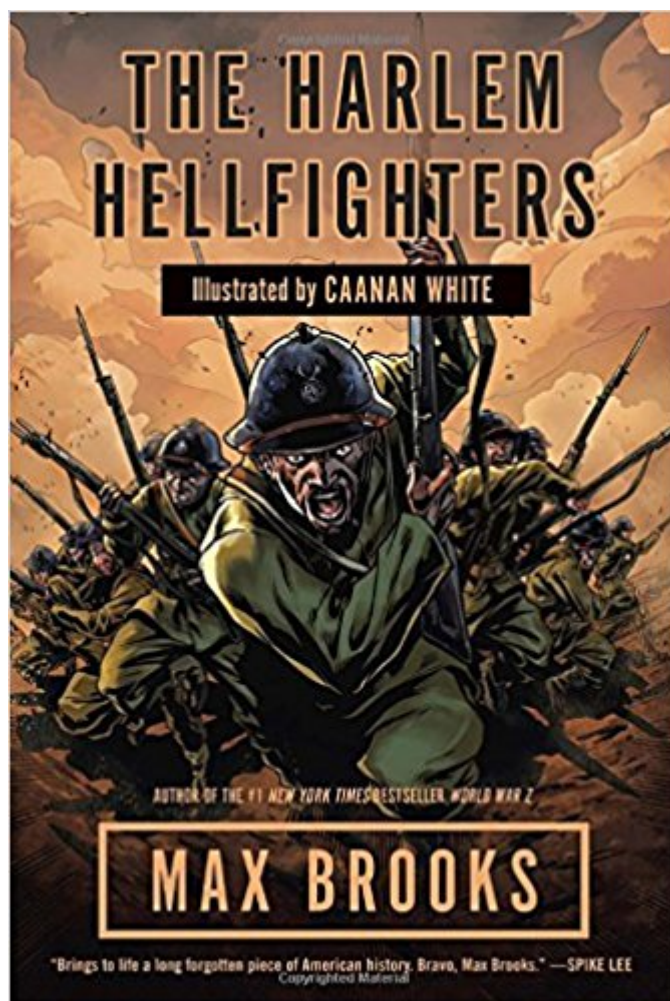


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The Harlem Hellfighters



Synopsis

From bestselling author Max Brooks, the riveting story of the highly decorated, barrier-breaking, historic black regiment—the Harlem Hellfighters. In 1919, the 369th infantry regiment marched home triumphantly from World War I. They had spent more time in combat than any other American unit, never losing a foot of ground to the enemy, or a man to capture, and winning countless decorations. Though they returned as heroes, this African American unit faced tremendous discrimination, even from their own government. The Harlem Hellfighters, as the Germans called them, fought courageously on—and off—the battlefield to make Europe, and America, safe for democracy. In **THE HARLEM HELLFIGHTERS**, bestselling author Max Brooks and acclaimed illustrator Caanan White bring this history to life. From the enlistment lines in Harlem to the training camp at Spartanburg, South Carolina, to the trenches in France, they tell the heroic story of the 369th in an action-packed and powerful tale of honor and heart.

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Customer Reviews

Exclusive: Essay by Max Brooks (adapted from the author's note within *The Harlem Hellfighters*)
I first learned of the Harlem Hellfighters from an Anglo-Rhodesian named Michael Furmanovsky when I was 11. Michael was working for my parents while getting his MFA in history from UCLA. He taught me about the British Empire, the Falklands War, Hiroshima, the Holocaust, and a host of other topics not covered in my fifth-grade western civilization class. Of all his after-school lessons,

