Perils of the Heroine: The Historic Role of Woman in Comics

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BY BRITAIN BRAY
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Now more than ever the comics industry is welcoming diversity in its creators and stories, but with its historically misogynistic past, what legacy are creators inheriting?

This essay seeks to explore that history, delving into the various eras of American Comics and how sexism shaped them. From the earliest heroines of the 40s, the ground-breaking feminist indie comics of the 70s, and the rampant female sexualization of the 90s, examples of brilliance and drudgery will be investigated in order to gain a better understanding of how comics became what they are today.
1: Introduction

When I was in elementary school, books were my favorite form of entertainment. I read nearly every fiction genre available to me in my school’s library, though my favorite was adventure stories.

One trend I noticed even at my young age was the prevalence of male protagonists in all the books with the most interesting premise, or as I put it:

“Boys get all the good books.”

Even the most accessible series with a diverse range of characters still felt like they didn’t belong to me, as none of the main female characters thought or acted as I did. Further, they weren’t relatable, because of their male gender or something about their personality.

I remember in one instance I really wanted to read a pirate book, of which my local library had quite a selection. My one criteria was that I wanted the main character to be female, which I was insistent about with the librarian. In my young mind, it seemed like an easy find. Why shouldn’t there be a pirate book with a female pirate? Alas, such a book did not exist. The closest thing was a book about a noblewoman being captured and subsequently falling in love with the much cooler male pirate, to my great annoyance. This observation was the first of many frustrations for my book-obsessed younger self, as well as the first time I realized that men and women are treated differently in stories.

Years later I discovered comics as a storytelling medium, a fact that brought much joy and even more irritation. Now, not only were women in action stories being written differently than men, but they are also being drawn differently! What made me fall in love with comics was the coolness factor of the art. Spider-Man swings through a city and gets into spectacular action fights. Batman outsmarts his villains while maintaining his head. These characters were cool. They had power, confidence, and sleek designs! Meanwhile, in the other corner, were the female characters in full faces of makeup and wearing outfits that if I had worn them as my 14-year-old self, would have gotten me sent home.

These female characters would dance across the page in a way that would accentuate their figures, a personal peep show for the reader. I had zero interest in these characters. Frankly, I thought they were lame. My frustrations even reached the point where I would actively search out comics without female characters, just to avoid their poor writing and uncomfortable depictions.

Ironically, it was this very annoyance that became one of the key factors in my starting to draw illustrations. The first original characters I ever drew on my math homework were muscled women with funky haircuts. The women, while poorly drawn, were cool, and fun, and in the stories I made up in my head, were Badasses.

I then made a key connection. If I learned how to draw comics, then I could make the stories I wanted to read, with the characters I wished existed. Ten years and two art degrees later, I finally feel qualified to take a deeper dive into the questions I asked myself as a child and teen.

What is it that makes a protagonist interesting? How does gender enter as a factor? How did female characters in comics arrive at their current state? What is the legacy non-male cartoonists are inheriting and what do we do with it?

In this paper, I will be examining these questions while providing my own evidence and opinions, as well as predicting the future of women in comics and story narratives at large.
02: Roles of the protagonist in early American comics.

The Golden Age of American comics started in 1938 and is marked by the creation of the first superhero Superman and an exploding demand for comic books. These early comic protagonists pursued episodic adventures where they pummeled bad guys, found treasure, and tickled the imagination of 1940s Americans. The stories featured in these comics were relatively simple and the comics themselves were printed on low-quality paper that sold for cheap. In one 1945 report by Yank Weekly, a military personnel magazine, 70 million Americans (over half the population at the time), read comics.

These comics served as a pervasively available entertainment source and were immensely popular even though the stories inside were mostly campy action-adventure stories. Nevertheless, these comics sold well and created a huge market.

The creation of the superhero was itself a power fantasy that reflected the ideals of the American white man. Superman, recognized as the first superhero, was created by teenagers in 1938 during a time where war was present throughout the world. As an indestructible, bullet-proof man, this early Superman did not fight colorful aliens and super-powered ne'er-do-wells. Instead, he fought the real villains of the 1940’s including stockbrokers, dictators, and bosses forcing their employees to work in unruly conditions. Powerful, smart, and persecutor of justice, these traits were at the core of the early comic protagonist.

