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INTERVIEW



## 'I try to stay true to my memories, even if it means making a mistake': an interview with Riad Sattouf

Translated by Oliva Hoskins

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### ABSTRACT

As we entered 2021, we interviewed Riad Sattouf about his *Arab of the Future* series, reflecting on how comics explore memory and the importance of narrative storytelling not limited to 280 Twitter characters or conforming to rigid and oversimplified ideology. Sattouf shared how he understands elements of comics, including the thought bubble and the uses of colour in his comics, as well as his many comics influences. There is an urgency in his work that we explore in this interview: his stories depict the corruption of political promises and ideologies. Sattouf's work reminds us that human life, and particularly child development intersects in painful and often confusing ways with cultural violence and political oppression. Comics as an art form can help us to depict and contend with the complexities of modern living, challenging and transcending nationalist boundaries.

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**Vera Camden and Valentino Zullo** Thank you for agreeing to do this interview with us. This is really an honour. Can we begin by talking about thought bubbles? We are so intrigued by your use of the thought bubble, an element of comics, which has been under erasure by mainstream companies in the United States. Would you share some of your thoughts on how you use thought bubbles and how it changes as you grow up in the volumes?

**Riad Sattouf** The process of narration and writing is quite instinctive. I try not to overthink its development. Instead, I try to use my memories, they guide me. For instance,

I'm always asking myself, 'Can I replace a speech bubble with an image instead? An image that would make sense here?' I always end up choosing the image (Figure 1). Obviously, as a child grows, his intellect evolves as well, because the situations he deals with become more and more complex. But it's a very instinctive process. Comics are a form of writing, a language, which I try to speak in the best possible manner, to really open this form of writing up to improvisation. I strive to let chance enter the pages of my comics, while controlling it as much as I can. I would really like to succeed in creating organic, living stories.

**Camden and Zullo** Do you think that the creation of these comics stories has led you to remember more?

**Sattouf** I try to stay true to my memories, even if it means making a mistake. I want to illustrate what I have in my head! I don't use documentation. For example, I recently reviewed some photos of my village in Syria, photos from the time I lived there. I had completely forgotten that the houses were all connected by power lines, creating a sort of net over the streets. This aspect of my village wasn't in my comics. But, oh well! I prefer not to correct it, to leave the distortions as they are

**Camden and Zullo** While most of your comic seems to be drawn from memory, there are times where you recreate events from pictures and or from TV. Do you just draw these from memory as well?

**Sattouf** Yes, I really love to draw scenes from movies and TV, especially for things I watched as a child. I try to be very realistic, I find that it reinforces the comic aspect of it all. When you're a child, everything on the TV seems so serious! My drawing style varies a little. I can go from being very realistic to very schematic. Chris Ware's style, for instance, often varies. He goes from a logotype drawing to powerful atmospheres, exploring a variety of styles according to the story he wants to tell. In my opinion, Ware is really the greatest comic artist alive. He's taken the art of comics so far, opened new doors, forged paths, taken extraordinary liberties...

**Camden and Zullo** Speaking of this versatility, you are both a filmmaker and a comics artist, what is it for you that allows the comics form to tell these very personal stories? Why comics? What is it about the form that has helped you tell such a painful story?

**Sattouf** I learned how to read from comics, and I immediately wanted to write them as well! It's my passion, my life! I had the opportunity to make films, but it was only thanks to comics that I had that chance. I've always loved cinema, I studied film and animation in Paris at the Gobelins École de L'Image. I used to dream of going to work for Spielberg. Then I signed a contract with a publisher when I was 18, before I'd ever even had a girlfriend! Comics are truly my first love. They possess a language of their own, a language that I love to speak. Becoming a comics artist was the identity I chose for myself when I was unable to reconcile my two cultures! I chose the identity of those who write books. I wanted to join them; I was interested in the lives of these authors. For example, I loved Antoine de Saint-Exupéry; I used to read books about his life in order to figure out how I could identify with him or be inspired by him. I did the same with other authors like Moebius, etc. I have much more in common with a manga artist from Japan than I do with the guy down my street in Paris who works for an insurance company!



