At the end of the year 2000, a publishing sensation left Baghdad abuzz with rumor. The excitement surrounded a torrid novel of romance published under the title *Zabiba and the King.* This was not the usual kind of literary splash. The publisher threw no book parties and the novelist gave no interviews—because the author remained anonymous. The preface explained that the author wrote the book upon the encouragement of Saddam Husayn, who had appealed to Iraqi novelists to write stories reflecting everyday life in Iraq. Out of humility, the author had opted for complete anonymity.

It was true that Saddam Husayn had met with Iraqi writers and playwrights earlier in the year. On that occasion, he had encouraged them to write novels, stories, and plays that would bring the feats of "the mother of all battles" (the Kuwait war) to the people.

But it was no secret that Saddam had his own literary ambitions. He even once declared his intention to write a play that would appeal to the younger generation. The evidence then began to mount that Saddam had fulfilled his ambition in *Zabiba and the King.* Iraqi newspapers reported "rumors" to the effect that the president himself was the author. The book immediately became a bestseller, especially as it cost only 1,500 Iraqi dinars (less than $1) and the royalties (according to the back cover) would go to "the poor, the orphans, the miserable, the needy, and [to other] charities." Iraqi newspapers lavished publicity on the novel, and writers and poets sang its praises.

A short time later, Iraqi television began preparing a 20-part series of *Zabiba and the King,* casting the famous actress Hind Kamil in the role of the heroine. Then the Iraqi National Theater announced it would produce a musical based on the novel, touted as the country's biggest production ever. (One foreign wit suggested it be titled "Springtime for Saddam.")

All this left no doubt: the book was either written or inspired by Saddam Husayn. Some speculation swirled around one other possibility, Saddam’s son ‘Udayy. But his authorship seemed very unlikely since, as we shall see, the only possible allusion to him in the book is very negative. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency was definitely persuaded that Saddam supervised the writing of the book, so much so that it subjected the text to a thorough analysis, in order to glean insights into Saddam’s mental processes.
At first glance, it may seem bizarre that a literary work be read as a key to the politics of Iraq. But this has a precedent in a similar episode dating from 1979, when Saddam was preparing the ground for his final assent to the presidency. A year earlier, a novel appeared in Baghdad entitled The Long Days and written by ‘Abd al-Amir Mu'alla. The novel describes the feats of a young man called Muhammad bin Husayn as-Saqr, who in 1959 takes part in an attempt to kill the then-prime minister, ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim. The failed attempt forces the hero to flee to Egypt, but he returns to Iraq some years later to become the leader of the country. This, of course, is the very thinly veiled story of Saddam Husayn himself, and the book presaged Saddam's final seizure of power. The film and television series based on the novel dropped the literary façade altogether, calling the hero by his real name.

Zabiba and the King, like The Long Days, was published to serve the needs and interests of Saddam Husayn. The difference is that in this case, Saddam himself is most likely the author. On the one hand, this is a handicap. The Long Days had some literary merit, whereas Zabiba and the King is boring and incoherent. The story is prefaced by a tirade of sloganeering propaganda. ("Did the nation's spirit of mission not revive again in Iraq ... after Zionism had prevailed and spread its tyranny alongside its hated ally the U.S?") Often the novel jumps without warning from pre-Islamic antiquity to modern times, making the story difficult to follow. The characters depicted in the novel are caricatures, lacking the complexity and depth of real people. And, alas, the novel is not written in the best Arabic style. This is clearly the work of an amateur author.

On the other hand, many of the messages in the book are crude and clear-cut, and easy to follow. It is not difficult to link the violence and vengeance that run rampant in the book to the same themes in the long career of Saddam Husayn. Yet is there still more to the novel? In particular, does it offer clues as to Saddam's future plans for Iraq? A close reading suggests that it might, and that it is part of Saddam's effort to mould posterity—to reach out, past his own demise, to assure his legacy for all time.

