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To cite this article: Michael R. Lavin (1998) Women in comic books, Serials Review, 24:2, 93-100

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00987913.1998.10764448>



Published online: 06 Dec 2013.



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## WOMEN IN COMIC BOOKS

**Michael R. Lavin**

For the past four decades, the largest segment of the comic book reading audience has been comprised consistently of males ages twelve to twenty-five. Librarians Doug Highsmith and Allen Ellis wisely suggests that "the comparatively low numbers of younger children and female readers reflect the scarcity of products designed specifically for them."<sup>1</sup> This scarcity was not always the case, however. In the early 1950s, a much broader selection of comic book genres was routinely produced by the industry's major players, and females of all ages represented nearly half of all comic book readers. Consequently, the aggregate circulation of US comics was much higher than it is today.

Librarians need to understand an important truth about comic books: just because the audience for comics has been traditionally comprised of pre-teen and young adult males, that doesn't mean the medium holds no interest for other readers, particularly older males, young girls, and women. Teenage boys may focus happily on comics which emphasize prolonged fight scenes, big guns, large-scale destruction, and provocatively dressed women, but if young fans stick with the medium, sooner or later their reading interests will mature. What do adult readers of both sexes look for in a comic book? Good stories well told, new ideas, interesting character development, and strong art work are basic requirements. Nor should it be too much to ask to see female characters portrayed in a realistic manner.

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## EARLY PORTRAYALS

From the medium's beginnings, female comic book characters have played an ambiguous role in comic books. A classic example is Lois Lane, the tough, self-sufficient career woman who is constantly in need of rescue by Superman, and who yearns for little more than to be his wife. Even super-powered females were often defined by their relationship to men: during the Golden Age, Mary Marvel was Captain Marvel's sister and Namora was the Sub-Mariner's cousin. Supergirl, introduced in *Action Comics* no. 252 (May, 1959), was Superman's cousin. In Supergirl's first appearance, Superman reassures her by saying, "I'll take care of you like a big brother," though it hardly seems likely that anyone with Supergirl's formidable powers would need looking after by anyone. The uneasy contradiction between strength and dependence (and in extreme cases, between strength and subservience) has characterized much of the history of female comic characters.

Another core contradiction is that between women as role models and as sex objects. Powerful super-heroines like DC's Wonder Woman or Marvel's She-Hulk may easily overcome the most overwhelming threats and obstacles, but they are invariably depicted as alluring objects of desire, wearing the scantiest of costumes. These twin themes of dependence and sexual desirability have permeated the comic book medium from its earliest days, as the following thumbnail history will illustrate.

Comic books as a publication format originated in 1933 as anthologies of popular newspaper comic strips. The first ongoing monthly comic to be sold as an independent newsstand periodical was M.C. Gaines's *Famous Funnies*, which premiered in May, 1934 (cover date July, 1934).<sup>2</sup> Plucky heroines, such as the indomitable "Little Orphan Annie" and the glamorous "Brenda Starr, Reporter," did appear in comic books of the 1930s and 1940s, but they were not the norm.<sup>3</sup>

Beginning in 1937, comic books began portraying the adventures of two-fisted detectives, masked crime-fighters, and ultimately, costumed, super-powered heroes such as Superman and Captain Marvel. Here women were typically relegated to the role of girl-Friday, victim to be rescued, seductive vamp, or perhaps, the long-suffering girlfriend. There was little room for women in a super-hero's life. As Jules Feiffer reminisces, "The ideal of masculine strength, whether Gary Cooper's, Lil Abner's, or Superman's, was for one to be so virile and handsome, to be in such a position of

strength, that he need never go near girls. Except to help them. And then get the hell out."<sup>4</sup>

The sleek criminal temptress, usually wearing a floor-length, low-cut, form-fitting evening gown, became a regular feature of such books as *Daredevil Comics* (1941-1956), *The Phantom* (1939-1949), *Blackhawk* (1944-1968) and even Will Eisner's light-hearted *The Spirit* (1940-1952), where the vamps had wonderfully outlandish names such as Powder Pouf and Sand Saref.<sup>5</sup>

## ROSIE THE RIVETER GAINS SUPER-POWERS

During World War II, patriotic super-heroines captured the attention of an unexpected audience of new readers, both male and female. The quintessential example is DC's Wonder Woman, who took the comics world by storm in 1942, but probably for the wrong reasons. Wonder Woman's costume utilized an American flag motif, with a red top and blue trunks emblazoned with white stars. Topping off the ensemble (so to speak), a gold eagle design hugged her chest.

