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Comics and Human Rights: Taking The Long Way. The Super-Heroine's Struggle for Respect

Maria Norris

Bob Reyer is a Senior Editor and podcast co-host for [Talking Comics](#). He has been a comics fan for more than half-a-century since reading *Fantastic Four* #5 and *Showcase* #37 back in 1962, and has been delving into the medium's history for nearly all the years since that first flush of wonder!

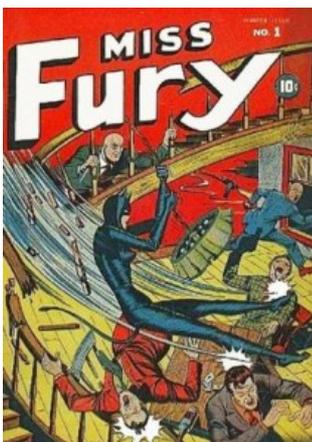
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Wonder Woman

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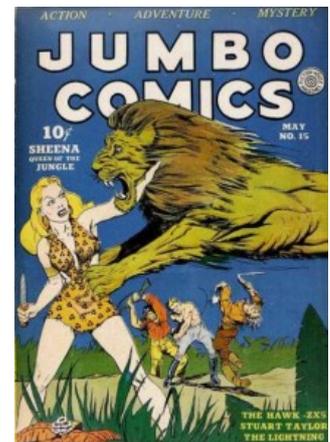


Miss Fury

As in the real world struggle for women’s rights, many of the steps toward more proper representation for female heroes have been met by resistance. From their beginnings, comic book super-heroines have had the added burden of representing the ever-changing face of womanhood, all while the majority of their stories were crafted from sometimes unsympathetic pens. “Women don’t buy comics” Trina Robbins was told when pitching a female-led book to DC; she replied “Not when they’re insulting to us, we don’t”.

Women have always been a part of the comics book industry. Barely six months after the June 1938 debut of Superman in *Action Comics* #1 which began comics’ Golden Age, “[Sheena, Queen of the Jungle](#)” appeared in *Jumbo Comics* #1 from Fiction House, a publisher who had previously specialized in pulp adventure magazines (Sheena had a preview in the 1937 British comics magazine *Wags* #1, so in the UK, she pre-dates Superman). They would soon add titles such as *Jungle Comics*, *Wings Comics*, and *Planet Comics*, which featured women of intelligence, courage, and determination.

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Sheena, Queen of the Jungle

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As servicemen returned to the jobs that were being held by women during the war, a creeping trend toward feminine domesticity began to take hold of the American zeitgeist. This was reflected in comics with the down-playing of super-heroines’ self-reliance and positive messages as well as through their shrinking numbers. These factors would be amped up even further by the [crusade against comics](#) by Dr Fredric Wertham, whose 1954 book “*Seduction of the Innocent*” created a firestorm that led to Congressional investigations, the self-censoring Comics Code Authority, and a decimated comic book industry. Even Wonder Woman (virtually the only super-heroine remaining) was left a shell of the figure she was, now more concerned with romantic encounters with Steve Trevor than changing the hearts and minds in “Man’s World”.

Throughout the Fifties, whatever new super-heroines appeared were generally spin-offs of male characters, and their stories seldom displayed any of the take-charge attitudes of their WWII counterparts. Non-costumed characters fared little better, as Lois Lane was reduced to "Superman's Girlfriend", constantly engaged in schemes to either learn whether Clark was Superman, or trick the Man of Steel into marriage.



1961 saw the publication of *Fantastic Four #1* and the creation of Susan Storm Richards, who remains to this day as one of the most significant female superheroes. Through the good works of writers such as Roy Thomas, Gerry Conway, and particularly writer/artist John Byrne, Susan Storm Richards still inhabits a fictional biography as rich as any in the comics medium.

Moreover, due to the sheer length of publication of the *Fantastic Four*, her character would experience all the peaks and valleys of the treatment of female heroes, from the burgeoning Women's Rights movement of the 60s & 70s, through to the "Bad Girl" era of the 90s. But early on, despite their stated intentions of her being an equal member of the team, the Invisible Girl would far too often be placed in the guise of the "damsel in distress".

