

The

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88

Finder, Third World ☉ Carla Speed McNeil

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Out from the Underground

by Susan Simensky Bietila

Graphic novels of all kinds have reached unparalleled popularity and variety. While traditional superhero comics have continued to proliferate beyond the serial magazine to film and video games, alternative or indie “comix” have converged with political cartooning and illustration to produce a wide variety of fiction and nonfiction in the form of drawn books. Many writer/artists, who had for decades written and drawn shorter stories for anthologies or as serials, are now publishing full-length books, and these books are sold in fine bookstores and shelved in libraries. Graphic novels are included in school curricula, starting with the widespread use of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, to teach the Holocaust, and the author/artists of these works are being included in mainstream museum collections and gallery shows. The graphic novel’s growth is exponential and international, with Japanese manga and anime also having a worldwide following. College courses in sequential art or the serial drawn narrative are offered in Art and English departments. This trend is a polar reversal for the genre since the 1950s, when Comic Books were censored, blamed for juvenile delinquency, and burned in bonfires. Many threads converged to bring Graphic Novels, particularly those critical of conservative social mores, into acceptance.

Growing up in the 1950s, I was not allowed to read comic books or watch cartoons on TV. My parents thought they were lowbrow, a bad influence. America was propagandized with psychiatrist Frederic Wertham’s much-cited 1954 book, *Seduction of the Innocent*. Congressional hearings concluded that comics contributed to juvenile delinquency. Comic books were accused of having a covert agenda of promoting illicit sexuality and political subversion... to children. And yes, there were book burnings—bonfires of comic books.

Comic book publishers then established official censorship, the *Comics*

Code: no immorality, no nudity, no seduction, profanity, perversion, or rape. No excessive violence, and no use of the word “horror” or “terror” in the title. Nothing ghoulish—no vampires, werewolves, or zombies. And to top it off, institutional authorities—police, judges, government—had to be depicted as totally good and incorruptible, while any opposition was by definition *criminal*. Every story’s obligatory conclusion was capture and punishment of the evildoers. Cold comics for the Cold War. The Comic Code’s clout was financial, like the Hays Code governing major studios’ motion pictures or the Comstock Law’s postal policing. Distributors would not sell publications unless they bore the Comics Code’s seal of approval.

In the world of high art, when I was an art student in the mid-60s, New York Abstract Expressionism reigned. Painting for galleries and museums dominated American art. In the ’50s, McCarthyist kangaroo courts on college campuses fired and blacklisted faculty for leftist sympathies. Art Departments and Schools of Art were “cleansed” of political content as well as regionalism, and narrative itself was shunned. Art that told a story, even as allusion, was derided as propaganda or illustration, as “commercial art,” not welcome in fine arts’ polite society. Despite this, the drawn narrative persisted as a resistant strain. But politics and social commentary were radically severed from the American art canon. It took decades and multiple social transformations to thaw this Cold War chill.

The wave of radicalism that grew throughout the 1960s saw the inception of myriad underground newspapers, both countercultural and political, united by their refusal to obey authority. These papers were highly visual and provided a venue for wildly transgressive comix, which violated each of the proscriptions of the Comics Code with flamboyance, by publishing crude, rude, and grossly sexual sequential art. Propelled

The graphic novel’s growth is exponential and international... a polar reversal for the genre since the 1950s, when Comic Books were censored....

The wave of radicalism that grew throughout the 1960s saw the inception of myriad underground newspapers,...a venue for wildly transgressive comix....

Cont. on p. 2



Out from the Underground

(cont. from p. 1)

Sequential narratives are as old as the cave paintings, painted tepees, or Illuminated manuscripts.

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Many graphic novels, such as Maus, cross fictional and nonfictional genres and refer self-consciously to other works and genres of art.

...contemporary graphic novels are often the product of an individual artist/writer.

by opposition to the Vietnam War, by Black, women's, and gay liberation movements, rock music, and the counterculture, the constraints of the comics industry were blasted away. Despite this, the Comics Code was not completely abandoned until 2011.

Sequential narratives are as old as the cave paintings, painted tepees, or Illuminated manuscripts. My political author/artist friends describe our historical progenitors as Hogarth (*A Rake's Progress*, 1732-33), Goya (*Disasters of War*, 1810-1820), Rodolphe Topffer (*Histoire de Mr. Jabot*, 1835), and the proletarian paintings and prints by Robert Henri, John Sloan, and the Ashcan School at the start of the 20th century. Iconic stories without words by Frans Masereel (*Passionate Journey*, [Belgium] 1919) and Lynd Ward (*God's Man*, 1929) have been highly influential stylistically as well as thematically.

The early 20th-century cartoons and illustrations by Wobblies (the IWW-Industrial Workers of the World) modeled the artist/activist's role, creating art, poetry, and songs in the midst of bloody labor battles in the US. Another influential locus of art activism was in post-WWI Germany, where the ironic and satirical art of comrades George Grosz and John Heartfield was created in close proximity to the barricades during the failed 1919 German Revolution. They went on to create scathing work critiquing the rise of fascism. So the participation of artists in radical social movements and the making of art as part of their activism has precedents.

Book-length visual storybooks for adults became a recognized form in the 1970s. Unique pioneering works like Will Eisner's *A Contract With God* and Spiegelman's *Maus* established a genre. Today we have many subgenres: in non-fiction, graphic journalism (*Days of Destruction Days of Revolt* by Chris Hedges and Joe Sacco, *Disaster and Resistance* by Seth Tobocman); graphic history (the anthology *Wobblies!—A Graphic History of the Industrial Workers of the World*, ed. Paul Buhle and Nicole Schulman); and graphic autobiography (*Fun Home*,

Alison Bechdel) or biography (*Isadora Duncan* by Sabrina Jones). Many graphic novels, such as *Maus*, cross fictional and nonfictional genres and refer self-consciously to other works and genres of art. They span straight representational illustration to the fantastical invention so possible in this medium, history and journalism to myth, metaphor, and fancy. There are books without words, including *The Arrival* by Sean Tan, *Flood* by Eric Drooker, and *The System* by Peter Kuper, and literary adaptations, such as Peter Kuper's version of Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and the new *Classics Illustrated* series.

The current wave of graphic novels differs from comic books not only in content but also in creative method. Mainstream comics publishers use the industrial model of Taylorist assembly lines, where there are separate writers, editors, pencilers, inkers, colorists, and letterers, a strict hierarchy of specialists. This model is profit-driven and has a history of exploiting the artists and denying creators' rights to the ownership of their artwork. In contrast, contemporary graphic novels are often the product of an individual artist/writer.

Self-published zines are a precursor of this creative process. A phenomenon from the '80s and '90s to the present, emerging out of the longer history of the fanzine, riot grrrl, third-wave feminist, queer punk, and personally-expressive or autobiographical zines grew out of the d.i.y. (do it yourself) anarchist youth culture. Zine fests are held in many cities. Small copier runs or xeroxed booklets are a subcultural phenomenon, not beholden to publishers or stores.

The personal zine morphed into the autobiographical graphic novel as a large sub-genre. Works like Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* or Craig Thompson's *Blankets* have been described as "coming of age nostalgia...delayed validation for kids who felt different," by Milo Miller, co-founder of QZAP, the Queer Zine Archive Project.

A comix anthology magazine in its 36th year, *World War 3 Illustrated* is located at the intersection of the sub-





by Eric Drooker

genres of graphic journalism, history, fiction, and autobiography. Will Eisner called this sub-genre “protest literature.” (Disclosure: I am part of the rotating collective that draws and co-edits the magazines.) Many stories have autobiographical roots, telling stories that remain faithful to the feminist slogan “the personal is political” and unfold analyses of injustice and resistance as we have experienced them. The initial core of the magazine’s artists was involved in the Squatter’s Movement on New York’s Lower East Side, a neighborhood facing gentrification and police violence. This story is told in co-founder Seth Tobocman’s book *War in the Neighborhood* (2000), scheduled to be rereleased. Several WW3 Illustrated artists went to New Orleans after Katrina and drew stories about the aftermath of the flooding in the Lower 9th ward, as they volunteered in the recovery. Collective members were, of course, part of the Occupy Wall Street movement.

A retrospective traveling art show, “Graphic Radicals” was followed by a full-color art anthology out last year.

The WW3 artists work in other forms, do illustration, stage sets, banners, write, and teach. Their art appears in museum collections and galleries. Some of the artists do spoken word performance accompanied with slide projection and live music; some do puppet shows, paint murals, illustrate magazine covers, or do film animation. Many of the group now have numerous individual books published: Peter Kuper, Seth Tobocman, Eric Drooker, Sabrina Jones, Sandy Jimenez, Kevin Pyle, and others. As the graphic novel has become even more of a global phenomenon, WW3 has included work direct from the recent uprising in the Mid-East and occupation of Egypt’s Tahrir Square. In a global context, the graphic novel in its more image-intensive and wordless forms can transcend written language.

Despite the WW3 collective’s success, both as individuals and as a group, they receive little note in the US histories of comic, comix, or graphic novels. One must wonder if the motivation is due to media conservatism, or merely avoidance of controversy as a remnant of the

Many stories have autobiographical roots, telling stories that remain faithful to the feminist slogan “the personal is political”....



Out from the Underground

(cont. from p. 3)

Fox News has attacked Superman as American culture wars play out in the comics.

McCarthyite separation of politics and art in the US.

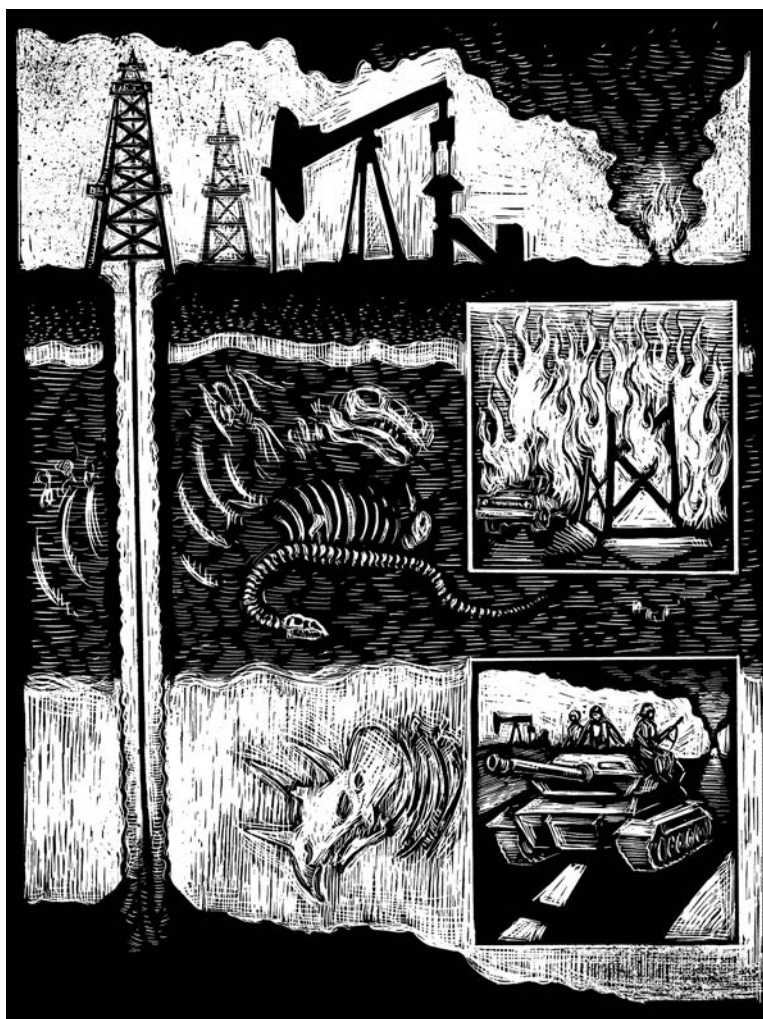
As I said earlier, I am clearly not the person to write about the history of the more commercial superhero comics, but I recently learned a bit about epic battles between the political Right and Left in this genre. Evidently, Fox News has attacked Superman as American culture wars play out in the comics. On the left is the appropriation of the Guy Fawkes mask from Alan Moore's *V for Vendetta* by the Anonymous group, and on the right, Frank Miller, creator of *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, blasts the Occupy movement.

