

‘WWWWD: What Would Wonder Woman Do?’ An interview with Trina Robbins

Olivia Hicks (University of Dundee) and Julia Round (Bournemouth University)

Trina Robbins is a comics creator, historian and activist. A long-time champion for female creators and readers, Trina has written and drawn pioneering feminist and LGBT comics in addition to reimagining iconic female super-heroines such as Wonder Woman. She spoke to Julia Round on 24 August 2016.

What initially drew you to comics?

My mother was a second-grade schoolteacher and she taught me to read at the age of 4, and that’s probably the greatest gift anyone has ever given me. Well, actually, the greatest gift anybody ever gave me was also from my mother and that was being born! But after that, learning to read at 4. I was reading way ahead of my age; I was reading everything. I was reading all the books in the house, and of course I was reading comics. Those were the days when they thought that comics were not good for kids; and a lot of people probably do still think that, but because I read everything, my parents weren’t afraid I would just read comics and never read anything else. So I had no problems from them, no objections.

Do you remember what sort of comics you were reading early on?

The earliest were comics that my mother bought for me. I really loved the *Raggedy Ann* book and so my mother got me the comics – there were *Raggedy Ann* comics. They were great! *Our Gang* was another. Just the young cute animal, cute comics. As soon as I was old enough to cross two streets (which was where the candy store was, which was where I got my comics), and I had an allowance, I would go myself and pick up books. And basically what I would pick up was anything that had a girl on the cover. Not as in being shot or being rescued or anything, but a girl as the heroine of the book. I’m about ten at this point; Timely, which later became Marvel Comics, published an enormous amount of teenage girl comics at that period. The most well known are the *Patsy Walker* and *Milly the Model* comics, but they had so many and they all had girls’ names like *Jeanie* and *Kathy* and kind of similar to England, where you had all those girls’ magazines with comics in them, and the British girls’ comics named *Bunty* and *Judy* and all that.

So ours were not like your British ones but they were similar in that they all starred teenage girls – so I bought those like mad, of course. You know 10-year-old girls all loved teenage girls and wanted to be like them. Once I’d used those up and there were no more comics to buy, I discovered the super-heroines. There weren’t a lot of super-heroines but of course there was Wonder Woman, who was fantastic. The other super-heroine I really loved was named Mary Marvel, Captain Marvel’s sister. And what was so cool about her was that she was a *girl*; she didn’t even have breasts. She must have been about 12, and it kind of told me that I was still a girl and maybe I could be a super-heroine too; I didn’t have to grow up to be a super-heroine. I just needed to know the magic word – because her magic word was ‘Shazam’, and, you know, maybe I would have a magic word, maybe all of us have a magic word. So those two, and then also I discovered the *Jungle Girl* comics – you know *Sheena*

Queen of the Jungle? I adored them. I mean, my fantasy was living in the jungle in a treehouse with my pet chimpanzee and swinging from vine to vine.

What's interesting about what you were saying is that these weren't sidekick characters. These were lead characters...

Oh yes, every one of them – every one of them, of course.

Wonder Woman is, of course, one of the most iconic female super-heroines we have, and you have both written and drawn her. What was the attraction to you about Wonder Woman?

Oh God, I always loved Woman Women since I discovered her at the age of 10. I mean, first of all it was through Wonder Woman that I learned about Amazons. Good heavens – what a great concept or what a great myth or what a great story! That there are these beautiful, wonderful women warriors and they live on an island on which no man is allowed. And, you know, I grew up in a time where there was a lot of places where no girl was allowed. I grew up under the assumption that although it says anybody could grow up to be President, really only boys could grow up to be President. That was the accepted assumption – no one even questioned it, you know? So there was this island and it was reversed; and the women were superior and no men were allowed. And, you know, if you are into mythology – I mean, I'm totally into Joseph Campbell, I love Joseph Campbell – and Wonder Woman conforms to all the rules basically, all the statements he makes about the hero. She is born of a virgin and a deity and, not only that, but the deity, the virgin Queen Hippolyta, sculpts her out of clay. Adam's made out of clay, you know. There are a lot of heroes that are made out of clay, or out of the dirt. And then, in her case, the other parent, the deity, is a woman – Aphrodite – that breathes the breath of life into her, so this is like a lesbian birth, you know. She has two mothers and, you know – going back to Joseph Campbell – she receives the hero's call when Trevor's plane crashes and she goes to the wounded country, America, fighting for its life against the Axis. She goes to the wounded country to make it better, to heal it...and she's a princess. Who doesn't love a princess?!

