about comics as well as moving images when she concludes that contemporary lone wolf vengeance seekers are directly descended from "the Western hero."

Finally, Henry Jenkins writes movingly about his lifelong and yet often ambivalent engagement with superhero comics, in particular about the ways in which the genre's "death-defying superheroes helped me to model a process of letting go" as he watched his mother succumb to cancer. While his essay explores the complex relationship between time, history, and superheroes, it also delves into deeply personal territory and helps explain why some of us take the genre so seriously, even though it is steeped in the ephemeral.

Wonder Woman

GLORIA STEINEM

Reprinted by permission of the author from *Wonder Woman* (Bonanza Books, 1972), 2–7.

COMIC BOOKS WERE NOT QUITE RESPECTABLE, WHICH WAS A LARGE PART OF the reason I read them: under the covers with a flashlight, in the car while my parents told me I was ruining my eyes, in a tree or some other inaccessible spot; any place that provided sweet privacy and independence. Along with cereal boxes and ketchup labels, they were the primers that taught me how to read. They were even cheap enough to be the first items I could buy on my own; a customer whose head didn't quite reach the counter but whose dignity was greatly enhanced by making a selection (usually after much agonizing) and offering up money of her own.

If, as I have always suspected, children are simply short people—ancient spirits who happen to be locked up in bodies that aren't big enough or skillful enough to cope with the world—then the superhuman feats in comic books and fairy tales become logical and necessary. It's satisfying for anyone to have heroes who can see through walls or leap over skyscrapers in a single bound. But it's especially satisfying if our worldview consists mostly of knees and tying our shoes is still an exercise in frustration.

The trouble is that the comic book performers of such superhuman feats—and even of only dimly competent ones—are almost always heroes. Literally. The female child is left to believe that, even when her body is as grown up as her spirit, she will still be in the childlike role of helping with minor tasks, appreciating men's accomplishments, and being so incompetent and passive that she can only hope some man can come to her rescue. Of course, rescue and protection are comforting, even exhilarating experiences that should be and often are shared by men and boys. Even in comic books the hero is frequently called on to protect his own kind in addition to helpless women. But dependency and zero accomplishments get very dull as a steady diet. The only option for a girl reader is to identify with the male characters—pretty difficult, even in the androgynous years of childhood. If she can't do that, she

faces limited prospects: an ideal life of sitting around like a Technicolor clothes horse getting into jams with villains, and saying things like, "Oh Superman, I'll always be grateful to you." Even as her hero goes off to bigger and better adventures, it hardly seems worth learning to tie our shoes.

I'm happy to say that I was rescued from this plight at about the age of seven or eight. Rescued (Great Hera!) by a woman. Not only was she as wise as Athena and as lovely as Aphrodite, she had the speed of Mercury and the strength of Hercules. Of course, being an Amazon, she had a head start on such accomplishments, but she earned them in a human way by training in Greek-style contents of dexterity and speed with her Amazon sisters. (Somehow it always seemed boring to me that Superman was a creature from another planet, and therefore had bulletproof skin, X-ray vision, and the power to fly. Where was the contest?) This beautiful Amazon did have some fantastic gadgets to help her. An invisible plane that carried her through dimensions of time and space, a golden magic lasso, and bullet-proof bracelets. But she still had to get to the plane, throw the lasso with accuracy, and be agile enough to catch bullets on the steel-enclosed wrists.

Her creator had also seen straight into my heart and understood the secret fears of violence hidden there. No longer did I have to pretend to like the "power and crunch" style of Captain Marvel or the Green Hornet. No longer did I have nightmares after reading ghoulish comics filled with torture and mayhem. Comics made all the more horrifying by their real-life setting in World War II. (It was a time when leather-clad Nazis were marching in the newsreels *and* in the comics. And the blood on the pages seemed frighteningly real.) Here was a heroic person who might conquer with force, but only a force that was tempered by love and justice. She converted her enemies more often than not. And if they were destroyed, they did it themselves, usually in some unbloody accident.