Plots Within Plots

To understand the political meaning of Zabiba and the King, it is necessary to dwell for a moment on the book's turgid plot—and a plot it certainly is. It unfolds, like any standard soap opera, through episodes of love, jealousy, betrayal, vengeance, and wisdom. (But since it is set in Iraq and not Dallas, the hero can tell the heroine "to cut her tongue"—a fate that befalls another character in the novel, and a punishment that is also sometimes administered in Saddam's Iraq.)

The narrator, an old, wise, and wizened woman, tells the following tale:

In Babylonian times, there is a young member of the royal house named ‘Arab. As the only son of the queen, he has a rightful claim to the throne. But he has a rough time in the palace of his father, fending off the conspiracies of his many jealous half-brothers, all of whom are lower than him in rank and nobility. Ultimately, ‘Arab's father banishes him from the palace and exiles him to a remote place. Later, however, one of the king's officials poisons ‘Arab's father during a power struggle within the palace. ‘Arab returns to the capital, and with the support of the people and the army he finally becomes king.
Sometime after becoming king, ‘Arab travels outside his capital and meets a woman named Zabiba (the name means "raisin") who completely changes his life. Zabiba is a simple young woman who leads a life of poverty in a small hut, at the foot of the palace of a greedy and malicious emir named Hezkel. She herself is married to a detestable ally of Hezkel—a marriage forced on her by her impoverished father.

From the moment ‘Arab meets Zabiba, he is drawn to her simplicity, beauty, and wisdom. He begins to visit her hut and later invites her to his palace. The two fall into platonic love: they have long talks about life and death, nature and God, and the management of the kingdom. Zabiba, it turns out, is even wiser than the king, persuading him to believe in one God, Allah, and thwarting a succession of devious plots against him.

Then, one night, Zabiba’s own husband attacks and rapes her. The rape is part of a wider plot involving Hezkel and others in his gang. Zabiba, who realizes the magnitude of the conspiracy, rushes to the palace to warn the king of an impending rebellion. The king, in turn, vows to take revenge and save Zabiba’s honor. While the king mobilizes his army, Zabiba sets out to lead the people against the conspirators. A battle ensues; Zabiba dies in the defense of the king; her evil husband also perishes. The date is January 17.

The king and the people bury Zabiba and proclaim her the "martyr of the people" (shahidat ash-sha'b). By the side of her tomb, they bury her evil husband, and pelt his grave with rocks and garbage. The king then orders that January 17 be marked every year by the placing of flowers on Zabiba’s tomb and the stoning of her husband’s grave, symbol of all “the invaders and the traitors.” The king also announces to the people that he had married Zabiba just before the battle, and had promised her that he would form a people’s council (majlis ash-shura) to discuss the future of the monarchy.

The balance of the book is taken up by deliberations about the fate of the monarchy. This part of Zabiba and the King is not well knit into the story, and hangs at the end of the book like a supplement. But it contains some of the most interesting nuggets for political speculation on the question of succession in Iraq.

**Family Resemblances**

One way of approaching the novel is to analyze its main characters. The king, of course, represents Saddam Husayn; the king’s life story runs in close parallel to Saddam’s. ‘Arab’s banishment by his father recalls Saddam’s own cruel mistreatment at the hands of his stepfather, Hajj Hasan Ibrahim. The jealous half-brothers are none other than Saddam’s younger stepbrothers: Barzan, Watban, and Sab’awi, who at different times posed challenges to Saddam. After having allowed them a certain share in power, Saddam eliminated them politically, one after the other.

Other parallels evoke Saddam’s cousins. In the novel, one of the conspiracies against the king involves a cousin who attempts to stab him in the back. Zabiba throws herself at the would-be assassin, leaving the king enough time to kill the assailant. This immediately brings to mind Saddam’s cousin Husayn Kamil, who fled to Jordan in 1995, together with his own brother, their wives (Saddam’s daughters), and other members of the family. Husayn Kamil not only divulged the secrets of
Iraq’s non-conventional weapons program, but also began to groom himself, quite naively, as successor to Saddam.