But were these ideals truly exclusive to the male population? When the superhero genre was still in its first years before the key tropes we know today were established one abnormality appeared in the form of Miss Fury, the first female superhero. Created in 1941 by female comic author and artist Tarpé Mills, Miss Fury features a woman who takes up vigilantism after donning a skintight black suit and disarming an escaped murderer with powder from her compact.

Although Miss Fury had some story features that would be considered on par with a parody by today’s standards she was still written with a level of respect. It was only later that year that the titular Wonder Woman first made her debut, and while her creator William Moulton Marston was a self-proclaimed feminist, most of Wonder Woman’s early work revolved around her pining over Steve Trevor rather than focusing on her own adventures. She also famously joined the Justice Society of America (an early form of DC’s Justice League) not as a member, but as a secretary.

In the years that followed, with the rise of the modern comic book and the large variety of stories that fell under the action-adventure genre, stories like Miss Fury became rare. Women who were employed in the comics industry were often working on Romance comics, another massively popular genre, or were uncredited artists who worked in-house as letterers, inkers, and colorers. As one can imagine, these comics focused on various female characters’ trials and tribulations trying to romance the man in their life, rather than issues such as saving the world or finding treasure.

Overall, this era of comics reflected the cultural sexism of America at this time. Women, while starting to enter the workforce, were still wildly considered lesser than men in almost every capacity, which was reflected in the media produced.

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2 Kelly, pg.4
03: Why do women in comics suck? (a historical analysis)

On the other end of the spectrum, we had the rise of Horror comics where violence and tragedy were at the forefront. Suicide, murder, drug use, there were no restrictions on what could and could not be shown in these comics, much to the distress of parents and other censorship radicals. With the fear of juvenile delinquency spreading across America in the 1950s, comics were a popular accusation when it came to “bad influences”.

These fears grew in the minds of Americans and eventually evolved into several Senate hearings where comic book publishers were questioned on how their comics were dangerous to America’s youth. Part of this fear came from the popularity of psychologist Fredric Wertham’s book Seduction of the Innocent. Published in 1954, the book specifically points to comics being to blame for the rise of ill-tempered youth.

While Wertham was considered a progressive by 1950s standards, he still perpetuated many flawed views on how exactly comics negatively influenced America’s youth. One specific passage, when talking about how women are depicted in comics, states the following:

“They are not homemakers. They do not bring up a family. Mother-love is entirely absent... Even when Wonder Woman adopts a girl there are Lesbian overtones.”

It is obvious Wertham’s fear over the power of comics expands beyond the depictions of gore and crime, he is also influenced by the fear of societal change in the form of women challenging gender roles and the slow increase of an openly queer population.

The panic brought on by Seduction of the Innocent became so great that in the same year, several of the largest comic book publishers in America banned together to create the Comics Magazine Association of America and subsequently the Comics Code Authority (CCA).

This code came with a set of restrictions about what would and would not be allowed in comics. The list was extensive with rules ranging from the mundane to the absolutely absurd with examples such as:

- The inclusion of stories dealing with evil shall be used or shall be published only where the intent is to illustrate a moral issue and in no case shall evil be presented alluringly, nor so as to injure the sensibilities of the reader.
- In every instance, good shall triumph over evil and the criminal punished for his misdeeds.
- Females shall be drawn realistically without exaggeration of any physical qualities.

This new code was seen as a compromise for the comics industry. Parents were no longer afraid of what could be seen in their children’s comics as long as they had the “stamp of approval” on the cover. Yet, with these new restrictions, many saw comics as a shadow of what they once were. Which stories could be told was restricted. Anything that could challenge a reader’s “sensibilities” was removed. Stores that sold comics simply would not put any book lacking the CCA stamp on their shelves, leaving many comic book authors and artists barred from the industry due to creating work that was deemed too controversial.

