



Big Black: Stand at Attica

by Frank "Big Black" Smith, Jared Reinmuth, and Améziane, 2020. 176 p. Ill. ISBN 9781684154791 (paperback), \$19.99.

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In September 1971, men incarcerated in New York's Attica Prison—having endured years of widespread abuse, racism, and unsafe living conditions—gained control of portions of the prison and took several hostages. Initiating a standoff, these prisoners held their ground for four days while negotiations played out with the state over their list of reform-oriented demands. This confrontation came to a conclusion only when then-Governor Nelson Rockefeller ordered the retaking of the prison by force. Dozens of people—prisoners and guards—died

in the ensuing assault, and the incarcerated activists faced brutal punishments in its wake.

Big Black: Stand at Attica depicts this history in unflinching relief from the perspective of advocate and former inmate Frank “Big Black” Smith, who served as chief of security during the rebellion. While the narrative centers around the uprising, the stakes are made all the more human via the inclusion of vignettes from Smith’s childhood and life pre-Attica as well as scenes depicting his post-release PTSD and the Attica Brothers’ decades-long legal battle against state officials. Smith passed away in 2004; this book came together with the assistance of Jared Reinmuth (the stepson of Attica Brothers attorney Daniel Meyers), who had been writing with Big Black since 1997.

Illustrator Améziane uses a fittingly somber palette throughout the book. While the reader may not want to linger on some of the book’s more disturbing scenes, each panel is crafted with incredible depth and rich detail; Améziane gives equal attention to tightly-cropped emotive faces and full-page scenes of harrowing, anonymous brutality. Elements like big onomatopoeias and Ben Day-esque dots and lines seem to deliberately evoke the midcentury comic books whose fictional fights cannot compare to the state-sanctioned violence perpetrated at Attica.

On its merits both as a stand-alone graphic narrative and as an accessible, personal history of a critical moment of civil rights activism within the carceral state, this title would be an important addition to most academic and public library adult collections. Libraries that frequently serve incarcerated or formerly incarcerated individuals should especially consider purchasing.