the one that left the deepest impression was the story of a unit of American soldiers who weren't allowed to fight for their country because of the color of their skin. To a white, privileged kid growing up on the west side of L.A. in the 1980s, that kind of prejudice was just inconceivable. When I confessed that I didn't know about them, he assured me that I wasn't alone. Ten years later I was an exchange student at the University of the Virgin Islands. The experience brought me back into the orbit of the Hellfighters when, while walking through an old cemetery, I noticed some graves from 1918. I wondered if they might be casualties of the Great War, maybe even members of the 369th. I decided to ask my professor of Virgin Islands history. He was an African-American from the mainland, and to call him passionate would be a laughable understatement. With his beard and spectacles and flaring dashiki, he would rail against the historical crimes committed by white men of Europe and North America. Most heinous was the erasure of black accomplishments by white historians. Colonization, he would tell us, begins with the mind, and the best (or worst) way to colonize a people is to bury their past. "There were no black soldiers in World War I." That was his dismissive answer to my question about the graves from 1918. When I started to argue, even bringing up the name "Harlem Hellfighters," he assured me that I must have been confused with the Tuskegee Airmen of World War II. I was shocked. Here was a scholar, a crusader, a thoughtful, driven man who'd made it his life's mission to trumpet the glory of Africa and her diaspora, and HE didn't know about the Harlem Hellfighters. I wish I could say that I decided then and there to write their story, but that would have to wait for nearly another decade. In the late 1990s, I was living back in L.A., just out of graduate school and trying to make a living as a writer. My decision to tackle the story of the Hellfighters came after watching two TNT made-for-TV movies about the Tuskegee Airmen and the Buffalo soldiers. I thought TNT might be interested in a story about World War I's black heroes, especially after A&E's successful *Lost Battalion* movie. I started collecting books about the subject (the most influential was and still is *From Harlem to the Rhine* by Arthur Little), and a year and several dozen drafts later, I pitched my screenplay to the TNT Network. They passed. So did everyone else. Things changed when I sent my script to actor/director LeVar Burton. "There are actually more than a couple Harlem Hellfighters scripts floating around Hollywood," he told me during our meeting, "but yours comes closest to the truth." He agreed that the subject matter would be difficult to sell to studios, but that by no means should that deter me. "I don't have the power right now to make this movie," he said, "but I'm not going to give up, and you shouldn't either." Thank you, Mr. Burton. Five years and what seemed like a lifetime later, an unexpected opportunity opened up in the world of comic books. In 2006, I began collaborating with Avatar Press on a graphic companion to my first

book, *The Zombie Survival Guide*. I learned very quickly how different comic book writing was from prose, but how similar it could be to movie scripts. I also realized that comics presented a forum for telling very visual stories without the cumbersome budget of movies or television. It seemed the ideal medium for telling the story of the Harlem Hellfighters. It's now been close to six years since I began working with William Christensen of Avatar Press and the amazingly talented artist Caanan White. And now it's time to share this heroic regiment's story of courage, honor, and heart with you. I hope that you are as captivated by it as I have been.

Brooks (*World War Z*, 2006) makes a U-turn from zombies with this fictionalized account of the famous all-black 369th Infantry. The opening scene of a trench bomb sets the stage for the whole book: endless, grimacing faces and buckets of gore, mostly in the form of exploded bodies splattering across the page. This intro also betrays the book's chief concern: simply telling the story of WWI combat, albeit from an unusual point of view. As a result, the plot is fuzzy and the characters suitably enjoyable placeholders. We follow our diverse bunch from enlistment to training to the hell of France, where they fight through inhumane conditions with the utmost valor, and for what? Prejudice and humiliation at every turn. "They would rather see white Germans," says one soldier, "instead of black Americans march in triumph up Fifth Avenue." White's appropriately cluttered art has the horrific shock value of EC Comics classics like *Frontline Combat* and *Two-Fisted Tales*, and the whole thing comes off as resolutely Tarantinoesque. The movie version should be along any second now. --Daniel Kraus

