

# Our Friend of the Mists

Julia Round

**In the late 1970s, a beautiful dark-haired woman wearing flowing robes and a star charm necklace invited young girls into a world of supernatural tales. Misty, the host of the eponymous comic, was one of the figureheads of a thriving global business that is mostly forgotten today. Although there's a preconception that girls' comics from 1970s Britain were all about horses and ballet, *Misty* echoed the types of horror that were developing in other media, reflecting social issues that were coming to the fore and, perhaps more importantly, tackling the uncanny aspects of girlhood.**

Figure 1

Cover of *Misty* #59. Art by J. Ariza, recoloured by Jack Cunningham/Ted Andrews. Reproduced with permission of Misty™ Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd.; copyright © Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd., all rights reserved.

*Come to my world of stardust where the bats fly high and all the other creatures of the night loom from the darkest shadows, a world of fear and nightmare where nobody is safe except myself and those who dare to tread my misty ways.  
Come then... if you are brave enough, follow your friend,  
Misty*

(*Misty* #37)

So began every issue of *Misty*: enticing young girls into a thrilling and fear-filled world where each week the comic's host—a beautiful dark-haired woman—charmed and challenged her readers with a selection of spine-tingling tales. The stories in *Misty* came in two formats: spooky serials about magical items, hidden powers, or mysterious secrets, and vicious one-shot stories where (anti-)heroines would learn a lesson or be punished for a mistake or misdeed. Nothing was out of bounds: reincarnation, schoolgirl sacrifice, parallel dimensions where the Nazis won the war, and deals with the devil were all themes that appeared in its serials. The single stories were even more extreme: television addicts might be sucked into their screens; delinquents trapped in the objects they vandalised or stole; animal abusers changed into hunted beasts; and those who indulged in vanity, pride, greed, or gluttony received poetic justice in the form of horrific ugliness, transformation, or even death.

For the two years that it was published, *Misty* pushed at the boundaries of horror and gothic for girls, gaining an obsessive fanbase and leaving an inspirational legacy. Its stories were reprinted

in European comics during the 1980s. By the early 2000s, websites and fanzines appeared, followed by online campaigns calling for its return. Collections of reprinted and new material followed. Today, like the ghosts that graced its pages, *Misty* has risen from the dead. But what was so appealing about its supernatural stories, and what do they tell us about the concerns and conventions of 1970s Britain?

## **A Magical Misty Tour**

British girls' comics began in 1950, when Amalgamated Press revived their text story paper *School Friend* as a weekly comic book. The following decades saw many other titles appear, developing in waves: from conservative school stories to kitchen sink dramas of class and exclusion to romance comics. The mystery and horror wave would peak in the late 1970s with the publication of *Spellbound* (DC Thomson, 1976-78) and *Misty* (IPC, 1978-80). Although older comics such as *Diana* (DC Thomson, 1963-76) and *June and School Friend* (Amalgamated Press, 1965-74) had told spooky stories and traumatic tales, these were often kept in a separate section and framed by a storyteller who addressed the reader directly: *June and School Friend* introduced "The Storyteller" in January 1965 as narrator of "The STRANGEST Stories Ever Told"; meanwhile, *Diana* had "The Man in Black", a vampiric character with widow's peak and fanged teeth, who told supernatural tales of girls pursued by witches' covens, or enslaved by the magical objects they discover.

Although girls' comics often dived with danger and drama, *Spellbound* was the first comic to focus entirely on the supernatural and mysterious. It also featured a horror host in the section "Chilling Tales of Mystery": Damian Darke, an elderly man in Victorian attire who had a raven on his shoulder and read spooky stories from a bound tome. These were often ghost stories that ended on ambivalence, as Darke asked readers to decide whether the supernatural events happened or were just in their imagination.

The rivalry between publishers DC Thomson and IPC (Fleetway) pushed the British comic industry to great creative heights, and each new title was met with a response by the other publisher. *Misty* was created to compete with *Spellbound*. Its co-creator Wilf Prigmore remembers being asked to produce a mystery title, building on Pat Mills' idea for a girls' horror comic. Mills, a comic creator and editor who had just launched the sci-fi-themed *2000 AD*, wanted a girls' comic that retold psychological thrillers and horrors for a much younger audience, including his new serial "Moonchild" (a reworking of Stephen King's *Carrie*). But this wasn't quite what the publishers wanted, and the project was handed on to Prigmore and the subsequent editorial team of Malcolm Shaw (editor), Bill Harrington (sub-editor), Jack Cunningham (art editor) and Ted Andrews (art assistant). These four would produce *Misty* for

most of its run, creating the blend of supernatural mysteries and shocking cautionary tales that made it so popular, alongside its alluring host and guide, Misty herself.

### **Sisters of the Mists**

[Figure 2 ]

Inside cover of *Misty* #37. Art by Shirley Bellwood, text by Malcolm Shaw, layout and calligraphy by Jack Cunningham. Reproduced with permission of Misty™ Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd.; copyright © Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd., all rights reserved.