The treacherous cousin also evokes another one of Saddam’s own cousins, ‘Adnan Khayrallah Talfah, who served as defense minister during the Iraqi-Iranian war. Many observers regarded Talfah as a potential threat to Saddam—until his death in a mysterious helicopter crash.\(12\) The association with Talfah is reinforced by another detail in the novel: the treacherous cousin acts in league with the king’s own wife. Saddam’s real-life wife, Sajida, was the sister of his cousin Talfah; Saddam and Sajida became estranged, in part because Sajida took her brother’s side in family quarrels.

As against these negative characters, there are some positive ones: Saddam, like the king, could rely on his mother and sisters, who remained loving and loyal even in the hardest of times.\(13\)

The CIA’s analysis of the book, as reported in the New York Times, seems to miss the point completely by concluding that Saddam sees the family as his “only trusted security.”\(14\) In fact, in the novel and in Saddam’s real life, the greatest threats arise from family. It is probably no coincidence that Saddam’s most trusted companions—‘Izzat Ibrahim ad-Duri, Taha Yasin Ramadan, Tariq ‘Aziz, and Sa’dun Hammadi—are not members of his family. While family members have come and gone, these cronies have been with him since his rise to power if not earlier. The CIA analysis is correct in asserting that tribal norms and values are strongly present in the novel. But rather than reinforce the king’s sense of security, they threaten him. The hero has to contend with jealous cousins, brothers, and other relatives, as well as blood revenge (\(\text{thā’r}\)) and conspiracies from among those closest to him in blood.

**Allegories of Good and Evil**

Good is embodied in the novel’s Joan of Arc: Zabiba. Time and again she is referred to as “the people’s daughter” (\(\text{bint ash-sha’b}\)), “the people’s darling” (\(\text{habibat ash-sha’b}\)), “the people’s conscience” (\(\text{damir ash-sha’b}\)) and “the people’s martyr” (\(\text{shahidat ash-sha’b}\)).

Some have seen Zabiba as representing Saddam’s favorite wife, Samira Shahbandar, whom he married in 1986 after forcing her husband to divorce her. Or Zabiba might also represent a third wife whom he was rumored to have married years later, namely Nidal al-Hamdani, general manager of the Solar Energy Research Center in the Council of Scientific Research. (Hamdani’s husband was reportedly persuaded to divorce his wife.)\(15\) In the novel, the king has many wives and concubines (though, the novel points out, far fewer than other kings of his time).

But there is no doubt that the figure of Zabiba represents and symbolizes the Iraqi people itself. That a female figure may represent nation and nationalism in Arab culture is nothing new. The very term \(\text{umma}\), nation, is derived from \(\text{umm}\), mother (in contrast to the French \(\text{patrie}\), which comes from father). Arabic nationalist discourse in general puts great emphasis on the woman as a symbol of love, loyalty, and sacrifice to the nation. Zabiba, as well as other positive female figures in the story (such as the woman who loses five of her sons in battle), symbolize the people, as well as the loyalty and love of the people for the king—read, Saddam.

In contrast to the mostly positive image of female figures in the novel, males are
portrayed negatively, reflecting Saddam’s own experience in life. One of the most revolting figures is Zabiba’s husband, who does not even have a name—insulting in any culture, but especially among Arabs. The husband, who behaves savagely toward Zabiba and even rapes her, breaks the basic Arab code of manliness (muruwwa), honor (‘ird), and faithfulness (wafa’). As his grave will forever be stoned on January 17 of every year—the anniversary of Operation Desert Storm—there is no doubt what he represents: the United States and its allies.

Two other contemptible figures, associated throughout the novel with churlish and brutal behavior, are the evil emir Hezkel and the merchant Shamil, readily identifiable to Iraqis as Israel and the Jews. In fact, the novel is filled with antisemitic references. Another despicable figure is a feudal lord given the name of Nuri Chalabi. Here, too, the association is almost too blatant: the Iraqi National Congress (INC), one of the opposition groups in exile backed by the United States, is headed by Ahmad Chalabi. In the novel, the feudal lords (iqta‘iyyun) and the merchants are reviled as bloodsuckers of the people, and one need only remember the execution of forty-two merchants in 1992 to fathom Saddam’s animosity toward this group.16 Other hated, feared, and despised adversaries are the kings and the emirs, about whom more will be said below.