The Dark Ages

Despite some well-intentioned efforts through the Eighties, the flickering candle of the noble super-heroine would be nearly extinguished during the Nineties in the era defined by the first incarnation of Image Comics and their house art style which would serve as the model for the hyper-sexualized heroines of the "Bad Girl" movement. Impossibly nubile, scantily clad, and ludicrously posed in the [broke-back/Escher-girl fashion](#), characters such as Witchblade, Fathom, Glory, and Lady Death would not only run violently rough-shod through their own books, but appear in "Lingerie Special" issues that codified their reversal in roles from subjects with agency to objectified fantasy figures.

This mind-set would infect the entire industry, with Marvel aping the art style of their former employees and publishing "Swimsuit Editions", and with formerly up-standing characters such as Wonder Woman and Susan Richards toggled out as if for the cover of a fetish magazine, adorned in thongs, midriff-baring tops, thigh boots, and the ubiquitous-for-the-time straps, pouches and weaponry.

It is not coincidental that portraying super-heroines in this objectifying fashion would lead to a rise in violence against women in story-telling as well. This "Dark Age" would feature stories that would defile the feminine heroic model in such horrific ways that it spurred the 1999 creation of the [Women in Refrigerators website](#), by soon-to-be comics writer Gail Simone. Women in Refrigerators painstakingly listed all the indignities piled on to female characters which reduced them to mere sexualized and disposable plot devices. Unsurprisingly, the nineties saw a reduction in the number of female comic book readers. As Ms Simone [pointed out](#)

"If you demolish most of the characters girls like, then girls won't like comics. That's it!"

The Renaissance.

The early 2000s would see Ms Simone would go on to a long run as the writer of the DC title [Birds of Prey](#), one of the most important female-led books and continue on into today as a leading voice for inclusion with series such as [The Movement](#), which featured a multi-racial, -abled, and -gender-identified cast and the creation of [Alysia Yeoh](#), Batgirl's best friend and a beloved trans character.

Furthermore, the 2012 launch of [Captain Marvel](#), written by Kelly Sue DeConnick, would provide a catalyst for the renaissance of the super heroine.

Captain Marvel is the alias of Carol Danvers, an airforce pilot with alien DNA. Carol Danvers first appeared as Ms. Marvel in 1977. However, in spite of having her own solo book, Carol Danvers also suffered in the dark ages of female representation. At the hands of various creative teams – she was twice de-powered, turned into an angry drunkard, and sexually assaulted in a ludicrous plot contrivance. Her [2012 re-launch as Captain Marvel](#) of this previously "multi-fridged" heroine clearly resonated with both old and new readers, who found in Carol Danvers a super-human character with *human* frailties, but who in her quest to overcome them, never fails to demonstrate what true heroism is about. The overwhelming response to the Captain Marvel series filtered through the fandom into Marvel's head offices, leading directly to the creation of the first female legacy hero, the [new Ms. Marvel](#), Kamala Khan, and the recent announcement that Captain Marvel [will be the first female-led superhero film](#)



Susan Storm



Captain Marvel.

[released by Marvel Studios.](#)

Thankfully, and at long last, many publishers realized that they were under-serving a huge and untapped readership. They would begin to address this through the release of titles that were aimed at a broader market than the stereotypical “25-to-45 white male” , with leading series featuring female leads as diverse in their presentation as [Saga](#), [Princeless](#), [Lumberjanes](#), [Velvet](#), and [Rat Queens](#), and even the majors trying for more inclusionary fare with titles such as [Gotham Academy](#), [Storm](#), [She-Hulk](#), [Black Widow](#), and the [re-launched Batgirl](#). Articles throughout the Comics and Human Rights week will deal with some of these titles in more detail, but suffice to say that the broad range of topics, themes, and tone in these books opens up the world of comics to fans of many genres across the literary and filmic spectra. We could be witnessing the start of another Golden Age for comics and their fans, both as to the variety and quality of the books, and to the positive nature of female representation.

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