

# It is still a man's world for comix women

by Suzette C. Chan

The comic book industry has only recently taken female characters seriously. The clingy, helpless, token females have been replaced with complex, rational, assertive women. This is not to say that women are now depicted as man-hating, beat-'em-over-the-head feminists. Rather, as women in reality are asserting themselves more eloquently and more forcefully, comic book writers, mostly men, are starting to learn how women think and feel.

Up until about ten years ago, almost all female characters in comic books were cardboard cut-outs, either harried girlfriends, wives, or groupies of male super-heroes, or spin-offs of successful male heroes (*Supergirl*, *Batgirl*, *Spiderwoman*, *She-Hulk*, etc.).

But when the women's movement grew in the '70's, the major comic companies introduced characters that over-compensated for their previously inadequate treatments of women. There was a crop of femme fatales, including a revamped, sexy Catwoman, and a number of those like She-Hulk, who would rather kill than have a door opened for them.

One character whose development has followed and withstood all the major phases of the Modern Super-Heroine is Marvel's Susan Richards, *Invisible Girl*. She started out as a fifth wheel for the *Fantastic Four*, hopelessly falling prey to some scrupulous villain and becoming a hostage for a couple of issues — long enough for the FF to figure out a way to save her, and long enough for the next bad guy to plan another (inevitably successful) attempt to kidnap her.

But in the late 60's through the 70's, Richards, reflecting the new, strong voice of women in society, underwent major life-like changes (if you think soap opera plots are confusing, then comic books may be too much for you). For one thing, they decided that her ability to turn invisible was to weak for the space age, so her creators granted her an extensively powerful invisibility force shield, making her the most powerful member of the group. She also found time to marry fellow FFer, Reed Richards and have a baby, the first baby born to super-parents in all of comicdom. Later, she separated from Reed, wanting a divorce, another comic book first. Now, she is expecting another child. She also refuses to be called "Ms." or "Invisible Woman", content to remain a "Mrs." and in Reed's shadow.



In other words, Susan Richards has become powerful enough to be exciting, but still submits to traditional sex roles.

DC's most well-realized female character has to be Wonder Girl. Like *Invisible Girl*, she started out as a mere token. She was a Wonder Woman spin-off (WW found her as a baby in a burning building and subsequently adopted her) and the only girl in the *Teen Titans*. When DC completely revised the Titans about three years ago, Donna Troy became the back-bone of the Titans, which now has three women to four men, all of whom are fascinating, mature characters (Robin no longer says "Holy Mackerall!").

Wonder Girl is typical of the type of woman that comics are starting to depict. She is independent, compassionate, ethical, and rational. Like all new characters, male or female, she is concern-



ed with the consequences of their actions. To make her character even more concrete, she has just discovered the real identity of her parents and therefore her own.

One of the most welcome and reassuring aspects of her life is her steady relationship to a handsome young history prof (well, they aren't realistic about everything). There's none of the Superman-Clark Kent identity crisis, because her fiance who is as well-adjusted to a world with super-heros knows all about her escapades as Wonder Girl. Their relationship seems to be more egalitarian than Sue and Reed Richards', indicative of another pleasant trend in comics.

Of course, nothing changes unless the old stand-bys change. Neither Wonder Woman or Lois Lane has undergone a character change in over forty years. But as serious comic aficionados are now 15 years of age or more, stories have to be more "adult" to succeed.

Sales of Wonder Woman are dismal, half that of leading titles like *The X-Men*, which sells over 100,000 copies a month. The only reason DC keeps publishing WW is her mass-market appeal: toys, watches, colouring books, etc. (I was dancing in the aisles when Steve Trevor died in the 70's. But for some odd and obviously vindictive reason, Aphrodite deemed this to be wrong and resurrected the wimp).

Now, just as she did 40 years ago, Diana Prince serves the U.S. government with almost as much dedication as Ronald Reagan can dream of — except when Trevor is in trouble; she'd drop everything just to help him across the street!

Ever since she was introduced, Lois Lane had been running around trying to find new and interesting situations from which Superman could save her. But just in the past year, Lois Lane has realized the futility of chasing a man who's always halfway around the world foiling someone's attempt at a dastardly deed. She is establishing her own character and is learning to live without Superman, signalling what amounts to a revolution in the Superman saga: Lois Lane no longer dates Superman.

I prefer Lana Lang, one of the most sensible, confident, and believable characters in comics. She likes her men to be "down-to-earth and secure" — so she dates Clark Kent!

Though the news is generally good for women in comics, there are still a few of those who would rather have women chained to the kitchen and bedroom.

I was going to complain about the skimpy, spray-on costumes and impossibly large breasts that artists envisage for women in an attempt to revolutionize physics. But come to think of it, the same artists give male heroes spray-on costumes and impossibly large muscles and, technically speaking, breasts, as well.

So I'll complain about Somerset Holmes instead.

One of the new "upstart" comic companies, Pacific Comics, is so proud of not being approved by the comics code that many of its titles eschews all attempts to

create plausible plots and characters in favour of an all-out show of sex and violence. One particular example is Somerset Holmes. Somerset is the victim of a hit-and-run accident that leaves her suffering from amnesia. In the pursuit of her identity, she becomes a detective by default.

Along the way, she stumbles across the office of a country doctor and we are subjected to a long sequence of frames showing Somerset sitting around in the waiting room in her underwear while the doctor is getting murdered.

She then goes to a bar to find help and is nearly assaulted in the washroom. As she puts a violent stop to her attacker, (she literally "cans" him), she is chased by a biker, and, typical of the rest of the comic and of this disturbing portrayal of women, runs around aimlessly in ripped clothing and covered with bruises until she hops into the truck of the first obliging driver. A male friend of mine reports that the next issue is worse.

Happily to say, however, the other new company not approved by the comics code, First Comics, has not followed the same direction.

Right now, there are only 3 female characters with their own titles: *Wonder Woman*, *Supergirl*, and *Dazzler*. WW and *Supergirl* are relatively "safe" as headliners; *Dazzler* is a mega-jiggle book that's escaped cancellation only because one of Marvel's execs has adopted her as a pet project. Hopefully, the comic industry will soon be confident enough of the potential of female characters to feature them in their own magazines without exploiting them.

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