

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Ari Kelman, Jonathan Fetter-Vorm.** *Battle Lines: A Graphic History of the Civil War.* New York: Hill and Wang, 2015. Illustrations. x + 214 pp. \$26.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8090-9474-5.



**Reviewed by** Jessica M. Parr (University of New Hampshire)

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**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

Those who teach the American Civil War in undergraduate survey courses are faced with the task of helping students get at a series of key questions: What events led to the secession crisis? Why did the South ultimately secede? And why did people fight? Popular traditional texts have included James M. McPherson's *What They Fought For: 1861-1865* (1994) and *For Cause and Comrade: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (1997); Charles Dew's *Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War* (2001); and several books by Edward Ayers. Survey course faculty might also pop over to The Valley of the Shadow, a massive, free digital archive of Civil War journals, letters, newspapers, and other sources, from the years 1859-70.

One of the challenges (and joys) of teaching survey courses is connecting students to the human story. One cannot ignore the big historiographical picture, of course, or the hope that students will come away from these courses with some degree of historical literacy. Nonetheless, getting students to see historical events in terms of what were once living, breathing human beings, rather than as an abstract set of dates and questions to be analyzed, then disregarded at the cessation of the course, is where the real pedagogical magic happens.

Graphic novels have offered a new, if not entirely uncontroversial, way of communicating this informa-

tion to students. *Battle Lines: A Graphic History of the Civil War* is no exception. Written by Bancroft Prize-winning historian Ari Kelman and award-winning illustrator Jonathan Fetter-Vorm, *Battle Lines* traces a cast of characters from the 1808 ban on the importation of new slaves to the trials of Reconstruction. It seeks not only to capture the causes and consequences of the Civil War but also to unpack the complexities of why soldiers on both sides fought. It is often difficult to get students to understand that the causes of secession and motivations to fight were not always the same.

The aspirations of *Battle Lines* are ambitious, and would prove challenging to a scholarly monograph. This graphic novel does not follow a singular narrative. Those who are dismissive of graphic novels might be surprised at its sophistication and complexity, even if they are already familiar with the high quality of Kelman's scholarship. But in this case, a meticulous scholar and a talented illustrator work together to successfully convey the nuances of a complex topic. Abolitionists, slaves, planters, Unionists, and Confederates are all present in the book. So too is material culture. Renderings of objects are carefully placed, so as to add to the reader's sense of living in the story. For this reason, *Battle Lines* may be suitable as a pedagogical tool in surveys or Civil War courses as well as in courses that explore public history or material

culture.

The casual nonspecialist reader will appreciate not only the vivid history but also the careful character development. A soldier's heartache becomes the reader's: the loss, the destruction, and the devastation. Com-

bined with battlefield photographs, such as those by Matthew Brady, the book makes the human cost of the war painfully real. Even serious students and scholars of the Civil War are likely to appreciate the graphic novel's intricacy, and the life it breathes into its subject.

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