

NOTES FOR A WAR STORY

Author: Gipi (pseudonym of Gianni Pacinotti)

Artist: Gipi (illustrator)

Publisher: Coconino Press; First Second

First book publication: *Appunti per una storia di guerra*, 2004 (English translation, 2007)

Publication History

Gipi's *Notes for a War Story* was initially published as *Appunti per una storia di guerra* in 2004 by Coconino Press, an Italian publishing house. Since its creation in 2000, Coconino Press has translated and published the work of various popular comics artists from around the world, such as American authors Daniel Clowes, Jason Lutes, and Adrian Tomine; French artists David B., Baru, and Emmanuel Guibert; and Japanese storytellers Jirô Taniguchi and Suehiro Maruo. In addition to these internationally successful authors, Coconino Press has published both established and new Italian talents such as Davide Reviati, Francesca Ghermandi, and Gipi.

Gipi has been renowned in Italy since 1994 for his subtle use of watercolors and psychologically complex characters. However, he became internationally famous as a result of his *Notes for a War Story*. This work was translated and published into French as *Notes pour une histoire de guerre* by Actes Sud in 2005 and then adapted into English by First Second Books in 2007.

Plot

Notes for a War Story recounts the tale of three young men—Giuliano, Christian, and Little Killer—as they travel in an unknown country ravished by the calamities of war. The story unfolds as a flashback from the perspective of Giuliano, the narrator, who (one discovers in the epilogue) is in fact being interviewed by a news correspondent collecting “notes for a war story” that will be “edited and packaged” for a documentary.

The physical journey of the three young men coincides with their experiences of early adulthood. From the beginning of the story, the trio attempts to take advantage of the chaos engendered by the war to get into what they think will be a lucrative business: selling

stolen-car parts. They soon realize, however, that their petty-crime enterprise is bound to fail by conventional means. The war has destroyed not only entire villages but also resources. Nevertheless, they quickly find their way into the militia that is occupying the area and are introduced to its leader, Felix.

Felix is a robust thug who takes a particular interest in the three friends, especially Little Killer because of his experience with manual labor. Felix quickly proposes a “real job” to the boys, giving them a list of items to collect in the city. Thus, the trio ventures into the main town where they soon transform from petty-crime novices into professional thugs, gathering money with both attitude and violence. Their typical and unique strategy involves Christian and Little Killer frightening people with guns while Giuliano stands guard outside. Inevitably, however, one of their jobs ends badly when they are robbed by other bandits. Afraid that Felix will belittle and castigate them for getting duped by another group of criminals, Little Killer vows to find their assailants and eventually kills them.

After regaining their loot, the young men proudly reconnect with Felix and his men. However, during the trio's absence, Felix is injured and the militia is weakened. Felix has other tasks to do to keep the war going. Little Killer, Christian, and Giuliano's assistance is therefore required elsewhere. They are separated and sent away to the war's front lines in militia trucks full of armed men. Alone and afraid, Giuliano jumps off the truck and escapes a dangerous and uncertain fate.

The narrative concludes with Giuliano's interview. The war is over, but Giuliano looks considerably changed and roughened. The journalists are about to leave him to go to the train station and interview the first war prisoners to be released, but Giuliano tags along. The last page of the book shows him on the platform scrutinizing the crowd, hoping to see his friends one more time.

Characters

- *Giuliano*, the narrator, is a young male adult from a well-off family. In contrast to his friends,

he is educated and has a house and a family, and therefore has the choice to turn back whenever he wants. He is often not directly involved in much of the crime and generally just observes the situations.

- *Little Killer*, a.k.a. *Stefano*, is a small but violent and sharp young male adult. He grew up in what the local kids called “the war zone” and was baptized Little Killer because during a childhood fight, he drew blood. He witnessed his father’s suicide. He is the leader of the trio and is Felix’s favorite, who trusts him with the job instructions and a gun.
- *Christian* is a young man who lived in an orphanage. He never had a proper house and is naïve and uneducated. He primarily cares about money and material possessions, and he does not care about how he and his friends acquire them. Similar to Little Killer and in contrast to Giuliano, he cannot choose a different life. His friends are his only family. He helps Little Killer undertake much of the thug action but recurrently asks irrelevant questions.
- *Felix* is a relatively young man who is probably in his thirties. He looks robust, rude, and macho and is the leader of the militia. He cunningly influences the boys and acts as their mentor. He takes Little Killer under his wing because he feels he may be useful to him.

Artistic Style

Notes for a War Story was published as a one-shot graphic novel in a rather small format, typical of European and North American alternative and independent publishing houses such as L’Association and Fantagraphics Books. The small-size format of the book illustrates Gipi’s willingness to draw the reader’s attention to the proximity of the war that the boys experience as well as to complement his anecdotic take on the topic.

