

Female Readers Find Their “Hero” In A Modernizing Comic Book Universe

By Caitlin Mulkeen

Contributing Writer

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Comic books have been a part of American pop culture since their emergence in 1934. Women have always had a noteworthy presence in comics, and this presence, or lack thereof, has changed over time as comic book audiences have changed. Although women comprised a large part of the comic book audience at the industry’s onset, the audience of mainstream comics has been assumed to be mostly male. This is changing as comics have become increasingly more popular among women in recent decades.

Artists in the exhibit “There Goes My Hero,” which runs through Dec. 5 at the Center for Book Arts (located at 28 W. 27 St.) have recreated the comic book superhero from a female perspective, thus challenging the accepted values behind traditional comic book heroes and their audiences. These artists have also created new comics—with modern female audiences in mind—that represent female characters accurately, with strength and powers equal to that of the male characters.

In the 1930s, at the introduction of the comic book industry, females constituted a significant part of the comic-book-reading population. There were many popular female comic book characters during this period. The famous “Archie” comics featured female characters such as Betty and Veronica. Other female-featured publications included “Millie the Model” and other career girl-inspired characters. These characters defined the new working woman of the post-WWII era in American society.

On the other hand, the heroic Wonder Woman character first appeared in 1941. Wonder Woman represented the identity of the modern American woman in a different way—as strong, sexual, powerful and rejecting traditional gender roles. Although female comic readers could connect to Wonder Woman’s independent spirit, her physical portrayal was certainly far from relatable.

“These female characters were always very independent, but physically always sexualized,” said Marc Jackman, FCLC ’11. Wonder Woman’s provocative crime fighting costume revealed a sexually objectified character. Dara Birnbaum breaks down this objectivity as part of the exhibit in her piece “Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman,” a video that shows Wonder Woman’s transformation from a secretary into the scantily-clad heroine of the television version. Birnbaum focuses on Wonder Woman’s clothing because it is the most attention-grabbing element of the character. Whether or not this sexual objectification was used as a selling tactic to target male audiences, it reflects stereotypical attitudes towards women and exemplifies women’s struggle for social equality during and after the 1940s.

Traditional comic superhero stories provide an interesting social commentary in that women characters were seen almost exclusively in supporting roles. This inferiority is portrayed in the exhibition in Chita Genesh’s comic creations in which the female character, Amnesia, struggles with feelings of repression and the inability to be seen or heard.

The popularity of the romance genre in interplay with superhero comics saw the emergence of the phenomena that has recently been dubbed “Women in Refrigerators” in online comic fan discussions. This is a plot device found often in superhero comics where the female character’s exclusive function is to motivate the male superhero into acting against a villain. The reoccurrence of this device in popular comics illustrates a sexist perspective, and it speaks to the idea of a power struggle between men and women during this time. Blanka Amezkua’s featured work in the exhibit challenges the “Women in Refrigerators” phenomenon, which undermines the significance of women in comics by taking the female character out of her comic world and portraying her as strong and powerful on her own.

Alisa Kwitney, adjunct professor at Fordham and writer and former editor at Vertigo/DC Comics, notes Rogue from the comic “X-Men” as an example of the struggle.

“When she touched you, she gained your powers but lost her personality. This hit a weird female preoccupation,” Kwitney said. Creators were wary, whether consciously or not, of portraying a woman as invincible. This reflected gender role tensions during a time of social turmoil.

In the exhibit, Batwoman is portrayed in Dulce Pizon’s 2004 photograph as a hardworking mother engaging in stereotypical domestic duties

while dressed in the heroine's costume. While still acknowledging stereotypical attitudes towards women, the photograph validates Batwoman's power and strength in a way that was not represented in the comic.

"These superheroes were unsatisfying because they never mixed it up," Kwitney said. These characters were still stereotyped, as in the case of the traditional Batwoman, whose impractical weapons included powder puffs and charm bracelets.

Increasing numbers of strong female characters during the feminist movement of the 1970s reflected women's growing success in their societal struggle and the subsequent attempts of the comic industry to recognize women as an audience. Characters included such strong women as Shanna the She-Devil, a college-educated jungle heroine whom Kwitney describes as a "strong and angry feminist in a leopard skin bikini, who arm wrestles with a park ranger who has a crush on her and beats him."

Since the mid-1980s, comics have increased their popularity among young women, and the number of strong female titles available both in mainstream and underground comics has grown. The work of autobiographical artists such as Julie Doucet, the creator of "My New York Diary" and Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz, the creator of "Wepa Woman," is featured in the exhibit. These women have created realistic, independent female characters and stories with no tones of sexual objectivity that young women can relate to. Anne Timmon's "GoGirl! Comic" series, which is featured in the exhibition, recreates the typical comic superhero in a positive, empowering way for young girls.

"I don't think there is a way to portray women or men accurately. Characters need complexity and nuance," Kwitney said, "The thing that gripes me is when there's one strong central female character, and that's enough. Women make up 51 percent of the population."

Women have been portrayed inaccurately because of a lack of equal presence to that of men in comic books and because of the genre's targetting of a male audience. The artists featured in "There Goes My Hero" make a dramatic statement about the inaccuracy of the typical portrayal of women, and they reshape comic book women into more fitting representations of their gender.

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