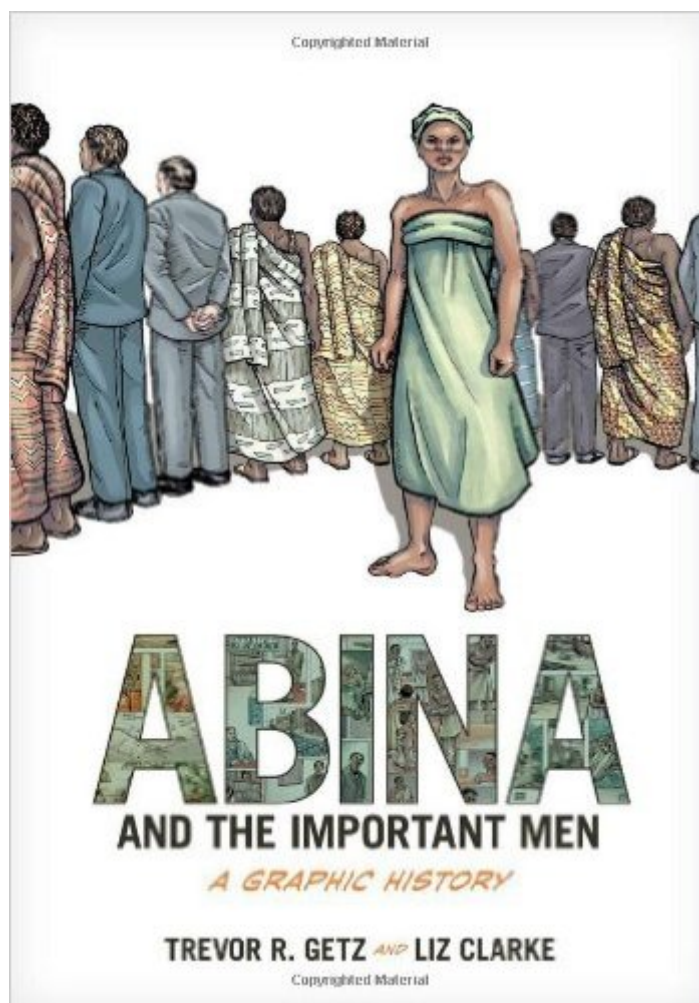


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Abina And The Important Men: A Graphic History



Synopsis

Abina and the Important Men is a compelling and powerfully illustrated "graphic history" based on an 1876 court transcript of a West African woman named Abina, who was wrongfully enslaved and took her case to court. The book is a microhistory that does much more than simply depict an event in the past; it uses the power of illustration to convey important themes in world history and to reveal the processes by which history is made. The story of Abina Mansah--a woman "without history" who was wrongfully enslaved, escaped to British-controlled territory, and then took her former master to court--takes place in the complex world of the Gold Coast at the onset of late nineteenth-century colonialism. Slavery becomes a contested ground, as cultural practices collide with an emerging wage economy and British officials turn a blind eye to the presence of underpaid domestic workers in the households of African merchants. The main scenes of the story take place in the courtroom, where Abina strives to convince a series of "important men"--a British judge, two Euro-African attorneys, a wealthy African country "gentleman," and a jury of local leaders--that her rights matter. "Am I free?" Abina inquires. Throughout both the court case and the flashbacks that dramatically depict her life in servitude, these men strive to "silence" Abina and to impose their own understandings and meanings upon her. The story seems to conclude with the short-term success of the "important men," as Abina loses her case. But it doesn't end there: Abina is eventually redeemed. Her testimony is uncovered in the dusty archives by Trevor Getz and, through Liz Clarke's illustrations, becomes a graphic history read by people around the world. In this way, the reader takes an active part in the story along with the illustrator, the author, and Abina herself. Following the graphic history in Part I, Parts II-V provide detailed historical context for the story, a reading guide that reconstructs and deconstructs the methods used to interpret the story, and strategies for using Abina in various classroom settings.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

As other reviewers have already noted, this book provides an engaging and important history of a story never meant to be told. Getz and Clarke's graphic history gives new life to Abina Mansah, an enslaved West African woman at the end of the nineteenth century, who not only fought for her freedom, but publicly redefined freedom in her own terms in the face of paternal British colonialism. Getz's interpretation of Abina's story and Clarke's beautiful illustrations break new ground, presenting academic history in a format that is accessible to public audiences and a wide range of age groups. While the historical narrative and innovative format alone are worth the purchase of this book, the real value of the text (in a classroom setting) begins in Section II, "The Transcript". Rarely do non-specialists and lower level students have access to primary source materials, which ultimately limits their ability to critically analyze or engage with lessons and course information. Here, Getz dares to go where many historians do not, and makes transparent, the process and production of historical writing. Unlike other historians and their respective texts, Getz shares the same primary sources he worked with (in their entirety), dismantling the relationship between knowledge and power, and making unilateral pedagogical practices nearly impossible. Furthermore, section III's, "Historical Context," equips students with the historical background needed to place Abina's story within a larger context. By this time, the reader has departed from his or her role as observer and student, and has become an active participant in the making and interpretation of Abina's "history".

This excellent book succeeds in a variety of ways: 1. As HISTORY, it offers a tragic snapshot of race, class and gender in colonial West Africa. Abina's struggle to get legal emancipation from what is effectively a subtle form of slavery is a challenge to the 'hegemonic histories' of the time that all too often address the big picture without considering how these forces affect ordinary 'little people', particularly those who are illiterate (what Eric Wolf famously called the 'people without history'). Creditable too in the narrative and in the subsequent analyses, the authors eschew simplistic ideological stereotypes of race (Abina's 'owner' is black, her lawyer is black, his lawyer is black, as are the jury; the magistrate is white, but not portrayed unsympathetically), gender relations and colonialism. 2. As PEDAGOGY, the book presents an innovative and deceptively simple introduction

to historiography, the way of writing history. On a technical level the authors cleverly explain such things as primary and secondary sources, the problem of gaps in the historical record, the ways in which historians have sometimes to fill in such gaps creatively while at the same time respecting the integrity of sources, with the result that history (as interpretive narrative) is always constructed.³ AESTHETICALLY, the book benefits from a well-drawn and evocative graphic narrative, equal to many good graphic novels out there. The way the rest of the book is structured - transcript of the court case, background information, theory of history and reflections on the process of writing history itself - is also appealingly produced. As a book, it is something intensely pleasurable to handle. One hopes this book will sell well, because it deserves to.

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