

*Battle Lines: A Graphic History of the Civil War*. Ari Kelman and Jonathan Fetter-Vorm. New York: Hill and Wang, 2015. ISBN: 9780809094745

With the litany of Civil War literature that exists, it is no easy feat carving a niche in the genre. Ari Kelman's *Battle Lines*, however, does just that as he offers a unique, multi-layered approach in this graphic history of the Civil War. On one hand, Kelman's book provides a history of the war, discussing strategies and turning points related to both the front lines and politics. On the other hand, Kelman blends personal narratives with these larger themes to emphasize a more human element that is often overlooked in more conventional historical writings. In presenting his work this way, Kelman argues for the importance of fleshing out the Civil War at a macro and micro level in order to fully understand and appreciate its complexities.

Each chapter begins with a summary of important moments and turning points leading up to, and through, the Civil War. These summaries are typeset to look like newspapers from that era. They appear as articles, complete with headlines, subheads, and a masthead. Every chapter has its own newspaper that gives a high level view of the war's proceedings, essentially acting as an abstract for each chapter. What sets Kelman's book apart from the majority of Civil War readings in academia, however, is that it reads like a series of comic books strung together. The book, while short on text, is filled with intricately detailed drawings that allow the story to unfold visually. Jonathan Fetter-Vorm's renderings are so meticulous that readers are likely to follow the drawings almost more than the text itself. Every story told is different as each chapter looks at particular objects—a brick, ink, a railroad spike—that would appear mundane in and of itself. When put in context with the drawings and thoughts of the individual characters, though, the

objects are given an extremely meaningful existence. The content of the book, both written and

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visual, works to capture the Civil War's essence from a national perspective, as well as from an individual perspective.

Examining the war in this way makes the book a useful and thought-provoking read. While it is difficult to weave a humanistic element into a broader, more general context of war that spans across four years, Kelman manages to do so in a way that is evocative, yet succinct. This stands as one of his book's biggest strengths. Kelman deftly takes a seemingly ordinary object and looks at it from the ground up. He sees what role the object played in the lives of citizens and soldiers and then works that into the larger context of the war. For example, in chapter four, "Leg Irons," a set of leg irons acts as the object in question. A runaway slave, George Washington, from North Carolina is found by a pair of Union soldiers who make it known they are there to protect him, but in doing so, they force the runaway to return to Union camp against his wishes. A blacksmith at camp agreed to break Washington's chain for free, but insists that removing the shackles would require payment, knowing full well a runaway slave would not have the money for that. As a member of the camp, Washington was forced to work, "diggin' trench" (54). In this instance, the leg shackles worn by Washington embody the freedom that remained elusive. Even when Washington fled his master's plantation, breaking the South's chain that tethered him, he still could not escape the shackles of a racist society that deprived him of his free will. This descriptive nature also extends to the drawings that tell each story. In chapter seven, "The Bug," a red, dotted line darts through each drawing. The drawings lead the reader from one social group to the next, intertwining individual banter with the larger topic of illness that had spread throughout the country. The chapter ends with a doctor providing his last

drawings zoom in closer to the doctor, a malaria-infested mosquito is shown sitting on his neck (90). This chapter demonstrates how illness was a problem at an individual level, but also conveys how it became a societal issue due to human contact and a lack of general knowledge about illness and hygiene that pervaded nineteenth-century America. Though this book possesses a number of strengths, if there is a weakness, it is the lack of groundbreaking material and research provided. This book does not unearth any new secrets or findings that put it at the forefront of historical scholarship. *Battle Lines* serves more as a way to provide a general understanding of the war's key points and its impact on the individual than it does to tell us something new.

It is important to keep in mind, though, that this book would appear to be unconcerned with that. Based on this book's broadly intended audience, it is unlikely that Kelman set a specific goal to do original research. First and foremost, I would argue this book is intended for a younger audience curious about the Civil War. It is short on text, big on visuals, and has a very comic book feel to it, all of which appeal to a younger generation, such as middle school through undergraduate students. It glosses over some of the war's battles and significant news stories, while completely neglecting most of them all together, in order to give a more basic understanding of what happened. It also presents the material in a way that conveys just how deadly and gruesome the war was without being gory or overly graphic. However, to say Kelman's work is only intended for a younger audience would be to sell his concepts and ideas short. *Battle Lines* could be targeted to anyone—from any age group to any academic level. To be able to effectively parse the Civil War of its complexities and identify what the war meant to the nation on a larger scale, and also to the individual on a smaller scale, is something anyone

can take to heart and appreciate. Too often, both general history enthusiasts and trained academics can forget how vital these individual stories are to the past and how, at its core, these individual stories weave together to comprise the larger thoughts, feelings, and actions of a nation.

Overall, this book serves well to remind readers about the importance of individual stories as it relates to a larger cause. It also offers a nice balance between a quick read and detailed visuals that make you want to slow down and think. Kelman's unique blend of research, art, and history help illuminate larger themes and symbols of the Civil War. If you are reading this book in search of new, historical research, it will likely leave you disappointed. However, if you embrace the book for its ability to bring the war to life visually and point out the complexities that existed at a macro and micro level, *Battle Lines* can be an interesting and worthwhile read.

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