We don't know what we are capable of. Woodrow Wilson knew what would happen if black soldiers returned from Europe victorious, having made the world "safe for democracy." The Harlem Hellfighters fought a double war: they fought the terrifying war against the Germans, and they fought the insinuating, sly racist oppression of their own president, Woodrow Wilson. Wilson was an uncloseted democrat racist, and his appointees understood that the black soldiers had to be sternly repressed, or else they might succeed. The book is excellent in its depiction of different social classes and accents, especially in the beginning of the book where the recruitment is shown. At times it is difficult to figure out who is who as the people are being blown to bits, but usually the next frame calls out the name of the deceased, so you can figure it out. Black and white graphics, a lot (a LOT) of bodily fluids, and people being blown to smithereens. The book does show the sickening racism against these soldiers by dishonorable democrat politicians, like Mayor John F. Floyd and Woodrow Wilson himself. And of course, it looks at the soldier's feelings of bitterness, resentment, and the

desire for violent revenge that arose from their treatment. You see a race riot on page 39. The book offers good historical quotes: from WEB DuBois on page 77, from Irvin S. Cobb on page 124, and the Alan Seeger poem "I have a Rendezvous with Death." There is a great discussion on page 175 on dignity and respect, and an excellent summary of what these men overcame. The graphics offer very good sensory information, and one of the best visual tricks involves "remembering." Great presentation of the graphics. As a parent, I highly recommend this book.

In the long history of war we have many instances of minorities who are treated many times as less than second class citizens. This is very inherent in the imperial armies of the French in Indo-China and Northern Africa and the British all around the world where the sun never set on its Empire. Such anomalies were in existence in all of the United States Armed Forces throughout the late 18th and the entire 19th century and half of the 20th century. During this time frame the black men of these times served in the military very often times as support troops doing menial tasks very much like slaves prior to the Civil War. During the 19th century we see for the first time that blacks were used in the Indian Wars of the West and were given the name of Buffalo Soldiers. This piece of historical fiction is based on factual material written by Max Brooks and illustrated in black and white by Caanan White which gives us a detail account that many Americans have no knowledge of. This being the centennial of the start of WWI, we are also given an education of a black 369th Regiment from New York. The fact that this unit was one of the first American units to be deployed to France and the French at this time were in desperate need of fresh combat troops to be the needed fodder to fight the German Hun, we see the 369th fighting not with other American units but rather the French. At this time in American history the American army would not use a black regiment to fight in any combat arm during WWI. However the French needed bodies and for them the color of the skin did not matter. Brooks shows the frustrations and the injustices that the black soldiers had to endure. What the author also brings to the table is that this regiment was one of the most decorated of all the units in WWI. It endured the most time of all American units on the combat line. If you go to Harlem today you can visit the 369th Regiment Armory and see a monument of the Harlem Hellfighters so named by their German adversaries on the Fields of Flanders. This book gives a wonderful history of this unit and is an enduring story which should be imbedded into American Military History.

Perhaps better as an introduction for younger readers with little knowledge of WWI or racism. Not recommended for those looking for a detailed insight into the Harlem Hellfighters.

The Harlem Hellfighters is an eye-opening account of not only the horrors of a war we are slowly losing focus of, but also the gross mistreatment of brave, decorated warriors solely because they were black. The art is fantastic. The writing and scripting are solid. The story is as inspiring as it is important and appalling. This is easily one of the most important works to grace my favorite medium. I have to take issue with one thing, however: the self-censorship of "curse words". Racial epithets aren't censored, but they're important to the tone of the story and shouldn't be. Graphic violence isn't censored, but again, without it the story of the Great War would lose some impact. So why censor "curse words"? It seems childish, but all in all, something so petty can't ruin this story. Buy this book. It's not just a great graphic novel, it's an important account of fading history preserved in a way that only comics are capable of.

I purchased this as a reward for myself back in April, and am just now getting to read it. I deeply enjoyed it, and will likely read it again before year's end, after loaning it out to a few friends and family. The story of black men in the military, the Irish, now Latino immigrants, and women is something that needs to be told, retold, and told again. Most tragic, are those people born Americans treated worse than America's enemies. These are important stories and important lessons, even when embellished or altered to keep a story flowing. As a country and as a people we need constant reminders of how horrible our past was, so that we do not slip back into it, or allow our country to slide backwards.

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