It was this radical shift in the comic industry that started what is referred to as the “Silver Age” of comics. Unlike the Golden Age, the Silver Age featured campy storylines with black-and-white morality. Yet there were also many readers distraught over this sudden change to the comic industry. These dramatic limitations left them with an appetite for stories that these new, sanitized comics could not sate.

It was this demand that gave rise to a new subset of comics known today as the Underground Comix(sic). Rising in popularity in the 60s, these comics had no such restrictions of comics approved by the CCA but had the issues of limited distribution and a more niche market. One of the most famous of these comics was Zap Comix. First created by Robert Crumb in 1968, Zap became known for featuring various short stories and experimental art styles with a focus on humor and parody.

Other key features of comics like Zap were its widespread sexism, racism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia. It was not uncommon to see comics featuring rape, incest, and pedophilia in the pages and storylines. It was the definition of “edgy” humor that was not afraid to make fun of everyone and everything.
Above
The Comics Code Authority Stamp, added to the cover of nearly every comic produced by major publishers throughout the 1900s.

Right
Doctor Strange, Vol. 2 No. 79
(1986)
Sourced via D.B. Dowd Modern Graphic History Library

An example of a comic book cover with the CCA stamp.
Above
My super awesome illustration that could span 1, 2, 3, 4 columns or the whole page. This super awesome caption is set in Maple.

Left
Cover of Detective Comics Vol.1 No.371 (1967)
Sourced via D.B. Dowd Modern Graphic History Library

Bottom Left
Interior Page. After failing to catch the villains, Batgirl laments over her feminine failings.

Bottom Right
Interior Page. The plot twist of this issue is that Batgirl ripping her tights was actually helpful in distracting the villains.
While American comics under the CCA increased the restrictions on profanity in any form, underground comix were doing the exact opposite, becoming a nightmarish parody of what the original protesters of 1950s comics could imagine.

While underground comix had more than its fair share of sexism, the more mainstream comics of this era also had plenty of misogyny on display.

The same year issue #1 of Zap was released this particular issue of Detective Comics was published. In this issue, we see a story from Batgirl’s perspective that focuses on her struggle to do some super-heroing while her “feminine instincts” betray her. The book starts with Batgirl jumping into a fight against a group of extreme-sport-based criminals only for her to let them get away after she has to stop and adjust her mask when it gets crooked. She blames her own vanity on this failure and quickly resolves herself to do better.

Unfortunately, she finds this harder than she first thought as she struggles to act when she gets mud gets on her costume. She sees Batman and Robin in danger and can’t help but let out a “feminine scream”. Near the end of the book we see Batgirl in yet another fight against the gang she has failed to defeat throughout the story. This time, when Batgirl stops in the middle of the fight to inspect a rip in her tights we get an honestly hilarious panel where the villains have become distracted by Batgirl’s glorious “gams”.

After this scene Robin and Batman are finally able to end the fight by punching out the villains. Robin even exclaims “Batgirl’s femininity gave us a break this time!” On the next page, it’s revealed that Batgirl actually ripped her tights on purpose to prove to the dynamic duo that her “feminine weakness” has its “strong points”.

With unnecessary sexualization, the portrayal that women are somehow biologically vain, and the fact that being feminine is straight-up called a weakness, it would be an understatement to call this comic problematic. The conclusion itself ends with the message that even though being a woman means one is both physically and psychologically less competent than a man, at least you can sexualize yourself to an advantage! In some ways, this feels even worse than Crumb’s work. Zap Comix was at least purposeful with its misogyny while this comic frames its sexism as somehow rational.

After the Silver Age of the ‘50s and ‘60s came the “Bronze Age” of the ‘70s and ‘80s, marked by the social reform and shifting values of the American people. It is around this time that the comic industry in America began to thoroughly cement itself as a male-focused industry. Even the once wildly popular female-focused romance comics such as Young Love and Heart Throbs were reaching the end of their publications.

With rampant sexism both in comics and in the general cultural landscape in America, it is no surprise that a surge of feminist comics would soon hit the scene.

