

THE GOLDEN HORSEMEN OF BAGHDAD

by Saviour Pirotta

BACKGROUND

The Islamic Golden Age took place between the 8th and 13th centuries CE. It was a period of cultural, economic and scientific development. During this time there were great discoveries in science, mathematics, medicine, architecture, poetry, music, engineering, philosophy, technology, education and astronomy. Many of these advances still have an impact on our lives today. Baghdad became the thriving capital of the Muslim empire during the Islamic Golden Age with nearly 2 million people living there. It is understood that during the reign of the caliph Harun Al-Rashid, Baghdad was the centre of learning, innovation and tolerance. Under his rule, hospitals were built and the 'House of Wisdom' was established where scholars from around the world came together to translate, preserve and study the writings of the ancient world. Knowledge and new discoveries soon spread far and wide across the world. (For more information see the historical note written by the author on pages 151-154.)

EXPLORING THE BOOK – READING FOR DISCUSSION

Chapter 1 – An Unwelcome Visitor

1. The book is written in the third person. What would the first chapter be like if it was written in the first person? Why do you think the author chose to use the third person?
2. How does the author show that it is dawn?
3. How did Jabir ibn Abdel become a fisherman?
4. What is Jabir good at?
5. Why was Jabir left to provide for his mother and three sisters?
6. What does Jabir need to do by the next full moon?
7. 'All obstacles are hurdles, waiting for you to jump over them.' (page 22) What does this mean and how does it relate to Jabir's situation?
8. What do you think Jabir should do for a living?
9. How would you describe Jabir after reading the first chapter? Support your answer with evidence from the text.
10. What are your first impressions of the landlord? Describe him using five adjectives.
11. Summarise to a partner what you have found out about Jabir.

Chapter 2 – Trouble in the Merchant's House

1. Why does Jabir go to Baghdad?
2. 'Baghdad is full of possibilities.' Discuss.
3. Give a description of Baghdad from the perspective of Jabir.

4. Make a list of the different emotions the main character goes through during the chapter.
5. Mousa has a conundrum on page 34. What is his conundrum? Debate what Mousa should do when Jabir is accused of stealing.
6. Do you agree that bad luck has followed Jabir to Baghdad? Give reasons to justify your answer.
7. How does Baghdad compare to Jabir's village?

Chapter 3 – Prison, and a Prayer!

1. Why do you think the chapter is called 'Prison, and a Prayer!'?
2. Was two months in prison a fair sentence for the crime committed? Discuss this with a partner.
3. How are Jabir's prayers answered?
4. Predict what you think might happen next.

Chapter 4 – The Incredible Clockmaker

1. Describe the workshop using five adjectives and five similes.
2. What is a caliph?
3. What is Jabir's mission? Why is it so important?

Chapter 5 – The First Horseman

1. How does Jabir's luck change in chapter 5?
2. What are your first impressions of Abu Mahfouz?
3. How does Abu Mahfouz help Jabir?
4. What does Jabir achieve? What complement does Abu Mahfouz give to Jabir?

Chapter 6 – The Grand Vizier

1. Who is the grand vizier?
2. How does the author show that Jabir is nervous?
3. Why does the grand vizier give Jabir a gold dinar?

Chapter 7 – The Landlords Revenge

1. How does the landlord get his revenge?
2. Why do Jabir's eyes 'grow wide with horror'? What would you do in Jabir's situation?
3. How did you feel when you learned Jabir's family were no longer living in the house but in a cave?
4. Was it right for the landlord to break his agreement and wait for the next full moon to receive the rent and arrears?
5. What does the landlord want to do with the house?



Chapter 8 – The Rest of the Horsemen

Chapter 9 – Fire!

Chapter 10– A Brilliant Idea

1. Why does Jabir feel optimistic about the future?
2. ‘Jabir is a brave character’ Discuss.
3. Why does Jabir feel guilt and shame?
4. Predict how Yasmina and her father will react when they hear the news.
5. What would you do next if you were Jabir?
6. What is Jabir’s brilliant idea?
7. Do you think you have to be religious to have faith?
8. How does the author develop tension and suspense in these chapters?

Chapter 11 – To the Desert

Chapter 12 – Grandma Nabiha

Chapter 13 – The Night of the Carvers

1. What preparations do they make for their journey in the desert? Why do they do this?
2. Why does Abu Mahfouz not go with them to find Jabir’s family?
3. Why is the wadi called the Valley of Bones?
4. What extra information do we gather about the landlord Yusuf Said?
5. What does Grandma Nabiha promise?
6. Why do the Badawi tribe come together to help? What do the Badawi tribe teach us about working together?