I bought my only Superman comic ever on August 2, 2015, because on the cover Superman is standing defiant in giant chains, locked-down a la Earth First, protecting people sitting down in the street from bloodthirsty riot squad police. The demonstrators are drawn stiff and

flat, with contorted angry faces. The reason for the demonstration is not identified or even hinted at. The only sign held says "Thank You, Superman." This is *not* what a demonstration looks like. It is the opposite of the leveling ethic and direct democracy of any of the contemporary mass movements. Critics cluelessly labeled it a "Black Lives Matter" demonstration, despite no one being depicted with the raised arms ("Hands Up, Don't Shoot") gesture this movement made iconic and the fact that most of the crowd is white. For the grand finale to this hollow narrative, Superman punches a cop. The demonstrators are silent and bland. Distorted and co-opted, this imagery is a recognition of political comix in the most mainstream of comics. Seth Tobocman's *Illustrating the Revolution* at the Occupy.com website is the real thing, art true to Occupy in content and form. Unfortunately, all too few people are privy to the art being imitated.

...on the cover Superman is standing defiant in giant chains, locked-down a la Earth First, protecting people sitting down in the street....

Susan Simensky Bietila has been a political illustrator for the New Left Press, the 2nd Wave Feminist Press, and pirate Xeroxed political zines. She has written and drawn stories and co-edited issues of World War 3 Illustrated, including a 2010 retrospective, and co-curated Drawing Resistance, a d.i.y. traveling art show.



Gender, Trauma, and Speculation in Moto Hagio's *The Heart of Thomas*

by Regina Yung Lee

What would it be like if speculative fiction imagined the future by reimagining gender, sexuality, trauma, and memory, as well as new technologies and their social impacts? Moto Hagio's 1974 manga *The Heart of Thomas* is one such speculation. This graphic novel traverses but does not reinforce a binary construction of gender by decoupling gender, sexuality, and sexual behaviors from heteronormative entanglements within the world of the text. Simultaneously, *The Heart of Thomas* presents its readers with visual and narrative spectacles deployed not to describe the social impact of technological innovations, but to show the working out of radical transformations in its characters' subjective interiorities, the remaking of death into life again and again. In the process, it embodies a distinct employment of speculative techniques that both link it to and distinguish it from the traditions of Anglophone speculative fictions.

The Heart of Thomas was part of a revolution in the genre of *shōjo manga*. An initial commercial flop for its magazine publisher, which specialized in stories for elementary school girls, *The Heart of Thomas* gained considerable acclaim after its republication in book form. The designation *shōjo manga*, or serialized girls' comic, is a Japanese media marketing distinction, a genre whose products historically reinforced a set of socially constructed expectations and meanings for that specific gender and time of life. *Shōnen-ai*, or boys' love comics—stories about beautiful boys in love with each other—do not immediately suggest reading material made for adolescent girls. But the publication of *The Heart of Thomas* inaugurated boys' love as girls' comics, inciting many ongoing transformations. This subgenre offers a complex comparison and contrast to the homoerotic dynamics of the "slash" fiction produced

in Anglophone fan communities.¹ Fantagraphics Press published Matt Thorn's translation² of *The Heart of Thomas* in 2012, making it possible for Anglophone readers to experience this foundational boys' love text themselves.³ Embodying the pure spiritual love of *shōjo* tradition, rather than the explicit sexuality of later manga, *The Heart of Thomas* rests firmly in the tradition of girls' comics while simultaneously expanding its borders.

Reading *The Heart of Thomas* requires setting aside existing constructions of boy and girl, as a necessary precursor to the speculative leap. As Kazue Harada argues in her dissertation, Hagio's deliberately gender-fluid presentations queer heteronormative and essentialist readings of masculinity and femininity from the text's opening pages. In a similar way, scholar Mari Kotani links *The Heart of Thomas* to Hagio's later, more generically speculative works (*Star Red*, etc.) by naming Juli's and Thomas's meditations on Christian myth as forms of speculation about guilt and atonement. Kotani considers the text's overlapping superficially fanciful settings a form of speculative estrangement, allowing clear consideration of what might otherwise be too close to see well. These separations permit readerly distance, while inviting speculative interpolation into the text's persistent ambiguities. The text's major fictive engagements thus remain accessible not



This graphic novel traverses but does not reinforce a binary construction of gender....

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Reading The Heart of Thomas requires setting aside existing constructions of boy and girl, as a necessary precursor to the speculative leap.

- 1 Scholars remain divided on how close the connections are between the boys' love phenomenon, especially in its networked amateur incarnations, and Anglophone homoerotic of slash fanfiction. See the 2013 special issue of *Transformative Works and Cultures* v. 12, edited by Kazumi Nagaïke and Katsuhiko Suganuma, dedicated to transnational boys' love fandom studies, for more information.
- 2 Thorn has noted a few errata on the text's Amazon comments page.
- 3 See Thorn's translator's introduction, and James Welker's review of *The Heart of Thomas* in *Mechademia*, for more on the text's publishing background, historical contexts, and multigenerational reach.

Cont. on p. 6



*The Heart
of Thomas*

(cont. from p. 5)

...the text contains
multiple visual and literary
attempts to grapple with
historically feminized
traumas....

only through identification but also because their initial strangeness permits a certain distance: a gap to alleviate traumatized anxiety, or an incitement to leap right into the symptom.

It would be easy to dismiss the plot's operatic improbabilities, the characters' huge starry eyes, or their grandiose statements on love and death, as ridiculous. However, this impulse fades with the realization that the text contains multiple visual and literary attempts to grapple with historically feminized traumas, including violent experiences of emergent sexuality. A central example is young Prefect Juli's abuse by senior student Siegfried, presented primarily through its traumatic repercussions: the memories of that experience trap Juli in cycles of corrosive guilt and self-hatred, exacerbating existing problems of racist objectification and religious obsession into something approaching psychosis. Whether he can be saved, and what that would mean, forms one of the text's several primary narrative arcs. The character designs, which draw from the symbol-laden visual lexicon of *shōjo* manga, both heighten this approach and threaten to trivialize its weighty content. But the delicacy of the characters' faces, their fluttering clothes, the profusion of roses, pass through surface-feminized appeal to land in a viscerally anxious sensuality, their flamboyance a passage toward the text's dark psychological heart.

The twining subjective experiences of the boys at Schlotterbach Gymnasium combine to question the primacy of the individual in the speculative encounter. Beyond its reformulations of gender, *The Heart of Thomas* also comprises shifting protagonists and recursive narrative loops, including a central character who dies in its opening pages. The resultant confoundings of voices and points of view, of death and life, immediately call into question who is narrating this text:

I've been thinking for nearly
six months.

Thinking about my life and
my death,

and about a certain friend.

I'm well aware that I am but an
adolescent child.

And so I know that this
boyhood love

will be flung against some sexless,
unknown, transparent something.

This is not some simple gamble.

And the problem is not that I
loved him.

He must love me.

He must.

Right now, for all intents and pur-
poses, he is dead....(5)

This ambiguous passage frames the death of 13-year-old Thomas Werner, and may or may not record his last thoughts. Thomas's death catalyzes the emergence of deep past traumas in the lives of his schoolmates Oskar, Erich, and Thomas's beloved Juli, and the purpose of Thomas's death ultimately proposes itself as the text's primary enigma. But the epigraph demonstrates divergent readings through its ambiguous narration; the tension lies between a speculation on the strength of love and a defeatist self-abnegation. Reading the epigraph in Thomas's voice yields his clear-eyed yearning for that death to matter: by forcing a confrontation with the undeniable tangibility of Thomas's love for him, Thomas hopes to heal Juli from his long trauma. The rejection of the "simple gamble" seems to refute a traditional definition for speculation, the bidding of currency against a randomly desirable future. But it may also indicate a rejection of the gamble's simplicity, for what Thomas (if the speaker is Thomas) is gambling for is Juli's future, as well as the ultimate meaning of his own sacrifice. Rereading the same text in Juli's voice dramatically transforms its import, especially in terms of referents for death and love. For Juli, love itself is the problem; it led him

...the tension lies between
a speculation on the
strength of love and a
defeatist self-abnegation.



to his own “death,” and the ashen existence he leads now. Juli’s violent introduction to sexual (vs. “spiritual”) desire at the hands of his abuser Siegfried has degraded his trust in his own body and the words of those around him; whether he can be restored forms an important narrative arc. The epigraph is eventually revealed as an excerpt from one of Thomas’s letters, a sacred relic that pits Thomas’s understanding of love against Juli’s understanding of damnation. It is, as Juli correctly interprets, a challenge, as well as a confession.

In the meantime, Juli lingers in darkness, a state that holds a crucial visual and thematic role throughout *The Heart of Thomas*. For example, while the majority of Schlotterbach’s students are stereotypically light-haired, Juli is dark. He undergoes constant racist discrimination from his grandmother, clearly a relic of Hitler’s Germany, and must also deal with Siegfried’s exoticizing gaze: “Let me guess. Your father’s Greek... Such lovely black hair” (498). This distinction follows Juli throughout the narrative as an unwanted, intrusive presence; reading these images from Juli’s perspective is to undergo his racialized visual differences, and the unwanted attentions they consistently gain him. Juli’s exoticization and hypervisibility eventually render him a target, not a person, a clear presentation of how destructive minoritization can be. This undercurrent renders Siegfried’s overtly sexual attentions as concurrently racist, an aspect of the text too often overlooked. As well, Juli’s outfits are reliably depicted in stark black; beyond visual distinction of his figure from the rest of the boys, his clothes mark Juli as racially and psychologically different from the other boys; as he might say, he is of a different kind: “bad seed” (500), “unworthy” (507). The clothing also covers the physical evidence of his trauma and thus is never voluntarily loosened or removed. They remain, like the twining stories of Thomas and Erich and Oskar, protection around Juli’s emotional core and the devastation of his physical and spiritual traumas.

These violent scars are visually referenced throughout the text. Oskar’s response to Juli’s paucitous letter home accidentally reveals the scar on Juli’s chest: “a deep scar, like a twisted grin...” says the text (94); the chapter title page emphasizes the moment’s gravity and frames Juli’s ensuing psychological break. The top of page 99 shows Thomas’s face with interference, as if through static, time, or wind; the white background of his horizontal panel gives way to swirling brushstrokes, a visual link with the background of the preceding page. The repeated visual of Thomas’s face draws a faint, mostly vertical line down the page, while Juli’s own face, in profile, describes a tortured arc leftward, as if thrown downward by the hands clutching at his face and throat. The lit cigarette on the upper left is clearly the source of the white, starlike splotches across the whole page, forming a descending arc that eventually meets Juli’s screams, then intersects with his restlessly dreaming face. That face, at the end of all this motion across the page, looks disturbingly as if it has just landed after a hard fall. The triple descents braid around Juli’s central statement, a cry of pain framed in the jagged white shapes that characterize the cigarette’s lit stub as well. The white starlike splotches repeat throughout the text, almost always in the background to Juli’s thoughts. By the end of the text, their relation to Juli’s own scarring is evident. In Juli’s case, he is unable to think past or move beyond the arc of the violence of abuse as the totality of sexuality. He no longer trusts his body or its reactions and cannot rely on his mind or will—his “heart,” which is broken. The swirling circular visuals and starlike splotches of his breakdowns indicates the latent circularity of his reasoning: that Siegfried punished him, as he deserved; that the abuse was his own fault; that there is no redemption or pardon possible. That his damnation has been complete for some time.

