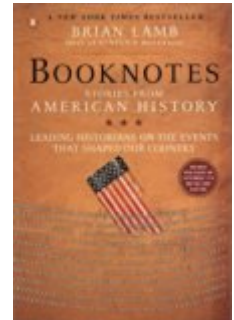**Brian Lamb, ed..** *Booknotes: Stories from American History: Leading Historians on the Events That Shaped Our Country.* New York and London: Penguin Books, 2001. xix + 556 pp. $16.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-14-200249-0.

**Reviewed by** Lora Knight

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### Edited Moments from C-SPAN Author Interviews

Brian Lamb's *New York Times* bestseller, *Booknotes: Stories from American History*, would make a worthy addition to any dentist office waiting room, but it is of little use to the historian. A collection of essays actually written by the historians, journalists, political analysts, and writers whose ninety-one names are attached to the eighty-one pieces in *Booknotes* would undoubtedly make fascinating reading. However, this is not their writing, but excerpts from transcripts of C-SPAN's weekly author interview series "edited into essay form" (p. xvi). The "stories" are aimed at the general reader and are not intended to provide analysis or interpretation for the expert. Nor does *Booknotes* function either as usefully or as efficiently as standard available book reviews in pointing the historian to potentially interesting works by other authors.

The heavy editing in *Booknotes*, which obliterates Lamb's presence as interviewer and reduces sixty minutes of conversation into as little as three pages of text, does not allow space for complexity or nuance in the stories. Furthermore, as a result of its contrived format, the volume delivers neither graceful prose nor interesting dialog. Without facial expressions, voices, or exchange we lose the spontaneity, inflection, and sense of personality that animated the original broadcast. Speech, posing as the written word, all too often comes out here in dry, choppy sentences that make reading downright unpleasant. On the other hand, it may well be that *Booknotes* owes its bestseller status to this same informal, conversational, and non-intimidating style that provides anyone who has ten minutes and a casual interest in U.S. history with a cocktail party factoid about this country's past. I was, in fact, frankly hoping to get a few interesting anecdotes to spice up my own U.S. history survey lectures. Ultimately, however, the work generally provides insufficient detail to confidently pass these stories on without examining the authors' original works.

Finally *Booknotes* would not make appropriate reading for a college-level U.S. history survey class. We usually assign historical essays to give students a deeper and more complex analysis of

specific issues than they would get in a survey text. The watered-down narratives in *Booknotes* contain insufficient context or development to serve that purpose. Also, with only 130 of the 514 pages in the volume dedicated to the pre-1865 era, the work does not include the necessary balance for inclusion in such a course. Social history gets extremely short shrift all around. Although there are a significant number of essays on African-Americans, no other racial, ethnic, or cultural minorities are covered. Gender and women in history are also greatly underrepresented. Lamb's choice of interviews and essays reveals his prevailing interest in biographies of great white men and twentieth-century Washington politics, rather than the overall historical significance of the personalities and incidents described. Where, for instance, could one dedicate time in a one- or two-semester survey to Robert Frost's appearance at John F, Kennedy's presidential inauguration, the feud between Robert F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, or Dan Rostenkowski's fall from Congress? In short, the audience for this book is unlikely to be found on the H-Survey list.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-survey

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