

Thunderbolt: An American Tale, Volume 1

Wilfred Santiago

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Wilfred Santiago's graphic novel *Thunderbolt* adapts the story of the controversial nineteenth-century American abolitionist John Brown, who took up arms against proslavery forces in Kansas. His violent methods led some to praise him as a hero, while others saw only a religion-inspired madman. The debate over Brown's actions and motivations provides fertile ground for the story.

Brown pledged to be "a thunderbolt to the liar," and the story gets right into its action with a fierce Senate battle over slavery and a raid on the Kansas/Missouri border. The tension escalates as Brown's men, several of them his sons, find themselves the targets of large mobs with deadly intentions.

Unsparing of blood and gore, the book employs kinetic artwork and minimal captioning. Santiago's cinematic approach is exciting but also demanding. It sometimes sacrifices clarity for raw immediacy.

A masterful range and use of colors draws attention as much as the line art, and many of the book's panels could stand alone as paintings. Brown's intense, inspired personality is revealed through dialogue and correspondence, but he remains an intriguing, enigmatic figure.

Thunderbolt is a handsome project that's constructed with care, from Santiago's mock ads in vintage style on the credits page to Dario Argosy's soundtrack for the book, which is available for download. The first volume ends with Brown writing to his family from Iowa in 1856, his famous raid at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, still several years away.

Though Santiago's saga is not yet complete, *Thunderbolt* marks an auspicious beginning to the project, which will be of interest to history enthusiasts and action fans alike.

PETER DABBENE (September / October 2019)

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