

In both fiction and literature, World War II narratives are generally clear cut. The Allies are good, the Axis are bad and sometimes there's some complexity to the action of soldiers. On the other hand, the Vietnam War is shaded in tones of gray, caught in a more morally complex situation. "Sara," a new graphic novel from Garth Ennis and Steve Epting, bucks against the notion of a morally simple war story.

The series is written by the prolific Garth Ennis, scribe of books like "The Punisher" and "The Boys" with art and covers by Steve Epting, the penciller behind one of the most lauded "Captain America" runs in the history of the character. The team is rounded out with colorist Elizabeth Breitweiser, whose previous work includes "Captain America" and "The Fade Out."

"Sara" follows a group of eight female soviet snipers caught in a dangerous game of cat and mouse with a German assassin during the wintery Siege of Leningrad. The titular protagonist of the comic, Sara, is by far the best sniper in the regiment, but also the most reserved. This status of being the best places Sara in the crosshairs of an enemy German sniper who puts the Soviets into a standstill, and the rest of the book is Sara's attempts to kill the enemy before he can kill her.

The first thing that elevates this graphic novel from the traditional World War II story is the writer's choice to focus on the Soviets, rather than the Western Allies. The easy choice to portray a hero in the context of the war is by making them British or American to show how democracy and freedom are the primary driving forces of "good". Ennis subverts this by not only choosing the Soviets, who at the time were still engaged in a Communist regime that placed the state over the individual, but by forcing the reader to sympathize with a sniper, one of the more detached and active killers in a war.

It's easier for an audience to justify a soldier's act of killing in the heat of battle, where chaos reigns, but to empathize with a sniper, one who kills with a clear goal in mind, is an entirely different task. This choice of the premise already brings a layer of moral uneasiness to the book that takes a step away from the cookie cutter tropes of World War II, and into a world of messy morals.

The book is told through Sara's point of view, using narration to provide exposition and context for why the women are fighting in the war, and Sara's particular frame of mind makes her an outsider. While the rest of the regiment sees their fighting as the best way to help the motherland, Sara's grown disillusioned with the idea and morphed herself into a machine killing because her family was eradicated by the Germans.

Ennis posits that the snipers are akin to Templars, fighting for a higher power, while Sara has found individualism by becoming a Blood Knight, only concerned with dead Germans. The use of thought bubbles for the bulk of the text, and a focus on the individualistic traits of Sara reveal that Ennis sees a connection between the heroes an audience wants to follow, and the reality that they might not like what they ultimately see.

If the foundation of subversion is Ennis' tight, but dichromatic script, then it is Epting's art along with Breitweiser's colors that elevate the book to an even higher level. The book is masterfully drawn, with a clear focus on the beauty of the natural world, contrasting the pure carnage that the soldiers inflict on one another.

Breitweiser uses the primarily white backdrop of Russian winter to contrast the bright colors of rosy cheeks and warm, flowing blood. Color is on display in the book, also bucking the idea that a World War II story has to take place in a drab, dreary world. The use of color is a flourish to the idea of subversion, pairing beautiful and vivid color to a morally gray world.

Battles are rendered as quick, bright splashes of blood, and never appear drawn out. In a world of snipers, speed is an efficient tool that Epting uses to the book's advantage. Achieving a goal, and defeating the enemy is clinical, a sequence of crosshairs and single gunshots. However, Epting isn't only limited to the quieter combat. In the book's third chapter, the Soviets are attacked by the German's in a snowy clearing, and Epting has the chance to express what a more traditional war image looks like.

The blocking of elements, tanks blasting, and roaring Gatling guns prove the artist hasn't lost his touch for the highly kinetic action sequences of a standard comic. Sara states in a narration that all battles have some type of rhythm to them, and Epting is able to masterfully illustrate the various types. Sometimes a battle is little more than quick spurts of gun fire, with combatants trying to outsmart the other, while others are stretches of primal rushes and attacks.

Whether a veteran of reading comic books or a new recruit, "Sara" provides a fascinating read into what it means to tell a story set in World War II. The book's subtle yet power writing, stylized and kinetic art and lushly complementing colors all function as ways to subvert the tropes of the genre and provide a wholly unique reading experience.