Chapter 14 – The Snake in the Grass

1. Why is the chapter called ‘The Snake in the Grass’?
2. How does Jabir outwit Yusuf Said?
3. Discuss the importance of forgiveness in the book.
4. Pretend you are Yasmina and make a statement in no more than 300 words describing your adventure.

Chapter 15 – Gold for the Horsemen

1. What is Ali’s latest invention? How will it help the clockmaker?
2. Why is it important that talents are nurtured?
3. What will Jabir be known as from now on? How will this help him in the future?
4. How does Jabir overcome the obstacles in his journey?



5. Why does Jabir feel 'pride' at the end of the story?
6. Discuss the importance of the words stated by the caliph: 'Tell him that I pray my gifts will please His Holiness and that they are seen as a token of our people's wish to co-exist happily with his own subjects.' (Page 146.)

BEYOND THE BOOK

Links to History

KS2 History (2014 Curriculum): A non-European society that provides contrasts with British history – early Islamic civilisation, including a study of Baghdad c.AD900.

- 'We are enjoying the results of their hard work and inspiration to this very day.' (Page 153.) How do the achievements of early Islam contribute to our lives today?
- Why were so many discoveries made in the Islamic world during this time?
- What impact did the early Islamic civilisation have on the world?
- Why did the Islamic Golden Age take place during the 8th and 13th centuries?
- 'Baghdad was for a time the intellectual capital of the world.' Discuss.
- Why did Caliph Al-Mansur decide to build Baghdad in its location?
- What can we learn about the Islamic Golden Age from studying how Baghdad was built?
- What was special about Baghdad in its Golden Age? Why would someone have chosen to live in Baghdad during the Islamic Golden Age?
- How did Baghdad become the centre of a flourishing trade network?
- Why did the 'House of Wisdom' attract scholars from around the world?
- How far did the Islamic civilisation spread? Why?
- What was daily life like for the rich in Islamic cities such as Baghdad?
- Look at a range of texts, images and objects to find out what made this civilisation advance compared to other civilisations of the time?
- Compare and contrast the Islamic Golden Age with what was happening at the same time in history in Britain e.g. clothes, food, architecture, inventions, discoveries, etc.

Geography

- Where in the world is Baghdad?
- Explore the location on a map and mark important landmarks. Identify the continent, the countries within it and their capital cities.
- Identify the countries which were part of the Islamic Golden Age. How far did their influence spread across the world?
- Compare and contrast Baghdad today and during the Islamic Golden Age.
- Study the physical geography of Iraq – its mountains, rivers, etc.

- Why was the River Tigris important to Baghdad during the Islamic Golden Age? Is the river still important in Baghdad?
- Jabir and Yasmina go to the desert to find his family. Investigate what it would be like to live in the desert. What is the desert like? What animals can be found in the desert? How have they adapted to live in their surroundings? (This could link to science: the classification of living things and adaptation.) What would you need in order to live in the desert? Compare and contrast what it would be like to live in the desert compared to Baghdad during the Islamic Golden Age.

Science

- What did the Islamic Golden Age do for science? What were the most significant discoveries of the time?
- How did early Islamic science advance medicine?

Art and Design

- ‘The walls were covered in tiles with geometric designs...’ (page 30). Explore Islamic geometric patterns involving the tessellation of shapes. Create your own design to put forward to the caliph for a) the ceiling of a new building in Baghdad during the Islamic Golden Age or b) for a ceramic tile in a special building.
- Study a variety of Islamic ceramics and create your own using clay.
- Explore the art of Islamic calligraphy.

Design and Technology

- Explore the great advances in architecture during the Islamic Golden Age. Design, make and evaluate a replica of one of the buildings, applying your understanding of how to strengthen, stiffen and reinforce complex structures.
- What were the most significant inventions during this time? What makes a good inventor? Make an invention of your own.

Cooking and Nutrition

- Explore the role that food and diet play in a religious context.
- What food did they eat in Baghdad during the Islamic Golden Age? Design a menu fit for the caliph.

Religious Education

- Learn about the beliefs of Islam:
 - The Five Pillars of Islam
 - Religious festivals
 - Holy book the Qur’an
 - Place of worship – Mosque