Wonder Woman was recruited from the peaceful existence of her remote island home by downed fighter pilot, Colonel Steve Trevor. Wonder Woman's mother, Queen Hippolyte, exhorts her daughter to accompany Trevor to America, "the last citadel of democracy, and of equal rights for women." In an interesting twist on an old theme, the handsome Colonel Trevor spends most of his subsequent career being rescued from danger by his beloved Wonder Woman.<sup>6</sup>

Following the spectacular success of Wonder Woman, DC launched another patriotic character, called Liberty Belle, in 1943. Marvel came out with Miss America, a female version of Captain America.<sup>7</sup> In most cases, super-heroines appeared in anthology titles or shared a book with a male super-hero, but if the character proved popular enough (as Wonder Woman did), she would get a book of her own. In addition to the patriotic heroines, female counterparts of the masked crime fighter also began to appear. Among the most popular characters of this genre were Quality's the Phantom Lady (who appeared in several comics from 1941 to 1949), Harvey's the Black Cat (1941-1951), and Marvel's the Blonde Phantom (1946-1948).<sup>8</sup>

Most super-heroines were dressed in revealing costumes. For younger, more innocent heroines, artists utilized a sexy school-girl look. For example, Mary Marvel wore a modified cheerleader outfit, complete with a flaring, ultra-short skirt. (In the 1950s and 1960s, DC adopted a similar look for the young Super-

girl). More mature super-heroines wore blatantly sexier costumes. An archetypical example is Wonder Woman, with her plunging bustier, skin-tight trunks, and bare legs.

### “GOOD-GIRL ART” AND “HEADLIGHT COMICS”

Male readers made the new lineup of super-heroines and female crime fighters increasingly popular, especially among the millions of US servicemen. This in turn brought about a new comics style which modern collectors ironically call “good-girl art.” In the words of comics historian Ron Goulart, “In the days before the advent of *Playboy* and *Penthouse*, comic books offered one way to girl watch.”<sup>9</sup> With each passing year, female characters found their clothing more daring, their poses more provocative, and their encounters increasingly steamier. (Surprisingly, many of these comics were drawn by female artists who signed their work using a male pen name.) By the late 1940s, the trend had become so prevalent that readers commonly referred to such books as “headlight comics.”<sup>10</sup>

The most unabashed example of headlight comics was Bill Ward’s “Torchy.” Torchy, a tall, leggy blond, appeared as a back-up feature in several Quality comics from 1946 to 1950, beginning with *Modern Comics*. Torchy and her girlfriends typically found themselves involved inadvertently in one improbable situation after another, but the real point of the stories was to find an excuse to portray Torchy in her underwear or negligee.<sup>11</sup> In many ways, “Torchy” was a tamer, more innocent precursor to Harvey Kurtzman’s “Little Annie Fannie,” which later became a regular feature of *Playboy* magazine.

Of the many comics publishers of the day, two in particular pushed the boundaries of headlight art: T.T. Scott’s Fiction House, and Victor Fox’s Fox Feature Syndicate.<sup>12</sup> Fox was especially exploitative, taking the Phantom Lady, a modestly costumed, slim, self-sufficient crime fighter, and turning her into a voluptuous pinup girl. The Phantom Lady became notorious for her prominent cone-shaped breasts, short-shorts, and a halter top that was little more than two narrow strips of cloth.<sup>13</sup>

A major variation on the “good girl” theme was the fur-clad jungle woman, first made popular by *Sheena of the Jungle* (1942-1952). This genre became quite common, generating a bevy of copycat female Tarzans, including Judy of the Jungle, Rulah, Princess Pantha, Zegra, Tiger Girl, and Cave Girl.<sup>14</sup> (It is interesting to note that this character type remains popular today, in

the form of such heroines as Marvel’s Shanna the She-Devil and Caliber’s Cavewoman. Although the modern jungle women are even more independent, resourceful, and intelligent than their forebears, they still wear the skimpiest fur or leather outfits.)