The first and most notable example is It Ain’t Me, Babe. First printed in July of 1970, it became well known as the first comic in America produced entirely by women. Featuring several short stories by female cartoonists such as Trina Robbins and Kim Deitch. The entire comic itself is a commentary on the current state of female characters being written by men and the frustration these female cartoonists felt as they see characters of their own gender perpetuating stereotypes. Robbins states that the inspiration for the comic stemmed from her own failed attempts to gain respect in the comic industry.

In one particular story, we see various female characters from comics such as Betty and Veronica from Archie and Supergirl from Superman rebel against the men in their stories. The characters seemingly gain a new awareness of how they were being treated in the narrative.

It Ain’t Me, Babe was a big success in the world of indie comics with over 40,000 issues sold from its three printings. The success eventually led to the creation of Wimmen’s Comix, another popular underground comic created by Robbins that features both fiction and non-fiction short comics about topics like sex, feminism, politics, and humor all while highlighting female cartoonists. It was Wimmen’s Comix that kickstarted many careers of women cartoonists, giving them a voice.

Books like Zap were still being published in this era but there was also a huge surge of underground comix that focused on political activism and commentary that followed the success of anthologies like Wimmen’s. Women in comics were still in the background and rarely got the chance to write or draw larger titles such as those from Marvel and DC, but at least there was a place in the comics community where their stories could be written as they pleased.

During the 80’s much of the same continued. Stand-out woman cartoonists such as Alison Bechdel had their own cultural splash in the comics scene with Dykes to Watch Out For, an underground comic strip featuring several lesbians navigating the drama and politics of their lives.
Britain Bray

Above
It Ain't Me Babe Cover Art (1970)
Sourced via D.B. Dowd Modern Graphic History Library
Violence in comics

The 90’s in general was a very turbulent time for the comic industry. A large boom in popularity in the early years led to some rapid growth for Marvel and DC. Comic book artists started to gain more of a celebrity status among readers with notable examples being Todd McFarlane, Jim Lee, and Rob Liefeld. Comic art was being pushed to its limits with more experimental styles being used. Darker and edgier storylines were also being explored as the CCA began to lose influence.

It was these factors, plus the fact that comics were still a massively male-dominated industry that caused comic art and writing to begin to change. And by change, I mean the woman started to take on a more exaggerated appearance.

Meanwhile, women artists and cartoonists also slowly began to enter the mainstream comics scene with Trina Robbins showing up again to become the first woman to draw for an official Wonder Woman comic in 1986, forty-five years after the character’s first debut.

Publishers in general were beginning to put an effort into increasing the diversity in their comics by adding more women and people of color to their character lineups while still keeping the industry itself male-dominated.

Even books featuring female characters were still typically written and drawn by men with few exceptions. One example is the fascinating Dakota North series. Featuring a gun-toting, motorcycle-riding P. I by the same name, Dakota North is a strange outlier from this era of comics. Published by Marvel, Dakota North was written by a woman named Martha Thomases (who had never written a comic series before) and was drawn by Tony Salmons (who had never drawn a comic series before.)

Dakota, while admired by the men around her, shows zero interest in romance. Her competence and crime-fighting skills are never questioned in the narrative. The villains in her story treat her like she is just as dangerous as any male comic book hero. She is written as a competent and charming protagonist which is a breath of fresh air in an era of hit-or-miss female characters who are usually put on the sidelines to begin with.

Unfortunately, and for unknown reasons, Dakota North was canceled after only 5 issues. Short-lived series were not uncommon in this era of comics as publishers would often throw metaphorical spaghetti at the wall to see what would stick.

While some good change was happening in the comic industry for both female readers and professionals alike, an even larger hurdle was approaching fast. A hurdle that is perhaps the largest, and most difficult one yet. It is here when we hit the 90s that we reach the Dark Age of comics.
Firstly, it ignores the decades-long legacy of sexism in comics with the more recent hyper-sexualization being only the latest in a long history of misogyny. When you acknowledge this history it becomes obvious that the objectification of female characters has less to do with the overall trend of unrealistic proportions in comics and more to do with the CCA, backlash to the rise of feminist comics and a general cultural shift in America to a new era of eating disorders and body shaming.