**Figure 1.** From *the Arab of the future: a childhood in the middle east, 1978–1984*, 67 by Riad Sattouf © Metropolitan Books.

And I quickly began to want to express myself freely, without being dependent on the permission of others or anything else. I turned towards independent comics, which was the universe that offered the most freedom from my point of view.

**Camden and Zullo** We can see that influence of the independent comics tradition in your work, particularly in the exploration and documentation of memory. How have you found that comics allowed you to explore memory?

**Sattouf** While writing *The Arab of the Future*, I discovered that memory is like a muscle. Give it a try: try to remember the pants your parents wore when you were little. You'll see an image in your head, but this memory will come back accompanied by sounds, smells, places, scenes. That's how it works for me! My memories come to me in waves.

**Camden and Zullo** Do you feel that your use of colour, which is so distinct, connects with the memories that you are drawing upon in your comic?

**Sattouf** I realised quite quickly that in my memories each of the countries I lived in during my youth possessed a particular dominant colour. Libya was bathed in sunlight, so I chose yellow as its dominant colour. Brittany in France was blue-grey, and Syria was the pink of the earth. If you go on Google Earth and zoom over my village in Syria, you can see the pink of the earth there quite well ([Figure 2](#)).

Besides this, I also allowed myself to use the colours of each country's flag, since this story is also about nationalism. Green for Libya; blue, white, and red for France; and red, black, white, and green for Syria.

I needed constraints, because this story is about countries and people bound by constraints. The monochrome also disorients the reader: if you stay in a room under a red light for two hours and then go outside, the world will look green. It's biological; it's in your eyes. I wanted to try and provoke this feeling of rupture, to illustrate the nature of the journey. Once you get used to the yellow, you move on to the blue, and you're transported elsewhere. Colours provoke emotions.

**Camden and Zullo** That is really quite interesting and true, it is a disorienting experience as reader when you shift from one country to the next because of the colour change. You also seem to capture well how your development affects the stories you tell. How do you navigate the different periods of your own development? How do you ease the reader into these developmental shifts?