### BONDAGE FIXATIONS

Good-girl comics of the forties and fifties may seem fairly innocent by today’s standards, but it is worth pointing out that for some men, characters such as Wonder Woman must have represented the ideal “Amazon fetish.” It is no accident that Wonder Woman is literally characterized as an Amazon of Greek myth or that she and her sisters live on Paradise Island. Wonder Woman was the creation of psychologist William Moulton Marston (writing under the pen name of Charles Moulton), also known as the inventor of the lie detector. Marston’s stated goal was to portray women in a strong, heroic light, but his views on male-female relationships were uncomfortably strange. Marston was once quoted as saying, “Give [men] an alluring woman stronger than themselves to submit to, and they’ll be proud to become her willing slaves.”<sup>15</sup> Similar preoccupations are found today with female characters such as Storm (of the X-Men), Fairchild (of Gen13), and the She-Hulk. One need look no further than the Internet to find examples of erotic fan-fiction and Web pages lovingly devoted to strong, sexy, super-powered heroines.

Along with their cheesecake art, the “good-girl” books conveyed thinly veiled, but unmistakable themes of bondage and domination. The Phantom Lady, Sheena, and other characters frequently found themselves bound and helpless at the hands of one villain or another, and their strategically ripped costumes became more revealing than usual. Amazingly, this less-than-admirable motif actually had its origins in one of comicdom’s Golden Age icons: Wonder Woman.

One of Wonder Woman’s weapons in the fight against crime was a magical golden lasso, which compels anyone it encircles to tell the truth and to obey Wonder Woman’s commands. Innocent enough, perhaps, but some critics have viewed the lasso as an erotic symbol of sexual control. More disturbing was Marston’s recurring use of bondage situations involving both sexes.<sup>16</sup> The theme was so prevalent that DC editor Sheldon Mayer became extremely uncomfortable with it and unsuccessfully strove to tone things down. Marston’s peculiar fascination is evidenced in one 1948 Wonder Woman story which contained no

fewer than seventy-five panels depicting women or men tied with ropes.<sup>17</sup>

### CRIME COMICS

Recurring themes of bondage and domination became even more pronounced in the late 1940s and early 1950s with the emergence of “true crime” comics. Where female super-heros inevitably escaped their bonds, in crime comics the terror-stricken women victims, trussed and helpless, were at the mercy of their captors. Here the theme edged from “harmless” bondage into sado-masochism and the implication of rape.

Crime comics were based on the success of such vastly popular adult newsstand magazines as *True Detective*. The first crime comic was Lev Gleason's *Crime Does Not Pay*, but many imitators soon followed. By the late forties, they had become more and more sensational, depicting extreme violence, cruelty, and of course, scantily clad women. Typical examples include *Famous Crimes* (1948-1953) and *Crime and Punishment* (1948-1955).<sup>18</sup>

Though not strictly of this genre, two more egregious examples of this era are *Slave Girl Comics* (1949) and *Women Outlaws* (1948-1949). The latter title, which ran for eight issues, combined America's appetite for westerns with the allure of sex, featuring plenty of beautiful, buxom, tough-as-nails cowgirls gone bad. This title was especially risqué for its time, with one issue containing a spanking scene and another with a woman wearing an unusually revealing negligee.

The increasingly tasteless and irresponsible portrayal of sex and violence, especially in crime and horror comics, resulted in an inescapable backlash. Psychologist Fredric Wertham held a symposium in 1948 on the “Psychopathology of Comic Books.” Media attention continued to excoriate crime and horror comics, culminating in Wertham's 1954 book, *Seduction of the Innocent*, which suggested a link between juvenile delinquency and comic book reading. The same year, the Senate Subcommittee on the Judiciary held hearings on the subject, resulting in an effort by the comic book industry to regulate itself. The end product was the Comics Code Authority, a voluntary industry group which established a written code of acceptable comics publishing guidelines. As a direct result of the anti-comic book offensive, some of the most egregiously offensive publishers, such as Fox Features, went out of business.<sup>19</sup>

Today, Wertham is vilified as a reactionary whose strident position nearly destroyed the comic book industry. In hindsight, Wertham made at least one valid point: the comic books of his day portrayed women as sex objects.<sup>20</sup>

### THE INDUSTRY REGULATES ITSELF

Aside from the continuing popularity of exploitative genres such as headlight books and crime comics, by war's end, the emphasis had shifted from self-sufficient heroines, returning female characters to the more traditional (and acceptable) roles of housewife, nurse or fashion model. Marvel launched several of these titles in 1945, including *Patsy Walker* (1945-1965) and *Millicent the Model* (1945-1973).<sup>21</sup> Although these titles explored the romantic relationships and day-to-day activities of “regular” (though glamorous) young women, their focus was clearly on fashion. Such books were primarily a vehicle to showcase adult hairstyles and clothing to teenage girls.

