Second Reaction: *The Real Benedict Arnold: An Engaging, Historical Rehabilitation*


**Gabriel Popovich**

Jim Murphy’s purpose in *The Real Benedict Arnold* could not be any clearer: he sets out to demonstrate that Benedict Arnold’s name has been unfairly maligned in our culture. Beyond that, though, the book is an interesting demonstration of how heroes and villains are essentially created by historians. Writing a book that reads as part biography, part historical makeover, Murphy positions himself as a revisionist. And if one ignores his reliance on a “Great-Man” framework of historical reporting, then it might not be entirely baseless to label him a sort of Howard Zinn for the young adult set.

Murphy begins with a lengthy account of Arnold’s early years followed by his involvement in the American Revolution as a raw but uniquely talented field commander. It is in these sections that the writing comes to life describing Arnold’s military exploits in campaigns such as the Capture of Fort Ticonderoga and The Battle of Saratoga. Later, Murphy walks the reader through Arnold’s eventual betrayal of the American cause, and one cannot help but feel sympathy for him as Murphy meticulously lays out the death by a thousand cuts that finally led Arnold to his infamous double-cross.

One wonders if Murphy is not indulging in some biased scholarship of his own as he attempts to rehabilitate Arnold’s image. But rather than being a strike against the book, the issue of Murphy’s objectivity might lead to some interesting classroom discussions about how history gets told. It is easy to imagine using *The Real Benedict Arnold* as a launching point into a unit called, say, “The Real...” in which students could explore the truth behind some mythologized moment in American history. I remember being utterly fascinated when I first learned that Rosa Parks did not give up her bus seat merely because she suddenly felt compelled as if by epiphany to fight racism on December 1, 1955, but that her actions were planned in advance with her NAACP boss, E. D. Nixon. My students have the same reaction when I share that knowledge with them today.

Imagine the real stories students might uncover about Henry Ford’s anti-Semitism or why we may want to reconsider celebrating Columbus Day. *The Real Benedict Arnold* urges students to look beyond the iconography (positive or negative) that makes up the story of our national history. Figures like George Washington and John Brown and Malcolm X are more nuanced than a standard American History textbook typically gives them credit for and an investigative process as such could provide students with good material for a
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research paper, a multi-genre writing project, or a speech.

This sentiment to explore history beyond what is merely surveyed in a U.S. history course was echoed by a few of the students I asked to review the book with me. One responded saying, “The way he writes about the hidden facts is so interesting, too. It shows students to dig for good details and not just what everyone knows already.” Another student wrote, “I would actually prefer Murphy to write my U.S. history book than whoever does.” On balance the students responded enthusiastically to what they saw as The Real Benedict Arnold’s unconventional retelling of the Revolutionary War—territory they have had to rehash over and over again in the course of their schooling. What a relief it might be to them to read an account of the war that is a little more “real.”

About the Author

Gabriel Popovich is an English teacher at Delphi Community High School where he has taught for six years.