By dying, Thomas shatters the links between one world and the next, breaking the circle, forcing Juli into confrontations with his own demons, and proposing (through his last message) that

Juli’s exoticization and hypervisibility eventually render him a target, not a person, a clear presentation of how destructive minoritization can be.

...he is unable to think past or move beyond the arc of the violence of abuse as the totality of sexuality.



The Heart of Thomas

(cont. from p. 7)

The Heart of Thomas is, at its core, a set of speculations about love itself...

A genuinely different outcome requires speculation: creative activity joined to the reconception of ethical relations between recognizably different beings....

the act is symbolic of his love. This final confession brings Juli back to the chaos and madness of Juli's relationship with the older student, Siegfried. In bringing Juli back to this moment of choice, Thomas reneges on time itself: by his actions he forces Juli to relive the traumatic events again—providing the only possibility for breaking through the bewildering cycles of repetition that characterize the memory of trauma.⁴ That is, through his sacrifice, Thomas gives Juli back his future, making a way for Juli to reclaim a sense of wonder around the possibility of love. *The Heart of Thomas* is, at its core, a set of speculations about love itself: what it looks like, how it acts, what it can do in the world, even after death. Love functions as a principle of futurity, even in the face of its seeming foreclosure. But *The Heart of Thomas's* speculative elements do not tend to produce the effect of critical distance on readers' norms; in contrast, Hagio's text relies on what look like a series of estrangements to bring about profound affective affiliations between the readers and the text itself. These estrangements do not constitute a technological or device-based alteration of social mores and capacities. But these subtle dislocations of gender, national belonging, sexuality, and perhaps death itself produce a near-cathartic passage through the dark early onset of human sexuality, in all its terror, confusion, recrimination, and self-hate—even if the reader did not experience that onset in that way. Thus, the estrangements required in the reading the text eventually result in the speculative leap—not from one society to another, but from self to self.

A genuinely different outcome requires speculation: creative activity joined to the reconception of ethical relations between recognizably different beings, in charting a way out of a brutal morass. Put another way, speculation is the path, the way between here and anywhere else. Thus, time does not heal trauma in this text. Only

4 See the work of historian Dominick LaCapra and literary scholar Cathy Caruth for more information on the cyclical nature of traumatized experience.

love does, and therein lies the depth of its speculation. What every reader must ask is the question at the center of the text: what is the heart of Thomas? Love, and its gentler cousin empathy, requires a jump not into a linear future, but sideways, into the murky depths of the unfathomable other. In this construction, love does not involve self-identification, but presence. Thomas's atonement for Juli's missing heart, caught in the recursive temporality of trauma itself, breaks through (as he did) the borders of panels and minds and eventually life itself in order to move the dead back to life.

From within his symptoms, Juli contends with these objectifying representations of himself. In the aftermath of Siegfried's abuses, he comes to believe them. This is also a part of his trauma. There is no room for *what if* or *what would it be like* in this closed system, deceptively logical in its circularity. Only repetition is possible, retracing the scar deeper each time. The subjunctive cannot exist there. But Thomas's death breaks open Juli's heart again, introducing thereby the first in a series of painful skips, decelerations, and detours that all slowly lead out from the closed circuit of the traumatic event: an equivalent shock that disrupts Juli's swirling disaster of self-image. In turn, speculation offers an alternative, a request to reconsider going down the same road; it is Thomas's gift to Juli, in the hopes that Juli can finally move past the abuses he has suffered, all those people (including himself) who have reduced him to a set of usable traits, a sullied or wasted impurity. *The Heart of Thomas* requires the reader to speculate, along with Juli, that instead of these things, he might be worth dying for, because he is who he is. Juli must then see himself first outside of all those previous contexts and ideas—the racism, the sexualization, the abuse, the guilt, even the perfection of his student veneer—and accept that none of those defined him to Thomas, or were the basis of Thomas's love for him. Seen in light of these intermingled traumas, the words of Thomas Werner's last letter gain resonance, their



demand to recognize and accept love echoing across the entire text:

To Juli, one last time.
This is my love.
This is the sound of
my heart. Surely
you must understand. (11)

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With thanks to Mari Kotani, whose scholarship and commentary at WisCon 39 first drew me to *The Heart of Thomas*, and to Kazue Harada, whose translation so clearly showed her own devotion.

Fan Culture and Non-Compliance

by Taylor Boulware

My first geeky tattoo acknowledges my devotion to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the TV show I credit with rescuing me from a period of intense turmoil and depression. My second is for *Battlestar Galactica*, in recognition for another take-no-shit feminist SF character, Kara "Starbuck" Thrace. My third, the most "literary" of my textually-inspired tattoos, is for *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood's speculative fiction novel that imagines a regressive society in which women deemed socially unfit are rendered "walking wombs" for the politically and religiously powerful.

Bitch Planet, the new comics series from writer Kelly Sue DeConnick and artist Valentine de Landro, inspired my latest fandom tattoo: the blocky, geometric letters NC, which stand for "Non-Compliant." And I'm not the only one. In fact, one of the most remarkable and fascinating responses to *Bitch Planet* is the legion of readers who, starting immediately after the late 2014 debut, have enthusiastically embraced the comic and all it stands for with a defiant NC logo

tattoo, in imitation of the tattoos forcibly applied to female prisoners in the comic. Non-Compliant is a label I eagerly embrace, and getting it tattooed on my left ring finger—where I will never again wear a ring from a man—is, to me, a powerful assertion: of solidarity with the women of the comic and the empowering resistance they represent, in celebration of such a stunning and meaningful work, and as a reminder of my own rejection of patriarchal ideologies as I struggle to live within and against them.

Kelly Sue, as she prefers to be called, in order to emphasize her place as a woman in a male-dominated industry and to be more approachable to readers, is renowned in comics for a bevy of feminist feats and creative achievements, including the spectacular reinvention of Carol Danvers as Captain (rather than "Ms.") Marvel, a reworking of the character that has inspired the Carol Corps, a cosplay phenomenon that allows women fans to produce a feminist presence in superhero comics and to introduce their own variations on the character by multiplying

...one of the most remarkable and fascinating responses to *Bitch Planet* is the legion of readers who... have enthusiastically embraced the comic and all it stands for with a defiant NC logo tattoo....

Cont. on p. 10



Non-Compliance

(cont. from p. 9)

Inconvenient women — any woman who does not meet the narrow standards of feminine beauty and behavior as determined by men — are deemed Non-Compliant....

and diversifying the female body images that the character can embody. Her latest work, *Bitch Planet*, has been described by its publisher, Image Comics, as a “women in prison sci fi exploitation riff,” and as “Margaret Atwood meets *Inglorious Basterds*.” Combining satire of patriarchal ideology and everyday misogyny with a healthy, deeply satisfying dose of unadulterated rage, *Bitch Planet* imagines a near-future society of gender conservatism and male domination that hyperaggressively dehumanizes women and regulates female bodies and behavior in the service of male interests and profit. Inconvenient women—any woman who does not meet the narrow standards of feminine beauty and behavior as determined by men—are deemed Non-Compliant and sent to the ACO, a high-security women’s prison on a neighboring planet (dubbed Bitch Planet in common parlance), where they’re sentenced to “live out [their] lives in penitence and service” to the Fathers of the New Protectorate.

The series draws on exploitation films and revenge fantasy for its generic inspiration, but its plot is more reminiscent of *The Hunger Games*, with a more radical and subversive thrust. *Bitch Planet*’s twist on the propagandistic televised battle combines the fervor and aggressive masculinity of American sports culture with the capitalist thirst for ratings and profit brought by spectacularized violence, in the form of the New Protectorate’s Duemila. Alternatively called Megaton, the sporting event “is one of many modern descendants of calcio fiorentino, a 16th-century Italian sport,” an early version of what is now called American football. In this version of the game, “teams may be comprised of any number of players, but their combined weight can be no more than 2000 pounds”; “all manner and degree of grappling is allowed, [and] the only rule is that it must be one-on-one,” with judges awarding advantages based on “athleticism and showmanship” (DeConnick & De Landro, Issue #4). Within this setting, the plot revolves around the creation of the first all-women Duemila team, made up

of prisoners from the ACO, who are conspiring to use the creation of the team as an opportunity to assassinate the leaders of the New Protectorate Council, who will be in the audience.

Beautifully drawn and colored, and fully taking advantage of the comic form to create and populate a richly detailed speculative future, *Bitch Planet* offers searing, radical indictments of patriarchy and misogyny only barely—if at all—exaggerated from our current moment. Over the course of the first four issues, the contours of the series’ narrative arc are drawn in tandem with critiques of modern American sexism that enliven every page, every panel, creating an overwhelming, visceral sense of the pervasive pressures and disciplinary mechanisms of patriarchal control.

The first page of issue #1, for example, presents us with a nameless, faceless woman rushing through a crowded street, her path and the scene around her littered with orders: OBEY, APOLOGIZE, YOU’RE FAT, WE GET BY WHEN WE COMPLY, BECAUSE HE SAID SO—along with ubiquitous advertisements for beauty products: “Eat less, poop more,” “Buy this, it will fix you.” The woman navigates this minefield with practiced ease, and what makes this opening both borderline-mundane and deeply unsettling is just how *normal* this scene of psychological and emotional assault is to both her and to us. Turning the page, we learn that the woman is a voice actor rushing to work to record ACO inmate indoctrination messages, this time in the persona of an elementary school teacher lecturing her fellow women about their evilness.

As they are suspended in hypersleep on their journey, the women, stripped naked and rendered immobile, are told by this recording that, “Earth is the Father. And your father has cast you out... for your trespasses, your gluttony, your pride, your weakness, and your wickedness are such that you are beyond correction or castigation. Like a cancer you must be excised from the world that bore you.” Of course, the “weakness” and “wickedness” of which these women are

Beautifully drawn and colored... Bitch Planet offers searing, radical indictments of patriarchy and misogyny....



guilty include anything that challenges the New Protectorate. Such offenses include murder, assault, insubordination, and political incitement, but also “aesthetic offenses,” “wanton obesity,” “sexual deviance,” “gender terrorism,” “marital withholding,” “ego dysphoria,” “nymphomania,” “cyber infidelity,” “mockery,” “patrilineal dishonor,” something called “capillary disfigurement,” and my personal favorite, “criminal literacy.”

When the inmates arrive at the ACO, they are greeted by the Model, a pink-hued hologram of an idealized, hyper-sexualized woman programmed to chastise and lecture the prisoners at every turn. She reminds them, with the condescension of the men who created her, that “non-compliance is not recommended.” This leads one new inmate to remark, “I hate that bitch,” and she’s answered by another, “We all do. That’s why they use her.” This exchange, and the Model herself, are just two brief examples of the series’ preoccupation with exposing one of the most potent weapons of patriarchy: how women, in countless ways, are manipulated to be complicit in the oppression and regulation of other women. This unflinching examination is handled with deft nuance, never blaming women for participating in their own domination; rather, this is one of the primary ways in which the comic reveals the insidious nature of patriarchal oppression, exposing not just the bodily violence it inflicts, but the psychological and emotional violence as well. It conveys, with aggressive, no-apologies prowess and vibrant creativity, the devastatingly powerful and insidious forces of patriarchal control and the impossibility of not, at least to some degree, participating in one’s own oppression and the oppression of others in order to survive, a point emphasized by the politics of language implicit in the title of the series, ambiguously balanced between reclaiming and reproducing a sexist term.