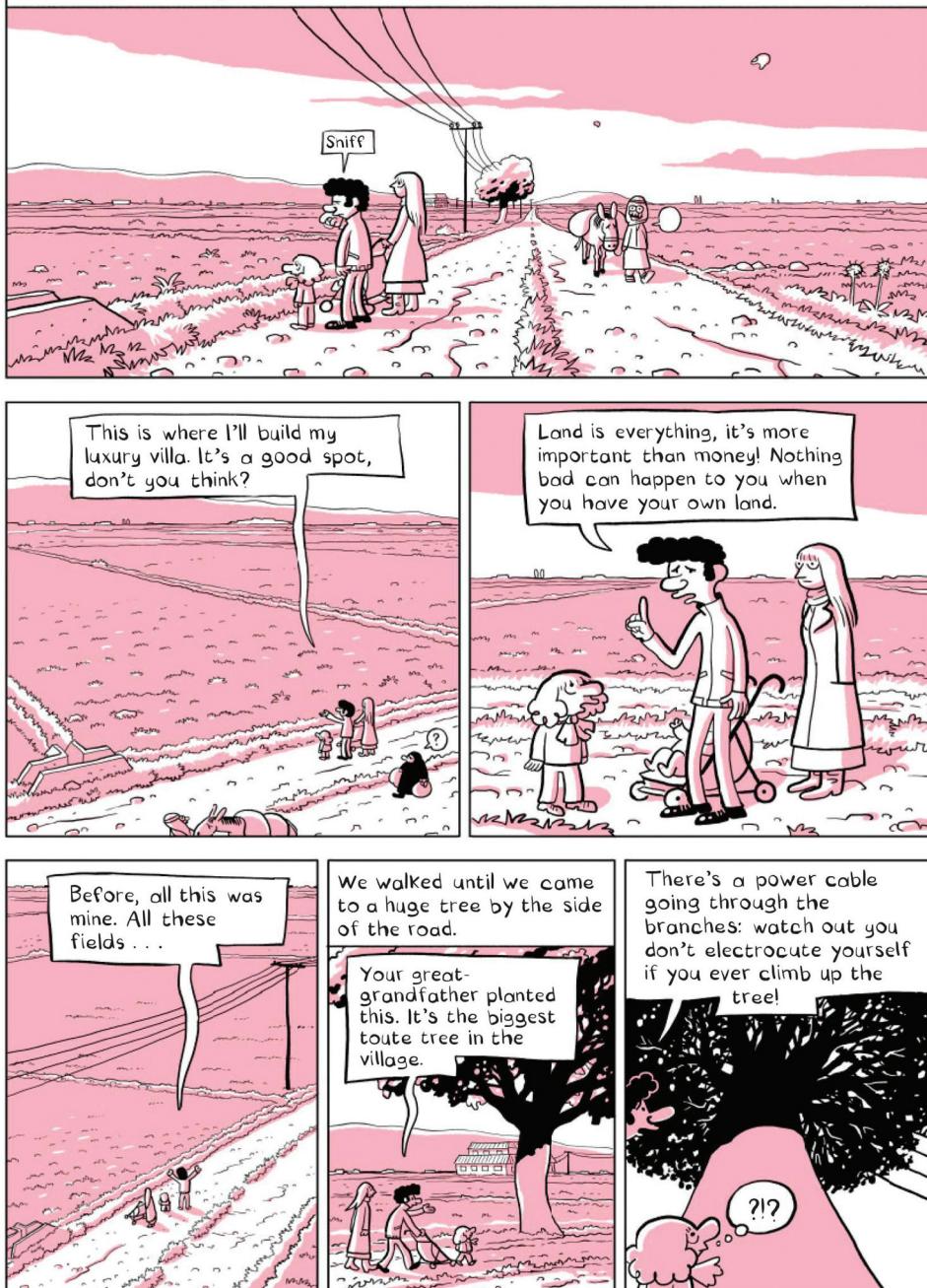
**Sattouf** It's the contents of my memories that influence me. When I was a child, I understood things the way a small animal does.

My memories of these periods of my life involve sensations: noises, smells, colours. Then, as the story progresses, these memories become more precise and filled with language. My memories are quite clear and neatly arranged in my head, like boxes on a staircase which ascends up to the current day ([Figure 3](#)).

I like to show the animal nature of human beings in my stories: that's why I endeavour to emphasise sensory experiences in my writing. Sometimes I open up one of my comics, and I don't remember having drawn or narrated this or that thing at all! It's sometimes as if another part of me wrote these books! That said, I try to stay focused on the father's journey in *The Arab of the Future*, which is why I ended up leaving out several stories that departed from this main subject. I try to maintain a direction in my writing.



Next, my father took us to the other side of the village, where he showed us the only field that still belonged to him after his brother had sold all the others.



**Figure 2.** From *The Arab of the future: a childhood in the middle east, 1978–1984,92* by Riad Sattouf © Metropolitan Books.



**Figure 3.** From *the Arab of the future: a childhood in the middle east, 1978–1984*, 153 by Riad Sattouf © Metropolitan Books.

**Camden and Zullo** As you document your father's journey, you capture his frequent denial of reality ([Figure 4](#)). How do you think your response to his denial has impacted your drive to document? And to extend the discussion outside of your personal story, what purpose do you think comics can serve as documentary in our contemporary moment where truth and fact are under attack?

