

WOMEN IN COMICS An Introductory Guide

by Trina Robbins

Today it is generally assumed that the world of comic books is male. Comic stores are filled with boys and men buying violent comics featuring grim-faced, overly muscled superheroes and improbably large breasted women. A girl or woman in these stores is a rarity, and comics by or for women and girls are equally rare. Most people associate comics with boys and superheroes, believing that this has always been the situation.

Not. In the not-so-distant past, scores of women drew comics, and comic book racks were filled with positive, strong female role models. There was a time when girl comic readers actually outnumbered the boys. But by the 1970s, when I was one of a small group of women cartoonists in the San Francisco Bay Area, those times had been forgotten. Because I suspected that the situation had once been different, I decided to research the history of women cartoonists. My archaeology paid off, and I have produced four books on the subject of women and comics, with a fifth coming out in 2000.

In this course I'll share my knowledge of the pioneering 20th century women cartoonists, dashing superheroine role models in comics of the 1940s on, and today's new girl cartoonist explosion. While each of these three topics can be read and enjoyed on its own, together they make up a well-rounded history of comics as they pertain to and affect women.

In *Great Women Cartoonists*, you'll meet the very commercially successful women who drew comics at the turn of the century; the charming, funny flapper cartoonists from the 1920s; and the 1940s women who, when the men went off to war, filled the pages of American comic books with great girl heroes. The second topic, *Superheroines*, will introduce you to the costumed superwomen and girls who've battled evildoers and righted wrongs in comics for the past sixty years. Among them you'll meet the Amazon princess whose psychologist creator also invented the lie detector, along with the cat-suited heroine who looked just like her woman creator, and the teenager who had only to say a magic word in order to become the most powerful girl in the world. Finally, *Contemporary Comic Grrrlz* will take you from the Underground Womyn Libbers of the 1970s to today's proliferation of self-published Grrl comics and zines. Thanks to computers and photocopy machines, anyone with a message can now cheaply produce their own comics or zines, as so many young women are doing. But it's essential for anyone interested in comics, especially women who aspire to a career in the industry, to know what it was like before the guys took over.

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WOMEN IN COMICS

GREAT WOMEN CARTOONISTS

Comics scholars date the modern comic strip from 1895, the year a cartoon called "The Yellow Kid" first appeared in The New York World. The strip's artist, R. F. Outcault, had started as a contributor to the weekly humor magazine, Truth, and in fact his first Yellow Kid cartoon was reprinted from that magazine. A year after the official birth of comics, strips by Rose O' Neill were running in Truth. So women were already creating comics when the industry was one year old.

O' Neill, who would become famous as the creator of the immortal Kewpies, wasn't alone for long. By 1901, a comic by Louise Quarles, "Bun' s Pns", ran in the New York Herald, and a year later, newspapers carried strips by Jean Mohr, Kate Carew and Grace Gebbie Weidersheim. The latter, under her married name of Grace Drayton, is best known for creating the Campbell Kids in 1905. Until her death in 1936, Drayton produced countless comics featuring cute toddlers, all looking like the Campbell Kids, with a confusion of names like Toodles, Toddles, Dolly Drake, Bobby Blake, Dolly Dingle, Dolly Dimples, and Dotty Darling. Early cartoonists like Drayton and Rose O' Neill were extremely prolific, publishing in magazines like The Ladies' Home Journal, Woman' s Home Companion, and Good Housekeeping, as well as national newspapers. They were also commercially successful. While Drayton had the Campbell' soup account, O' Neill drew ads for Jello.

There have always been trends in comics, and the fashion in the early 20th century was for cute kids, drawn both by men like Outcault and Jimmy Swinnerton, and by women like Grace Kasson, Inez Townsend Tribit, Drayton' s sister, Margaret Gebbie Hayes and Margaret' s daughter, Mary Hayes. Even Rose O' Neill' s popular Kewpies were really just winged babies.

The undisputed queen of comics from the 1910s through the early thirties was Nell Brinkley. She had started drawing cartoons for the Denver Post in 1905, at 16, but within two years had been discovered by William Randolph Hearst, who brought her to New York to produce daily cartoons and commentary for his Evening Journal. Writing in purple prose and drawing with delicate swirling pen lines, Brinkley depicted pretty girls, handsome boys and enough cherubs to fill the Vatican. Her cartoons were an instant hit, and within a year The Brinkley Girl, as her Art Nouveau beauties were called, was featured in the Ziegfeld Follies of 1908 and 1909, sold products, and had at least three popular songs written about her. Although she hardly seems revolutionary today, Brinkley led the change in women' s comics from precious postVictorian toddlers to single, active women who even held jobs. By the teens, other women cartoonists like Stella Flores, Eleanor Schorer and Juanita Hamel were following in Brinkley' s satirishod footsteps.