Even the most non-compliant character, Penny Rolle, who adamantly refuses to hate her fat, black body despite the patriarchy’s constant assault

on her self-worth, cannot escape from their deathgrip and is doomed to a life on Bitch Planet. Kam and Meiko, along with the other inmates we’ve met so far, Violet, Fanny, and Renelle—are also each non-compliant in their own ways, each finding ways to resist the system that seeks their destruction while being forced to live within in. They see the games as an opportunity for further resistance and rejection of the system that has imprisoned them; but they know that they must, at least partially, consent to the power that seeks to destroy them in order to resist it. They must, quite literally, play the man’s game.

This totalizing force of patriarchy (along with its patron and bedfellow, capitalism) ensures that no facet of life remains unsullied by its ugly cruelties, leaving those of us who seek to struggle against it with precious few options. This recognition of patriarchy’s inescapability resonates powerfully and taps into the deep frustration and anger so many of us have with the misogyny and sexism that have wounded us in countless ways. It helps to explain, I think, the embrace of the Non-Compliant label on the part of readers; why, so many of us have chosen to permanently mark ourselves with this particular sign of defiance.

My fandom tattoos are four of my nearly two dozen pieces, a hodgepodge collection that I’ve gathered over the past fifteen years. I’ve long been fascinated by the relationship between fandom and tattoos, particularly for women, whose participation in both activities is fraught with all manner of sexism and dismissive stereotyping. For me, tattoos are a way to reclaim my body from the grips of patriarchal forces that seek to regulate and discipline me, and fandom/geek tattoos are an even more aggressively resistant act: not only will I mark my body as I choose, I will do so in celebration of texts that dominant culture deems unworthy of such devotion and emotional attachment, of such permanence.

I wanted to know more about my fellow Non-Compliant tattoo-bearers and their reasons, to see how my own motivations might overlap with others’, and

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Non-Compliance

(cont. from p. 11)

I was struck by the variety of experiences and relationships to tattoos amongst the people with whom I spoke....

what that might tell us about the comic, tattoos, and how women grapple with living inside a system that profits from their subjugation and self-hatred. With the formidable reach of social media-based comics fandom at my disposal, as well as some signal-boosting tweets from Kelly Sue, I was able to get in contact with six of my NC comrades and asked them to share their experience reading the comic and their decision to get the NC tattoo.

I was struck by the variety of experiences and relationships to tattoos amongst the people with whom I spoke: four cisgender women, one cis man, and one person who identifies as gender neutral. Their ages range from 18 to 43, some with dozens of tattoos like myself, and some with only a couple; Dani can proudly claim his NC tattoo as his first. Their histories and relationships to comics are varied as well; Liza, 23, and S., 43, have read comics almost daily for years; Carolyn, 18, reads comics frequently and got her NC tattoo four days before high school graduation; Cory, 33, and Dani, 30, both read a handful of series regularly; *Bitch Planet* is the first comic that Hek, 43, has ever read.

I was also deeply moved and impressed by their generosity of spirit, enthusiasm, thoughtful self-reflection, and astute insights. Despite their various differences, they all spoke to the challenges and pain of being marginalized, dismissed, and otherwise oppressed by the power structures and ideologies that *Bitch Planet* seeks to subvert and destroy, and how permanently bearing the NC logo signifies their commitment to remaining true to themselves and resisting expectations:

This tattoo is my way of reminding myself, in a concrete manner, that it really is OK to not be the person you are expected to be. – Hek

I'm unabashedly feminist in everything I do and say, so this is another extension of that. – Liza

I hesitated before deciding to get mine because I am a straight white American male. As much as I feel

and identify with the Non-Compliant concept, I didn't want to insult those who would see me more as the one who would brand than as one who would be branded.... [But] when someone asked Kelly Sue about a male getting the NC tattoo and she gave it her blessing, I decided to get mine. – S.

Once I read the issue all about Penny Rolle I just knew I had to have [an NC tattoo]. I'm a very heavy person myself and...I'm good with that. People have trouble with that. They think fat people should want to be thin, and if you don't, then obviously you're just crazy and need someone to tell you what is right and attractive. So as soon as I read about Penny and how she felt about herself I cried to see that Kelly Sue understood that, and then I got angry that others don't seem to get it. Then I started planning the tattoo.... [It's] validation of who and how I am, and a bit of a sneer at the patriarchy and societal "norms" that say that women can't be trusted to be in charge of their own bodies. – Cory

These Non-Compliant readers also share the common experience of immediately recognizing and identifying with the comic's radical politics. Given the mixed reactions I've received over the years in response to my geeky tattoos, I was also curious about how others have experienced explaining to non-geeks and non-fans the meaning of theirs, especially a Non-Compliant tattoo, which is disruptive of norms surrounding both tattoos and comic books:

The tattoo artist was asking me about it and kinda shamed me for getting a tattoo for a comic book that only had one issue out. I told him I had never related to a single piece of work more, and even if for some terrible, horrible reason, another issue never came out, it would still mean the world to me. He was kinda a dick. – Liza

© ... permanently bearing the NC logo signifies their commitment to remaining true to themselves....

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These Non-Compliant readers also share the common experience of immediately recognizing and identifying with the comic's radical politics.



It's funny because all my friends of a female persuasion have had almost uniformly positive "that's fucking awesome" responses, and the only shit I've gotten has been from guys. One guy...in response to me explaining where the design came from [said], "I hope [the series] lasts a long time, for your sake." – Carolyn

The confusion, dismissal, and derision these women describe, while infuriating, is not all that surprising. While tattoos in general may be gaining wider social acceptance, and while geek and comic book culture has become more mainstream, when the two intersect in the form of fandom/geeky tattoos, those who bear them are still often disdained for their excessive, disproportionate response to the "wrong" thing, ridiculed for permanently marking themselves with something as "trivial" as a movie, tv show, or comic.

Kelly Sue has been incredibly vocal and active in her support of NC tattoos. She used the backmatter pages of issue #4 to address criticisms of women for having gotten a tattoo for a series that hadn't "proven" itself yet. Responding to two men on Twitter, she wrote:

The "fake geek girl" accusation is none-too-subtle (if you were real geeks, gals, you'd know not to jump in so fast!), but that's not really what pushes my buttons. Neither is the incredibly patronizing implication that women are lemmings unclear on what exactly "permanent" means, or that this is even yet another example of men, unsolicited, policing grown ass women for what they think they should or shouldn't do with their own bodies.

This scathing takedown is incredibly satisfying, but what makes the letter truly remarkable is her insistence on the true meaning of non-compliance, and what it means for those of us who have chosen to permanently wear that label. It's not about adoration of the comic, although we do adore it, wholeheartedly; but rather, it's an act of resistance, a reclamation of bodily autonomy and agency, an

act as radical and meaningful as Penny's unwavering self-love. She continues:

No, what gets me is that they think they get what "non-compliant" means; they don't.

And the thing is, as proud as I am of this book, as much as it means to me, I know something that these marked women know too: *it isn't about the book.*

Here's how I articulated it in our newsletter and I think it bears repeating: *I can't speak for the real world men and women who have chosen to get the tattoos for themselves. I'm sure their reasons are as various as they are, but as the co-creator of the book that uses the term in this context, I can tell you what I think when I see someone wearing it. To me, it says: "I am finding the courage to be my authentic self, whomever he or she may be. I do not fit the box assigned to me: I am too tall, too short, too fat, too thin, too loud, too silly, too serious, too masculine, too feminine, too passionate, too shy, too angry, too proud, too black, too brown, too devout, too atheist, too slutty, too frumpy, too gay, too WHATEVER THE FUCK IT IS that my culture will condemn me for today and I refuse to cede my power. I refuse to see myself through your eyes, just as I refuse to cast that same lens on my brothers and sisters. I will hold my head high and you will support me or get the fuck out."*

DeConnick, Kelly Sue (writer) and De Landro, Valentine (art/covers). *Bitch Planet*, Issues #1 – 4. Berkeley: Image Comics, 2015.

Goodyear, Sheena. "Why Bitch Planet Is Inspiring Women to Get Badass Feminist Tattoos." *The Mary Sue*. Abrams Media Network. June 16, 2015.

It's not about adoration of the comic, although we do adore it, wholeheartedly; ...it's an act of resistance, a reclamation of bodily autonomy and agency,



Taylor Boulware is a PhD Candidate in English at University Washington, where she studies American literature and popular culture. Her dissertation is an exploration of the motivations and effects of writing slash fanfiction. She has two dozen tattoos, many of them geeky.

Trying On Sex: *Tits & Clits* Comix

by Roberta Gregory

Until recently, the rich history of these heady times seemed to be in danger of being lost as these daring foremothers grew old or passed away, their stories untold.

So, what is feminism, really? Those scrambling to distance themselves from the label seem to believe they have a good idea, but the concept of feminism can get a bit complicated, even for those of us who have been in the movement for the long haul. Early 1970s feminism produced the SCUM (Society for Cutting Up Men) Manifesto, the short lived Wages for Housework movement, *Ms. Magazine*, and *Tits & Clits Comix*.

The first issue of the latter was published in 1972 by two women artists in Southern California, Lyn Chevli and Joyce Farmer. Both identified as feminists. Both wanted an alternative to the sex-and-drugs, male-dominated world of underground comics that had been thriving since the late 1960s. (Underground comics often depicted women in a “Tits & Ass” style; hence their title.) So, having never written or drawn comics before, they created over two dozen pages of thought-provoking, sometimes sexually explicit graphic content with their feminist message firmly attached and formed a publishing company, Nanny Goat Productions, to help bring this work to the world.

Interestingly, *Tits & Clits* came out just weeks before the first issue of another landmark title, *Wimmen's Comix*, which was published in San Francisco by the Wimmen's Comix Collective. This was a true collective effort inspired by a small handful of earlier feminist underground comics such as Trina Robbins' *Girl Fight* and the *It Ain't Me Babe* “women's liberation” anthology produced by Trina and the Berkeley feminist collective of the same name. Until recently, the rich history of these heady times seemed to be in danger of being lost as these daring foremothers grew old or passed away, their stories untold. Fortunately, next year Fantagraphics will be publishing a complete facsimile edition of every one of the 17 *Wimmen's Comix* anthology issues, and historian Samantha Meier is



writing a painstakingly researched book on Joyce Farmer, Lyn Chevli, and Nanny Goat Productions.

The groundbreaking title *Tits & Clits* presents a feminist message that is woman-oriented and distinctly sex-positive. Nineteen seventy-two was a year steeped in the potent brew of the Sexual Revolution, and it was also the year that Anselma Dell'Olio wrote her influential essay, “The Sexual Revolution Wasn't Our War.” Sex and feminism have apparently always been ambivalent partners. The content of *Tits & Clits*' first few issues reflects Lyn and Joyce's vision of feminist sexual liberation. The art is sometimes crudely drawn and the writing clumsy and heavy-handed, but they deal with topics never before shown in the context of an underground comic book story, using all the genre's directness, deliberate crudity, and dark humor. And they were drawn, written, and published by women.

Sex is an intimate subject, and the medium of comics itself tends to be very intimate, too, the precise lines on paper drawing in the viewer to participate in the unfolding of events in a very personal manner; illustrated panels progress to tell a story, and the reader interprets the information hidden in the artwork. Some of the drawn lines in *Tits & Clits* force the reader to look deeply at some things that could be considered strange and disturbing by many.



This was true from the first issue's first story. In "The Menses is the Massage," Mary Multipary (a somewhat flawed though knowledgeable Earth Mother type who would become an ongoing character for the series) deals with both poverty and her menstrual period, and devises a large, phallic tampon cut out of one of her kitchen sponges. She strikes a blow against the economic exploitation of women while having an arousing good time in the process. All goes well until she forgets to take the sponge out and after several days is chased home by a pack of hungry dogs. Undaunted, she invites her women friends over for a party, and they happily sit around the table manufacturing feminine hygiene products of their own.