She was beautiful, brave, and explicitly out to change "a world torn by hatreds and wars of men."

She was Wonder Woman.

Looking back now at these Wonder Woman stories from the forties, I am amazed by the strength of their feminist message. One typical story centers on Prudence, a young pioneer in the days of the American frontier. (Wonder Woman is transported there by her invisible plane, of course, which also served as a time machine.) Rescued by Wonder Woman, Prudence realizes her own worth and the worth of all women. "I've learned my lesson," she says proudly in the final scene. "From now own, I'll rely on myself, not on a man." In yet another episode, Wonder Woman says, "I can never love a dominant man who is stronger than I am." And throughout the strips, it is only the destructive criminal woman, the woman who has bought the whole idea that male means

aggression and female means submitting—who says "girls want superior men to boss them around."

Many of the plots revolve around evil men who treat women as inferior beings. In the end, all are brought to their knees and made to recognize women's strength and value. Some of the stories focus on weak women who are destructive and confused. These misled females are converted to self-reliance and self-respect through the example of Wonder Woman. The message of the strips is sometimes inconsistent and always oversimplified (these are, after all, comics), but it is still a passable version of the truisms that women are rediscovering today—that women are full human beings; that we cannot love others until we love ourselves; that love and respect can only exist between equals.

Wonder Woman's family of Amazons on Paradise Island, her band of college girls in America, and her efforts to save individual women are all welcome examples of women working together and caring about each other's welfare. The idea of such cooperation may not seem particularly revolutionary to the male reader. Men are routinely depicted as working well together, but women know how rare and therefore exhilarating the idea of sisterhood really is.

Wonder Woman's mother, Queen Hippolyte, offers yet another welcome example to young girls in search of a strong identity. Queen Hippolyte founds nations, wages war to protect Paradise Island, and sends her daughter off to fight the forces of evil in the world. Perhaps most impressive in an age fraught with Freudian shibboleths, she also marshals her queenly strength to protect her daughter in bad times. How many girl children grew to adulthood with no experience of a courageous and worldly mother, except in these slender stories? How many adult women disdain the birth of a female child, believe it is "better" to bear male children, and fear the competition and jealousy they have been conditioned to believe is "natural" to a mother and daughter? Feminism is just beginning to uncover the sense of anger and loss in girls whose mothers had no power to protect them in the world, and so trained them to be victims, or left them to identify with their fathers if they had any ambitions outside the traditional family role.

Wonder Woman symbolizes many of the values of the women's culture that feminists are now trying to introduce into the mainstream: strength and self-reliance for women; sisterhood and mutual support among women; peace, fullness and esteem for human life; a diminishment both of "masculine" aggression and of the belief that violence is the only way of solving conflicts.

Of course, the Wonder Women stories are not admirable in all ways. Many feminist principles are distorted or ignored. Thus, women are converted and saved; mad scientists, foreign spies, criminals, and other male villains are regularly brought to the point of renouncing violence and, more often, of saying, "You're right. Wonder Woman, I'll never make the mistake of thinking

women are inferior again." Is the reader supposed to conclude that women are superior? The Wonder Woman stories not only depict women as culturally different (in ways that are sometimes constructive and sometimes not), they also hint that women are biologically, and therefore immutably, superior to men.

Few modern feminists would agree. There are as yet no perfectly culture-free tests to prove to us which traits come from conditioning and which do not, but the consensus seems to be that society, not biology, assigns some human traits to males and others to females. Women have suffered from being taught to develop what society considers the less-valued traits of humanity, but this doesn't mean we want to switch to a sole claim on the "more valuable" ones either. That might accomplish nothing more than changing places with men in the hierarchy. Most feminist philosophy supposes that the hierarchy itself must be eliminated, and that individuals who are free of roles assigned because of sex or race will also be free to develop the full range of human qualities. It's the multitudinous differences in individuals that count, not the localized differences of sex or race.