Do you think it's those things that allow her to continue to hold the public's imagination?

Well, there have been times when she has been so badly misused – you know, decades when she has been misused by men, by male writers who just totally do not understand her and often, I think, resent her and don't even like her. But she is iconic and she is different from the other super heroines. I mean, her costume is iconic and this is another thing – the men who get control of her, who write her or draw her, one way they show their resentment is often by trying to remove her iconic costume and put her in something really dopey. They are always trying to redesign her costume – but it's iconic.

When you were working with her what did you really want to do with her in the storylines and the artwork you produced?

Well, the four part series that I drew was merely my sort of homage to Harry G. Peter, who was the original Wonder Woman artist. His work is so closely associated with William Moulton Marston, in the same way that Tenniel is so closely associated with Lewis Carroll. The two of them are iconic together, you know? So I wanted to do a homage to Harry G. Peter, which I did; the others were simply stories I wanted to tell. The one that I wrote that Colleen Doran drew, it was really great to just make this statement, and the last few that I have done – I guess I have done three at this point; one of them has not come out yet – were stories that I wanted to tell. What I always think is, you know, WWWWD: What Would Wonder Woman Do? I mean, she is compassionate – people, a lot of the guys who write her, have forgotten this – you know that she would rather not fight, she only fights as a last resort and she uses her bracelet to defend herself and defend others.

Moving on from that to other recent work, let's talk about the romance genre, because you recently contributed to 'Secret Loves of Geek Girls'. In the past, romance comics have been denounced by some feminist critics for conservative attitudes and the traditional path of romance and love, marriage and so forth. Is that fair or is there a new breed of romance writers?

Oh no, it's absolutely true, except for now. The first romance came out in the late '40s, after the war. And if you read those books from the late '40s and through the '50s, you will see that the message is 'no matter who you are, no matter what you do, you are not going to find true happiness unless you meet the right man and get married and settle down and raise a family' – because that's what they needed women to do. They had sent them out of the factories and back to the kitchen; the guys wanted their jobs back, the women needed to make families and repopulate America, and that's what they were pushing, that's what everyone was pushing. And the accepted attitude was – even if you have a great position, a career – when you get married you are going to stay home and raise the kids. There is a movie that I can't even remember the name of...it's from World War II and this woman is a war correspondent and she is really, you know, amazing for her time, she is a war correspondent but she falls in love with this guy and the guy says something like, 'Would you be willing to give all this up for the right man?' – isn't that awful?! I mean, the right man doesn't have to give anything up; but she has to.

What about now? Is there a new breed of romance writing that's coming out that is different?

Of course. We don't fall for that propaganda and it isn't given to us. It's old propaganda; nobody tells us this anymore. What's more, you can love whoever you want, you know. Women can love women, men can love men. Love is here to stay, as the song goes. You know people still fall in love and they always will fall in love.

I think this feeds into the next question, which is that it probably is quite important what we give our children and in particular our girls.

Well, as I said before, young girls and adolescent girls love teenagers, they do, they just love teenage girls. So it's important to have comics about girls for them, comics they can relate to. We went through an awful period with comics, and with Saturday morning cartoons, too; that was the '80s and '90s – that was really the dark ages. When they talk about propaganda, I don't know who it is who dispelled this propaganda but it was accepted by people that (1) girls don't read comics, which is bullshit because we all read comics when we were kids, and that (2) boys will not watch a Saturday morning cartoon that stars a girl – but girls will watch Saturday morning cartoons that star boys. More bullshit. They were watching them because there was nothing else for them to watch; so, in desperation, they watched the ones that starred boys. These were excuses to not to have to do anything for girls, who were treated like stepchildren. There was nothing out there for them. So yes, they need comics, Saturday morning cartoons, they need movies – Disney has wised up. Look at all those great movies that Disney is doing now, not just about princesses who are rescued by Prince Charming.