Mary also stars in two surreal tales, one a post-nuclear holocaust story in which she is left alone with (and boorishly impregnated by) the Last Man on Earth, resulting in an endless stream of babies and breasts that transform into penises; the other a sequence in which she squats to pee in a forest and is happily assaulted by spring flowers that turn into very active phalluses.

Two other stories in this issue feature Fonda Peters, a modern woman who contends not only with birth control issues but also with a yeast infection resulting from her many sexual encounters. After she is successfully cured of the infection (with advice from Mary Multipary), the last panel shows Fonda in bed enjoying the attention of no less than five gentlemen.

The abundance of explicitly cartooned heterosexual activity ensured that *Tits & Clits* would find its way onto the shelves of the more progressive bookstores, along with the rest of the underground comics of those days. Unfortunately, it also attracted the attention of a very ambitious local district attorney who declared it obscene, resulting in the arrest of the shop's owners, the seizure of other titles, and a lengthy legal battle aided by the ACLU. During the course of all this Lyn and Joyce learned that they could face arrest and heavy fines as well. The case against the bookstore

owners was dropped in 1974, and both Joyce and Lyn breathed big sighs of relief. The incident is illustrated in Joyce Farmer's 1988 comic story account of the incident, "Busted," first appearing in *Itchy Planet Comics*.

Actually, during the time of the obscenity accusation Nanny Goat was still very actively publishing. In 1973, the same year that *Roe v. Wade* legalized abortion, Joyce illustrated a full-length educational and political comic, *Abortion Eve*, following the stories of five different women who arrive at a clinic on the same day to terminate unwanted pregnancies, expressing a variety of emotional and intellectual reactions to the information dispensed by Mary Multipary.

The second issue of *Tits & Clits* also came out in 1973, under the somewhat tamer title of *Pandora's Box Comix*. It contained far less explicitly drawn heterosexual activity than the first issue, and more consistently written stories, featuring Fonda Peters and her two sisters, Glinda and Wanda. The Adventures of the Perfectly Permeable Peters Sisters was a feminist parody of The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers with a focus on contemporary sex and relationships rather than the drug culture. Romantic Wanda moves in with her boyfriend and begins to be treated like a servant, resulting in a wake-up call when his cat pees on her panda. Glinda brings home a woman friend who comes out as a lesbian and is then bombarded with a laughably clueless interrogation by all three Sisters, and adventurous Fonda visits a "massage parlor for women" in a story that dissolves into a sensually drawn erotic tale with fountains, feasts, and three hunky young men. The most serious story in the comic is also drawn by Joyce Farmer (the most polished illustrator of the two) and titled "An American Dream." It's about a married-with-children woman who sacrifices a writing career for a successful husband and the "perfect" life; the ending is grim and disturbing. As simple as a tale like this may seem now, in 1973 it was exploring new territory. For women this was the age of consciousness-raising and questioning roles.

She strikes a blow against the economic exploitation of women while having an arousing good time in the process.

...it also attracted the attention of a very ambitious local district attorney who declared it obscene...

For women this was the age of consciousness-raising and questioning roles.

Cont. on p. 16



...as they undress, they discover, to their delight, that the man is really a woman and the woman is really a man.



In 1976, Joyce and Lyn returned to the title of *Tits & Clits*, and published the official second issue, the last one that would be their sole creation. It presents a very mixed collection of shorter stories: Persephone the cat contemplates getting older, and Mary Multipary returns, driving the “Clitmobile” as she delivers vibrators and similar appliances to various women in need. Far from just being a frivolous sex toy story, this piece shows Mary outlining her expansion plan with several employees, creating a monthly magazine, and lobbying in Washington for free birth control. Another ambitious woman, “Fanny Sparks,” leaves her office job to go into business for herself as a highly successful and very exclusive sex worker who retires in luxury at the age of 30, with a woman for a lover. An older married couple fall in love all over again after a day in a swinging “summer camp for adults,” and a progressive mom goes out to a movie so her teenage son can spend the evening alone with his girlfriend, only to come home to an appalling mess best left to the imagination. A man picks up a woman in a bar, and they go home together: as they undress, they discover, to their delight, that the man is really a woman and the woman is really a man. Another serious but beautifully drawn piece, “The Secret,” depicts the harsh reality of an unwanted pregnancy among the very poor.

Even taking into account all the problems of the decade, this publication reflects the freedom of the Sexual Revolution from a feminist point of view.

Not all of *Tits & Clits*' content would be considered feminist by all readers. Some of the material was clearly intended to be controversial (children are sometimes depicted being sexually precocious), some issues of race and homophobia seem to be a bit clumsily handled, and some simply tossed in on a creative whim. But in the sex-and-drugs adults-only and male-dominated world of the underground comics scene of the early 1970s, there were very few women exploring formerly unmentionable subject matter to this extent, or this graphically. And both Lyn and Joyce gave sex education workshops at the local Free Clinic in the past, so consciousness-raising was obviously one of their goals.

Even taking into account all the problems of the decade, this publication reflects the freedom of the Sexual Revolution from a feminist point of view. A full-page illustration by Joyce Farmer in Issue 2 depicts a little girl playing dress-up in front of a mirror with crudely applied makeup and a feather boa tucked in a strategic location, surrounded by low-cut dresses and strappy heels. Confronting the reader she asks, “How can you know for sure 'til you try it on?”

In 1976, after having a story rejected from *Wimmen's Comix* I decided to self-publish my own full-length comic book, *Dynamite Damsels*, and was inspired by the comics created by Lyn and Joyce. They gave me great advice and encouragement, and I consider them my mentors.

Following Issue 2, *Tits & Clits* became an anthology comic open to other women contributors, now reflecting a wide variety of storytelling and experiences by female artists and writers, even as the concept of feminism faced challenges and adapted to changing lives and times. Four of my comic stories were published in anthology issues of *Tits & Clits*: numbers 3, 4, and 6. Lyn Chevli, whose true art was sculpture, dropped out of comics to spend more time writing. She created an erotic novel and two memoirs of her very colorful life (besides publishing adult comics, she lived in India in the 1950s). The memoirs are still unpublished. Joyce



Farmer contributed stories to the remaining four issues of *Tits & Clits*, which were co-published by Nanny Goat Productions and Last Gasp, the San Francisco publisher of *Wimmen's Comix*, for which she was also a writer and editor. Farmer's story in Issue 10 of *Wimmen's Comix* is a mini-masterpiece, a mostly wordless illustration of the impact of sexual abuse on several generations of one family.

Then, as is often the case with women, Farmer's life took a different turn. She was forced to put her creativity on hold for years, functioning as the caretaker for her aging parents as they grew old, suffered failing health, and passed away. Ever the artist, she spent the following ten-plus years on a lengthy, painstakingly illustrated graphic novel on the subject of aging and death, *Special Exits*, published in 2010.

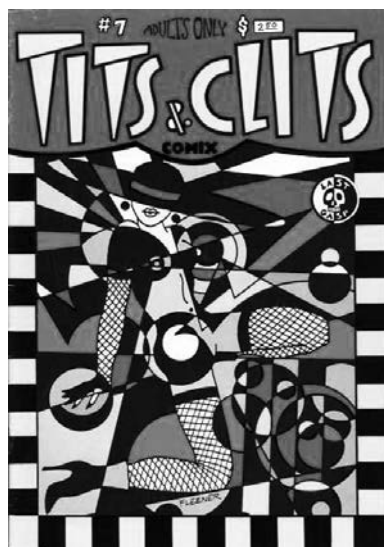
Once again, precisely drawn lines invite the reader onto the page, to intimately experience subject matter that may not be the most comfortable, things better not thought about. Only this time the topic is failing health and mortality, not the exuberance of the Sexual Revolution that Lyn Chevli and Joyce Farmer laid bare in the early issues of *Tits & Clits*.



One of these stories is a mini-masterpiece, a mostly wordless illustration of the impact of sexual abuse on several generations of one family.

...precisely drawn lines invite the reader onto the page, to intimately experience subject matter that may not be the most comfortable...

Roberta Gregory is an award-winning comics creator best known for her "Bitchy Bitch" character featured in Fantagraphics' 13-year-long Naughty Bits series. She lives and works in Seattle.



The Persistence of Memories

Jennifer's Journal: The Life of a SubUrban Girl, Vol. 1, by Jennifer Cruté

Rosarium Publishing, May 2015, 94 pp., \$8.95.

reviewed by S. Qiouyi Lu

The art is not so much simple as it is deliberate—every line serves a purpose.

Jennifer's Journal is a delightful series of personal anecdotes illustrated with sequential art. Although its narrative starts off light-hearted, Cruté introduces some heavier elements toward the middle of the book as Jennifer begins to explore and experience depression, difficult family dynamics, religion, and sexuality.¹

The grayscale art in *Jennifer's Journal* is deceptively simple—at first glance, the round faces seem minimalist, but the characters are all very expressive and dynamic. Every background is carefully drawn. A close examination of the characters' clothing reveals the stitches in jean seams and the drapes in billowy dresses. The art is not so much simple as it is deliberate—every line serves a purpose. Cruté's lettering is also fantastic. The various fonts, weights, and speech bubble shapes convey tone and emotion, and visually underscore the actual text. Regardless of whether panels are clearly delineated, whether art extends past the panel boundary, or whether there are any panels at all, the flow of the story is never confusing—the absence of reading roadblocks reveals Cruté's masterful handling of page layouts.

Jennifer welcomes us into her story by introducing her family: her mother, a fashion designer who chose to work at a bank after marriage for stability; her brother, whose art and creative sculptures inspire Jennifer to draw as well; and her father, a bus driver who encourages his children to doodle whenever they go to work with him. Photographs of actual drawings and items from Cruté's childhood punctuate the introduction and give *Jennifer's Journal* a scrapbook feeling while emphasizing its autobiographical nature.

1 Although the graphic novel is autobiographical, in this review, I distinguish between "Cruté," the author/artist, and "Jennifer," the main character in the graphic novel.

Then Jennifer walks us through other scenes from her childhood, from stories of being scared of the dark, to her misunderstandings as a kid, to quintessential suburban life: pets, bike accidents, family vacations, and family gatherings. Moments from her friends' lives interrupt Jennifer's tales and offer glimpses into the lives of other suburban children, many also of color. Racial misunderstandings begin to dot Jennifer's childhood, with white children saying the N-word around her and her family.

A family portrait starts the next chapter in *Jennifer's Journal*, and here we see the first hint that all is not as harmonious as Jennifer has presented it to be: over her smiling father's head a thought bubble reads, "I won't be in this picture for long." In the previous chapter, Jennifer characterizes her father as someone who pulls the occasional insensitive prank, but for the most part, he's by her side. After the family portrait, Jennifer begins to muse more about her father's irresponsibility and her parents' constant fighting. It's heartbreaking to see Jennifer learning coping tactics at a young age—as spiky, angry yelling fills a panel, Jennifer continues playing with her toy frog in another room and learns to avoid her parents. Cruté creates palpable tension through the juxtaposition of calm narration with angry shouting and exaggerated emotions on her parents' faces versus more neutral expressions on Jennifer's face. Although young Jennifer doesn't fully understand what is happening, readers—and a growing Jennifer narrating—can see her struggle clearly. As a more mature Jennifer reflects on her parents as people with their own personalities and interests, she wonders how they ever became a couple. Page 50 in particular weighs heavily: Jennifer narrates that she "understands certain decisions," followed by a panel showing her smiling parents on their wedding day,



with a thought bubble coming off her father that shows a mouse in a wheel, and a thought bubble coming off her mother that says, “He doesn’t hit me.”