For psychologist William Moulton Marston—who, under the pen name of "Charles Moulton," created Wonder Woman—females were sometimes romanticized as biologically and unchangeably superior. "Women," he wrote, "represent love. Men represent force. Man's use of force without love brings evil and unhappiness. Wonder Woman proves that women are superior to men because they have love in addition to force." If that's the case, then they were stuck with yet another social order based on birth.

For the purposes of most Wonder Women stories, however, the classic argument of nature versus nurture is a mere intellectual quibble. Just helping women to respect themselves, to use their strength and refuse domination by men is time-consuming enough. Wonder Woman rarely has the leisure to hint at what the future social order ought to be as for men. We do get the idea that they have some hope—even if vague—of collective redemption. "This man's world of yours," explains Wonder Woman, "will never be without pain and suffering until it learns respect for human rights." Put in more positive terms, this does seem to indicate that humanized men will have full membership in the new society.

Some of the Wonder Woman stories preach patriotism in a false way, but much of the blame rests with history. Wonder Woman was born in 1941, just about the time that World War II became a reality for most Americans, and she therefore had to spend much of her time protecting this country from foreign threats. Usually, that task boiled down to proving that women could be just as brave and loyal as men in the service of their country. Even when her adventures took place in other countries or at other times, they still invariably ended

with simplistic commercials about democracy. Although Wonder Woman was shocked by America's unjust patriarchal system—a shock she recorded on her arrival here from Paradise Island—she never had much opportunity to follow up on it. A nation mobilized for war is not a nation prepared to accept criticism. In fact, her costume was patterned after the American flag, and her wartime adventures sometimes had highly jingoistic and even racist overtones, especially when she was dealing with Japanese and Germans.

Compared to the other comic book characters of the period, however, Wonder Woman is still a relief. Marston invented her as a counter to the violence and "bloodcurdling masculinity" that pervaded most comic books, and he remained true to his purpose. Wonder Women and her sisters were allowed to use violence, but only in self-defense and only if it stopped short of actually killing someone. Most group conflicts between men and women were set not in America, but in a mythological past. Thus Mars, the god of war, periodically endangered the Amazon community and sometimes tried to disarm Queen Hippolyte through the ruses of love. Mars, of course, was the "heavy." He preached that women "are the natural spoils of war" and must remain at home, the helpless slaves of the male victors. Marston used Mars as the symbol of everything Wonder Woman must fight against, but he also gave the god of war a rationale for his beliefs that was really the female superiority argument all over again. If women were allowed to become warriors like the Amazons, they would grow stronger than men, and put an end to war. What future for an unemployed god?

The inconsistencies in Wonder Woman's philosophy are especially apparent in her love life. It is confused, to say the least. Sometimes her adventures with Steve, the pilot she is supposedly "in love" with, bear a feminist message, and sometimes they simper and go conventional in a way that contradicts everything that has gone before. In her American disguise as mild-mannered Diana Prince (a clear steal from Superman), she plays the classic feminine role: secretary, nurse, and worshipful, unrequited sidekick to Steve. The implicit moral is that, at least as Wonder Woman, she can love only an equal. But an equal never turns up, and sometimes she loses her grip on herself and falls for the masculine notion that there must be a permanent winner and a permanent loser, and conqueror and a conquered. "Some girls love to have a man stronger than they are to make them do things," she muses aloud. "Do I like it? I don't know. It's sort of thrilling. But isn't it more fun to make a man obey?"

I remember being worried by these contradictions. How could Wonder Woman be interested in Steve, who seemed so weak and so boring? Did women really have to live in a community by themselves—a separate country like Paradise Island—in order to be both happy and courageous? The very fact that the ideal was an island—insular, isolated, self-contained, cut-off—both

pleased and bothered me. And why, when she chose an earthly disguise, did Wonder Woman have to pick such a loser? How could she bear to be like Diana Prince? Did that mean that all women really had to disguise their true selves in weak feminine stereotypes in order to survive?

