

# Super-Heroines

Jol Silversmith

When many people think about “comic books,” they are reminded of the 1960’s *Batman* TV series, and still expect comic books to be populated by cartoonish characters with appeal primarily for children. But comic books have changed. Their audience now primarily consists of teenagers and young adults; the stories and art have likewise matured. But despite all these changes the role of women in comic books has not greatly improved. They are still often depicted in a stereotypical and discriminatory fashion. Female characters are frequently mere beautiful objects rather than full-fledged characters.

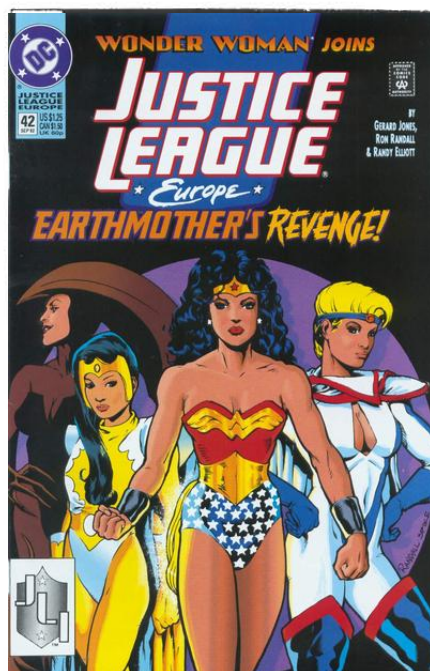
The majority of comic books continue to feature “superheroes” and other characters with appeal for a male audience. Few feature female characters, although the roles available for women have expanded. Lois Lane is no longer identified as “Superman’s girlfriend.” She is a self-reliant reporter more interested in her work than Clark Kent’s secret identity; when he proposed to her in 1990 she initially turned him down. But many comic books appear to feature women only so that their revealing costumes will raise sales. Even intelligent or powerful women do not seem to have the sense to fully clothe themselves; their value is ornamental. Based on many female characters’ “endowment,” it is difficult to believe that they can stand up, much less fly.

The two major comic book publishers, Marvel and DC, are not above this trend. Progress has been made. DC’s President is a woman, Jenette Kahn. But innovation and rapid change have been lacking. According to the trade publication

*Advance Comics*, only seven out of their nearly two hundred April 1993 releases star women. Two are based on the *Barbie* fashion toys; *Silver Sable* features a female mercenary who fights crime in a skin-tight mirrored costume; *Black Canary* features another superhero, who patrols the streets wearing fishnet stockings. Women may no longer be overtly placed in subservient roles in comic books, but the message conveyed by the art about the appearance of women, idealized and impractical,

belies this improvement.

Some of the smaller “independent” publishers that arose in the 1980’s have used the graphic medium to tell stories with less physical and more mental interaction. But many have relied upon sex to sell their publications. Titles such as *Femforce* and *Vampirella* feature women wearing what is certainly the minimal amount of clothing that permits them (the comic books) to be sold to minors. Some comic books even feature explicit pornography. Ironically, such “underground” comic books have often been the only titles to address standards of beauty for women in society and the medium. *Omaha the Cat Dancer*, one of



Crimson Fox, Doctor Light, Wonder Woman, and Power Girl from *JUSTICE LEAGUE EUROPE* by Gerald Jones, Ron Randall & Randy Elliott. © 1992 DC Comics. All rights reserved. Used by permission of DC Comics.

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the most acclaimed comic books of the 1980's, is a soap opera that focuses on the life of an erotic dancer and the implications of her work. The title depicts graphic sex—but it is in fact written by a woman, Kate Worley.

But most comic books do not address the implications of their depiction of women. Virtually every male character wears a costume that covers him from neck to foot, but it is a rare female character who does not have lots of flesh exposed, be it bare legs, a plunging neckline, or high-cut thighs. Wonder Woman is one of the most progressive comic books currently on the market. However, her costume, ostensibly armor, hardly offers protection against most weapons or even inclement weather. Women often assert their independence by wearing costumes that make them look more like a sexual dominatrix than a mature adult. Susan Richards, the Fantastic Four's Invisible Woman, along with a once-matronly personality, recently traded in a full

bodysuit for a low-cut tank top, hip boots, and a bare midriff—a costume that is itself almost invisible.

Comic books have long been biased towards characters of WASPish appearance; women have been no exception. Races with subtle physical distinctions, such as Asian and Hispanic, are particularly rare, although this may perhaps be

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due to the limitations of the medium. But when a woman is not white, she is most likely to be green (the She-Hulk), furry (the feline Tigra), or inhuman (the alien princess Starfire). Women of color often seem to be the women most likely to have a full-body costume, while Asian women

often possess the most revealing outfits. These two distinctions can only further perverse beliefs about what types of the female body are worth displaying (as well as the very idea that it should be displayed). Comic books are only now beginning to accept that women can differ in appearance from the Caucasian norm without being inherently repugnant or seductive.

But it is too simplistic to dismiss contemporary comic books as sexist or prejudiced. Not all artists, writers, and publishers have contributed to these trends. Further, "beauty" is more than physical appearance; comic books have often depicted female characters beautiful in their inner strength. For example, Dorothy Spinner, a disfigured teenage girl, chose to grow up in the real world with the

Doom Patrol rather than living "happily ever after" on a fairy-tale like planet. The human body—the female body—is not in itself something of which to be ashamed. It is not so much the existence of revealing costumes that should be a concern but their intention and interpretation. Do the stories and text that accompany the sometimes exaggerated depiction of women justify the art?

The predominantly young male audience (and creative teams) may in part explain the emphasis on physical traits, and comic books are further likely to do so as a visual medium. As a product of society, comic books reflect and reinforce societal standards of beauty. But this is not a vicious circle. Attitudes can be changed by a portrayal of women as more than objects, and an increasing number of comic books have sought to do so. The Barbie titles may in fact be among the most progressive. They do not just focus on gender-role stereotypes; female characters fix cars, take vacations on a ranch, and have full-time jobs. Wonder Woman is not just a crime-fighter

but an ambassador from a race of Amazons to the "man's world."

But such titles and characters are still few in number, and many titles featuring women or addressing women's issues have been canceled for lack of sales. In addition, a trend of the 1990's has been an increasing emphasis of art over story in comic books. If the power of visual images is not tempered, if images of ideally shaped and scantily clad women convey comic books' primary message about women, the status quo is indeed distressing. A new school of art among independent comic books, for example, seems to have as

a fundamental premise that women's nipples are always erect and visible through any piece of clothing. Whether intentional or not, images of women as little

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more than play-objects to be gawked over do not serve the medium—or women.

The future is not all gloomy, but equality seems distant. Stereotypes persist. Women should be depicted wearing more practical clothing and with more normal and diverse physical features; if they're going to be superheroes, they should at least be unlikely to trip over their hair or fall out of their costumes. But more than the depiction of women in comic book art needs to change. The uniqueness of the medium lies in its integration of text and art. Likewise, beauty is more than surface appearances but reflects a person's entire being. Comics books are ideally suited to explore this relationship; the graphic medium can depict not just great feats but emotions and interaction, even in a fantastic context. By doing so comic books could help redefine beauty in the minds of comic book readers—and through them influence all of society.

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