By the twenties, newspapers featured flappers drawn by women in a streamlined, Art Deco style. Women had the vote, and the new star of America' s comics pages drank and smoked, wore short skirts, and wisecracked with the boys. The most prolific and successful of this new group of cartoonists was Ethel Hayes, whose work was influenced by both Brinkley and by famous 1920s cartoonist John Held, Jr. Hayes produced a

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prodigious body of work throughout the twenties and thirties. Along with children' s books and paperdoll books, she managed to turn out a full page Sunday newspaper strip, a black and white strip titled "Marianne," and two daily panels, Flapper Fanny, and Ethel, with her commentary running under the art, in the manner of Nell Brinkley. Another flapper cartoonist was the equally prolific Virginia Huget, who, with a full color Sunday page and at least two daily strips, all featuring flappers modeled after silent film star Louise Brooks, also found the time to draw ads for Lux soap.

The next revolution for women cartoonists came in the forties, with the advent of the comic book, which contained more pages to fill, and needed cartoonists to fill them. During the war years, more women worked in comics than ever before. With male cartoonists overseas, as in other industries, women stepped in, drawing exciting female characters for comic books. Lily Renee, Fran Hopper, Jill Elgin, Nina Albright and Janice Valeau were among the women drawing girl detectives, counterspies, jungle girls, and girl commandos, in colorful, pulp magazine styles. Newspapers also carried adventure strips, and of all the women cartoonists of that period, two stand out: Tarpe Mills and Dale Messick. Mills' s nationally successful adventure strip featured a costumed heroine named Miss Fury. Read more about her in my second topic, Superheroines.

The most important woman cartoonist to emerge from the forties is Dale Messick and her heroine, Brenda Starr. Born Dalia, her first attempts to sell a strip had been rejected. As The Saturday Evening Post put it in a 1960 article, the editor who rejected her "had tried a woman cartoonist once...and wanted no more of them." Messick changed her name to the unisex Dale, and finally sold her adventurous and romantic strip. The red haired girl reporter was an instant favorite, especially among women, and although Messick retired in 1979, her creation lives on in newspapers around the country.

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EXPERT' S TOP PICKS BOOKS Unfortunately, very few books have been written about women cartoonists, and of those, some are more out of print than others, but all of them are out of print. *Women and the Comics*, co-written by me and Catherine Yronwode, is probably the most out-of-print of all, but my more recent 1993 book, *A Century of Women Cartoonists*, can still be found, and Fall, 2001, saw the publication of my new book, *The Great Women Cartoonists (Watson-Guptil)*. All these books chronicle far more women cartoonists than I could possibly squeeze into this course. *The Red-headed Bombshell*, compiled and edited by Tom Mason, reprints the first year of "Brenda Starr" and includes an interview with Dale Messick. An excellent book about Rose O' Neill sadly, the only book about that great artist - is *Kewpies and Beyond*, by Shelley Armitage. Chock full of illustrations, Armitage details O' Neill' s life and discusses all aspects of her work, from the Kewpies to her fine art.

VIDEOS The only video of its kind, *Funny Ladies*, by Pamela Beere Briggs, starts with a visual history of early women cartoonists, scripted by me and narrated by Jean Stapleton, and segues into interviews with Contemporary cartoonists Lynda Barry, Nicole Hollander and Cathy Guisewhite, and 84 year old pioneer Dale Messick.

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WOMEN IN COMICS SUPERHEROINES

America went to war in 1941, and Wonder Woman -- "beautiful as Aphrodite, wise as Athena, stronger than Hercules and swifter than Mercury" -- entered comics. Her creator, psychologist William Moulton Marston, coincidentally also the inventor of the lie detector, intended to design a heroine for girls in the all-male world of comic books, and succeeded admirably with a mixture of mythology and feminism. When handsome pilot Steve Trevor crashes his plane on the matriarchal Paradise Island, amazon Princess Diana dons a costume based on the American flag and departs with him for "Man' s World", to fight fascism and defend sisterhood and democracy. The constant message in Wonder Woman was that girls could do anything boys could do, and often better, especially if they stuck together.

Wonder Woman paved the way for countless other comic book superheroines and remains a favorite among girls and women to this day, but she was not the first superheroine. That honor belongs to Miss Fury, a newspaper strip heroine drawn by a woman named Tarpe Mills, who beat Wonder Woman by eight months. The strip' s glamorous panther skin-clad protagonist was actually a dead ringer for her attractive creator, Mills. In her film-noire adventures in exotic locales like Brazil, the heroine fought Nazis side by side with an equally glamorous girl guerrilla who looked like Carmen Miranda. Miss Fury' s panther skin supposedly had been cursed by a witch doctor, which may explain why the heroine got no rest. After the war, she battled gangsters, kidnappers and mad scientists until 1949.