Jennifer’s Journal then jumps back to 1915 Georgia. Jennifer relates the story of her great-grandmother Pearl, who eloped, and says on page 52, “From what I hear, they lived happily ever after— for once in my family. Jeez.” She tells stories of Grandma Faye, who had eight children. Although Grandma Faye’s domestic life at first seems cheerful, that idyllic domesticity crumbles once Jennifer’s controlling grandfather Jake enters the picture. Although these anecdotes may appear at first to be an unrelated tangent, they actually come at a perfect time in the narrative: as Jennifer struggles to understand her difficult home life, she introspects and reaches back to find the intergenerational trauma that informed her mother’s decisions.

The rest of the graphic novel discusses religion and spirituality. Even as a young child, Jennifer had questions about stories in the Bible. Some biblical stories disturb Jennifer, and Cruté shows Jennifer’s conflicted feelings by illustrating quotes from the Bible, then having one of the characters deviate from the biblical text. Of all the pages in this section, and even in the whole book, page 75 stood out the most to me. Prior to this page, Jennifer wonders why Satan has multiple names. When she gets older, she names various self-defeating personalities within her and realizes that this is why Satan has multiple names: evil and misery manifest in many different forms, but they all serve to tear people down. Although this volume of *Jennifer’s Journal* doesn’t discuss her experiences with depression, this illustration sets up an antagonist for the next volume and is an evocative, tragicomic representation of depression.

Toward the end of *Jennifer’s Journal*, Jennifer finds herself pulling away from the church as she witnesses two-faced behavior, hypocrisy, and sexual abuse. Her homosexuality also becomes a source of cognitive dissonance—while the church preaches that homosexuality is a sin, Jen-

nifer begins to realize that maybe she is homosexual herself. When Jennifer gets to college, she lets go of her Christian beliefs and explores Buddhism and Taoism. Her icon, Miss Buddha Bear, gradually comes into existence within the last pages, and *Jennifer’s Journal* ends with Miss Buddha Bear teaching a lesson on heaven and hell to a samurai.

Jennifer’s Journal may feel a bit disjointed, but that disjointedness serves the narrative. The back-and-forth between presenting a straightforward image from Jennifer’s childhood, then complicating that image, reflects the processing that Jennifer does as she grows up. As a child, she doesn’t realize that anything out of the ordinary is happening, but with time she comes to reflect and understand her experiences in context. That processing hurts all the more when juxtaposed with the naïveté of childhood, but it is also a necessary part of growing up.

Although my individual experiences were different, so much of the arc of Jennifer’s life resonates with me. *Jennifer’s Journal* tells not just Jennifer Cruté’s story, but also my story—the story of growing up in suburbia, yes, but also the stories of finding my own identity and learning where toxic thoughts and abuse originate from. The only people who won’t be able to relate to *Jennifer’s Journal* are those who have lived completely perfect and happy lives, but I’m certain those people don’t exist.



Cruté creates palpable tension through the juxtaposition of calm narration with angry shouting and exaggerated emotions on her parents’ faces versus more neutral expressions on Jennifer’s face.

As Jennifer struggles to understand her difficult home life, she introspects and reaches back to find the intergenerational trauma that informed her mother’s decisions.

S. Qiouyi Lu left both coasts to settle in Columbus, Ohio—for now. This is their first review.



“You Should Read It!”

Ava's Demon, by Michelle Czajkowski

Self-published webcomic updated twice weekly

reviewed by Jamie Kingston

If you want to remain unaffected by spoilers, this is where you should go make a cup of tea....

Ava's Demon is a title that's been floating about the Twittersphere for a while, with nothing attached to it but the recommendation, “You should read it!” That's a really oddly consistent thing to hear about a webcomic. People are usually passionate about why they love a comic, and what they love about it. Perhaps, I thought, as I opened my browser to read it for this review, that's just a function of Twitter's character limit, or maybe I'm simply hearing from people who are having trouble articulating what it is they love about it. So it was with no clue about the comic but its name that I plunged into it.

I'm pretty cautious as a webcomic reader. I like what I like, and that includes characterization, fairly faithful updates, fill-in artist text that isn't just “read *my* webcomic too,” a story I can follow, diversity, and art that catches and holds my eye. Not necessarily in that order.


I see now why people just say, “You should read it.” If you want to remain unaffected by spoilers, this is where you should go make a cup of tea—but I'd rather you keep reading. That's what happened to me when I sat down to begin *Ava's Demon*. I meant to read it in a number of smaller sessions. I ended up reading from the first post to the current last, clicking “NEXT” eagerly until there was nothing more to click. That's one of the primary hallmarks of a great webcomic: it draws in the reader and keeps their attention until they've blazed through the entire thing in what seems only an eyeblink.

Despite a mighty 1400 panels online to date, the story is obviously only in its early stages. As of August 2015 we have gotten to meet Ava and her titular demon, and the rest of the cast. First we encounter reckless, conniving, mean-girl classmate Maggie. Then we encounter

Odin, whose motive seems to be that of a creeper with a crush, but develops into something more as he interacts with his lively and boisterous twin sisters Raven and Crow. Shortly after those two step onstage we meet Gil, who appears to be a religious devotee with a genuine and sincere desire to help people. The big conflict that affects the entire cast is that they approach the mystery of the entity known as “TITAN” from different angles. Ava discovers those variations quickly.

The *Ava's Demon* About page says more about the story's creator than about the comic itself, so what a reader knows of the universe of the story is only revealed as she decides what to show. Let me tell you: what she decides to show is worth waiting for. Michelle Czajkowski's About Page bona fides indicate she has worked with both Pixar and DreamWorks. This is not mere puffery. Czajkowski's style is her own: it has certain visual commonalities with most animation, but it looks like her work, neither resembling those uncannily similar fanarts that are easily mistaken for Disney or any other recognizable name, nor some mishmash style that randomly combines elements taken from elsewhere. Her grasp of lighting is enviably capable. Her shifting of her palette to suit characters, mood, and story is like the weaving of a tapestry; visuals go from subtle soft colors and swooshy gentle curves to ragged, jagged blacks and sharp primary colors, only to fade into gloomy, muddied browns lit by nothing but the vivid, fiery colors undulating in Ava's psyche.

The cinematic style of the artist's storytelling is one of the most captivating things about this webcomic. Several scenes are best viewed by clicking through them rapidly one after the other, so you can experience the effect of persistence of vision. Best of all, certain key moments are fully animated, short scenes with

 Let me tell you: what she decides to show is worth waiting for.

20

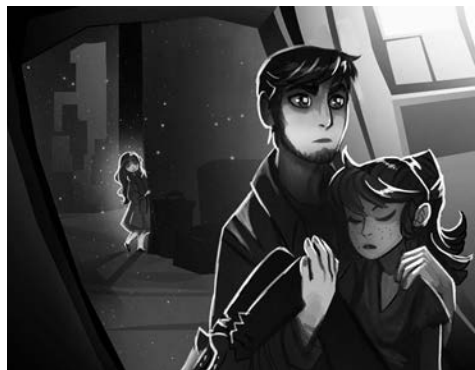
The cinematic style of the artist's storytelling is one of the most captivating things about this webcomic.



music quite obviously chosen for its atmospheric and emotional resonance. The only spoiler I feel duty-bound to include is that a content warning for readers sensitive to mental illness and violence should be considered.

Ava's Demon is a standout among webcomics, including many of the other

partially animated ones I've seen. I understand now why the recommendations were so short on words. It really is best experienced with no preconceptions or expectations. I can echo in all sincerity and confidence what I was told: You should read it.



Jamie Kingston has been a fan since childhood. Her love of reading and all things science fiction and fantasy has only grown. The resulting opinionated New Yorker transplanted to Georgia is now a senior staff writer for womenwriteaboutcomics.com



⚙️ “Feminism made Wonder Woman. And then Wonder Woman remade feminism...”

The Secret History of Wonder Woman, by Jill Lepore
Knopf, October 2014, 432 pp., \$29.95 (hardcover).

reviewed by Karen Burnham

“Superheroes...are excellent at clobbering people; they're lousy at fighting for equality”



In her book *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*, Jill Lepore wastes no time putting Wonder Woman in her historical context: “Aside from Superman and Batman, no other comic-book character has lasted as long” (xi). Superman debuted in 1938, Batman in 1939, and Wonder Woman in 1941. Lepore writes: “Feminism made Wonder Woman. And then Wonder Woman remade feminism, which hasn’t been altogether good for feminism. Superheroes, who are supposed to be better than everyone else, are excellent at clobbering people; they’re lousy at fighting for equality” (xiii). But Wonder Woman doesn’t just have a secret identity; she also has a secret history: her creator “Charles Moulton” was actually William Moulton Marston, a lawyer, psychologist, and patriarch of a polyamorous household. His story, and how it allows Wonder Woman to bridge the divide between the women’s suffrage movement of the early 20th century and the feminist movement of the 1960s and ’70s, has been uncovered by Lepore’s in-depth and meticulous research. It’s a story that is well worth learning.

Marston’s life defies easy categorization or narrative. He was an excellent student at Harvard in the 1910s, where he majored in psychology at the time

when it was splitting off from philosophy. While there, he wrote a movie script that won a prize and was produced by the Edison Company. He married his high school sweetheart Sadie Holloway, who had gone to Mount Holyoke. Between her and some of his Harvard professors, Marston was deeply committed to the women’s suffrage movement, to the point of often claiming that women were superior to men and should eventually rule the world. Both Marston and Holloway went to law school. He passed the bar and also got his PhD in psychology, but fared poorly in both professions. His attempts to introduce the lie detector to criminal evidence resulted in an unfavorable and famous court ruling; he ran a few companies into bankruptcy. Holloway got solid jobs in publishing to support them.

As Marston fell down the academic ladder, his reputation increasingly in tatters, he took up with a female student, Olive Byrne, the niece of Margaret Sanger (of birth control fame). Byrne joined the Marston family in a secret capacity: despite the fact that all the adults (Marston, Holloway, Byrne, and occasionally a woman named Marjorie Huntley) were lovers, the pretense was that Byrne was a widower living with a married couple. She and Holloway had two children each by Marston, but all maintained that Byrne’s children were really by a fictional, deceased “Mr. Richards.” Byrne raised the children, which allowed Holloway the freedom to work and support the family, while for a long time Marston cast about looking for a productive path forward. He eventually found it as a “consulting psychologist” for a comic book company.

At first, Marston was there to give respectability to the comics being produced by Maxwell Charles Gaines. However, he soon pitched a heroine of his own, a woman, to defend against charges that

Marston was deeply committed to the women’s suffrage movement, to the point of often claiming that women were superior to men and should eventually rule the world.



comics were too violent. Her origin story was rooted both in Greek mythology and in the feminist utopian literature of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Although she wasn't drawn by a woman (and there were plenty of qualified women available), she was illustrated by H. G. Peters, an artist from San Francisco who had drawn for several feminist magazines. One of the dominant images of suffragette editorial comics was that of Woman being bound in chains by men, a situation in which Wonder Woman found herself in almost every comic book written by Marston. Add to this the similarities between Wonder Woman and a particular brand of pin-up girls popular at the time, the Vargas Girls, and it's no wonder that Gaines was fielding fan mail from fetishists, and more disapproving psychologists were using her as ammunition in their war for "comics decency."

In 1946, Marston contracted polio and fairly quickly succumbed to it, dying at the age of 53. After Marston's death, Holloway and Bryne lived together to the end of their days, never publicly breathing a hint that they might be a couple or that their children shared the same father. Holloway attempted to gain control of the Wonder Woman legacy, but she was quickly sidelined, and the superheroine was handed over to an anti-feminist writer. Wonder Woman was rediscovered in the 1960s with the renewed feminist movement; she appears on the cover of the inaugural issue of *Ms. Magazine*.

