Some Nations Manage Ethnic Disparity

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We've seen it so many times before: Israel. Northern Ireland. Rwanda. Kosovo.

When rival ethnic groups occupy the same piece of land, war seems inevitable.

But is it? Can diverse groups live together without resorting to violence?

Macedonia, the new graphic novel from independent comics writer Harvey Pekar, tackles these questions.

Co-written by peace activist Heather Roberson and illustrated by Ed Piskor, the book tells of Roberson's journey to Macedonia to find out how the region has maintained a fragile peace among ethnic factions.

At the dawn of the 21st century, Macedonia -- formerly a part of Yugoslavia -- seemed poised to follow its Balkan neighbors Bosnia and Kosovo into bloody civil war. Tensions between the majority Orthodox Christian Macedonians and Muslim Albanians mounted after the war in Kosovo. In 2001, Macedonian authorities bombed Albanian villages, and rebel forces armed themselves in preparation for war.

But the United Nations stepped in, sending 800 peacekeepers to disarm the rebels and persuade the government to ease up on the minority population. In turn, the government enacted reforms, and its people seem genuinely committed to peace.

Roberson sees Macedonia as an example of how ethnic conflicts can be resolved.

Part travelogue and part history lesson, the graphic novel begins with Roberson's argument with a professor upon first pondering Macedonia's situation. The adventurous activist couldn't find substantial written accounts of the conflict, so she decided to see the country firsthand.

In a meta-moment, Macedonia chronicles its own conception. On the eve of her journey, Roberson meets Pekar, who is in her hometown promoting his autobiographical film, American Splendor. Pekar is interested in Roberson's impending journey and asks her to take detailed notes, which become the basis of the graphic novel.

As Roberson researches Macedonia's history, Pekar intersperses images of her and her boyfriend performing everyday activities, such as cooking dinner and watering flowers, with long stretches of type describing the bloody history of the Balkans. The scene shows how Americans go about their lives blissfully unaware of all the bloodshed in the world.

The Macedonian history lesson is necessary to understand the story, but it bogs down early parts of the book, which often read more like a master's thesis than a graphic novel.

Pekar saves the narrative by paying attention to the mundane details of life during Roberson's travels. He humanizes the story by making the book as much about Heather and the people she meets as it is about the overarching political themes.

Along with Piskor's detailed black-and-white line work, Pekar creates a vivid portrait of the nation and its people.

Roberson, who finds the people friendly and helpful, begins to view Macedonia like the Midwest.

She is careful to point out that mistrust between ethnic groups still exists and that the government needs to push reforms further. Macedonia is a work in progress.

For Pekar, Macedonia is a departure. Most of the Cleveland native's work is autobiographical, addressing day-to-day struggles of life. His curmudgeonly outlook seems at odds with Roberson's positive thinking and cheerfulness.

But clearly they agree that Macedonia offers a lesson worth learning.

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