Secondly, what this argument fails to acknowledge is the fact that women were not only drawn differently in comics but also written differently. As mentioned previously, the “Dark Age” of comics gave rise to darker and edgier storylines, one of the most famous examples being *Watchmen*, written by Alan Moore and published by DC in 1986. *Watchmen*’s main storyline acts as a commentary on the superhero genre as a whole. It includes sex, gore, nudity, and tremendously flawed superhero characters, everything considered taboo in comics only ten years earlier. *Watchmen* is one of the most critically acclaimed comics of all time, with Alan Moores’s Wikipedia page labeling him as “one of the best comic book writers in the English language” in the first paragraph.

What many ignore about *Watchmen* is that, while revolutionary in many ways, still failed to break away from the misogynistic writing trends of comics. There are very few female characters throughout the book, with the only

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![Above](image)

Sally Jupiter in Watchman, crying over the picture of her rapist. The picture was taken the day of her assault.
ones given plot relevance being Laurie Jupiter and her mother Sally Jupiter.

While both characters are at least shown as competent crimefighters in their shared superhero persona Silk Specter, the entirety of their stories revolve around the men in their life.

Laurie at the very least is not a one-dimensional character. She is a modern woman and vocal feminist but is still very flawed. Laurie only became a superhero at the behest of her mother, Sally Jupiter AKA the original Silk Specter, despite the fact it was shown poorly Sally was treated by her misogynistic co-workers. It is even revealed that Laurie was born as the result of Sally having an affair with the man who had raped her years earlier, Eddie Blake AKA The Comedian. In the story, it is shown that Sally forgave Blake for raping her and is even drawn kissing and crying over his picture later in the story. (a picture, notably taken on the day of her assault)

To make matters worse for the female characters of Watchmen, Laurie is shown to enter a sexual relationship at 16 with Doctor Manhattan, a 30-something male. In her second relationship in the book with Dan Dreiberg, is also shown that he has a fetish for her superhero costume, even further cementing Laurie’s character as a sex object.

The purpose of Watchmen’s plot is to talk about flawed characters, which it does well. Yet the flaws of the female characters all relate to sex and men. They are not independent, they are not written the same as men.  

Alan Moore was one of the most popular comic book writers of this era and has a writing style that perfectly exemplifies the traits of the “Dark Age”, yet most of his stories still hold the same problematic tropes for female characters that had been used for decades before. The most notable being the fact that A) their character revolves around men and B) they are often sexually assaulted and/or raped. Moore was not the only one to focus on these tropes. It became a notable feature of many mainline comics for female characters to be brutally murdered, raped, have miscarriages, etc for the sake of plot development for male characters.

This trope became known as “fridging”, coined by comic author Gail Simone in 1999 when she made the webpage “Woman in Refrigerators”. The term comes from a 1994 Green Lantern comic where Green Lantern himself comes home to his apartment to find his girlfriend murdered by one of his villains and stuffed into their refrigerator. What Simone’s website tracked were any instances of female characters who were “killed, raped, depowered, crippled, turned evil, maimed, tortured, contracted a disease or had other life-derailing tragedies
Above
Interior page from Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser No.1 (2007)
Sourced via D.B. Dowd Modern Graphic History Library

In this scene, the main characters return home to see their treasure stolen and their love interests, only introduced earlier that issue, brutally slaughtered. Their emotional response peaks only in that first panel. This event triggers their reasoning to start adventuring together.
Fridging became an easy way for writers to give strong motivations to their more important male characters. There is much that can be said about how men are written in media when, in order to have a strong emotional response, they must deal with some cruel tragedy against the woman in their life.

In one 2004 Batman storyline, supporting character Stephanie Brown is brutally tortured into revealing intel about Batman’s plans, yet is still sexualized post-torture. It is later it is revealed that the doctor treating her let her die to treat Batman a lesson, once again perpetuating the trope of “fridging” women.