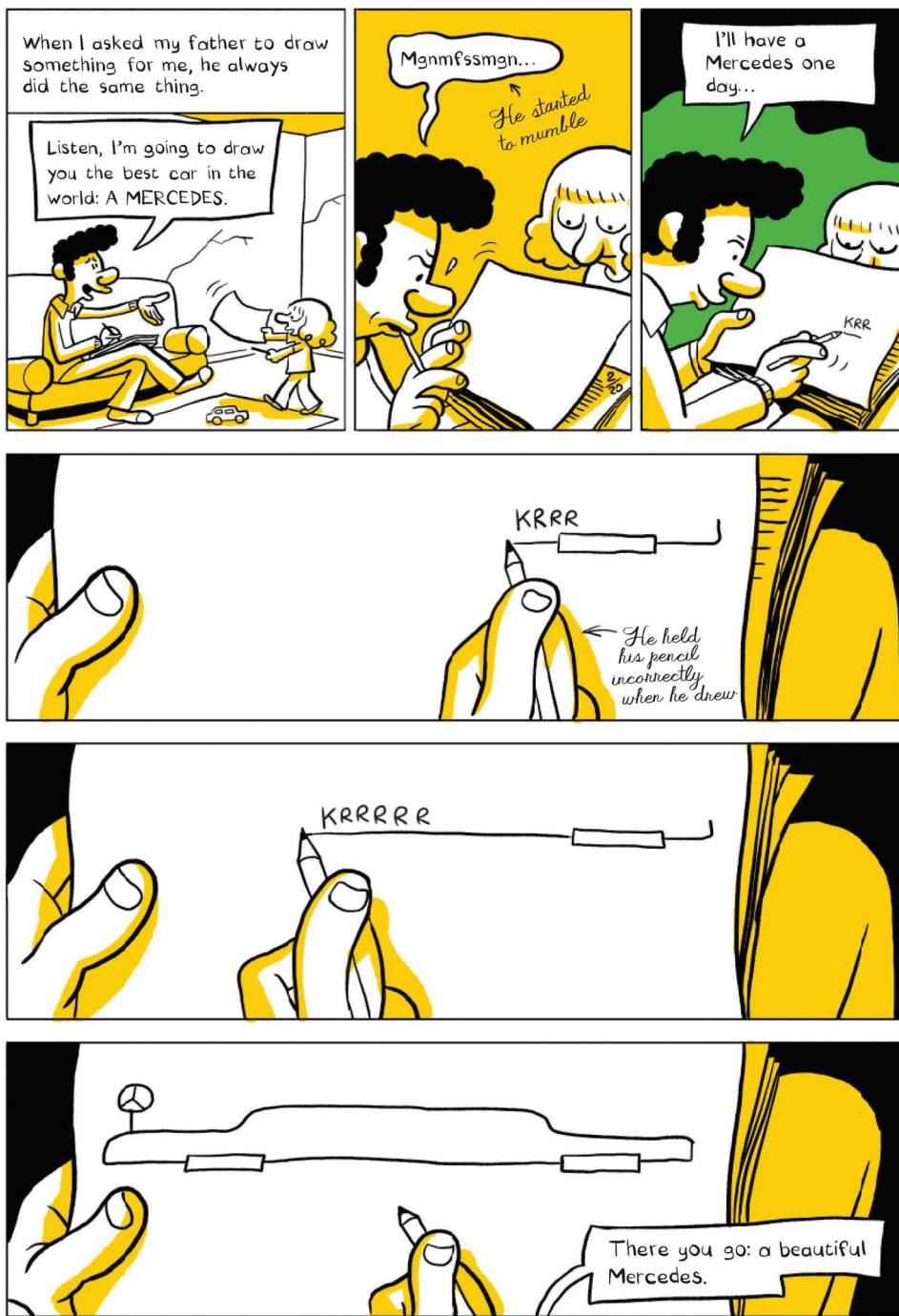
**Sattouf** I want to recount what I saw! To tell stories from my perspective which express a certain complexity, a certain clouding of the issues. I think that one consequence of American show-business has been a simplification of the stakes, of the narration, in comic books. We want things to be very reassuring and very clear, but life is anything but reassuring and clear! I'm also not a fan of stories that are overtly politically committed, whether it's from the far-right or the far-left. I find stories like that bothersome; they make me uncomfortable in the sense that I feel ashamed to read them. In a way, they remind me of religious thought, when people who seem to be profoundly convinced of something try to pass that conviction onto you, but in doing so they just end up sounding crazy. With stories like this, I can understand what the author's thinking right away, and I tell myself 'Ah, he's not going to change his opinion for even a second throughout the whole story, so what's the point in reading the whole thing.' I can't stand stories where you know where it's going right away, where the whole thing is very cautious and predictable. They remind me of fast-food hamburgers with that bright yellow sauce that possesses only the faintest taste of actual mustard so as to avoid any chance it might sting the palate of sensitive consumers. There is a quote by a French author that I love, André Gide, who said something like, 'Cherish those who search for the truth, run away from those who find it.' Today, a lot of people in the world think they have found the truth, it's quite anxiety-provoking ?

