



**PROJECT MUSE<sup>®</sup>**

## REVIEWS

Trevor R. Getz and Liz Clarke. *Abina and the Important Men: A Graphic History*. New York: Oxford UP, 2012. 179 pp. ISBN 978-0199844395, \$15.95.

*Abina and the Important Men: A Graphic History* by historian Trevor R. Getz and illustrator Liz Clarke is a unique combination of educational storytelling and meticulous historical research. Touted by its authors as a new kind of historical graphic “novel”—a graphic history—*Abina* in its entirety is a fascinating multipart text. It contains a pictorial translation of an engrossing historical account, the primary transcript of that account, and various textbook-like supplements for understanding and teaching the history behind the story. In the first section, lush pictures convey the all-but-forgotten legal case of Abina Mansah, who in 1874 brought charges against Quamina Eddoo, her slave master and an “important” man in the Gold Coast’s lucrative business of palm oil cultivation, for wrongly enslaving her. Her charge, of course, was based on the fact that the British had abolished slavery in all of their territories in 1834. But the complexities of the case, as the book cleverly demonstrates, arise from the difficulties faced by British “important men” in balancing principles of abolitionist justice with the profitable necessity of allowing rich landowners like Eddoo to quietly carry on with abusive systems of indenture and slavery. Although ultimately unsuccessful in her lawsuit, the intrepid character of Abina shines through in every panel, incarnating a very different kind of colonized African woman, one that threatens to replace the historian’s standard for the representative with the novelist’s ideal for the exceptional. By the end, Abina voices one of the conceits of the entire project, not to exert a retrospective and largely empty justice of sympathy for those wounded in the traumatic past, but to allow their stories to be heard. “You don’t understand,” Abina says to her lawyer, with tears in her eyes and seeming to implore the reader more so than he: “It was never just about being safe. It was about being heard.”

Despite a few lapses in which the dialogue unnaturally trudges through the backstory of British colonization, Getz does a superb job of recreating the court scenes, basing his word choices on the actual primary source of the

court transcript, which is also included in the book's extensive appendices. In fact, whether to call these other, more overtly pedagogical components of the text appendices at all is problematic, since *Abina* is expressly an anthology. As explained in the prefatory letter to the reader, the book is intended to expose the interpretive work that all historians must do when converting primary documents into readable narratives of the past. To make this work of translation as transparent as possible, Getz and Clarke include alongside the graphic story many of the primary documents and historical contexts that informed their creative rendition of the facts. The result is a book that is as much a classroom tool as it is an experimental marriage of the comics form, historical research, and storytelling.

Aside from the primary text of the court proceedings in part two, part three offers the essential historical context for understanding the narrative. It nutshells the early history of West Africa, providing relevant maps of major Akan language families and the evolution of the Asante region in what is modern-day Ghana. Bolstering these concise overviews of slavery are a few subsections that go on to elaborate the British civilizing mission. Although appropriate given the subject, these explanations generalize the ambivalence of William Melton, the British magistrate in the case, whose behavior wavers between lazy idealism and smug indifference. Some readers might see these sections of a piece with the subtly exonerative portrait given of the British in this text. The author would most certainly pass this off as a by-product of the historical facts of the case; after all, the British administrator does ask Abina—as indicated in the transcript from part two—whether she had “a will of [her] own” (86), and so was probably legitimately concerned with the philosophy of natural rights, just as the more speculative account in the graphic narrative suggests. Nevertheless, one potential pitfall for students seeking a more general overview of British imperialism in Africa is that in the narrow glimpse presented of it in *Abina*, the British come away looking far less guilty of anything than the wicked palm oil slave drivers whom they administrate.

Even so, the pedagogical sections of the book would help students of all levels come to this realization for themselves. Indeed, one reason why I am excited to teach this text is that it contains much of the relevant information any student would need to both appreciate and critique it. Parts four and five of the book make good on the authors' prefatory promise to make the work function as a teaching tool. These parts include such important ancillary materials as an annotated timeline, reading questions calibrated to student levels from undergraduate to graduate, an extensive list with relevant subcategories for further research, and even a glossary of key terms.

Clearly, the teaching components of this project lend it a brilliance it would not otherwise achieve. But aside from their bold partnering of comics

with the obviously more elevated fields of biography and history, Getz and Clarke indicate in the preface and later sections of the book a reductive view of the illustrations as that part which adds a touch of fun to the more mundane rigors of historical knowledge. From my perspective as a comics scholar (and it must be said that this is only a minor complaint given the inroads a project like this makes for comics), I am wary of outdated hierarchies that continue to value pure text as a medium of abstraction or as primary knowledge, while relegating pictures to the more infantile domain of the concrete, which demotes the visual to a secondary mode of knowledge. The illustrations in a comic rendition of history could be doing much more than simply documenting or dramatizing, much more than merely helping to spice up the textual monotony of standard history. They could be unmasking, ironizing, interrogating, or even undermining the claims of the textual as they commonly do in graphic novels and comic strips.

But even if the illustrations in *Abina* do not seem inspired to stand on their own as interpretations of the history, they are, nevertheless, skillfully done and interesting to look upon in light of the story they help to tell. Liz Clarke's illustrations are at their best when providing a visual context for the courtroom dialogue. Clarke animates the past with a clean-line style and a patterned palette that alternates between bluish hues, sienna browns, and golden ambers. One potential drawback, however, is the discernible invariance with which mouths and cheekbones are depicted. Characters appear in slightly frozen postures, their mouths always slightly agape.

But while it may not pack the same visual punch as other historically-minded graphic novels such as Rick Geary's *J. Edgar Hoover: A Graphic Biography*, Kyle Baker's *Nat Turner*, or James Sturm's *The Golem's Mighty Swing*, *Abina and the Important Men* is still an important, engrossing, surprisingly affordable, and eminently teachable book. Its major triumph is that it surpasses these other texts by being not just a graphic history but a metacritical reflection on history as well. With entire sections devoted to such questions as "Whose story is this?" and "Is this a 'true' [and later, 'authentic'] story?", Getz and Clarke have created a work that is sure to be an enduring fixture in a range of classrooms. I can think of no other text that makes the historian's negotiation with historical materials as clear, or the process of translating those materials with and against the grain of the historian's own cultural mores so vividly integral to the work as a whole.

*Michael A. Chaney*