

# Women in Refrigerators: The Growing Dialogue Between Comic Creators and Fan Communities

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## Introduction

The idea that comic book fan culture has had a complicated relationship with female readership is no great revelation. For at least the last few decades, women have been depicted in comics as Barbie Doll-proportioned creatures who are allergic to clothes and who very often meet graphically violent demises. I don't think there's ever been a time when I walked into a comics shop with my daughter and not felt looks of confusion directed at her. A girl has invaded the clubhouse! Did she not see the "No Women Allowed" sign? So much alienation had taken place that in 2000, a survey of comic readership estimated that women purchased less than six percent of all comics sold (Wilonsky). The response of the main comic companies, even in the face of plummeting sales, has been to continue business as usual. However, the realization and widespread access to the internet has empowered groups of non-traditional fans (that is, fans who are not 18-39 year old, middle class, white males) in their search for a new relationship with comic book culture.

These groups of fans, both women and men, use technology to form communities and to move from being passive consumers of media to more active critics of culture. While similar research has previously focused on Fan Fiction, there is an active and growing group of fans who are using technology to make their concerns known about the role and depiction of women in comic literature.

## Rejecting the Status Quo: Women in Refrigerators

In 1999, Gail Simone (writer of comics such as *Batgirl*, *Wonder Woman*, and *The Secret Six*) and some of her friends compiled a list of super heroines who had been killed, maimed, or disempowered. She called the list, and the website that sprang out of the discussion, "Women in Refrigerators" referring to an incident in *Green Lantern* #54, in which the hero comes home to his apartment to find that his girlfriend had been killed by a super villain

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and stuffed in a refrigerator. Simone maintained that her point behind the list was to make clear that "...if you demolish most of the characters girls like, then girls won't read comics" (Cronin). It is telling that the list was read and distributed via the internet. Prior to the 1990s, such a discussion would have been isolated and read only by those who searched it out. It may have, for instance, appeared in an independent comics fanzine, its reach greatly diminished.

By using the distributive power of the internet, Simone opened this conversation up to mainstream comic creators as well as fans. Several comic book creators, such as Superman writer John Byrne and *Kingdom Come* writer Mark Waid, indicated on Simone's site that the list caused them to pause and think about the stories they were creating. However, not a whole lot came after that pause. It's easy to see that over the past 13 years not much has changed. Primarily, since 1999, the overall strategy among dissatisfied fans has been to try and convince comic companies to change the way they create and market their product to consumers through traditional channels – letters or boycotts. That strategy had proven to be largely ineffective because comic companies could afford to, at that time, ignore this minority of fans. The belief seemed to be that there would always be an available audience of boys and young men who would pick up as older readers stopped buying. The companies seemed to prefer the fans who were "built-in" even as research suggested that a few simple changes would dramatically increase sales.

Janelle Asselin, former DC and now Disney editor, wrote her college thesis on marketing to women in comics and found "four different ways the comics industry can adjust to increase sales [to woman readers]:

- better marketing towards women
- more inclusive content
- more effective distribution
- changing the cultural preconceptions of comics." (Pfeifer)

One might not expect every company to do all of these things, but it seems fair to say that it's also surprising that the industry continues to alienate fans by doing few of those things.

#### **The Movement from Casual Reader to Co-Creator**

Although to be fair, notable exceptions include characters like Mark Andreyko's *Manhunter* at DC (now canceled), or over at Marvel, Brian Michael Bendis's *Jessica Jones*, Tamora Pierce's *White Tiger* (a limited series), and Dan Slott and Juan Bobillo's *She-Hulk*. In all of these cases, the creators constructed strong female characters who were independently defined rather than contrasted with male counterparts. It should be noted that while the writing was strong, the artwork still leaned on the decades-old hypersexualization of female

characters. However, despite these exceptions, decades of inaction have made it clear that this problem cannot be fixed by relying upon the industry to fix itself.