How much has gender parity and sexism in comics changed since your early days?

Oh, enormously, it has changed enormously. I mean, comics are a pleasure right now. It took them a while, maybe, because they were a little dim, but the mainstream companies, the big two, have finally, finally understood that when there are comics that girls like to read, girls will read comics. It's as simple as that, you know. And there are comics starring girls, not just written and drawn by women, but by men, too; really good ones. I think *Paper Girls*, which I believe is drawn by Cliff Chiang [and written by Brian K. Vaughan], is wonderful and I love it. There are all these books now [...] that are just so girl-friendly, it's a pleasure.

But in terms of female creators, there seem to be very few women perhaps getting the recognition that the male artists had traditionally had. And the biggest awards tend to go to male creators. You will have heard about Angoulême this year. As you have been particularly active in getting women into the Hall of Fame and so on, what are your thoughts on that?

Well, that is pretty pathetic. I mean, there were exactly four women at the Will Eisner Hall of Fame, and that's a sad statement. I'm happy that I'm one of them but I can think of other women who really should be there, who should be put into the Will Eisner Hall of Fame while they are still here to appreciate the honour – rather than waiting for people to die and then giving them the award.

Absolutely. Have there been particular disappointments you would like to mention, or particular successes?

Well, every year I push for Lily Renée to be inducted into the Will Eisner Hall of Fame – she is in her middle 90s by now – I think she is about 96 – and she's incredible. She was a refugee, a World War II refugee. She was a teenage Jewish girl in Vienna in 1938 when the Nazis marched in, and she escaped to England via a Kinder Transport in 1939 and then

eventually to America, where she wound up drawing comics; this was during the war. And because a lot of the male cartoonists were of draft age, they were either enlisted or drafted to fight overseas, and, as in every other industry – as in the factories and, you know, driving trucks and making planes and ships – the women came into this work that the men had done, and it was the same in comics. The comic book companies hired more women during the war than they had ever hired before, and one of them was Lily Renée. She went to work for Fiction House, which, out of all the publishers, had more women drawing for them than any other publisher – bravo for Fiction House. These were the people who printed *Sheena, Queen of the Jungle*, so there you go. Lily and the other women, they were really great artists and they wrote really great stories starring women – starring women who were in control, starring women who didn't need to be rescued, and Lily, of all of them, Lily was the best. She was the only one who was so good that they let her do covers. And she's still with us and should be inducted into the Will Eisner Hall of Fame while she is still with us.

I completely agree. Linking to that, recently there have been a number of female-focused exhibitions. What is your feeling about these women-only shows of comics? Is there a danger it might ghettoize the female contributor?

Not at all. I hear women say that: the occasional woman says, 'I don't want any part of it because it ghettoizes' – stuff and nonsense!! If it weren't for these exhibitions, would women be exhibited? Period. I see anthologies of poetry by African American lesbian women poets and they don't say, 'I'm being ghettoized', you know?

How do your work as a comics historian, your activism and your comics work influence each other? Do they provide different rewards working in these different areas? Or do you view it all as the same thing?

But they are all connected, you know, all connected. I mean, the writing that I do, the comics that I write, I do so because I love to write. The history that I write is because once I've started researching women cartoonists, it has uncovered such a vast, wonderful...wonderland, really, so much to learn and so much to discover, and so exciting. And, of course, I want to share it; I want people to know about all these wonderful women. Activism, well, it's – am I an activist? I don't know. I speak up. I have always spoken up.

Can you talk a little bit about the work or works that you are most proud of – where you felt that you achieved exactly what you wanted to do?