I would argue that this trend of using rampant sexualization, written sexual abuse, and general lack of competent self-actualized female characters from this era is a direct response to call for more diverse and less sexualized characters from the ’80s. By drawing and writing women this way, comic creators of this era were stating that the comics medium was not for women.

Eventually, we reach the 2010s, which was the era of comics I grew up with. Unfortunately, many of these same problems with over-sexualization, poor writing, and fridging are still prevalent. Luckily, the rise of modern fandom and internet blogging made it easy to find others who were equally frustrated with the state of American comics.

One particular Tumblr blog post, written by cartoonist N.D Stevenson in 2012, summarized the glaring problem with female comic-book heroes in a straightforward way:

“How to fix every Strong Female Character pose in superhero comics: replace the character with Hawkeye doing the same thing.”


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What Stevenson is referring to with the “Strong Female Character” pose is when a female superhero is doing an action while also being drawn as sexily as possible, often making the action look cartoonishly unrealistic to how a real human would move. By replacing these characters with Hawkeye, a male character who isn’t usually sexualized in any way, the double standard for how male vs. female characters are drawn becomes obvious.

This post went viral as the concept of redrawing Hawkeye in “sexy superheroine poses” became a meme, eventually evolving into its own blog page called “The Hawkeye Initiative”. Much like Simones’s original “Woman in Refrigerators” webpage and the original It Ain’t Me, Babe comic, The Hawkeye Initiative was created to point out the disparity between how female and male comic characters are treated.

05: What comes next?

Today, the age of monthly floppy comics had reached its twilight years with sales dwindling to a fraction of what they once were. Instead, collected editions, graphic novels, and self-published webcomics have become the main way people read comics. Restrictions like the Comics Code Authority no longer have any influence, with Archie Comics and DC being the last to drop the stamp in 2011.

There is also a greater call for more diverse stories featuring women, people of color, and those with LGBTQ+ orientations that go beyond being just a side character who was lucky to get a B-plot. Books like Nimona, The Unbeatable Squirrel Girl, and Monstress breath new life into the adventure-comics genre by giving us self-reliant protagonists who can explore their own flaws and character arcs without having to rely on male characters to further their stories.

But as shown before, a new era of diversity always comes with a new era of backlash. In recent years, book bannings have become a new trend for churning controversy, with comics being specifically targeted in multiple instances. In both 2021 and 2022, Maya Kobabe’s graphic memoir Gender Queer was the most challenged book in America according to the American Literature Association, meaning it had the most attempts at being banned from any other book. Critics cited explicit imagery and inappropriate content as reasons for the book banning, despite the 15+ age rating and lack of pornographic content. The most common books targeted by censors are those made by diverse creators talking about culture, politics, or experienced bigotry, with comics targeted often due to how easy it is for parents to flip through the pages and decide they don’t like what they see.

These bannings draw an eerie comparison to the backlash against comics in the 1950s, which led to the creation of the CCA. This time, however, instead of comic book publishers being allowed to self-regulate (which they already do with age ratings on books), people are forcing public libraries to remove the books for everyone.

So with all this in mind, what comes next for comics? In this essay, I’ve gone over nearly a century of comics history in order to try and answer that question, among others. There are obviously still issues in the industry at large, plenty of the same artists and authors from the 90s still work today despite some outdated practices. Yet despite this, more and more diverse creators are entering the comics scene. With the rise of self-publishing and publishers’ increased interest in diverse stories, comics have never been more accessible or more welcoming.

For me, it all comes back to why I became interested in comics in the first place. Comics are a spectacle, they bring a unique sense of awe with beautiful art and clever writing. The community around comics is also something else, no longer a boys club. Instead, creators all around the world love and share each other stories as a celebration of the medium.

I am not only hopeful, but excited for the future of comics. I believe the best comic stories have yet to be written, only waiting for the writers and artists to make them. My only wish as a comic creator is that I can contribute to that collection of work in a way that can inspire others.

So that no kid or teen or adult can miss out on finding stories that they see themselves in.


15 Colin Spacetwinks, The Problems With Comics, 2016,
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