The first “true romance” book, entitled *Young Romance Comics* (1947-1963), appeared shortly thereafter. By the early fifties, several dozen romance comics could be found on the newsstands, with titles such as *Brides in Love* (1956-1965), *Youthful Romance* (1949-1954), and *All True Romance* (1951-1958).<sup>22</sup>

During the early 1950s, roughly half of all comic book readers were female, largely due to the huge number of titles aimed directly at them.<sup>23</sup> In addition to the abundant romance comics, a variety of other comics genres appealed to female readers. Teenage humor books, which made their debut in 1942 with *Archie Comics*, remained popular through the fifties.<sup>24</sup> Cartoon kiddie humor books were also plentiful, including *Little Audrey* (1952-1957) and *Little Dot* (1953-1976), both from Harvey Comics, and the mischievous escapades of *Margie's Little Lulu* (1954-1964), from Dell. Television adaptations, such as Charlton's *My Little Margie* (1954-1964) and Dell's *Our Miss Brooks* (1954) were also popular with female readers. And of course “funny animal books,” from *Oswald the Rabbit* to *Donald Duck*, were ubiquitous throughout the decade. All that changed in the early 1960s when super-hero comics returned to center stage. Slowly, inexorable, they began to crowd other genres to the margins, and with them, the female audience.

**“YOU’VE COME A LONG WAY, BABY”—  
OR MAYBE NOT**

Beginning in the late sixties, DC and Marvel both attempted to incorporate the messages of the Women’s Movement into their comics. In 1968, Denny O’Neil and Mike Sekowski radically transformed Wonder Woman, removing her super-powers, focusing on her alter-ego of Diana Prince, and killing off boyfriend Steve Trevor. As a consequence, Diana studied martial arts under an inscrutable oriental teacher and relied on her native abilities to battle assorted crooks and miscreants. Some feminists applauded the change, especially now that Diana had lost the provocative costume, but others complained she had been stripped of her strength. Some fans loved the changes, but most seemed to hate them, so DC abandoned the experiment soon after.<sup>25</sup>

In the mid-seventies and continuing through the eighties, Marvel introduced a string of independent, strong-willed, and generally admirable heroines, largely due to the work of such writers as Chris Claremont (*Ms. Marvel*, *Spider-Woman*, *Uncanny X-Men*) and John Byrne (*The Sensational She-Hulk*).<sup>26</sup> A typical Claremont creation was Kitty Pryde, a fourteen-year-old gifted student with the super-human ability to make her body intangible at will. Kitty was recruited to the ranks of the X-Men, but she struggled with the anxiety of meeting her new teammates’ expectations, the loneliness of separation from her parents, and the desire to be treated as a grown-up. In her first months with the team, she experimented with a variety of costumes, and she tried several different code names before settling on “Shadowcat.” Kitty was bright and inquisitive, with a strong aptitude for computer science. She was fun-loving, caring, and alternately confident and tentative. More importantly, she looked like a young teenager. Rather than drawing her as a statuesque amazon, she was a slim, coltish, and flat-chested. Female readers wished they had a friend like Kitty, while young male readers developed lasting crushes. Over the years, long-time fans have watched Kitty grow up to become a strong, competent leader and an important member of the X-Men family.

Marvel also introduced an intriguing anti-heroine by the name of Elektra. A merciless, coldly efficient ninja assassin, Elektra was created by Frank Miller in 1981 (*Daredevil* no. 168). Unlike later, derivative characters, Miller’s Elektra was lithe and graceful, but drawn with recognizable human proportions. More importantly, she was a character whose past history was richly

detailed and interesting. Elektra was an instant sensation in the comics world. Miller’s near legendary work on *Daredevil* during this period is regarded by many to be among the very best the super-hero genre can offer.