With a lack of initiative or desire to change on the part of the creators, an alternative has arisen—comic fans taking matters into their hands. However, it takes a particular type of fan to affect that change. To help define the characteristics of these fans who have the capability of turning from reader to activist, I draw upon David Beard and Kate Vo Thi-Beard's essay "Comic Fans and Convergence Culture: Community of Readers in *The Master of Kung Fu*," which was a study of the letters page of the 1960s Marvel comic book, *Master of Kung Fu*. Letters are a valuable, but largely untapped, source of fan attitudes and the changes revealed longitudinally. The Beards' work also discusses comic creator and scholar Trina Robbins' similar exploration of the letter column of *Wonder Woman* comics from the 1960s which also reminds us that comic book readership has not always been the stereotypical boys club that it is today. The April 1962 issue contained letters from two girls and one boy, the May 1963 issue had letters from five girls, and the October 1964 letters page was an all-female affair with letters from five girls. Interestingly enough, and quite unlike the letter columns of today, the writers were all young, and they wrote to *Wonder Woman* herself, not the artists or writers as contemporary fans do. Here, the Beards found that fan letter writers wrote with a purpose, believing that they could influence the direction of the comic, the fate of the characters, and the work of the creators.

After analyzing the *Master of Kung Fu* letters pages, the Beards came up with a set of criteria that allows one to move from casual reader to fan to activist/co-creator.:

Fans must be literate enough to be able to measure the quality of a comic not just against other comic books, but also against forms of "high" culture: film and novels.

Fans must be objective enough to critically read a text they love for its implications towards equality and cultural diversity.

Fans must be capable of engaging each other and the editorial staff with both passion and respect.

Note that these are *not* the characteristics traditionally associated with the stereotypical old school Fan boy. However, the recent mainstreaming of comics and graphic novels has opened up readership in a relatively small way but enough so that a new sort of fan who meets these qualifications has emerged and are beginning to find like-minded readers.

These new, more empowered fans identify with a book or character who, for them and the others who share their taste, gives them a sense of identity and a sense of place within a community—a sense of emotional connection (just as the girls in Robbins' study did with

Wonder Woman). The readers interact with each other in online forums and other sites of “online community” and from this interaction, a web of likeminded members is formed. Through this web of influence, fans come to believe that through their community’s actions, they can shape the future of the comic books, the heroes, and the stories therein.

### **Convergence Culture**

However, the big comic companies still have a role in these communities. For these critics to exist and stay active, there must be some gain from being a member of this community. Scholars in media studies often refer to “uses and gratifications” in media consumption; it is the idea that we consume media for individual psychological and social purposes: escape, social interaction, information and education (Ruggiero). If fans are ignored or attacked by more traditional fan communities with the tacit approval of the comic companies, these fans will withdraw attempts to engage the culture; their input and dollars will be lost. Comic companies literally cannot afford to alienate these consumers. They must, in order to survive financially, find a language and rhetoric that enables them to engage constructively in a dialogue with these fans.

This active dialogic role has been called “convergence culture” by media critic Henry Jenkins. Jenkins calls this “convergence culture” because the older media models (in which the relationship between creator and consumer is one way – the corporation sells to a passive audience) are being replaced by the convergence of the creations of the corporations and the creations of the fan base across multiple media. It becomes harder in these communities to mark the line separating producer and consumer of media text. For example, the Beards suggest CBS has created a media powerhouse in its reality show *Survivor*, but fans of that show have also created a mountain of texts (most of them online) responding to and helping to bolster the cultural importance of *Survivor*. Similarly, fans of Harry Potter have created a vibrant fan culture which entails not only buying the Potter products and reading about the young wizard, but also extending his adventures in fan created fiction, art, crafts, and even videos.

However, comics have been resistant to this loosening of control to their detriment. In convergence culture, the productions of these fans advance the agenda of the companies. That is to say, the more readers are passionately involved in finding a home in comics, the more comics will be sold and the more fans recruited. In this way, the (mostly free) labor of the fans advances the success of the comic industry’s economic eco structure.