The only favorable male element comparable in any way to Zabiba is the army. It appears in the book as the steady and loyal ally of the people and the king. But the army is not allegorized. Had it been, this would have spread speculation in the direction of army commanders—something Saddam apparently preferred to avoid.

**Saddam Loves His People**

On a superficial level, *Zabiba and the King* reads like a love story between the king and a simple but very clever young woman. The illustrations on the cover and inside the book were plagiarized from a well-known Canadian "goddess art" painter (see box), and there are a few risqué scenes. ("Let’s take a break so that I can smell and kiss you," says Zabiba to the king.)17

But on another level, the novel is an allegory of love between the Iraqi people and Saddam Husayn. Consider for example the following confession by the king:

"I have loved you Zabiba in this manner so as to love the people in you and through you ... and I have embraced your God because you are a living part of the people, you believe in its role, and you love the homeland..."

When the king uttered these last words, tears filled his eyes and rolled down his cheeks and moustache. At that point Zabiba rose and, with tears pouring forth from her eyes, embraced the king, kissed him on his forehead, and said: "Thank God for the creation."18

Yet Zabiba, an allegory for the people of Iraq, is not blinded by love. To the contrary: she is sometimes critical of the king—of his living in a closed palace, isolated from the people; of the way he organizes the kingdom’s affairs; of his belief in gods and idols; of his total lack of knowledge of God. Since no criticism of Saddam is permitted in Iraq, what purpose is served by Zabiba’s criticism of the king? Has Saddam engaged here in a veiled form of self-critique?

If so, it is certainly a minor theme. Saddam, of course, is well aware of the great suffering the Iraqi people has had to endure under his rule, especially since the Kuwait war. But the entire thrust of the novel is self-absolution, laying all blame for
Iraq's agony at the doorstep of foreigners, Jews, and other kings and emirs. It was not the king who raped Zabiba; it is not Saddam who violates the people. Quite the contrary, just as the king mobilized his army to defend a woman's honor, ‘ird, so Saddam sent his army to defend the honor of the Iraqi people—nay, of the entire Arab nation—from invasion, enslavement, and colonialism. The very name ‘Arab, given to the king, symbolizes his devotion to the Arab nation.

Kingship and Succession

The novel does express ambivalence about the king-like stature Saddam has acquired in contemporary Iraq. Zabiba and the King effectively places Saddam on a par with great kings of Mesopotamia and Iraq. Yet in the rhetoric of Ba'thist Iraq, kingship has always been an evil thing. Not only was kingship imposed on Iraq by imperialism, in the form of the Hashemite dynasty. Saddam himself clashed with a succession of monarchs: the shah of Iran (in the novel Iran is represented by ancient Eilam), King Husayn of Jordan, and most importantly with the king of Saudi Arabia and the emir of Kuwait. As a result, throughout the book it is never quite clear whether kingship can ever be a good thing. ‘Arab, of course, is a king of great stature. Yet time and again, Zabiba and other heroes in the novel criticize the corrupt palace life of the kings and emirs: "The air enclosed within thick [palace] walls is rotten and even the animals in the gardens are different from the animals in their natural environment." God belongs to "the people and the army," he is not the "God of the kings, the emirs, the merchants, those who live in ease and luxury." But most Iraqi readers will assume that these derogatory references refer to the pleasure palaces of Saddam's adversaries, the robed denizens of Arabia. Saddam himself has built massive palaces, even in the midst of Iraq's deprivation. But these, it is explained, have a practical function. "You are under siege," Zabiba tells him, "and even imprisoned... how is it that you love freedom, yet you build a palace without enough windows to bring in light and air?" To which the king responds that these are the exigencies of rule and security. These are not places of luxury and repose (the novel seems to argue), but fortresses that guarantee the stability of the state.