The superheroines who followed Wonder Woman into 1940s comic books tended to have "girl" names like Sun Girl, Moon Girl, Hawk Girl, Bullet Girl, and Bat Girl, were often merely sidekicks of the male heroes, whose names ended with "man" rather than "boy" -- Hawkman, Bulletman, Batman -- and were not as strong. But one teenage superheroine, Mary Marvel, had only to repeat the magic word, "Shazam" to become the world' s mightiest girl. Bullets bounced off her, and she could fly. At her peak of popularity, Mary had a fan club, and girls wanting to emulate their heroine could even buy Mary Marvel fashions. The "Shazam Girl" lasted for twelve years and appeared in 172 comic books, more comics than any other superheroine except Wonder Woman.

1940s Superheroines often got literally spacey. Venus was actually the Roman goddess of love herself, come down to earth as a superheroine -- from the planet Venus! Sun Girl didn' t come from the sun, and Moon Girl didn' t come from the moon. The latter was from "the mountains of Samarkand", where she was known as "the Princess of the moon". Moon Girl used her magic moonstone to attain the strength of ten men and battle equally spacey enemies, like "Erica with her wolf-girls from Venus." On the other hand, Mysta of the Moon did live on the moon, along with her faithful robot. The silver-haired heroine was, says the comic, "sole possessor of the scientific knowledge of the universe", so her super power consisted of being really smart!

By the 1960s, superheroines no longer starred in their own comic books, instead joining super groups like The X-Men and The Fantastic Four. But they generally were much weaker than their male companions. Sue Storm, for example, had the dubious power of

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becoming invisible, while the male members of The Fantastic Four were able to burst into flames, stretch themselves like putty or be strong as rocks. She spent most of her time fainting or worrying about her stretchy boyfriend, Mr. Fantastic, and was not designed to appeal to girls. Since female comic book readership had dropped off sharply by then, it didn' t matter.

Comics did attempt to change with the times, and in 1974 Marvel comics introduced the first Black superheroine, Storm. The goddess-like African led The X-Men and as her name suggests, controlled thunder, lightening and winds. But by the Nineteen-nineties, comics became not merely a boy' s club, but a Playboy club. Using circular logic, the comic companies produced ultraviolent hypersexualized superheroines appealing only to boys, rationalizing that "women don' t read comics." Of course, as long as female comic characters insult the average woman, she won' t read comics.

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EXPERTS' TOP PICKS BOOKS At the risk of sounding repetitive, the only comprehensive book on superheroines is my book, *The Great Women Superheroes*. A thorough search of used book stores might yield the 1972 compilation, *Wonder Woman*, featuring an introduction by *MS* magazine founder Gloria Steinem, Phyllis Chesler's essay on amazons, and a sampling of *Wonder Woman* comics from the 40s, including the first *Wonder Woman* story. 2001 saw the publication of another book, also called *Wonder Woman*, this one a Chronicle Press book written by Les Daniels. However, Daniels serves as a mouthpiece for DC comics, and comes up with such dubious and unproven statements as "It's an open secret...that *Wonder Woman*'s readers have always been predominantly male...", so I would take his writing with a grain of salt, although the book's illustrations are worth the price. In 1977, Stan Lee put together *The Superhero Women*, a collection of Marvel comics superheroines from the 60s and 70s.

WEB SITES Sequential Tart, "a webzine about the comic industry published by an eclectic band of women," contains lively articles written from a woman's perspective about all aspects of the comics industry, including amusing critiques of 90s superheroines, such as *Bizarre Breasts*, about *Catwoman*. <http://www.sequentialtart.com/home.shtml> Michael Norwitz has put together a comprehensive website on superheroines, <http://www.best.com/~blaklion/women.html>, which links to most other superheroine websites. <http://gnofn.org/~jbourg/grrls/comic/comix.htm> includes a gallery of superheroines.

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WOMEN IN COMICS

CONTEMPORARY COMIC GRRRLZ

By the early 1970s, the women's liberation movement was in full swing, and affected most industries, including comics. Women cartoonists, disgusted by their portrayal in mainstream comics, and disenchanting with an all-male underground comix "boy's club" that excluded them, produced their own comics (or comix). Unlike mainstream comic books, comix were cheaply produced in black and white and had small press runs, but were accessible to their intended audience, young radicals, hippies, and college students. Comix anthologies like *It Ain't Me, Babe*, *Wimmen's Comix*, and the outrageously named *Tits and Clits* were forums for new women cartoonists to communicate previously taboo subjects that mattered to them and to their readers: sexual harassment, abortion, lesbianism, single motherhood, sex and sexism - and certain not-yet legal drugs. Some of the cartoonists to emerge from this period were Lee Marrs, Shary Flenniken, Roberta Gregory, and Trina Robbins.