But all these doubts paled beside the relief, the sweet vengeance, the toe-wriggling pleasure of reading about a woman who was strong, beautiful, courageous, and a fighter for social justice. A woman who strode forth, stopping wars and killing with one hand, distributing largesse and compassionate aid with the other. A Wonder Woman.

In 1947, William Marston died, leaving his heroine in the hands of writers who didn't really understand his spirit. Gradually, her feminist orientation began to wane. She became simultaneously more submissive to men. I don't remember the transition very well possibly because I myself was on the verge of adolescence and was therefore putting comic books behind me. Or possibly because the comparatively free years of my childhood were at an end. Like Wonder Woman, the full impact of the feminine role was beginning to close around me. Now I was thirteen and made to see that the idea of accomplishing anything on my own was at best eccentric and at worst impossible. Recognition, and status through men, was the best possibility; it was also socially rewarded and socially enforced. Both Wonder Woman and I fell into some very hard times in the 1950s.

Looking at her most recent adventures is even more discouraging. By 1968, she had given up her magic lasso, her bracelets, her invisible plane, and all her superhuman Amazonian powers. She had become Diana Prince, a mere mortal who walked about in boutique clothes and took the advice of a male mastermind named "I Ching." She still had adventures and she had learned something about karate. But any attractive man could disarm her. She was a female James Bond—but far more boring since she was denied his sexual freedom. She had become a simpleminded "good girl."

In 1973, Wonder Woman comics will be born again; I hope with the feminism and strength of the original Wonder Woman—my Wonder Woman—restored. But regardless of her future, the original adventures of the golden forties will remain classics for children, boys as well as girls, and perhaps for many heroine-starved and nostalgic grownups as well. If we had all read more about Wonder Woman and less about Dick and Jane, the new wave of the feminist revolution might have happened less painfully and sooner.

Wonder Woman is a comic book character. She and her Amazon sisters are fictional creations. Indeed, Amazons have generally been considered figments of the imagination, perhaps the mythological evidence of man's fear of woman. Yet there is a tentative but growing body of anthropological and archeological evidence to support the theory that Amazon societies were real;

they did exist. German and Brazilian scientists exploring the jungles of Brazil, for instance, recently came upon the caves of what appears to have been an all-female society. The caves are strikingly devoid of the usual phallic design and theme. They feature, instead, the triangular female symbol. (The only cave that does bear male designs is believed to have been the copulatorium.)

Though the Brazilian research is still too indefinite for conclusions, there are many evidences of the existence of Amazon societies in all parts of the world. Being a writer, not a scientist tied to proven fact, I have fused the sometimes contradictory versions of Amazonia into one amalgam; into a story that sounds right to me in the way that a dream interpretation or a race-memory seems suddenly, thuddingly right as it strikes off our subconscious. Much of it has been proved, but I tell it as a story.

Once upon a time, the many cultures of this world were all part of the gynocratic age. Paternity had not yet been discovered, and it was thought (as it still is in some tribal cultures) that women bore fruit like trees—when they were ripe. Childbirth was mysterious, it was vital and it was envied. Women were worshipped because of it, were considered superior because of it. Men prayed to female gods and, in their religious ceremonies, imitated the act of birth (as many tribesmen still do). In such a world, the only clear grouping was that of mothers and children. Men were on the periphery—an interchangeable body of workers for, and worshippers of, the female center, the principle of life.

The discovery of paternity, of sexual cause and childbirth effect, was as cataclysmic for society as, say, the discovery of fire or the shattering of the atom. Gradually, the idea of male ownership of children took hold. With it came the idea of private property that could be passed down to children. If paternity was to be unquestioned, then women had to be sexually restricted. This was the origin of marriage.

