

Battle Lines: A Graphic History of the Civil War

Brannon Costello

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Review

Costello, Brannon

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Fetter-Vorm, Jonathan and Kelman, Ari. *Battle Lines: A Graphic History of the Civil War*. Hill and Wang, \$26.00 ISBN 9780809094745

Visual Medium Brings Emotional Weight to the Traumas of War

The introduction to cartoonist Jonathan Fetter-Vorm and writer Ari Kellman's *Battle Lines: A Graphic History of the Civil War* notes that over 65,000 books have been written about the Civil War. The authors mean for this statistic to emphasize the enduring fascination with the nation's bloody conflict, but it also raises a question: Does *this* volume make a meaningful contribution to that already imposing mountain of books? My answer is a qualified *yes*. *Battle Lines* is distinguished from other books on the Civil War by virtue of its medium. It is a "graphic history" – that is, a history that relies heavily on the graphic narrative form most popularly known as "comics" – and the book succeeds to the extent that it embraces and exploits the unique capacities of the comics form.

Each of *Battle Lines*' fifteen chapters is introduced by a short historical essay by Civil War scholar Kellman, formatted to evoke the pages of a nineteenth-century newspaper, that explains the military strategies of commanders in the field, the political machinations of leaders in the U.S. and the Confederacy, and the social ramifications of the war on life away from the front lines. Each of these essays is followed by a narrative vignette, usually focused on an individual character or group of characters whose life is affected directly or indirectly by the war. It is easy to see why the authors would have been drawn to this approach: sketching a big picture in the essays and then focusing on a particular detail in the vignettes allows for a complex, panoramic view of the war and its effects. Yet the book struggles to reconcile its competing aims, trying both to offer a factual historical overview and to use the comics medium to weave more affecting, emotional stories. Kellman's historical essays are well-written and engaging, but they are necessarily so condensed that they cover

little new ground for anyone with even a broad familiarity with the Civil War. Perhaps the goal is to appeal to casual readers who are not Civil War buffs but who might be tempted to pick the volume up because of its unique format. Even so, the essays could have benefited from being integrated into an overall aesthetic approach that more fully utilized the comics medium. In the essays' current form, the newspaper formatting feels like a half-measure and a missed opportunity. I could not help but wish the authors had taken the newspaper conceit further, blurring the line between image and text, perhaps by weaving in reprinted archival material or evoking more imaginatively the language and graphic design of the newspapers of the day. Such an approach could have used the properties of the comics medium to make clearer the messy, contested, evolving nature of history. And after all, surely a contemporary newspaper would have been the last place to go for the sort of sober, dispassionate overview of the causes and effects of the Civil War that Kellman provides.

The comics, however, are where *Battle Lines* shines. Fetter-Vorm displays a versatile, thin-lined style that recalls the work of Kevin Huzienga or Ben Katchor. His art is loose and engaging enough to evoke a range of powerful emotions, but precise enough for recognizable historical likenesses. Most of the stories involve ordinary people rather than generals and statesmen, and they often revolve around some everyday object (opera glasses, a journal, leg irons). These objects, as the authors put it on page ix of the preface, come "to represent the history of the war from the ground up, from multiple perspective and unexpected angles." In their focus on common men and women and on the unexpected depths revealed by the mundane, these tales are very much in the tradition of Harvey Kurtzman's war stories for EC Comics, published in the pages of *Two-Fisted Tales* and *Frontline Combat* and illustrated by the likes of Wallace Wood, John Severin, and Kurtzman himself. Kurtzman and Wood's story "New Orleans," from the Civil War-focused *Two-Fisted Tales* #35 (October 1953) which opens by following a bale of cotton as it floats down the Mississippi into the Gulf of Mexico to meet Farragut's approaching Union gunboats, would not be out of place in this volume.

The stories of Kurtzman and his collaborators still have the power to move readers some 60 years or more from their original publication for two main reasons: the strength of their use of the comics form, and the consistency of Kurtzman's point of view – his (sometimes heavy-handed) insistence on depicting war as a beast that chews up the lives of the individual soldiers caught in its maw, his emphasis on the absurd coincidences and cruel ironies that

undercut any claims for war's glory or honor. The best stories in *Battle Lines* succeed on both counts, expressing a distinct point of view in an interesting way. One of Fetter-Vorm's most effective formal strategies – on display in "The Magic Bullet," "Leg Irons," "Opera Glasses," "Ink," and elsewhere – is to use the page turn to transition from a series of small, clearly delineated panels to a single, full-page bleed image, a transition that reveals the horrifyingly vast scope on which individual tragedies play out. Fetter-Vorm also uses a repeating three-panel structure to tell a series of interconnected stories in "Draft Numbers," and the authors effectively exploit the tension between the hopeful text of a black soldier's letter home and the devastating image of his hastily buried corpse in "Bodies." The strongest story here, to my mind, is "Death Letter," and it is no coincidence that it is also one of the longest. With room to breathe, this tale of doomed camaraderie in an Army of Northern Virginia camp in the days leading up to the battle at Spotsylvania Courthouse is able to develop distinct, sympathetic characters as it depicts the drudgery and routine of their days and the horror of their final hours. Other stories are less convincing, coming across more as straightforward dramatizations of this or that aspect of life in the Civil War era. These lack the emotional weight and aesthetic innovation of the best tales, but the strong entries well outweigh the weaker ones.

Ultimately, *Battle Lines* is an uneven work, with the originality of its comics narratives compromised by the familiarity of its historical overview. Despite the considerable strength of its parts, the effect of the whole is that of a text stranded somewhere between history and historical fiction. However, even though – and to some extent *because* – the book does not quite realize its full potential, it is nevertheless an interesting and valuable text for scholars interested in the intersection between comics and historical narrative, a useful companion and comparison to works such as Jack Jackson's *Comanche Moon* (1978), Ben Katchor's *The Jew of New York* (1998), or James Sturm's *Above and Below: Two Stories of the American Frontier* (2004).

Brannon Costello is Associate Professor of English and Director of the Master of Arts in Liberal Arts program at Louisiana State University. He teaches and writes about southern literature and comics and graphic novels. He is the author of Plantation Airs: Racial Paternalism and the Transformation of Class in Southern Fiction, 1945-1971 (LSU P, 2007), the co-editor of Comics and the U.S. South (UP of Mississippi, 2012), and the editor of Howard Chaykin: Conversations (UP of Mississippi, 2011) and Conversations with Michael Chabon (UP of Mississippi, 2015).