Lepore's book is interesting, readable, and amazingly well researched. But while valuable, it is also a bit of a mess. Although moderately sized at roughly 300 pages of main text in hardcover, it feels like it's trying to do too much. As we bounce through Marston's life, we get capsule histories of the women's suffrage movement, certain Harvard professors, early psychology, women's colleges, the lie detector (including a detailed examination of the case *Frye v. United States*), motion pictures and screen writing, the early birth control movement, the strife between Ethel Bryne (Olive's mother) and her sister Margaret Sanger (includ-

ing Ethel's arrest and hunger strike), the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (where Holloway was an editor), the early comic book industry, the different psychologists engaged in the war over comic books, women in WWII, and of course the actual biographies of the principals.

All of this was interesting material I was glad to learn, but I had taken the most interesting assertion of the introduction to be the aforementioned quotation: "Feminism made Wonder Woman. And then Wonder Woman remade feminism, which hasn't been altogether good for feminism." Lepore does an excellent job of proving the first part of that statement, tracing the influence of the women's suffrage movement both through Marston's biography and other writings and also through the iconography of the art used in the comics. Addressing the last part of the statement seems to be something of an afterthought, crammed into the epilogue, because this is a biography more than it is a social history of a particular comic book figure and her influence. As such, it is somewhat misbilled: both the title and the introduction lead one to think that this is a book about Wonder Woman. And it is, but it is her story centered around William Moulton Marston and a very specific lineage of the feminist movement.

If this were a book about Wonder Woman primarily, it might have covered her entire history, not just from her first appearance in 1941 to her reappearance in *Ms. Magazine* in 1972, but also her trajectory through the 1980s and beyond. After dismissing all the comics written about her in the '50s and '60s, where she became plain old Diana Prince and lost most of her superpowers (despite a series of six comics written by Samuel R. Delany which were so controversial that only the first was published), it would have been nice of the author to tell us more about what Wonder Woman has been up to in the last 35 years: her scholarly reputation, all the Linda Carter lunchboxes, the war over trying to get her own movie, and the different ways she's been drawn as the women's movement has evolved over the decades.

One of the dominant images of suffragette editorial comics was that of Woman being bound in chains by men, a situation in which Wonder Woman found herself in almost every comic book written by Marston.

...this is a biography more than it is a social history of a particular comic book figure and her influence.

Cont. on p. 25



⚙️ Provisional Realities, Frequent Revisions

Supreme: Blue Rose, by Warren Ellis and Tula Lotay

Image Comics, July 2015, 168 pp., \$14.99.

reviewed by Cynthia Ward

What would be truly radical would be a Lois Lane graphic novel in which Clark Kent barely appears and his alter-ego, Superman, never actively sets foot on stage.

It's not difficult to imagine a graphic novel centered on ace reporter Lois Lane, whose award-winning career spans more decades than the contemporary women's liberation movement. After all, she's the best known superhero's girlfriend/wife in the eighty-odd-year-old history of comics, co-billed in the title of the '90s television series *Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*, and headliner of her own mid-century comic book series, *Superman's Girl Friend, Lois Lane*. What would be truly radical would be a Lois Lane graphic novel in which Clark Kent barely appears and his alter-ego, Superman, never actively sets foot on stage.

This is essentially what you get in *Supreme: Blue Rose*, from superstar comics writer Warren Ellis (*Transmetropolitan*, *The Authority*) and artist Tula Lotay (*Elephantmen*, *The Witching Hour*)— except for the not-insignificant detail that the award-winning ace reporter is Diana Dane, an inhabitant of the Image Comics universe, in which the mightiest defender of justice is the platinum-haired, red-and-white-spandexed superhero known as Supreme.

Supreme, Diana Dane, and several other variations/commentaries on iconic comic book characters (Wonder Woman, Captain America, etc.) were created by writer-artist Rob Liefeld in the 1990s. His Superman-manqué Supreme was a not-very-interesting violent spin on its inspiration. Supreme's origin and nature were revisited and revised in a three-issue miniseries by Keith Giffen and Robert Loren Fleming in the early '90s, but Liefeld's Superman-knockoff would become of wide interest when the series was turned over for an extended run to Alan Moore (*V for Vendetta*, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*), comics' greatest writer. Jettisoning the violence and paying homage to the Silver Age of DC Comics, which was re-

Moore's Supreme finds his initially near-blank memory filling itself in from moment to moment, finds himself battling earlier incarnations of himself....



vised out of existence circa 1970, Moore won the Eisner Award for best comics writer as he rebooted Diana Dane and Supreme's alter-ego, Ethan Crane, as comic-book creators. This metafictional twist was just the tip of Moore's multi-layered iceberg. Moore's Supreme finds his initially near-blank memory filling itself in from moment to moment, finds himself battling earlier incarnations of himself, and learns that previous versions of the Supreme now inhabit an afterlife environment known as the Supremacy. But, alas, all good things must come to an end, and a new team revised Moore and company's Supreme out of existence.

Two thousand and fifteen brings the latest reboot. Ellis and Lotay follow Moore's metafictional lead. However, this time it's not Supreme who begins to realize reality is provisional. It's the mortals, who have no access to the knowledge contained in the Supremacy (in fact, the golden arches of that para-celestial city have crashed to Earth, leaving many mortals convinced Heaven has been destroyed). Laid off, neurodiverse, and increasingly desperate, ace reporter Diana Dane is hired by Lex-Luthorish mystery millionaire-businessman Darius Dax to investigate why the universe seems, impossibly, to be only four months old.

The influence on this reboot is less Moore, or DC (or Marvel), than it is the multiverse of Michael Moorcock, the



alternate timelines of Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*, the metafictional scenario of Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren*, the bleeding technocultural edge of Ellis's *Global Frequency*, and the uncertain realities of Philip K. Dick. The Supreme's universe is subject to frequent revision, and the current rewrite has failed to install correctly. In an attempt to preserve itself, this universe's future attempts to avert its doom by forcing itself damagingly into its chosen contemporary oracle, a brilliant lesbian scientist. Meanwhile, the Supreme universe's oldest and most popular TV serial, *Professor Night* (an analog of the pirate serial in Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's seminal comics miniseries *Watchmen*), is breaking into the world in a fashion similar to the *Ubik* commercials of Dick's eponymous novel. And Supreme isn't going to fly in to save the day.

Even for a completist fan of The Supreme, the graphic novel *Supreme: Blue Rose* isn't likely to be smooth sledding. Nonetheless, it's recommended to both comics and non-comics readers. The women characters are strong, nuanced, independent, relatively numerous, and hetero-romantically-unentangled career women (a state of existence considerably less common in the wider world of

comic books). The seven-issue miniseries collected in this volume ranks among the best science fiction of Warren Ellis's writing career, who already has produced a string of excellent progressive SF, steampunk, and technothriller graphic novels largely underappreciated by prose SF readers. And newcomer Tula Lotay's digital/watercolor artwork is nothing short of breathtaking.

This is not to say Diana Dane's turn on center stage isn't problematical. For starters, she inevitably won't be the star of the next Supreme title. She's unlikely even to retain this graphic novel's freedom from romantic attachment. Still, she's a radical figure as both the mortal female investigator of a superhero mystery and as an active female lead in a multiversal PhilDickian existence. And Tula Lotay's phenomenal talent should establish her as a central creator in sequential art.

The women characters are strong, nuanced, independent, relatively numerous, and hetero-romantically-unentangled career women...

Cynthia Ward has published stories in numerous anthologies and magazines. With Nisi Shawl, she coauthored *Writing the Other: A Practical Approach* (Aqueduct Press, 2005). She lives in Los Angeles.

Feminism made Wonder Woman... (cont. from p. 23)

While Marston's history is fascinating—Lepore does an amazing job of tracking down all the ways he included his own biography in everything he wrote, as when she points out that Wonder Woman's bracelets are replicas of the ones Olive Byrne wore to symbolize her relationship with him—in many ways this is Marston's biography, not Wonder Woman's. To someone who is used to comic books being a source of study in their own right, there seems to be a lot more time spent on odd corners of Marston's life than on his creation's legacy. Lepore's book will be an invaluable resource for future researchers, and she has uncovered a wealth of material that no

one had found and no one had connected to Wonder Woman before. She set it all down in a well-written and passionate book. So it feels churlish to complain that there's more human biography here than comics social anthropology. This is a book aimed at a fairly general audience; anyone who is interested in comics history or Wonder Woman specifically will find interesting things here—just maybe not *all* the interesting things their hearts desire.

Karen Burnham is vocationally an engineer and avocationally a fiction writer. Her work has appeared in venues such as *Locus*, *Strange Horizons*, and *SFSignal.com*. Her book on the work of Greg Egan was published by the University of Illinois Press in 2014.



☸ “Good is not a thing you are. / It’s a thing you do.”

Ms. Marvel, Volumes 1/2/3, created by G. Willow Wilson and Adrian Alphona
October 2014/April 2015/June 2015, 120 pp./136 pp./112 pp., 15.99.

reviewed by Tili Solokov

Kamala gains the power to stretch and alter her body when a strange mist activates her latent Inhuman abilities.

There is so much to love about *Ms. Marvel*. I could go on and on about the comics series’ artistry, telling you about how it walks a tightrope between serious problems and funny adventures, about the refreshing and complex friendship between its protagonist Kamala Khan and her best friend Bruno, about the deft hand with which Kamala’s conflicts with her imam and her deeply religious elder brother are portrayed. I could easily spend paragraphs on a single issue or even a single page. Instead, I’ll give you an overview of the joys awaiting you in the series’ first three collected volumes, *No Normal*, *Generation Why*, and *Crushed*, and hope that this short introduction will help a new set of people discover my favorite superhero.

Kamala gains the power to stretch and alter her body when a strange mist activates her latent Inhuman abilities. (There is at least one heavily-researched article waiting to be written about the splash page showing what Kamala sees when she wakes up from being knocked out by the mist. I won’t spoil the surprise, but simply say the vision of heroism, beauty, and belief it presents is moving.) Already as dedicated a fan of superheroes as any of her real-world readers would be, Kamala immediately begins to apply her abilities to protecting her hometown, Jersey City. The series’ first story arc, covering the first eleven issues, sees Kamala establish the superhero identity of Ms. Marvel and face off against the Inventor, a monomaniacal bird-man who has convinced Jersey City teens to carry out his bizarre plans. This is followed by a four-issue arc focusing on romance and its difficult effects on Kamala’s family and her superheroing.

(A brief aside about comics publishing: *Ms. Marvel* has been printed in monthly magazine-sized issues since February 2014. These issues have been

collected into three volumes, one of which also contains some material from an issue of a different comic called *S.H.I.E.L.D.*)

When Kamala initially uses her powers she transforms into a doppelganger of Carol Danvers, aka Captain Marvel, the superhero she most idolizes. Though she soon abandons Carol’s appearance, she borrows her earlier title, Ms. Marvel, and the blue-yellow-red color scheme of Carol’s current costume. The raw material of the costume, however, is a burkini Kamala once told her mother she’d never wear and a polymer her friend Bruno discovered that allows it to stretch with her. Ms. Marvel’s costume encapsulates her superheroic approach: inspired by more famous heroes, but made by hand using materials given to her by her family and friends. While groups like the Avengers defend the world, Kamala defends her community.

Much of the media attention on *Ms. Marvel* has focused on Kamala’s Pakistani-American background. Although Marvel has featured Muslim characters before, Kamala is the first to headline her own series. Sana Amanat, the series’ editor, and G. Willow Wilson, its writer, are both Muslim women and are clearly conscious of the political and personal impact of broader representation in superhero comics. Though I (being white and agnostic) am in no position to evaluate the authenticity of Kamala’s depiction, she and her family do ring true to me as well-rounded people, whose culture, race, and religion shape them but do not define them. In particular, Kamala’s conflicts with her protective parents show the consequences of maintaining a secret as huge as, well, one of Ms. Marvel’s embiggened fists. What could easily have been played as the cliché of Muslim immigrant parents who want to lock up their daughter, instead comes across as a

While groups like the Avengers defend the world, Kamala defends her community.



humanizing element drawing on shared common experiences.