The more radical of the 1970s and 1980s second wave feminists removed the word "men" from the spelling of their gender, preferring spellings such as "womon" or "womyn", and *Wimmen's Comix* was often criticized for "spelling it wrong". In 1992, the last issue of *Wimmen's* changed the spelling to *Wimmin's Comix*, but ironically, it no longer mattered. Countless new women cartoonists had emerged on the comics scene since their "*Wimmen's Lib*" big sisters broke ground in the 70s, and they had reclaimed the word "girl." The new women's comics bear titles like *Real Girl*, *Girl Talk*, *Girl Hero*, and *Action Girl*. Soon, inspired by the punk music and Riot Grrl movement of the early 90s, three Rs were added to spelling of "girl," adding a growl to Barbie lunch boxes and plastic barrettes.

The grrrl cartoonists combine feminist anger with a contemporary "girly" energy, and despite their often strong political messages and sometimes depressing autobiographical subjects, such as rape and incest, they often include paperdolls in their books. Some outstanding cartoonists of the 90s are Dame Darcy, who produces the quirky gothic *Meatcake*, Diane DiMassa and her hilariously over-the-top *Hothead Paisan*, *Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist*, and Sarah Dyer, whose title, *Action Girl*, carries an upbeat, "girl power" message: "Remember -- action is everything!...be an Action Girl (or boy!)...go out and do something with all that positive energy!"

A popular image of the 90s, seen on refrigerator magnets, coffee mugs and posters, is a picture of Rosie the Riveter, the mythic World War II factory worker, rolling her sleeves up for action, and the words "We can do it!" This is the do-it-yourself philosophy stressed in comics like *Action Girl*, and in the 90s grrrl zine movement. Although zines -- short for "fanzines" and referring to self-published, photocopied mini-magazines -- date as far back as the early 1930s, when they were produced by young science fiction fans, grrrlzines started with the Riotgrrrl movement, and often consist entirely of comics. A slick, mainstream comics style is farthest from the minds of the zine artists; their comics are personal statements, and perfection is secondary to communication. Just as many young publishers of early science fiction fanzines later became successful writers, many of today's better known cartoonists, such as Julie Doucet, Mary Fleener, and Jessica Abel, started by publishing their own zines.

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Reaching an even greater audience than zines, and even cheaper to produce, the internet is the newest place to find comics by women. While most cartoonists have websites, some women are starting to put their own comics up on the internet, where they can be read by anyone with access to a computer. Today, computers and cheap photocopy machines make it possible for anyone with a message to produce their own comics.

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EXPERTS' TOP PICKS

BOOKS Once again, the only comprehensive book on contemporary comic grrrlz is my *From Girls to Grrrlz*, and I'm happy to say that it is definitely in print. *Twisted Sisters* is a 1991 anthology containing the work of fourteen women cartoonists from the 70s and 80s. Roz Warren has edited a great many collections of women's cartoons, including *Women's Glib*, *Women's Glibber*, *Kitty Libber*, and *The Best Contemporary Women's Humor*.

WEB SITES The internet is the place to find most information about current women cartoonists. Here's a sampling of some cartoonist's home pages:

Phoebe Gloeckner: <http://ravenblond.com/pgloeckne>

Caryn Leschen: <http://www.wenet.net/~violet>

Carla Speed McNeil: www.lightspeedpress.com

Diane DiMassa: www.hotheadpaisan.com

Madison Clell: <http://www.cuckoocomic.com>

Roberta Gregory: www.robtagregory.com

Donna Barr: www.stinz.com

Ellen Forney: www.ellenforney.com

Trina Robbins: www.trinarobbins.com

And the home pages of two zine artists: Helga Romoser: www.aubergines.com

helga Patti Kim: <http://www.interlog.com/~fhabzine>

The Women's cartoon Index <http://www.happychaos.com/wci> is a comprehensive list of contemporary women cartoonists, with links to their sites.

Sequential Tart <http://www.sequentialtart.cm/home.shtml> and *Grrls in the Comix* gnofn.org/~jbourg/grrls/comix/comix.htm are online magazines by and/or about all aspects of women in comix.

Finally, here are some online comics by women: www.waitingforbob.com, <http://crfh.tripod.com/roomies.htm>

ORGANIZATIONS Friends of Lulu is a national organization aimed at getting more girls and women involved in comics. The group's main purpose is to promote and encourage female readership and participation in the comic book industry. To join Friends of Lulu or to find out more, visit their website at: <http://www.friends-lulu.o>