Despite the increasing use of complex, realistic female characters, old habits did not disappear. Many of Marvel’s super-heroines still wore scanty costumes, including such newcomers as Storm (a beautifully regal African mutant who can control the weather and glide on wind currents), Shanna the She-Devil (a veterinarian, ecologist, and leather-wearing jungle queen), and Red Sonja (a fierce, sword-wielding contemporary of Conan the Barbarian). Marvel’s ultimate example of the lingerie-as-costume look was a villainess called the White Queen, who first appeared in the pages of the *Uncanny X-Men* 129 (1980). The White Queen was a powerful telepath who used her powers of mind control to manipulate and deceive men in order to gain wealth and power. Her over-the-top costume was the stuff of male sexual fantasy: a push-up bustier, panties, and high-heel boots, all in white. The color scheme was particularly jarring, combining the look of a dominatrix with that of a demure bride.

Another flagrant example is the character of Vampirella, who first appeared in a black & white comic magazine from Warren Publishing Company in 1969. Because of the magazine format, Warren was not constrained by the limitations of the Comics Code Authority. Vampirella, an alien who must drink human blood for nourishment, looks like a super-voluptuous parody of the 1950s pinup model, Bettie Page. Vampirella’s costume consists of black, high-heel boots and an outrageous red thong bathing suit which does little to hide her ample charms.

**THE “BAD GIRLS” TAKE NO PRISONERS**

The trend toward super-heroines as sex objects reached an interesting peak in the early 1990s when both Marvel and Image published a series of annual swimsuit issues. These annuals, clearly capitalizing on the yearly *Sports Illustrated* phenomenon, contained poster-type drawings or paintings of popular female comic book characters posing in revealing swimsuits.<sup>27</sup> Swimsuit issues and pin-up albums continue to be published today, and some companies, such as Angel Entertainment, specialize in them.

If anything, the comics of today are more blatantly sexist and provocative than ever. For every positive female role model, two negative ones can be found. Just as the 1940s saw the rise of good-girl art,

the 1990s witnessed the ascension of bad-girl art, focusing on erotic, violent female villains and anti-heroines. The essence of this trend is aptly described by Jones and Jacobs: "Females, perpetually bending over, arching their backs, and heaving their anti-gravity breasts into readers' faces, defied all laws of physics... The Victoria's Secret catalogue became the bible of every super-hero artist, an endless source of stilted poses ripe for swiping by boys who wanted their fantasies of women far removed from any human reality."<sup>28</sup>

The explosion of bad-girl books began in 1991 with a title from Malibu called *Evil Ernie*. In it, artist Brian Pulido introduced the nihilistic character of Lady Death. Pulido soon formed his own publishing company (Chaos! Comics) and launched a host of additional bad girl characters. One of the beneficiaries of bad-girl art was Vampirella, who had disappeared from the scene for several years. Her career was relaunched in comic book form by Harris Publications in 1992, and she has been going strong ever since.

A common motif in bad-girl books is that of the female martial arts assassin or vigilante. The precursor to this trend was Marvel's Elektra, but few of the modern replicas possess the stylish grace of Frank Miller's classic creation. Many fans derisively refer to such characters as nimbos (ninja bimbos), justly accusing the comics companies who publish them of pandering to adolescent "drooling fanboys." Among the many examples of nimbo excess are Psylocke (Marvel), Shi (Crusade), Avengelyne (Image), Razor (London Night) and Dawn (Sirius). Marvel even revived Elektra, giving her a book of her own in 1996, but the series fell flat and was canceled after nineteen issues.

Although the bad-girl trend has diminished somewhat in the past few years, the character-type prevails in comic books such as *Witchblade* (Image), *Verotik Illustrated* (Verotik), *Ghost* (Dark Horse), and *Warrior Nun Areala* (Antarctic). Without question, these bad girls are designed to appeal to the lascivious interests of their male readers.

As further proof, fans attending any major comic book convention in the United States will be treated to the sight of several scantily clad professional models dressed in the costumes of popular comic book babes. These models are hired by the comics companies to promote the publishers' wares. For a small fee, any fan can immortalize the fantasy by having his picture taken with one of the role-playing women.

