is here that, during the events of Baghdad Burning Riverbend talks to a released young girl who had been an inmate of the prison. Towards the end of the book Riverbend is shocked by the news and pictures that come out of American and British soldiers torturing inmates.

The Amiriyah Shelter

The Amiriyah Shelter becomes an important place for the narrator of Baghdad Burning as Riverbend recounts how she visited this place of pilgrimage to remember the deaths of over four hundred civilians at the hands of two American missiles in the first Gulf War.



Tikrit

Tikrit is a small town to the Northj of Iraq which comes under heavy shelling during the events that Riverbend's blog talks about. It is also discovered that it was Saddam's home town and where he remained in hiding for over a year.

Sadir City

Sadir city is not really a city at all but rather the poorest parts of Baghdad itself. Almost like a ghetto, the district was notorious before even the Gulf Wars and became synonymous with bombings, kidnappings and abductions.

Baghdad International Airport

The Baghdad International Airport is one of the first places that the coalition troops 'liberate' and hold as one of their military bases of operations throughout the occupation. During the events of the blog, Riverbend refers to it several times as a place no one is allowed near, and to which some detainees are taken.

'The Green Zone'

The Green Zone is a wide tract or area of military-occupied land that is often cordoned off and only Coalition forces are allowed to travel within. It becomes like a second city and is amorphous in nature; the Coalition can extend the Green Zone or decrease it in response to insurgent attacks in the city of Baghdad.



Themes

Women's Rights

One of the dominant themes that run through the course of the blog is Riverbend's interest in the welfare of women across Iraq. The author and blogger discusses her life in emotional detail, what it feels like to be a woman in Iraq during the occupation, and also discusses the political and cultural changes that start to occur around her during the years of the reconstruction. Uniquely placed as a 'girl blogger' Riverbend is able to empathise with the stories and rumours that she recounts of abductions, rapes and daily humiliations, and is also able to give to the predominantly western readers a unique insider understanding of what it means to be a woman and also a Muslim.

Having grown up in Iraq during the regime of Saddam Hussein, Riverbend enjoyed a certain degree of secular freedom, which was balanced carefully with the religious and Shar'iah views of how a Muslim woman should behave. Riverbend reveals that Iraqi women were free to marry, divorce, and have equal inheritance rights in the moderate Iraq, whilst during the occupation, these rights began being eroded as the culture started to redefine what it meant to be an Iraqi woman.

Riverbend tells the audience what it means to wear the hijab, the burka and also what it means for a conservative society for a girl to be bare-headed. Defiantly, Riverbend places her views alongside the 'moderates' of Muslim culture (which allow women to wear whatever they like, as long as it is respectable). Riverbend reveals the great source of strength and comfort there is to being a Muslim and an Iraqi woman, always knowing that there is family around you and a rigid code of honour that honours women. What she sees happening after the war however, is a far more conservative interpretation of Muslim law being expected of herself and the others that she knows (she herself is asked to leave her job merely because she is a woman), and she recounts the tales of outspoken women's rights activists being assassinated for standing up for their beliefs.

Riverbend uses her blog to try and examine what is happening to her country and for the rights of women in reconstruction-era Iraq where it is not safe for her or her sisters to leave the house without a male escort. She also tries to answer these questions by examining the political events and machinations that appear to be happening around her.

Propaganda & Information

As the book weaves between the personal thoughts of Riverbend and her recounted news reports from major world sources (including reports and studies from top security organisations), we see that one of the themes of the blog is the role of information and propaganda in determining our understanding of any historical event.



The new wave of 'citizen-journalists' such as Riverbend and Salaam Pax have revolutionised the way that news is spread and how it is presented to the world; perhaps contributing to the recent development of online communications services such as Twitter and Facebook themselves becoming means of finding out about the world around us. Whilst we read *Baghdad Burning* we are forced to examine what we think of as 'News' and what constitutes an 'accurate historical record'. The immediacy and one of the impacts of Riverbend's blog is that it counts as a source of primary information. This elevates her musings to the status of 'news' as we turn to it to look for information about what actually is happening inside Iraq during these years.

This fact is placed alongside our concerns over the News industry, and what sort of stories become told through the major news networks, the way they get reported and what, eventually turns out to be the propaganda on behalf of one side or another. Riverbend's blog is itself a tool with which we can examine what sort of news is released to the Western audience through CNN, the Fox News Network and the BBC, as well as other news networks such as Al-Jazeera. Riverbend herself seems dismayed at the fact that many atrocities (both personal and large-scale) have never made to the scale of world news, whilst other things (the reception of President Bush in Iraq at the end of Eid, 2003) are covered extensively and only with a certain interpretation. Whilst Riverbend's blog is unashamedly personal and subjective in viewpoint, during the entries that make up the book of *Baghdad Burning* we see Riverbend comparing and contrasting the different pronouncements made by the 'official' Coalition Provisional Authorities (the CPA) with her own experience of Iraq; forcing us to ask the question: 'What counts as propaganda and what counts as real news?'

