

Book Reviews

Abina and the Important Men: A Graphic History. By TREVOR R. GETZ and LIZ CLARKE. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 208 pp. \$15.95 (paper).

Abina and the Important Men joins a prestigious, if limited, selection of works that transgress the boundary between “traditional history” and comic books. Such works, which include *The Plot: The Secret Story of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (2005), written by the father of the graphic novel himself, Will Eisner, and to some degree or another Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (volumes 1 [2003] and 2 [2004]), Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* series, Joe Sacco’s *Palestine* (2002), and even Jim Ottaviani’s *Suspended in Language: Niels Bohr’s Life, Discoveries, and the Century He Shaped* (2004), add new dimensions to questions of historical interpretation and analysis. Indeed the list of graphic novels that are ideal additions to the history classroom is rather extensive, but as with the examples above, few graphic novels are intended to be histories, and even fewer are authored by trained historians. Of course historicity need not be proven, as with *Suspended in Language* and *The Plot*, by extensive notes and bibliographies nor by the author’s graduate degree, as Trevor Getz himself repeatedly notes, but Getz’s work is set aside from the likes of other graphic histories by its very format.

Abina is not only a “graphic history” but a behind-the-scenes look at the historian’s craft and the ways in which history is imagined, conceptualized, and presented. The graphic (and in this sense I mean *graphical*, not violent, sexually explicit, or necessarily vivid) component of the work is the majority of the book. Half of *Abina and the Important Men*

is taken up by a graphic interpretation of the history of Abina, a young woman who believes herself to be wrongfully enslaved. Getz's interpretation is based on court documents of the case brought against those she contends are her slave masters. The remaining half of the book is divided into various components that detail the process of creating history. These sections include a look at court documents that first introduced Getz to Abina. Their inclusion gives readers the ability to see for themselves what inspired him to interpret Abina's legacy in this way, as well as compare his narration with what the historical data offer. Additionally, these sections offer a look at the historical context of Ghana in the late 1800s and a self-reflective narrative of world historiography, Getz's position vis-à-vis the historian's craft, and his perception of the book's place in the growing narratives of African history, microhistory, and graphic history. The self-reflection Getz indulges in adds complexity to the basic nature of *Abina*. On the Oxford University Press's blog, Getz states: "I will not pretend that I don't love the Abina I have constructed in my mind, even though she is only an unreal representation of the real thing." Moving determinedly away from objectivity as part of the historian's work, Getz lays clear the complexity of conceptualizing and reconceptualizing history. This "historian's craft analysis" that Getz offers is both extremely worthwhile and a questionable addition, particularly in looking at who the intended audience is.

On one hand it is a significant consideration that Getz thought to do this. Few historians (and perhaps even fewer world historians) use graphic novels in the classroom (at least at the university level; in K-12 classrooms their use is quite common), and as a result a lot of people do not actually know how to "read" a graphic novel. Publishers such as Random House (*Persepolis*) have offered teachers' tools on their websites that help facilitate the teaching process. However, the caution used in questioning the addition of this component is expressed because it feels a bit like the reader has received the teacher's edition of the book. Students can certainly use the material included, but it may be more often than not seen as extra material that is never really going to be used and yet still had to be paid for. Still, with this caution comes additional ways the book can be used. Using a graphic novel at the graduate level is almost never done, and yet here Getz's work is an ideal addition to a historiography course as a practice example of integrating theory and practice.

In conclusion, Trevor Getz's *Abina and the Important Men* is a tremendous step forward for the world history community. Both world history as a field and graphic novels (and comic books) as a genre have been maligned by conventional academic agendas. Getz propels the

field of world history forward in using the vehicle of graphic novel by authenticating the non-generalist vision of his historical work and giving thorough scholarly credence to the format.

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Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference.

By JANE BURBANK and FREDERICK COOPER. Princeton, N.J.:
Princeton University Press, 2010. 528 pp. \$49.95 (cloth);
\$24.95 (paper).

Empires matter. Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper remind us that empire—as a form of state—enjoyed a much longer life than has the nation-state of the present. Competition between empires to capture, mobilize, and control resources profoundly shaped the course of human history at local, regional, and global scales for millennia. One of the most persistent questions faced by imperial rulers was how to govern and exploit diverse and widely scattered populations. In *Empires in World History* Burbank and Cooper examine how some dozen of the most influential empires did precisely that. Their approach challenges a number of recent interpretations not only of particular empires but also of the relationship between empire-states and nation-states.

Burbank and Cooper argue that the acquisition and maintenance of imperial power always required local-level intermediaries—individuals of influence drawn from a conquered society who enabled control from afar. The persistent trouble with intermediaries was that they had their own interests in mind. Their cooperation was always contingent upon perceived benefits, special concessions, and the like. Intermediaries could never be taken for granted. All empires therefore had to find ways to incentivize both cooperation and subordination. Hence imperial power demanded the careful manipulation of what Burbank and Cooper refer to as a “politics of difference”—a way of accommodating competing interests and ultimately of “governing different people differently” (p. 184).

Techniques for doing this varied markedly. Burbank and Cooper make the case for two general tendencies, which they trace to two ancient manifestations of empire. The Qin and Han dynasties of ancient China fashioned institutions that recognized and preserved the ethnic, linguistic, and religious differences that distinguished their various subject populations. By contrast, Roman leaders built their empire