And what of that crucial attribute of monarchy, hereditary succession? Succession is the focus of the second, shorter part of the book. "What will happen if the king dies or is killed in a war?," the king asks. "Who will take charge of the kingdom?" The salience of this question for contemporary Iraq is obvious: there are no orderly procedures for succession in the system created by Saddam; there is widespread speculation that in Iraq, as in Syria, the ruler plans to be succeeded by one of his sons.

Not surprisingly, Iraq-watchers have found ample fuel for speculation in Zabiba's answer to the king. "Why should we assume," she asks, "that the king's son should be preferred over the son of the people, and that he should have the right to rule just because he is the son of the king?" Rule should be open to fair competition and should be given to the best of people.

The novel does not leave it at that. In the deliberations that follow the death of Zabiba, it is the scoundrels in society—the big merchants, the feudal lords, the emirs, the Jew Shamil, and the aristocrat Chalabi—who are supportive of hereditary rule. But the majority, representing the salt of the earth—everyday people, women,
and the soldiers and officers who fought in the battle against the enemy—are unanimously opposed to hereditary succession: "We do not have any personal grudges against this king ['Arab], especially since he fought with us, but he would not have been a king in the first place without the support of the people ... and the army." Moreover, the people and the army had to save him time and again. "Have we done all this just to bring another king on our head?", they ask. "Who knows, maybe [after him], an unbalanced son of this king will come to rule us." It is difficult to resist reading this as anything but a reference to 'Udayy, Saddam's eldest, unruly, and possibly unbalanced son.

The novel then delivers a final shot. In the midst of the council's deliberations, a messenger arrives with news of the king's death. But instead of the usual proclamation, "the king is dead, long live the king," the chair of the council simply announces: "May God have mercy on the dead ... long live Zabiba, long live the people, long live the army." It is difficult to resist reading this as anything but a reference to 'Udayy, Saddam's eldest, unruly, and possibly unbalanced son.

Needless to say, this is all highly intriguing if we assume that the king stands for Saddam. Over the last year, Saddam has taken some important steps to promote his younger son, Qusayy, in the military and political establishment. Most notably, in May 2001 Qusayy was made a member in the Ba'th party Regional Command, after having been appointed supervisor of the Republican Guard. All signs indicate that Saddam is grooming Qusayy as heir-apparent. What possible interest could Saddam have in writing or promoting a novel that questions hereditary succession?

There is no clear-cut answer to this enigma, and no interpretation is completely satisfactory. Is the whole point of Zabiba and the King to counter a relatively new opposition group, located abroad, that favors a restoration of the Hashemite dynasty? Is Saddam hoping to cast Qusayy as "the son of the people," whose claim to rule will rest not on heredity but on his own merits? Or is it possible that Saddam is all too aware of his own unpopularity among the people, and fears they will avenge themselves on his legacy? If that is the case, perhaps Zabiba and the King is no more than a plea that his body not be dug up by some future potentate and tossed into the Tigris, that his name not be effaced from the dedicatory plaques on the countless monuments he has erected. "We should pay the last honors to him who was the king of our country," says the head of the council in the novel, "in appreciation of our country first of all." Ultimately, only Saddam knows what the novel's discussion of succession really means.

**Legacy of Fear**

*Zabiba and the King* is best understood as Saddam's own preparation for his final descent from the stage. It should be read as a summary of his life, an "artistic" contribution to his people, an epitaph, and a last will and testament, all rolled into one. In all probability, Saddam was moved to write the novel by the deaths of other veteran rulers in Jordan, Syria, Morocco, Qatar, and Bahrain. Were Saddam still welcome at an Arab summit conference, he would no longer face many of his old cohorts across the table.