### **Dialogic Examples: *Girl Wonder*, *The Hawkeye Initiative*, and *Project Rooftop***

Now that technology has made the creation of fan responses and finding other fan activists easier, concerted group efforts have begun to spring up around these communities. I’d like to highlight three of

these hubs as an example of the sort of valuable work being produced (but still largely ignored by mainstream comic creators and corporations) by these highly involved communities.

One such site, *Girl-Wonder.org*, sadly appears to be no more. However, while active, it provided a blueprint for involved fans. It employed both columnists and fans who kept tabs on the portrayals of female superheroes in mainstream and alternative comics; it also recommended comics featuring strong female characters and collected and archived academic papers on the subject of women in comics. *Girl-Wonder* hosted web comics and had expansion plans that included a *Girl-Wonder* publishing imprint and making funds available for female creators to attend conventions to help their work reach a wider audience.

More contemporary, *The Hawkeye Initiative* (found at <http://the-hawkeyeinitiative.com>) is a satirical Tumblr page that enables fans to comment directly on the depiction and treatment of female characters and superheroes in comic books. The site features fan art of Marvel character Hawkeye drawn in various poses that fans believe to be impossible or sexually provocative. These poses are taken from the pages of comics and are the same poses held by female characters. Recognizing the continuation of her work on her Tumblr site, Gail Simone called *The Hawkeye Initiative* "the best thing in the history of historical anything ever in the universe or elsewhere." The site's intent is to make visible the poses and costumes of female characters, believing that these sexist depictions are so common that they have become expected, even invisible, to readers. By changing the context of the art and embracing the huge and low cost distribution model of Tumblr, the fans attempt to make the ridiculousness of the depiction visible again.

Finally, the last, most subtle, and possibly most effective site of fan resistance to the comic culture of misogyny is *Project: Rooftop*. In February 2006, comic creator Dean Trippe and comics journalist Chris Arrant started the site as a way "to showcase and improve costume design in the comic industry" ("About").

*Project: Rooftop* allows both professional artists and fans to re-design superheroes and villain costumes. Positioning itself primarily as a fan community site, *Project: Rooftop* does not involve itself directly in the discussion of misogyny within comics (although costume design is an important part of the problem). However, the amount of participants at all skill levels and the nature of the re-designed costumes (many make a transition from cheesecake to utilitarian: fewer strapless bathing suits, more leather and Kevlar) suggest that the concern of hypersexualized costumes are very much on fans' minds.

### Historical Model: Romance Comics

This list is by no means exhaustive, but rather a sampling of some of the best examples of fans voicing their concerns in a public forum. These are communities of fans who are unwilling to stop at merely complaining and throwing up ink stained hands with a "well, what can you do?" shrug. It is not a panacea, but it is a promising begin-

ning made more powerful through the ease of use of technology. Perhaps, as fans take more and more initiative to foster change outside of the entrenched comics system, the culture will change. This change will happen just as slowly as it took comic companies to push away those young women who took the time to write to Wonder Woman in 1964. Trina Robbins said in the *Dallas Observer* when asked about the Women in Refrigerators project, "It has taken 30 years for the comics companies to paint themselves into the corner they're now in. They didn't care that their books didn't sell to women, because they felt they had this never-ending supply of young guys. Now, of course, the industry is falling apart" (Wilonsky).

This isn't the first time a comics industry has faced collapse. A model of the rise and fall of such a dynamic genre exists in the examination of American romance comics of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Following World War II, superhero comics had one of the problems they are encountering today – the books were seen to be childish, appealing primarily to the worldview of boys. Jack Kirby and Joe Simon (who, together and working with others, created or co-created some of the most widely known superheroes in contemporary American culture—Captain America, the Fantastic Four, The X-men, the Hulk and many others) saw an opportunity to fill the need for a comic that spoke to an older, female reader. Into this gap moved Kirby and Simon's *Young Romance* in 1947.

