

The Civil War

Ruchir Shah

EZ Comics (May 2007)

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In his college application essay, seventeen-year-old Ruchir Shah, the author of three historical comic books, writes that he was inspired to make history more interesting for children by portraying it in comic form. “As exciting as it is to me, the study of history is often considered boring, so I wanted to depict history visually to make the learning process more engaging,” he wrote. At age fourteen, he created his own press, EZ Comics, and published three books: *The Civil War: The American Civil War 1861-1865*, *Martin Luther King, Jr.*, and *Benjamin Franklin*. These fascinating comic books will open the marvel and wonder of American history to reluctant readers and English language learners as well as to all those kids who simply like a good book for its own sake.

Reluctant readers will be attracted to the straightforward comic frames in which Shah narrates history. They will also appreciate his dual-level narrative that tells these stories in frames lettered in capitals, while dialogue bubbles add depth and detail. For example, when Martin Luther King’s home was bombed, the strip at the top of the frame explains, “Hearing about the bomb, an angry mob of people began gathering at the King residence.” The following frame shows King addressing the crowd in a dialogue bubble: “Do not panic. He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword. What we are doing is just and God is with us.” The accompanying strip reads, “Thus he averted a disaster.”

Shah’s first book, *The Civil War*, delivers a history that will even fascinate Civil War aficionados. In one frame, a white manager says, “I am against slavery. My workers are free, and paid wages.” Shah also devotes space to the unprecedented killing that this war saw. From the two battles of Bull Run to Shiloh and the Battle of Antietam, he highlights the high casualties, poor medical care, and poor living conditions suffered by soldiers of both armies, especially near the end of the war. Neither does he flinch from depicting racism among Union troops who refused to “fight WITH blacks” or “FOR blacks.”

A century before the Civil War took place, Benjamin Franklin, who “snatched lightning from the sky and the scepter from the tyrant,” was busy leading the kind of life that has come to represent the American dream. This all-around eighteenth-century man invented the lightning rod, the Franklin stove, bifocal lenses, and the extendable arm that many stores still use today to reach items on the highest shelves. He also played a significant role in the American War of Independence and helped write both the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. In an age when many people change not only jobs, but careers, the varied chapters of Franklin’s life provide lessons in adaptability that are especially relevant.

Shah corresponded with historians at several universities to verify the accuracy of his work. He also consulted multiple sources for each book, including Franklin’s autobiography. Contacts made at a summer internship with a publishing firm in India enabled him to enlist the services of prominent Indian artist Shriram Hisabnis, a prizewinner in the Indian Cyber Humour Cartoon Contest, as well as other Indian artists who were “both talented and inexpensive.” In a telephone interview, Shah commented that working with Indian illustrators was a “really intense process” that highlighted cultural differences. For example, when he asked for a frame showing Martin Luther King playing baseball, the illustrator instead drew King playing cricket.

Aimed at a fourth- to eighth-grade audience, these books provide much more detailed and interesting history than most textbooks for that age. They will be a valuable addition to any library or home, and they certainly challenge adults to expand the definition of what a comic book can be.

ELIZABETH BREAU (November 13, 2008)

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