I think that what I am most proud of are the two non-profit collections that I edited or co-edited in the late '80s, I think it was, when AIDS was a horrible scourge. I was in England at a convention and I saw a book called *Strip AIDS* that was published by a Don Melia and Lionel Gracey Whitman, and it was comics, and all the profits went to benefit AIDS charities and causes. I looked at it and I thought it was a wonderful thing, but there was one problem with it, which was that the comics weren't about the subject; they were not about AIDS. They were just people's comics, drawings. And I felt, 'We can do this in America' and we should do it – but the comics should be about AIDS. That's the whole point.

I came home from Britain and the first thing I did was call my friend Robert Triptow, who was the editor of *Gay Comics*, because I knew there had to be a huge contribution from the gay community. Then someone told me that Bill Sienkiewicz, a really good mainstream artist in New York, was talking about doing something like this. I called him and said, 'Would you join us?' So there were three editors – I was one of the editors – and Ron Turner at Last Gasp was the publisher. When I phoned him and asked him if he would do this non-profit book, he didn't even let me finish my sentence before he said, 'Yes'. That was so nice, so nice, and we put together *Strip AIDS USA*, and all the comics were about AIDS, were about the subject, and we made a lot of money for AIDS-related causes. So I'm very proud of that. The other one I was very proud of was a pro-choice book – this was around 1990, when the Supreme Court passed this ruling, I don't remember the official name, but it was usually called the Webster decision. And what it did was put abortion decisions in the hands of each state rather than federal. And we knew right then and there what it was going to lead to, and it did. If you know what is going on here – there are states that are doing their damndest to get rid of abortion completely. And they are doing it because they can, because the right wing whine and the women-haters whine and because they can do – because of the Webster decision. That was 26 years ago. We knew what this would lead to. There were quite a few demonstrations, pro-choice demonstrations, when that decision was passed, and [because I had co-edited *Strip AIDS USA*] they were going 'Trina! Someone must do a benefit book for this! Trina!' That was funny. OK, I guess they want me to do this – so I guess I should do it! I did the editing and I co-published it with a woman called Liz Shiller who just happened to be the treasurer of the Oaklands NOW, the National Organization for Women. So we did it as a benefit for the National Organization for Women; we worked very closely with the president of San Francisco NOW on the book and we raised money, which we donated to the National Organization for Women. Those are the two things I'm proudest about.

Moving on to what you are working on now, can you tell me a bit about your current projects? What attracted you to them?

Yes, I have four books coming out in 2017 – it's quite bizarre. I mean, suddenly I'm in my old age and suddenly I'm very popular and I'm kind of thinking that's because I'm still alive or something! But it's nice; I feel very justified and it's good to feel justified. Because I've been through it: criticizing rape and mutilation and torture of women being portrayed as something funny. And I've criticized it, but because I've criticized it I've been called a censor and far worse. But anyway, yeah, it feels good to be popular. So I have four books coming out in 2017 and one of them is a memoir [*Last Girl Standing*].

What is the scope and focus of your memoir? Is it based on the comic industry or is it bigger?

Oh, it's much bigger; it's based on my life. It starts as a shy kid discovering comics, and me being a bohemian and discovering science fiction and being a science fiction fan. And living in the Sunset Strip and making clothes for rock'n'rollers and coming to New York and being connected with the underground newspaper in the '60s, and opening a boutique and making clothes and getting into comics and coming here to San Francisco and facing a lot of exclusion from the boys and not giving up and all of it.

The second book is called *Babes in Arms* and it's a collection of the work of four women cartoonists; I was talking about how in World War II there were more women drawing for comic books than ever before and what they drew invariably were women, were heroines who were courageous and beautiful and rescued themselves. So these four women who drew women fighting the Axis, women fighting the fascists, and kind of symbolically – Lily Renée was one of them, and especially in the case of Lily, because she had been persecuted by the Nazis – she is fighting back with paper and ink. They were fighting the war with ink on paper, these women.