The series' writing is skillful and deep, but it is not subtle. Often, Kamala's internal narration straightforwardly states the theme of an issue or outlines a dilemma she faces. This is very much not the lit-fic method of evoking characterization slowly and via askance depictions. Instead, *Ms. Marvel* makes ample use of the freedom the superhero genre allows for posing moral questions and showing characters solving them, and constructs its complexity within that straightforwardness. One of my favorite moments in the first volume is illustrative. Having decided to take on the mantle of Ms. Marvel, Kamala experiments with her powers with Bruno's assistance. The last two panels of this training montage show Kamala adding the finishing touch to her costume, focusing intently as she squirts out a lightning bolt in fabric glue. This symbol is an homage to Captain Marvel—Kamala must be thinking about superheroism. Her face and posture as she crouches on her bedroom floor are pure adolescent determination. The narration boxes for these two panels tie up everything the images depict and everything Ms. Marvel stands for: "Good is not a thing you are. / It's a thing you do." And on the very next page, Kamala sets out to do good, to find out who is threatening her home.

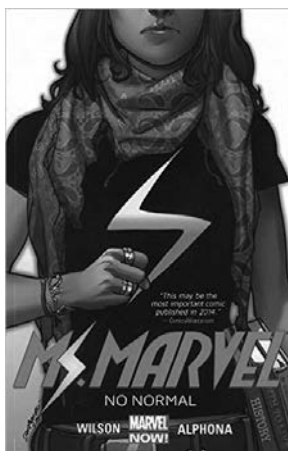
The sequence I just described demonstrates another hallmark of *Ms. Marvel*, in addition to its thematic clarity: its quotability. This has historically been a somewhat unusual quality for comics, since only a small fraction of their content—the dialogue and narration—can be quoted in text. *Ms. Marvel*, though, was built for Tumblr photosets. The comic is structured beautifully for clipping out a particular moment, whether inspiring or silly (and it is peppered with both sorts), and sharing it online.

Kamala Khan has a lot to live up to. Like any teenager, she has to balance her parents' plans with her own hopes for her future. Like any superhero, she knows that her powers come with responsibility. But perhaps the weightiest set of expecta-

tations placed on her shoulders is one she doesn't even know about: the expectation that she'll attract a new generation of comics readers. *Ms. Marvel*'s integration with Millennial culture goes far beyond the simple presence of a young heroine. Kamala's references to her fanfic getting upvotes could have come across as young-person-tinted window dressing, but the themes and structure of the work actually reflect young people's interests in a way mainstream comics' attempts to allure young readers rarely do. Kamala stands at the end of a lineage stretching from Peter Parker through Kitty Pryde: she is Marvel Comics' young audience surrogate for the 2010s. She couldn't be better suited for the job. *Ms. Marvel* overflows with charm, poised to draw in readers who might otherwise have no interest in superhero comics. Even if you find primary-colored tights a little silly, I urge you to get to know Kamala Khan.

Ms. Marvel makes ample use of the freedom the superhero genre allows for posing moral questions and showing characters solving them....

Kamala stands at the end of a lineage stretching from Peter Parker through Kitty Pryde....



Tili Sokolov lives in Manhattan, where she spends her time reading comics and cooking. By day, she works as a mild-mannered editorial assistant at Oxford University Press. By night, she furiously reblogs fanart. She can be found on Twitter @tgsokolov



Carla Speed McNeil, author and artist of the award-winning *Finder* series, started working in comics in 1997 and hasn't stopped since. The images shown here are primarily from *Finder: Third World*, the first full-color volume—initially serialized and then published in full by Dark Horse Comics in 2014. This *Finder* adventure proves to be a massive, eye-opening turning point in the life of Jaeger, a major character in this mysterious, complex, sci-fi world.

In addition, Speed has included here three black/white panels from her new story “Written in Stone,” which will appear in her latest sci-fi anthology project, *New World*, involving cultures in collision.

Finder is a long-running science fiction drama that Speed self-published for over a decade (including later issues serialized through Lightspeed Press). Since 2011, in addition to new volumes, Dark Horse Comics has republished eight of the earlier graphic novels as two lovely Libraries. They follow various main characters, including a young girl whose first love is a book, a college girl majoring in The Art, which, when capitalized, makes her more like a geisha than Banksy, and a wandering pathfinder with one foot in another world. The collected editions of *Finder* contain extensive footnotes by the author, which expand upon the ideas and comment on their origins.

Speed uses the phrase “aboriginal SF” to describe *Finder*. “Ab origine” is a pre-Roman term meaning “original inhabitants.” It means, essentially, someone who’s been in a place since the earliest time and generally refers to people who lived close to the earth, or whose ancestors did. People travel; people settle; people look at each other and embrace or else fight. People see kin; people see enemies. Push and shove over territory may not be as old as the hills, but it is as old as King of the Mountain. Aboriginal science fiction deals with alien societies. *Finder*’s aliens are all one family, but

their coming to understand that isn’t going to happen easily.

In addition to ten printed volumes of *Finder*, Speed has worked on a variety of projects like *Queen & Country, Vol. 5: Operation: Stormfront*, written by Greg Rucka (Oni Press Inc.). She adapted and drew *Pendragon: The Merchant of Death* (based on the prose book by D. J. MacHale) for Simon & Schuster, drew for fan-favorite *Frank Ironwine* by Warren Ellis (Apparat/Avatar), as well as two pages of *Transmetropolitan*, also by Warren Ellis (DC/Vertigo). *Bad Houses*, created with writer Sara Ryan, was released in 2013 by Dark Horse Comics. Then Speed began a series of collaborations with writer Alex De Campi, drawing part of her book *Ashes*, an issue of *My Little Pony* (IDW), and a new miniseries called *No Mercy* (Image) that began in April 2015.

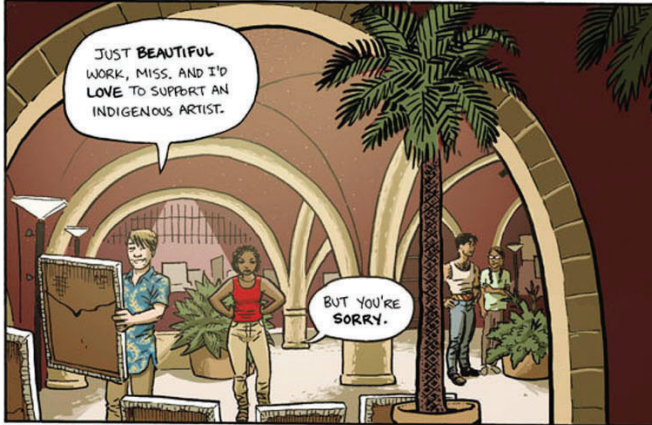
Speed has been nominated eight times for an Eisner award and won once. She has won two Ignatz awards and the Kim Yale New Talent award from Friends Of Lulu. She also won the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize for graphic novel in 2012 and three Stumptown Comic Arts Awards.

<http://www.carlaspeedmcneil.com/>



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Finder: Third World

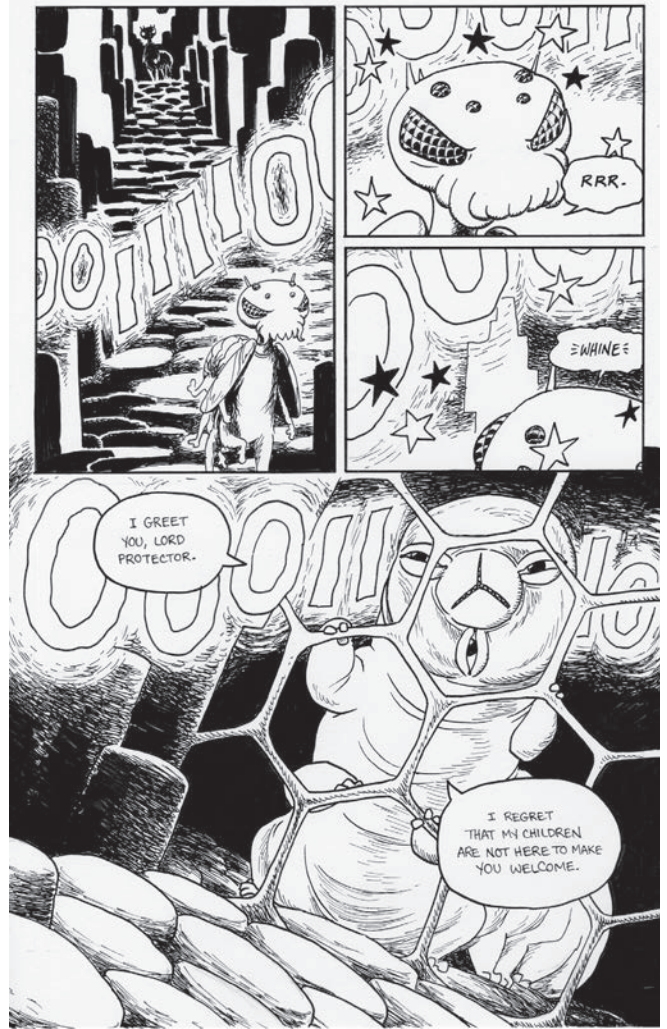
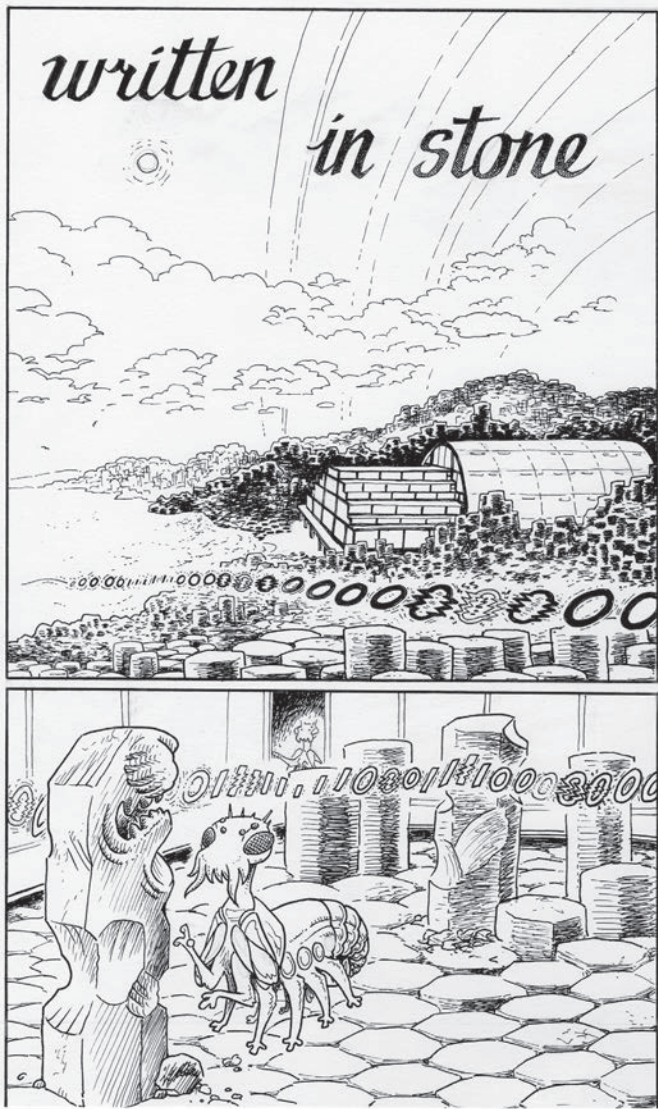


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