War, Liberation & Occupation

The constant theme for the blog of *Baghdad Burning* is, of course, that of War, Liberation and Occupation. Riverbend uses her blog to examine the impacts of the many recent wars in Iraq, from the first Gulf War headed by Bush Senior to the Second Gulf War led by Bush Junior. As she does this she uses the common people, or stories from her own life and those of people that she knows to describe and elaborate what war actually means for people who are experiencing it; from the horrifying, the tragic and even to the frustrating consequences of water shortages.

This blog appears to be remarkably anti-violence in its stance (she remarks again and again that she does not hate the American troops, and merely wishes for the people responsible for such atrocities as cluster bombs and abductions to be severely punished in a court of law). However, the violence inherent during these years are everywhere around Riverbend, and small tales of loss and destruction fill the spaces between her entries.

The War, the Liberation, and the Occupation are almost presented as forces of nature through the blog. No one can stop them, no one really understands what is happening or why, merely that everything: the whole environment of her life has changed. In a sense of confused resignation the actual war itself is talked about rarely through the



course of the novel, rather like it was an event that everyone (and Riverbend herself) is trying to forget. What becomes intensely obvious is that such words as 'war' and 'liberation' and 'occupation' are very small words for the situations that she is describing, and in no part really explain why this tragedy or atrocity occurred. Through reading this blog we get an unparalleled glimpse into what it must be like living in a conflict zone, the fears, and the worries of those affected, as we accompany Riverbend as even she seems to struggle with what the nature of 'War, Liberation, and Occupation' actually means for her country.

Secularism vs. Fundamentalism

Throughout the events of Baghdad Burning, the reader sees Riverbend reacting to the propaganda of the American-led Coalition and the reactive press of the resistance movements, and comparing all of these sources of rhetoric with her own experience of Iraq and the experience of the everyday people. What we see emerging is a debate about Secularism (I.E; not religious), and Fundamentalism (intense faith-driven politics). The American led Coalition in part represents the Secular society, but through the course of the blog we can see that the announcements of Bremer and the speeches of Bush are just as fanatical and ideological as the extremist clerics on the supposed other side. Caught in the middle, between one group preaching about 'Democracy' and 'Liberation' and another angrily complaining about 'Western Imperialism' we have the normal, every day people of Riverbend's neighbourhood, who represent the civil, mundane society.

During this year of her blog, as Riverbend witnesses an increase in violence in Iraq, she also witnesses an increasing fundamentalism based on Shar'iah law that was never in existence in Iraq before the 'Liberation'. What she movingly and insightfully describes is a time of power vacuum, where normal Iraqi people are reaching out to understand why they are suffering these hurts and injustices, and looking for a narrative that will support them and protect them. Some Iraqi's find this new narrative to be the 'Liberation' ideology (such as Chalabi), whilst many others find it to be the fundamentalist ideology as told by Imam Sistaani. Riverbend watches in horror as her country is pulled apart by these different ideologies that do not understand the other where each harms the majority of citizens in Iraq.

Style

Perspective

The Point of View of the entirety of Baghdad Burning is that of Riverbend's perspective, with experiences of other people recounted in her own words. Occasionally Riverbend dips into more serious academic-style security reports and news coverage of events (often re-copying reports from other sites which are relevant to her discussion) which gives different perspectives in the novel; however, she always returns to her own narrative voice.

The use of her first-person perspective is of course subjective. However, Riverbend manages to maintain a strong voice that can discuss events coolly or become impassioned at immediate concerns, such as threats to her own family.

This use of the first-person narrative focuses the events of the story directly onto, and through the character of Riverbend: charging the whole account with emotional immediacy and drama. Occasionally she will herself use the third person while she is talking about another person, story, or event, but even that perspective will be mitigated through her own narrative point of view as she discusses it at large, with her readers.

Tone

The Tone of Baghdad Burning by Riverbend struggles to remain objective but changes through the course of the blog as she witnesses her country being torn by warfare and internal conflicts.

Definitely a strong defiant voice, Riverbend unerringly seems to try and support the underdog in the news reports that she hears and the information that she uncovers. In the case of this book, the victim that she most closely associates herself with is that of the general Iraqi people, and in particular the more vulnerable women, children and elderly members of society. Her general 'voice' is that of a sardonic wit, which empathises and is moved by the stories of the normal people around her. Despite this overt defiance, we can gradually detect a growing cynical and weary tone as the year progresses for her (especially towards the end), reflecting that everything around her is too much to bear.

The effect of Riverbend's tone is immediately to endear the reader to her character and her perilous situation. We can easily equate to her feelings and startling honesty as she navigates her world and her thoughtful choice of words allows the reader to examine the events through her eyes.