## WOMEN IN COMICS TODAY

After all these years, is there any hope for the positive portrayal of women in comics? Well, perhaps. Today, many strong, competent, independent super-powered heroines can be found in the pages of mainstream comics. Characters in the Marvel lineup include Storm, Shadowcat, the Black Cat, the Scarlet Witch, and many more. Likewise, DC chronicles the adventures of the Black Canary, Oracle, Catwoman, and others. The current version of DC's Supergirl, written by Peter David, is a particularly good example of a complex, conflicted-yet-heroic, female super-character.

Many of the comics which do portray strong, interesting heroines nevertheless still pander to young male readers. Despite all of their admirable qualities, such characters as Dark Horse's Ghost, Image's Esperanza del Toro, and Caliber's Cavewoman are still drawn in skimpy outfits and sexy poses. Some industry insiders argue that super-powered characters are supposed to have idealized bodies, regardless of their gender. Brian Augustyn, one-time editor of *Wonder Woman*, suggests that toning down the bodies of female super-heroes is "like asking someone to draw Superman at 5-foot-10."<sup>29</sup> Such justifications side-step the issue of scanty costumes and flagrantly sexual poses, but it remains clear that without gratuitous pinups, such books would have far fewer male readers.

Although male writers and artists have traditionally dominated the comics field, female creators have long been a part of the industry. Notable examples among the major publishers are Marvel's pioneering inker and penciler, Marie Severin (*Incredible Hulk*, *Sub-Mariner*), artist Jo Duffy (*Amazing Spider-Man*, *X-Factor*) and writers Louise Simonson (*Superman*, *New Mutants*) and Ann Nocenti (*Daredevil*, *Longshot*). Cat Yronwode was editor-in-chief of Eclipse Comics, a major independent publisher that thrived in the 1980s and early 1990s. It is particularly noteworthy that a woman—Jenette Kahn—has held the position of president and publisher of DC comics since 1976. Although women are still relatively scarce as comic book writers and artists, most major publishers employ substantial numbers of female editors and assistant editors.

The most active arena for female comics professionals continues to be independent publishing, including self-publishing. The most remarkable example is writer/artist Wendy Pini, co-creator of the *Elfquest* series. Twenty years ago, Pini and her husband Richard founded WaRP Graphics for the sole purpose of self-publishing *Elfquest*, a fantasy series which portrays

females as leaders, hunters, and warriors—the co-equals of men in their forest society. Today WaRP Graphics is a mini-juggernaut in the comics industry, and *Elfquest* remains phenomenally popular among teenage and pre-teen girls, and to a lesser extent, pre-teen boys. Among the many other examples of successful, critically acclaimed self-publishing enterprises by women writers and artists are Colleen Doran's *A Distant Soil* (Aria Press), Tara Jenkins's *Galaxion* (Helikon Press), Teri Wood's *Wandering Star* (Pen & Ink Comics), and Rachel Hartman's *Amy Unbounded* (Pughouse Press). In the cases of Doran and Wood, their works were subsequently picked up by larger publishers (Image and Sirius, respectively).

Certain male comics professionals have also made outstanding strides in the positive, believable portrayal of female characters in recent years. Current examples which come immediately to mind are Terry Moore's *Strangers in Paradise* (Abstract Studio), the Hernandez Brothers' *Love and Rockets* (Fantagraphics), Steven Seagle's *House of Secrets* (DC), Frank Miller's *Martha Washington Goes to War* (Dark Horse), and even Budd Root's *Cavewoman* (Caliber). Men are also writing positive, engaging stories with young girls as heroines, notably James Robinson's *Leave It To Chance* (Image) and Mark Crilley's *Akiko* (Sirius).<sup>30</sup>

### WOMEN TAKING A MORE ACTIVE ROLE

The Friends of Lulu (FoL) is a nationwide, nonprofit support group which encourages the involvement of women writers and artists in the comic book industry and which also tries to promote comic book readership among women and girls. One way in which FoL strives to accomplish the latter goal is to work with comic book specialty shops to make their stores (heretofore the near-exclusive domain of the male "comic geek") more appealing to a female clientele. Another method is to promote a more positive image of comics in the news media. FoL's third tactic is to make comic books more visible and accessible, by encouraging placement in bookstores, schools, and libraries.<sup>31</sup>