Freedom of speech is still strong in France, and I really try to make the most of it in order to tell the stories I want, and also, before anything else, to try and reflect the diversity of morality and the various perspectives that are to be found in life and human beings.

**Camden and Zullo** Could you reflect more on the questions of nationalism as you portray the radicalisation of your father? How do you understand the radicalisation happening across western countries today?

**Sattouf** I really try to avoid generalisations when I speak about these issues. They're very complex. Today, probably influenced by the rise of Twitter and its 280-word character limit, we would like to be able to sum up the world's problems in a few sentences, a few words. As if a handful of words could ever allow us to explain and understand our problems so easily! There are millions of reasons why individuals are pushed to extremes, not only poverty, frustration, rage, and jealousy, but also ambition, a feeling of superiority, a fascist belief that other groups of people are inferior and should be dominated. The nasty school-yard bully's words have gained a much greater audience than they ever had before. Conspiracy theories, ideological pressures, political and ideological invectives, all already existed when I was a kid, but they didn't have anywhere to express themselves.

**Camden and Zullo** You point to social media as giving a greater voice to the 'schoolyard bully,' do you think this has led to attempts of censorship of cartoonists in France? How do you feel that this might connect back to the censorship that comics experienced in the United States in the 1940s/50s?



**Figure 4.** From *the Arab of the future: a childhood in the middle east, 1978–1984*, 26 by Riad Sattouf © Metropolitan Books.

**Sattouf** There is no censorship in France! Someone can be condemned for racism or antisemitism if they attack you, but you have to prove it in the eyes of the law. Thankfully, there is no organisation that has the ability to decide whether this or that drawing may be published! There are of course people on social media who express a certain nostalgia for censorship, but I don't believe that they represent the population as a whole. In my view, the true problem with social media is anonymity. The more I think about it, the more I believe that the use of pseudonyms should be banned on all social media platforms. There are people who run multiple accounts, automated bots, hidden political parties, etc. I remember when Twitter suggested that I get the blue badge that designates a verified account. They asked me to take a photo posing with my ID card! I don't understand why they don't make all users do this.

In France, the freedom of speech is still strong.

When I was a teenager, we knew if this or that editor was independent, if this or that film had been financed by big companies. We knew that freedom of speech was limited in large corporations, Marvel for instance wouldn't publish Julie Doucet. Today, there is no longer any debate on these topics by the public, or hardly any!

We talk about Marvel films in the *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Netflix has become both a fixture of normal life and a positively-viewed societal phenomenon. In France, novelists present themselves as anticapitalist rebel punks calling for a communist revolution while being published by multinational billionaire corporations! Nobody finds this upsetting anymore. This is how I believe capitalism has completely won; it organises its own opposition. But it's an interesting era to observe first-hand! As for myself, I respect all points of view, but I have a special respect for those who have the honesty to act in accordance with their words.