Structure

The Structure of Baghdad Burning is a highly unusual one for a novel, originating as it does from an online blog. There are no chapters per se but rather there are dated entries covering the year between August 2003 up until September 2004. Sometimes there are two or three entries per day, whilst sometimes a few days or a week goes past without any entries whatsoever. Instead of the traditional chapters or parts, there are three broad sections, titled August through December 2003, January through March 2004, and April through September 2004. Each of these three sections cover a different 'phase' of the reconstruction of Iraq in the post-war period, and vary considerably in size to each other.

The choice of these three sections seems to be that they cover various different important events that occurred during this time. The first (and the largest of all of the sections) records Riverbend's reactions and recollections to the war itself (which nominally ended hostilities in June), and the immediate aftermath: the occupation as it is now called of Iraq by Coalition forces. The second section of 'January through March 2004' marks a small interim period when civil war seemed almost imminent, and is marked with President's Bush's first ever visit to Iraq after the war, massive demonstrations of resistance to the occupation, and the Karbala Ashoura tragedy (an explosion which killed hundreds). It seems after this time that some of the different factions within Iraq; the Shia and the Sunni began to come together as they used to in public condemnation of the explosions.

The daily structure of the book is erratic, predicated as it is by the available electricity for Riverbend to use her computer. This erratic structure serves to give the novelised account a fast paced immediacy. Inside the narrative however, the structure is very coherent. Riverbend mixes the personal and the academic, speculation and stories into a subjective patchwork that works together to tell a combined story of her times. Sometimes the entries are academic; articles and speculation that she writes to help describe the events and their history, sometimes the entries are pure whimsy; stories or immediate reactions to things that have just happened.

The overall effect is a patchwork of narrative, much like a rolling news report, but instead continuing over a whole year and actively responding to events. The continual nature of the posts can make it difficult to follow if read from start to finish, and so is probably best read in 'batches' at a time, similar to the way that it is written.



Quotes

"A little bit about myself: I'm female, Iraqi, and 24. I survived the war. That's all you need to know. It's all that matters these days anyway" (Sunday, August 17, p. 31).

"They question why we mourn our dead instead of gratefully offering them to the Gods of Democracy and Liberty. They wonder why we're bitter" (Wednesday, September 3rd, 2003, p. 74).

"As soon as we got our averages, we fill out forms that go to the Ministry of Higher Education...I recall nothing on the form asking me if I was a ba'athist or loyalist, but maybe I filled out the wrong form" (Tuesday, September 16th, 2003, p. 96).

"'How was your day, dear?' doesn't get a typical answer in Iraq. Depending on who is being asked, the answer vaies from stories of abductions and hijackings, to demonstrations, to empty gas cylinders and burned out water pumps" (Saturday, October 18th, 2003, p. 140).

"It bothers me that we didn't begin Eid 'together' this year because that's what Eid is really about - togetherness...It's a strange sort of Eid of Eid this year - with helicopters and tanks" (Tuesday, November 25th, 2003, p. 183).

"It took me fifteen minutes to try and explain to her that they had electricity but actually chose to sit in the dark because it was more 'romantic'....the 7 year old has associated candles to explosions and blackouts her whole life" (Monday, December 22nd, 2003, p. 204).

"If every ethnic group in Iraq were to call for an independent state, we would have to split the country into more than 5 groups" (Thursday, January 8th, 2004, p. 218).

"After this massacre, and after seeing the reactions of Sunnis and Shi'a alike...it has been like a large family - with many serious differences- reuniting after a terrible tragedy to comfort each other and support one another" (Wednesday, March 3rd, 2004, p. 256).

"I'm so sorry ... in spite of the fact that dozens of iraqi's are abducted and killed each day, I'm really sorry" (Sunday, April 11th, 2004, p. 293).

"I sometimes get emails asking me to propose solutions or make suggestions. Fine. Today's lesson: don't rape, don't torture, don't torture...and go" (Friday, May 7th, 2004, p. 305).

"We have 9/11's on a monthly basis. Each and every Iraqi person who dies with a bullet, a missile, a grenade, under torture, accidentally - they all have families and friends and people who care"



Topics for Discussion

Do you think the character of Riverbend is impartial in her account of the Occupation of Iraq? Why or why not?

Why is the narrator Riverbend scared to leave her house?

Describe what the practice of Ramadhan is and what Eid represents. What happens during this period? What does it signify for those partaking in it?

With reference to her own words on the subject, would you describe the blog of Baghdad Burning by Riverbend to be pro-American, Anti-American, neither or both? Discuss.

How does the use of a blog, and the format of the diary help the reader get more involved in the story? Are there any drawbacks to this kind of writing?

Did this account of the Iraqi conflict change your perception of the war? If so, why? Discuss how this book affected you.

What is the difference between a hijab, a berkha, and an Abaya? What is their significance to Iraqi culture?