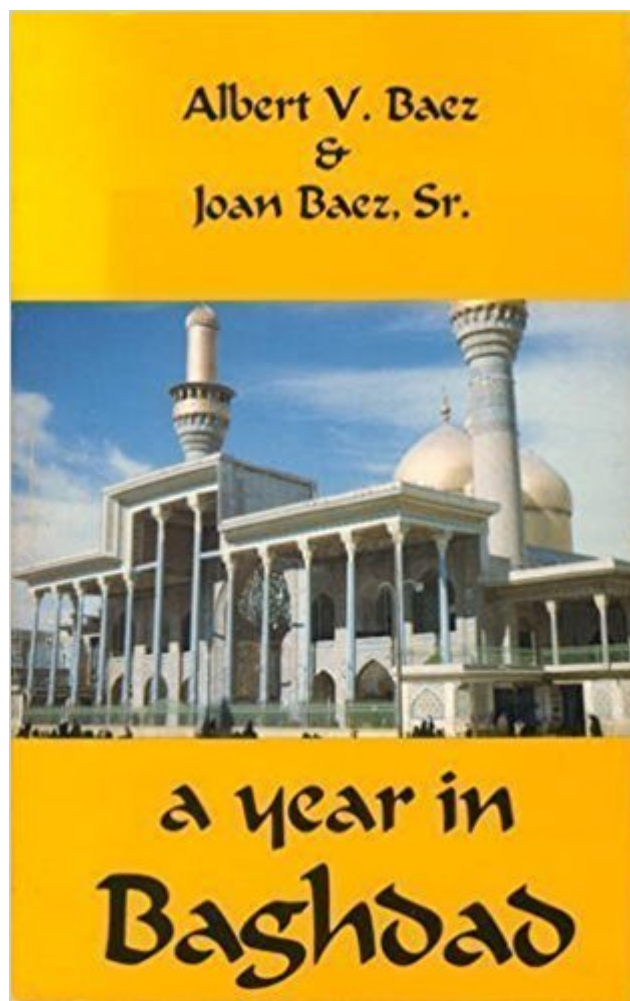


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# A Year In Baghdad



## Book Information

Paperback: 205 pages

Publisher: John Daniel & Company (October 1988)

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Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars 2 customer reviews

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## Customer Reviews

Parents of the famous singer and pacifist tell of their year-long sojourn in Iraq in 1951 and how it helped to crystallize their family's values. A 10-year-old Joan drew the slight illustrations that decorate each of the short journal-like entries, where the warm, informal voices of the parents alternate in a medley of familial harmony. Albert Baez concentrates on describing his work as a physics professor and his wife on her efforts to create domestic comfort in their crude Baghdad house. We're steeped in details of trip preparations, private matters and itinerary that are the usual stuff of family vacations. Travails include their anxiety over attaining a functional bathroom, their clash with villagers who took offense at their photographing an historic site and their rainy-day outing to a movie house. One of the Baez family's ostensible motives is to register a vote for cultural diplomacy. The book, however, most resembles a testament to their beliefs, and they speak of their affiliation with the Religious Society of Friends. But, unfortunately, interest in their homey stories wanes too soon despite their good will, and readers, except those curious about the singer's upbringing, will be convinced that the treasure of these memoirs remains personal to the Baez family. Photos not seen by PW. Copyright 1988 Reed Business Information, Inc.

In 1951, Al and Joan Baez took their three young daughters to Baghdad for a year, where Al was on a Unesco mission to teach physics. Their experiences as a young and idealistic family in a strange, inefficient, and uncomfortable land make up this book. Alternate chapters by the two authors relate the difficulties in getting settled, the professional challenges, the many friends and kindnesses, the illnesses, and more. They conclude that the year was stressful for all, but valuable. The style is

personal and prosaic, and the results are pleasant but not memorable. The only thing noteworthy about the book is that the illustrations were done by their daughter, the famed folk singer. Elizabeth R. Hayford, Associated Colls. of the Midwest, Chicago Copyright 1989 Reed Business Information, Inc.

A surprisingly fine read. The drawings by Joan Baez are very well done and contribute to the overall fine feel of a lovely travelogue of a multi-talented American family in a very unusual land.

Despite the rather luke-warm opinions of the "experts" as shown, I wanted to offer a more positive review. To me, a good travel book is not defined by the number of its adventures but by the quiet observation, honesty and empathy of the author(s). And this book is loaded with those fine qualities. It is written by the parents of the famous Joan Baez, Albert and Joan Baez. But instead of being written as a pure collaboration, the chapters instead flip back and forth between their two voices, and perspectives. As Albert struggled to launch his chemistry lab at a Baghdad University, Joan the mother tried to bring a domestic normalcy into the home, mostly for the sake of the three young children. The children for their part suffered some trials, including hepatitis for Joan the daughter, and some bad days at school with the mean old nun. But probably the most affecting pieces are the ones where the authors lovingly describe the people and the sights around them. I was moved by Albert's description of the old city, as observed from his roof, while he mused about the town of Bethlehem at Christmastime. And Joan's description of the local woman bearing endless gifts of spinach, was also touching in its own way. There's lots of quoted expressions in the book that are not soon forgotten, such as "Izzent it?", and "Me Chris" translated: "I'm Christian". It was clear that the language barrier created a huge obstacle in reaching out to the locals, and as a consequence the book has a feeling of a hole in it, like a sizeable pothole in the road. But all in all it was good reading, and quite well written, impressively so for "non-writers". I only saw one mention of Quakerism in the book, so don't believe that it's filled with propaganda, because it's not. The family does seem quite astonishingly liberal, considering the time, and the respect that the parents give to the ideas and opinions of their daughters is truly admirable. In the afterward, there is a bit of an explanation as to why the book was written the way it was, because apparently the authors weren't living together at the time. You'll have to read the book to find out why. Oh, and not to forget, the drawings were quite charming as well. It's really a shame that the book isn't in print anymore, I was a bit surprised at that. So check it out at your local library, and perhaps you'll be charmed too!

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