**Camden and Zullo** As we think about these different organisations, could you also reflect on your time at *Charlie Hebdo*? How has it influenced your work? How do you think about that time?

**Sattouf** I met Cabu and Philippe Val from *Charlie Hebdo* in 2003, after I had already published one or two comic books. They proposed that I join their editorial staff, but I told them that I was no political cartoonist. I knew nothing about political cartoons, and I was useless at drawing caricatures. Drawing Trump golfing would be a real nightmare for me! I was never a member of the editorial staff at *Charlie Hebdo*. I would just stop by and see them every now and then. It was an impressive place, and I was still very young. They were always arguing, calling each other all sorts of names. They would frequently have great ideological debates, on the left, where they would call each other social traitors, etc. I offered them a strip called *La Vie Secrète des Jeunes*, known in English as *The Secret Life of Youth*, in which I recounted scenes I had observed in the street that featured young people. I sent them a page by email. I ended up working on this project for eight years, leading to three collections which haven't yet been translated into English. I wanted to tell stories about the things I saw in the street!

I had grown up, like many other French people, watching Cabu's drawing lessons on TV. He was a legend! I was never able to speak with him normally, I'll admit. I was really in awe of him. I left *Charlie Hebdo* a few months before the attack. I had wanted to do something else, to start a new series. So I threw myself into *Les Cahiers d'Esther*, which was published in the French magazine *L'Obs*. This comic has just been translated into English under the name *Esther's Notebooks*, published by England's Pushkin Press. It's written from the perspective of a young girl who tells stories about her life and society.

**Camden and Zullo** Who are your influences? Are there cartoonists that you return to often? What do you return to ‘see’ again?

**Sattouf** I learned how to read French through Hergé’s comic series *The Adventures of Tintin*, which were the only books I had in my village in Syria when I was a child. My French grandmother would send them to me in the mail. I was immediately fascinated by the little speech bubbles and the neat panels which followed one after the other and seemed to come alive before my eyes! Then, during my teenage years, I got to love science fiction, Moebius, Drillet, and Corben. Later on, when I was an applied arts student, I discovered independent comics through L’Association’s publications in France: *Livret de Phamille* by Jean-Christophe Menu, *L’Ascension du haut mal*, known in English as *Epileptic*, by David Beauchard. I also loved Julie Doucet, Peter Bagge, Clowes, and Chris Ware. I don’t really read modern comics anymore. I’m afraid of being influenced by what’s in fashion! Instead, I reread my old favourites and try to see what fascinated me so much when I was a kid.

**Camden and Zullo** Finally, just for fun, what do you think is next for you after you finish *The Arab of the Future* series? Also, what are you reading now?

**Sattouf** I have several other projects waiting, yes, but I’m keeping them a secret for now! I would really love to write science fiction or heroic fantasy comics. Maybe soon, who knows? I’m now reading *La jeunesse de Yoshi*, in English *Yoshi’s Youth*, by Yoshiharu Tsuge. Tsuge is an absolute genius in the comics world. He’s my idol. His works have only just been translated into French and published by Editions Cornelius. I’m a huge fan of manga. I particularly love the manga that emerged during the ‘60s and the ‘70s, like that of Shigeru Mizuki, and the quick, expressive, and slightly brutal comic styles which characterised this period. While completely different in style, I also love to reread Antoine de Saint-Exupéry books. *Night Flight* and *Flight to Arras* in particular are two stories of his that I love. I also admire the works of Joseph Kessel, a great journalist and adventurer whose articles explored the events of the last century. I try to make a conscious effort to read other things besides comics too, which is something I always advise young authors to do.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

**Vera J. Camden** is Professor of English at Kent State University, Clinical Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at Case Western Reserve University and Training and Supervising Analyst at the Cleveland Psychoanalytic Center. She is editor of the forthcoming, *Cambridge Companion to Literature and Psychoanalysis*, associate editor of *American Imago*, and American editor of the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*.

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