

Drawing attention

By Stephanie Mann

All tits and Spandex, right?

This was the reaction I got when mentioning my brief to write about girls in graphic novels. Maybe once upon a time my (male) naysayer was right, but be-lined ladies have moved on a lot over the past 30 or so years.

I should state now that I am a fan, and a feminist. As a child, two of my all-time heroines were Scooby Doo's bespectacled sidekick Velma and the jumpsuited April O'Neil from 'Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles'. Today we're spoilt for choice (hello, Ramona Flowers from the Scott Pilgrim series, Hit-Girl from Kick-Ass and Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis) but there have been some damn cool characters along the way...

Golden girl

Wonder Woman first appeared in the 'Golden Age' of comics in the 1940s: here was an Amazonian princess, specifically designed to be a distinctly feminist role model. As a heroine, she is a match for any villain of any gender. To help her in her quest to bring about harmony, she is blessed with speed, stamina, intelligence and good looks. Oh, and the ability to talk to animals, as well as that famous lasso. With Batman and Superman, she is one of only three superheroes to be continuously published since 1941 - not bad for a 68-year-old!

Bad gals

Female superheroes have never had the same exposure as their male counterparts, although female villains have always been a crowd pleaser, particularly in the Batman series. Catwoman is by far the most famous of the villainesses - again, she appears in the very earliest issues of the Batman comics as a femme fatale and a woman in charge of her own destiny. She is only hampered by brushes with the law, and of course her love/hate relationship with the Dark Knight (and we've all been there). As her alter-ego, Selina Kyle, she gives birth to a daughter by Batman's 'other self', Bruce Wayne, but even this fails to stop her late-night vigilante activities.

In fact, the Batman series has always had a wealth of interesting female characters from eco-terrorist Poison Ivy to the Joker's evil sidekick Harley Quinn.

Hey, good looking

But despite the kick-ass element, female heroes and villains have often fitted into the tiny waist/good-looking mould,

although their message was equality, they were essentially doing it through the male gaze, and yes, lots of Spandex. Hardly surprising when you consider the traditional misogyny of the comic-book world. On her 1999 website *Women in Refrigerators*, Gail Simone wrote "it occurred to me that it's not that healthy to be a female character in comics." She includes a list of female characters that met "untimely and often icky ends" that reads like a roll-call of extras in a paranormal episode of "Casualty": Batgirl I (Paralysed); Firebird (dead); Starfire (raped, tortured, enslaved; forced into marriage... twice)"

Angst

But moving on to the Nineties, female characters in comics and graphic novels left behind the traditional 'superhero/femme fatale' dynamic and took on a more realistic, and cynical mould.

'Tank Girl', created by 'Gorillaz' artist Jamie Hewlett and Alan Martin, was a graphic novel about a girl outlaw who lived in a tank and refused to conform to traditional 'female' ideals (a fondness for promiscuity, farting and drinking set her apart from the women of the Golden Age). And 'Ghost World', first published in 1997, spawned several reprints and a successful film. The tale of two small-town American misfits, Edith and Rebecca, it's a story of friendship and the awkwardness of growing up. Rather than wielding weapons, artist Daniel Clowes' characters suffer from everyday angst, sexual frustration and unease about their future.

Yes, the uber-slim, muscular superheroes were still around, but these were complemented by the more 'normal' portrayals. Neil Gaiman's portrayal of Death in the 'Sandman' series is, instead of a hooded chap with a scythe, a down-to-earth, nurturing Goth girl.

Getting darker

By the 2000s, comic book publishers had really begun to think about a female readership. The massive success of Joss Whedon's graphic novel spin-offs of his shows, particularly 'Buffy', proved that strong women sold well. Buffy develops as a leader of various groups of young slayers and becomes at once a hero and a villain for the world to look to (a role previously adopted by Batman, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s). Although there are similarities between the TV show and the comics, Buffy's character becomes darker and more complex.



A similar vein of 'strong women' emerged in the resurgence of popularity of Frank Miller's series 'Sin City', which originally was published in the 90s, but enjoyed a renewed interest thanks to the 2005 film. In the books, an area of the city is run and inhabited by 'The Girls of Old Town'- prostitutes who are not afraid of toting Uzi submachine guns and killing a man in an instant. The most famous of these women are the silent assassin Miho and the fearsome Gail. The women are self-governing, self-sufficient and self-protecting.

Lesbianism became a bigger issue in the 2000s- even Buffy has a fling with one of her slayers. Despite DC having an openly gay character in the Gotham universe since 2003 (Detective Renee Montoya), the company caused a stir in 2006 by introducing a Jewish, gay incarnation of Batwoman. The move was such an unusual one that it was covered across US media but the character garnered mixed reviews, especially as, despite the fact she is shown on dates with women, she goes to lengths to hide her sexuality. Pretty ironic considering the original Batwoman

was introduced in 1956 in order to dispel any homoerotic suspicions of Batman!

No more damsels in distress

So, where do comics seem to be heading? In 2009, Bluewater Productions introduced a series of biographical stories 'Female Force', which focuses on influential women in politics, pop culture and media. So far, the series features books on Michelle Obama, Hilary Clinton, Sarah Palin (!), Stephenie Meyer and Princess Diana and plans to release books on Ellen Degeneres and Lady Gaga (which, I really, really want a copy of!) in order to inspire more female readers to try comic books.

So, hopefully, the new decade will see a slew of kick-ass females (and not just simpering Bella-a-likes and rehashed vamp fiction) If I had a wish, it would be more diversity, more intelligence and more self-sufficiency. Women have come too far to be relegated back to damsel in distress status. ■



CREDITS: TANK GIRL by Jamie Hewlett. TANK GIRL and BATWOMAN - Titan Books.