The sub-genre that *Young Romance* created courted young adult female readers by deliberately creating older, more realistic female characters—characters to whom the readers could relate and identify. Shortly after its debut, *Young Romance* was selling millions of copies per month (Simon). To contextualize, according to Diamond Comics Distributors, the July 2014 issue of *Batman* sold about 117,000 copies; this number was seen as a great success. However, this staggering financial powerhouse was short lived. Ten years after the creation of *Young Romance*, the fear that had created the Comics Code Authority was a strong enough power to convince romance comics to self-censor. The writers moved away from what the readers wanted to see with stories of marriage, jealousy, the minefield of dating, and relationships ending badly being replaced by traditional tales of love and marriage. This choice would, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, lead to the genre's demise as publishers couldn't (or wouldn't) react do the changing world of the sexual revolution. Stubbornly ignoring the wishes of the readers, comic companies watched as readership disappeared because the books no longer reflected the lives the readers lived. Although, amusingly enough, in the convoluted Marvel Comic universe, one of the romance comic stalwarts, Patsy Walker, re-appeared nine years after the cancellation of her romance title as the superhero Hellcat.

Superhero comics re-emerged following the death of the romance comic. With that re-emergence came something that the romance comics hadn't established—a strong fan culture. Although the romance comics letter columns received reams of reader responses (especially for the very popular advice column features), the comics were consumed passively rather than actively.

### Conclusion

The evolution of fan culture communities has not been smooth. When Janel Asselin wrote an article for *Comic Book Resources* that, in part, took artist Kenneth Rocafort's depiction of Wonder Girl, a teen aged super heroine, to task for its hyper-sexualized nature, her critique was greeted with ferocity from the tradition fan community. Interestingly, Asselin's discussion of Wonder Girl's body and costume was not an end. Instead, it was one part of a larger critique of the cover art itself, including a discussion of how the cover alienated both boys and girls (the *Teen Titans* televised cartoon is one of the most popular for children ages 2-11) which Asselin wrote, to maximize profit, should be the target demographic for the comic, not the standard demographic of males aged 18-39.

As angry fans focused on Asselin's criticism of the depiction of Wonder Girl rather than the economic argument, she soon began receiving rape threats via twitter and through a comments section on her website (Moosa). This attempt to silence Asselin is not an isolated incident. As in any paradigm shift, especially one in a field where fans are so invested in the subject that they go to great lengths to identify with the heroes, a perceived interloper threatens the way things are – the way things have always been.

The fan demographic continues to change and evolve. This is a trend born not only out of anecdotal evidence with websites like *We Are Comics* which asks fans, especially those who were previously "invisible" (women, LGBTQ) in the fan community, to post a photo of themselves and a short bio explaining their involvement with comics in order to "promote the visibility of marginalized members of our population; and to stand in solidarity against harassment and abuse" but also in sales figures. *Publishers Weekly* revealed in early 2014 that "...the demographic that seems to be growing fastest is young women, aged 17-33" (O'Leary). With a greater feeling of agency and a backlash against attacks on "non-traditional" comics fans, the overall make-up of comic readership is changing. "Digital comics vendor Comixology revealed that 20% of its new customers in the third quarter of 2013 were females aged 17-26" (O'Leary). Tellingly, *Publishers Weekly* credits this growth not because of the relaunch of traditional titles and distribution centers, but as a result of the abandonment of the traditional comics press and a greater involvement with the new fans through the internet and social media.

In the 1950s, comics faced a similar depression in sales brought on, in part, by the advent of a new, disruptive technology: television. As a result, smaller companies such as Atlas fell by the side or were absorbed until only DC and Marvel stood alone at the top of the industry. In response to economic pressure, many titles, some of which were predominantly romance related and had been aimed at young female readers, were cancelled. What we today think of as traditional superhero comics received the marketing and creative focus. Now, as these comics reach a time of pressure, publishers may be forced to decide if they will embrace a conversation with fans or allow titles like *The Teen Titans* and *Power Girl* to fade into obscurity like *Young Romance* and *Millie the Model*.

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**The Literary Genre  
of the Comic Book**