Who were the other three women that are in it?

Jill Elgin, Barbara Hall and Fran Hopper. And Fran is still with us also; she is in her 90s. So I really hope that these women can just hang on a little bit longer for this book to come out for them to see their work.

What are the other two projects that you are working on?

OK, *Dope*, my 1980s serialized adaptation of Sax Rohmer's novel, is finally being reprinted in graphic novel form. I did this back in the '80s in the hopes that it could all be collected into graphic novel form. It was being published by Clips, one of the many independent comic publishers that had sprung up in the '80s. They were great, they were very inclusive; they invited me into their books, which not everyone did. They were willing to take a chance on me, so I adapted this wonderfully pulpy 1919 book by Sax Rohmer, who was a very successful pulp writer. And I think that my art was at its best in the 1980s. So Drew Ford, who has a very small publishing company called It's Alive, is reprinting it.

And what's the final project?

I am so excited about this; I'm excited about all of them, but I'm so excited about this one. My father came from a small village in what is now Belarus and came to America at the age of 16. The little villages are called *shtetl*, I don't know if you are familiar with that. Anyway, he wrote in Yiddish, he was a Yiddish writer – it was almost like underground comics, you don't exactly get paid for this. And in 1938 he published a book in Yiddish. Now I was an ungrateful little shit of a daughter who was actually embarrassed that her father wrote in Yiddish, because I wanted to be American. So I wanted nothing to do with it, and as a result I had nothing to do with it. I mean, it was published before I was born but, I mean, I just didn't care that my father wrote in Yiddish. And so years go by and my father is gone and my attitude is that, 'There's this book he wrote but I will never know', you know, because what could be more obscure than a 1938 book published in Yiddish? Well, my daughter, who is a much better daughter than I was, found it on the Internet. It was reprinted, a print on demand, believe it or not! In Yiddish! I bought a bunch and had it translated and it turns out to be these snapshots of life in the *shtetl* before all the terrible things happened. They didn't know this was a way of life that was going to end, they didn't know the Nazis were going to come in, they didn't know that anyone who didn't make it to America would die. So it's kind of poignant, and it's kind of funny because the people he is writing about, he kind of does make

fun of them and they are funny people. And then there is this small section at the end – 75 per cent of it is life in the *shtetl* and the other 25 per cent is here, is New York, you know, the late '20s, early '30s. So I read it and I said, 'Oh my God, this has to be a graphic novel!' So that's what I've done, I've adapted it into chapters and I have found artists – twelve artists – to draw it, and it is going to be published – well, it's going to be a Kickstarter in October. And it's being published by Hope Nicolson, who also published *The Secret Life of Geek Girls*.

What's it called?

It's called *A Minyan Yidn (Un Andere Zacken)*, which loosely translates as *A Bunch of Jews (and Other Stuff)*. As I was adapting it, I just kept thinking *Fiddler on the Roof*; I wanted Chagall to do the cover but, alas, he was unavailable. But that's how I see it, you know.

So is it largely your father's words that you have taken for the adaptation?

I used his work whenever possible; occasionally he would do something where he would telegraph a punchline, so I would change that so the punchline was where it belonged. You know, just little stuff like that, just moving a couple of stuff around, but none of it is my writing. Some of it may be my editing – a lot of editing – but not my writing. It's his.

Finally, what comic are you reading at the moment and what is on your all-time must-read list?

Well, I did read the latest *Paper Girls* and a beautiful graphic novel called *Nimona* [by Noelle Stevenson]. It is lovely, the artwork is beautiful. It's very appealing to a big audience at the moment as well, and it's got that kind of edgy thing going on which I like.

What about your all-time list? What would you recommend to anybody?

Well, of course I would suggest reprints of all the 1940s *Wonder Woman* comics – all of the ones written by Marston and drawn by Peter. Of course, there are the classics, you know, the same old classics – Alison Bechdel, Marjane Satrapi – but there is so much more. I would have to sit down and really think about that!

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