Have such efforts met with success? As mentioned above, the comics publishing industry employs more women writers, artists, and editors than ever before. From a retailing perspective, dingy, crowded, chaotic comic shops are being joined by larger, better lit, more attractive competitors. But on a wider front, no hard evidence suggests that female comic book readership has increased dramatically. According to a 1991 article in *American Demographics*, 10 percent of the comic

book readers at that time were female. It is unlikely this percentage has risen significantly in recent years.<sup>32</sup>

On the other hand, anecdotal evidence suggests that female fans are becoming more visible and vocal. Women remain a conspicuous minority on relevant Internet discussion groups, but their commentary is typically among the most informed and articulate to be found. Comic book letter columns, in genres of all types, continue to print representative letters from female readers. Retailers report more female customers than a decade ago, and women are appearing in greater numbers at major comic book conventions and trade shows. As female readership grows, it is hoped that the negative portrayal of women in comic books will diminish.

### NOTES

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2. Maurice Horn, *World Encyclopedia of Comics* (New York: Chelsea House, 1976), pp. 9-10.
3. Maurice Horn, *Women in the Comics* (New York: Chelsea House, 1977). This work, which covers both comic strip and comic book women, is especially noteworthy for its lavish illustrations.
4. Jules Feiffer, *The Great Comic Book Heroes* (New York: Dial Press, 1965), p. 21.
5. To see examples of Eisner's stylish and witty vamps, consult one of several collected editions, such as *Will Eisner's Spirit Color Album, Volume Two*. (Princeton, WI: Kitchen Sink Press, 1982).
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10. Goulart, p. 243.
11. Ron Goulart, *The Comic Book Reader's Companion* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), pp. 171-172.
12. Mike Benton, *The Comic Book in America: An Illustrated History* (Dallas: Taylor Publishing, 1989), pp. 44-46, 119-122; Goulart (1986), pp. 241-245.



13. Benton (1992), p. 120; Goulart (1986), p. 246.
14. Horn, pp. 111-112; Goulart (1986), pp. 243-244; Benton (1989), p. 161-162.
15. Daniels (1995), p. 58.
16. Numerous essays have been written about the psychosexual overtones of the early *Wonder Woman* comics. For typical examples, see Benton (1992), pp. 138-142; and Gerard Jones, "Wonder Woman," *The Encyclopedia of American Comics*, ed. by Ron Goulart (New York: Facts on File, 1990), pp. 391-392.
17. Daniels (1995), p. 61-62. To see a typical example of the Golden Age Wonder Woman in chains, see the reprint from *Wonder Woman* no. 2 (1942) in Feiffer, pp. 142-152. Of the seventy-five panels in this story, twenty show Wonder Woman or other young women bound in chains.
18. Benton (1989), p. 166.; Goulart (1986), pp. 227-240
19. The story of the Wertham crusade has been told many times. One of the best brief accounts can be found in Goulart (1986), pp. 263-274.
20. Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1972). The Kennikat reprint includes the numerous black & white plates which Wertham used to illustrate his points. (The good doctor didn't need to look too far to find particularly odious ones.) The chapter on sexuality (pp. 173-194) is ever-so-subtly entitled, "I Want To Be a Sex Maniac!"
21. Daniels (1991), pp. 54-57. Note that fashion comics were not limited to the 1950s. Marvel ran two licensed titles, *Barbie*, and *Barbie Fashion*, from 1991 through 1996. Like Mattel's Barbie doll itself, Marvel tried to make Barbie's adventures meaningful and relevant, but the focus of the books was clearly on "dress-up."
22. Robert Overstreet, *Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide*, 28th ed. (New York: Gemstone Publishing, 1998), p. 49. See also Benton (1989), pp. 167-169; and Goulart (1986), pp. 251-255.
23. Jackie Estrada, "Friends of Lulu Sounds Off on Comics," *Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide*, 28th ed. (New York: Gemstone Publishing, 1998), p. 80.
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27. Santiago Esparza, "Comic Books and the 'Rape Culture'" *Gannett News Service*, August 31, 1993.
28. Jones and Jacobs, p. 341.
29. Wendy Marech, "A New Curve in Comics," *Los Angeles Times*, August 16, 1993: E1.
30. Many of the independent comics mentioned here will be reviewed in Part 3 of this *Serials Review* Forum, which will appear in the Fall 1998 issue.
31. Estrada, pp. 79-81.
32. "Comics Age with the Baby Boom," *American Demographics* 13 (May, 1991): 16.