Gynocracy also suffered from the periodic invasions of nomadic tribes. Gynocracies were probably stable and peaceful agricultural societies since agriculture was somewhat more—though not totally—a female occupation. Nomadic tribes survived by hunting, which was somewhat more—though not totally—a male occupation. The conflict between the hunters and the growers was really the conflict between male-dominated and female-dominated cultures.

Restricted by new systems of marriage as well as by occasional pregnancies, women gradually lost their freedom, mystery, and superior position. For five thousand years or more, the gynocratic age had flowered in peace and productivity. Slowly, in varying stages and in different parts of the world, the social order was painfully reversed. Women became the underclass, marked by their visible differences regardless of whether they had children. Often, the

patriarchal take-over of female-dominated societies was accomplished violently. Everywhere, fear of goddesses, of women's magical procreative powers, and of the old religions caused men to suppress the old social order very cruelly indeed.

Some women resisted the patriarchal age. They banded together to protect their female-centered culture and religions from a more violent, transient, and male-centered way of life. Men were dangerous, to be tolerated only during periodic mating ceremonies. The women themselves became adept at self-defense.

These were backlash cultures, doomed by their own imbalance, but they did survive in various groupings on every continent for many thousands of years. Why don't they turn up in history? For one reason, most of their existence was lived in those thousands of years dismissed as *pre*history—that is, preliterate. The few records that are available to us were written under the patriarchal assumptions of a much later age. Even archeology and anthropology have suffered from the fundamental, almost subconscious assumption that male and female roles as we see them in the patriarchal age are "natural"; therefore, they must have been the same in the prehistoric past. Only lately have we begun to question and check out those assumptions. Large, strong, and presumably male skeletons from prehistoric sites, for instance, have turned out on closer examination to be female after all.

Mythology is a collective human memory that has, on other occasions, turned out to be accurate about invasions, great floods, and the collision of stars. The Amazon cultures may also one day be proven as fact. Meanwhile, the fascination that brings them up as fantasy again and again may itself be some psychic evidence of their existence.

If so, Wonder Woman becomes just one small, isolated outcropping of a larger human memory, and the girl children who love her are responding to one small echo of dreams and capabilities in their own forgotten past.

Invisible Girl

LILLIAN ROBINSON

Reprinted by permission from *Wonder Women: Feminisms and Superheroes* (Routledge, 2004), 88–94.

WHAT MAY BE CALLED THE NEW MARVEL ATTITUDE BEGINS WITH THE CREATION in 1961 of *The Fantastic Four*, with mutations, internecine insults, ambivalence, and irony all over the text, but drawn in the traditional adventure or detective comics mode. The first major change in artistic style did not occur until well into the 1960s, after the success of Pop Art. I do not insist on this "post-Pop ergo propter Pop" argument, but it seems to me suggestive, not only of a seismic shift in visual approach, but of the growing importance of the visual domain that was later to mark the "Revelation" phase of comic book history in general and the female superhero experience in particular.

Marvel's first female superhero, Invisible Girl, preceded the moment of Wonder Woman's feminist renewal by more than a decade. Invisible Girl was subsequently—and significantly—to become Invisible Woman who, as wife, mother, and superhero, remains one of the Fantastic Four. Along with the other mutants in that group, she was "transformed by an accident in outer space into something much more than human" and has "vowed to use . . . [her] awesome power to help mankind chart the unknown" (#357, October 1991). And, as is the case with the other Fantastics, her particular superpower is an extension of her salient premutation qualities. Sue Storm was a distinctly—almost pathologically—shy and retiring girl. Her invisibility, along with some additional powers, enabled her to help "chart the unknown" on behalf of "mankind," and, in the process, vanquish technologically and cybernetically sophisticated villains, who often possessed convoluted motives of their own. These included but were by no means limited to the alien Skrulls and the human Dr. Doom. Her role and powers increased with time and become most interesting in the period from 1968 on. Throughout, Sue's visible dimension, when not in action, includes no signs of exceptional bodily powers, although, like the latter-day Wonder Woman, she evidently frequents a reputable health club.