The ongoing sanctions and the suffering of Iraqis make for a very mixed legacy, and Saddam now feels the need to be absolved of guilt by his own people. The possibility that they might trash his memory on his demise is a fear that runs...
through the novel. "Will the people carry me aloft on their shoulders," the king asks Zabiba, "after I die?" "Yes," she reassures him, "after long life, your royal highness, they will bear you aloft on their shoulders and keep you in their hearts." 27

But Saddam cannot be so certain. His core message is that he is blameless for the many hardships, and that "others"—family members, Jews, kings, emirs, and foreigners—are the true villains of the piece. Saddam has tried to convey the same message by every possible medium; in Zabiba and the King, it is the turn of literature. This is propaganda disguised as a novel—and poorly disguised at that.

It is also the capstone to the vulgar kitsch that forms the "artistic" legacy of Saddam's regime. Iraq was once a flourishing center of Arabic literature. But nothing it has produced in recent years is likely to outlast the rule of Saddam, since all of it is somehow contaminated by his omnipresence. Now that Zabiba is headed for the musical stage, one begins to wax nostalgic for the art of imperialism. After all, it gave Egypt Aida.

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Artistic License

The cover of Zabiba and the King carries an illustration first described by the New York Times as a portrayal of Zabiba "in a flowing one-shoulder blue satin gown, her long brown tresses blowing in the breeze. Doves encircle her. Behind her stand the arches of ancient Babylon." 28 In fact, the cover was inspired neither by Zabiba's story nor by an Iraqi artist's notion of ancient Babylon. "The cover art of Mr. Hussein's new novel," complained Canadian artist Jonathon Earl Bowser, "is an oil painting I created in 1998—an image which has been published as a limited-edition print, and for which I own the copyright." 29 Three images published inside the book were also stolen from the repertoire of Bowser. None of them had anything to do with Babylon, and none were published with permission. The original painting of the cover illustration, entitled "The Awakening," is in the possession of a California collector. (Bowser's publisher: "Maybe Saddam would like to buy it.") "A romantic allegory isn't necessarily bad," reflected Bowser. "I just would have chosen a different author." 30

—The Editors

1 Riwaya likatibiha (anonymous), Zabiba wal-Malik (n.p.: Matba'at al-Bilad, n.d.)
4 Al-'Iraq (Baghdad), May 31, 2001; Babil (Baghdad), as quoted by Reuters, Aug. 13, 2001.
The role of the hero was played by the president's cousin and son-in-law, Saddam Kamil, who in 1995 fled with his more famous brother, Husayn Kamil, to Jordan. He returned to Iraq in 1996 and was killed at the behest of the president.

Zabiba wal-Malik, p. 4.


Zabiba wal-Malik, p. 40


17 Zabiba wal-Malik, pp. 16, 83.

18 Ibid., pp. 96–97.

19 Ibid., p. 156.

20 Ibid., p. 152.

21 Ibid., pp. 23–24.

22 Ibid., pp. 66–67.

23 Ibid., p. 132.

24 Ibid., p. 160.


26 Zabiba wal-Malik, p. 160.

27 Ibid.


29 At www.jonathonart.com/LotusMaiden1/saddam.html.

Saddam Hussein was the ruthless dictator of Iraq from 1979 until 2003. During the Iraq War in 2003, Saddam was caught and ultimately executed. Published Works: Novels including Zabiba and the King, The Fortified Castle, Men and the City, Begone Demons. Spouses: Sajida Talfah, Samira Shahbandar. Children: Uday Hussein, Qusay Hussein, Raghad Hussein, Rana Hussein, Hala Hussein. The Dictator of Iraq. Saddam Hussein ruled Iraq with a brutal hand, using fear and terror to stay in power. He established a secret police force that suppressed internal dissenters and developed a "cult of personality" to build public support. His goal was to become the leader of the Arab world, with territory to include the oil fields of the Persian Gulf. Zabibah and the King (Arabic: زبيبة والملك Zabībah wal-Malik) is a romance novel, originally published anonymously in Iraq in 2000, that was written by Saddam Hussein. 'Arab — The protagonist of the story, the novel follows 'Arab as he becomes king of Iraq. The character represents Saddam Hussein. Zabibah (زبيبة) — A poor woman in an unhappy marriage, she is the love interest of 'Arab. Zabibah represents the people of Iraq.