Gipi is famous for a simple, minimalist, and straightforward line style and his use of watercolors. *Notes for a War Story* is no exception. The drawings of the book are not especially sophisticated in that they lack embellishment or superfluous details. In addition to allowing

reader identification, this minimalist strategy conforms to the serious tone and subject matter of *Notes for a War Story*, which unabashedly presents the collateral damage of warfare. Gipi’s use of black-and-white watercolors, supplemented by a large palette of half-tones, also works toward a similar understanding of the trauma that the boys experience. Furthermore, the use of sepia tone coincides with the narrator’s flashback.

The artistic style does not change considerably over the course of the book. However, one specific artistic peculiarity is worth mentioning. The narrative is interspersed with several of Giuliano’s dreams in which his friends Christian and Little Killer appear headless. This visual metaphor, suggests Alexis Siegel in his afterword to the 2007 English translation of *Notes of a War Story*, is significant in two distinct ways. First, it suggests that the narrator “never stops thinking for himself” and even challenges Felix’s authority. Second, the metaphor conveys that Giuliano is different from his friends because he has an “inner life” and “tries to work out his feelings.” Interestingly, the war prisoners that Giuliano scrutinizes at the end of the book also appear headless and mark the final episode of the book as inconclusive.

Themes

Notes for a War Story stands out for its treatment of masculinity in the context of war. Although the actual war zone is never directly depicted, the nameless country in which the trio evolves is devastated and can neither provide the boys with future prospects nor inspire them with a clear structure. In this context, Felix rapidly becomes a role model for the three young men. He offers them something to do and, thus, a sense of purpose. In addition, the boys enjoy free enrollment in Felix’s “continuous school of life.” He teaches them lessons from his perspective about what it means to be a man, and in that sense he influences their behavior.

Notes for a War Story shows similarities to the innocence-experience-consideration model that critics generally employ to discuss the psychological development of soldiers in war literature. The three boys lose their innocence and gradually become more experienced and less naïve as they learn how to operate within organized crime. However, Gipi’s book does show how the soldier, after the war, reflects on his

Gipi

Gipi is the pen name of Gianni Pacinotti, one of the most influential Italian cartoonists of recent years. Having broken into the Italian comics scene with short works in a variety of newspapers, magazines, and anthologies in the 1990's, his breakthrough work appeared in 2005 when he published *Notes for a War Story*, which went on to win the Grand Prize at the Angoulême Comics Festival. The book tells the story of three young men in an unidentified war-torn European nation. His follow-up, *The Innocents*, deals with a reformed drug addict and a friend who was recently released from prison for a crime that he did not commit. *Garage Band* depicts the trouble that follows a rock band after their only amp blows a fuse. More recently, Gipi has taken an autobiographical turn with *S.* and *Ma vie mal dessinée*. Gipi's art is notable for its fine, thin lines, stylized naturalism and use of delicate watercolors.

mischievous acts. Giuliano's interview at the end of the book hints at the possibility of consideration. However, his interview lacks closure and therefore gives a rather pessimistic twist to both the book and the treatment of masculinity in a war or a postwar context.

Impact

Notes for a War Story was one of the first of Gipi's books to be translated into various languages, including English. In 2006, the French version of the book won the Best Album Award at Angoulême, Europe's most famous international comics festival. The Italian storyteller was at that point only the second non-Francophone artist to receive this prestigious prize

since first awarded in 1974. In 2003, American Chris Ware won the prize for *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*. Before Ware's award, the festival only awarded prizes to non-Francophone artists within the Best Foreign Book category. Since 2003, however, the Best Album Award has considered artists from all over the world. It is in this context that *Notes for a War Story* has participated in the increasing recognition of international comics in Europe. This change in strategy of the Angoulême Festival has allowed artists such as the British Neil Gaiman, the Australian Shaun Tan, or the Japanese Taniguchi to win important prizes.

The Angoulême award that Gipi obtained for *Notes for a War Story* also improved the artist's popularity on an international level. Since then, for example, First Second Books and Fantagraphics Books, two major American alternative publishing houses, have translated and released various works by Gipi, including *Garage Band* (2007) and *They Found the Car* (2006).

Christophe Dony

Further Reading

Gipi. *Garage Band* (2007).

_____. *They Found the Car* (2006).

Bibliography

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Gipi. "Taken from Life: An Interview with Gipi." Interview by Nicole Rudick. *Words without Borders* (February, 2008). <http://wordswithoutborders.org/article/taken-from-life-an-interview-with-gipi>.

Siegel, Alexis. Afterword to *Notes for a War Story*. New York: First Second, 2007.

See also: *The Arrival*; *Jimmy Corrigan*; *Photographer*