

The New York Times review struck me for a completely different reason than the Amazon reviews and Dave Thomer's comments about "Battle Cry of Freedom". What first stood out to me about the Times review was the praise for the lack of redundant details. In one breath, the reviewer is praising McPherson's literary genius by stating that he omits "nothing important, whether military, political or economic." In the next, he is claiming that the magic of McPherson's writing is in what he omits, such as Lincoln's assassination. It seems obvious to me that such a national shock would influence the country's military, politics, and economy. The reviewer claims that, "Lincoln's sudden disappearance from the book gives us something of a shock that his contemporaries felt when he died," and claims this to be a brilliant literary move. In my opinion, to assume that "everybody knows the story of the murder" is a little pretentious and myopic. For a volume the reviewer believes to potentially be the best ever written on the subject, it should be complete in all major events, even the ones the author may assume are redundant.

The second issue I took with the New York Times Review was the reviewer's admiration of McPherson's ability to "argue his readers" into his viewpoint. The reviewer is enamored by the "living relationships" in the book, which he describes as "magical". It seems that he or she read "Battle Cry of Freedom" strictly from the viewpoint of a literary critic, rather than a historian. The accolades given the book are largely based on McPherson's gifts as a persuasive writer, rather than historical accuracy and objectivity. That is, until the last couple paragraphs, in which he nitpicks the choice of titles for chapters seven and eight. For one so hell-bent on semantics and accuracy, you would think the reviewer would expect a more unbiased approach to historical writing. I dare say, it even seemed that the reviewer penned the last couple paragraphs as a matter of prestige, to give himself weight as a history buff, in order to make his review seem more legitimate.

Dave Thomer is much less enthralled with McPherson's opinions. Though he concedes that the book is "fair and extremely informative," he cannot call it balanced or objective. This alerts me that I may require a fine toothed comb to separate the fact from opinion. I've found it especially true in textbooks that it is hard to recognize where absoluteness ends and rhetoric begins, which makes me hyper-sensitive to whatever slant may be present in McPherson's writing. I am concerned that my relative ignorance of Civil War history will hamper my ability to detect inaccuracies. My hope is that although this is our main text, we will have additional readings from other perspectives in order to formulate our own opinions.

For several reasons, I feel most inclined to trust the customer reviews of the book. Most of them seem to be written by people who are either disputing historical inaccuracies, or who believe that the book was written with an unrealistic opinion. These reviewers care less about the style of writing, and more about the accuracy of the content. They have nothing to gain from writing a review at all, and many of them seem to be well-versed on the subject of Civil War history, even offering alternative books to read. The customer reviews call McPherson's book, "disappointing and very biased," claim that, "McPherson takes the easy way out and sides with his own bias," and argue that he "embarks upon an anti-Southern crusade." I feel these reviews make it necessary for me

to approach “Battle Cry of Freedom” with an air of skepticism for the opinions presented, and an intentionality for absorbing only the facts. I feel confident in my ability to extract fact from opinion, especially being armed with the knowledge that a bias most likely does exist. The vast majority of events and depictions of relationships are probably accurate, and I can certainly learn a lot from McPherson’s writing, even from his opinions.