Misty was a unique character—a combination of cover girl, horror host, and fictional editor of the comic. She came about almost by accident, after the comic’s name was decided and ideas for an older male host were rejected as “too creepy”. Although the writers originally imagined her as a ghost, this swiftly changed. She appeared on the inside cover of each issue, drawn by the romance comics artist and famous portraitist Shirley Bellwood. These pictures were set in wild, natural places, such as a lake, forest, mountain, or ruins, showing Misty dancing, walking, or gazing dreamily at the landscape (or at us). Her long black hair, flowing robes and star charm necklace all fit with the iconography of pagan witchcraft, while her gentle and attractive qualities spoke to the 1970s feminist reclamation of the witch as a positive force associated with nature and spirituality. Misty consistently named herself “your friend” and presented herself as a guide or companion, addressing readers as her “children” or “sisters” of the mists. She always spoke directly to readers, using mystical language and often challenged them to take some action: to “be my companion”, “take my hand”, “follow” or “come with me”. Her words emphasised time and place, the body, and the journey. In this way, she framed the comic as a supernatural space that readers could only visit with her, daring them to venture there.

Her poetic welcomes created a rich supernatural mythology that her audience was desperate to explore. From the very first issue, Misty teased “[p]erhaps one day I’ll tell you my story”. Naming herself a “[c]hild of the mists, born on the very first midnight hour”, she welcomed us from places such as the Willows of Wistfulness, the Pool of Life, and the Cavern of Dreams, all within her realm. She never defined its location, suggesting instead that it shadows ours (“...if you see me it will be in dreams or perhaps the briefest glimpse on a misty day”). Readers rose to the challenge, sending in poems and filling the letters page with questions and guesses about her life and background (“[were you] found as a baby in the pool of life by the mother of the mists and she brought you up to become a sister of the mists”), but also seemed aware that this was a game they could never win (“I hope you *don’t* tell us your story because I like to think of you as something strange with no story to tell”). Through Misty herself, the supernatural became political (as an example of 1970s feminist counterculture) and personal (as an inspiration to her readers to think creatively and help shape her mythology through the questions they asked).

**PULL QUOTE: Misty framed the comic as a supernatural space that readers could only visit with her, daring them to venture there. Her poetic welcomes created a rich supernatural mythology that her audience was desperate to explore.**

### **Contemporary fears**

Misty's main function was to guide and reassure readers in an unpredictable realm, often inspired by the contemporary fears of 1970s Britain. While the decade saw technological innovations, foreign travel, and important liberal legislation emerging, poverty, racism and terrorism were also foregrounded. Some of *Misty's* supernatural stories reflected these fears: "The Cats of Carey Street", for example, alludes to the threat of poverty and homelessness, with Jackie's gran terrorised into leaving the street she grew up on—until the local cats get involved.

The violence and delinquency in *Misty* also comment on a moral panic around youth culture. The *Misty* serials often have bullying antagonists (working-class Norma in "Moonchild" and Fat Rosie in "Hush, Hush, Sweet Rachel" are both good examples). The single stories, however, are more likely to have delinquent protagonists: in "The Revenge of Granny Godber" a gang of girls smash up an old lady's shopping, but then get a long and painful payback as she casts a spell on them while picking flowers in her garden, leaving them in agonising pain and decaying like cut plants. There is also a strong strand of environmental and animal rights stories, such as "The Experiment", where Fleur wakes one day to find that she is trapped in a fake plastic house and dies trying to escape, revealing alien scientists who observe "Don't be silly, tiny creatures can't think and feel in the way that we do" alongside an image of a caged rat.

[Figure 3]

'The Cats of Carey Street', *Misty* #34. Art by Mario Capaldi, writer unknown. Reproduced with permission of Misty™ Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd.; copyright © Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd., all rights reserved.

These cautionary tales with pursued heroines and ambiguous or unhappy endings have a lot in common with 1970s public information films, which were broadcast on television and shown in schools to warn children of dangers such as drowning, electrocution, strangers, and fireworks.

### **Rewriting Horror**

If television shows such as *Children of the Stones* (1977) were reframing pagan folk horror for a young audience, *Misty* also followed this tactic, adapting many established horror texts into new forms for young readers. Serials such as "The Body Snatchers" (*Invasion of the Bodysnatchers*), "Moonchild" (*Carrie*), "Hush, Hush, Sweet Rachel" (*Audrey Rose*), "The Sentinels" (*It Happened Here*) and "End of the Line" (*Death Line*) were rewritten to remove any sex or violence and add a happy ending—although often at "a terrible price", as "Moonchild"'s Rosemary Black concludes.

But, more importantly, these adaptations were also refocused through the eyes of a young female protagonist and told from her point of view. The horrors were reworked to reveal the uncanny and threatening aspects of girlhood, reflecting fears and concerns of puberty, such as bodily changes or changing states, loss of control, loneliness, and social pressures around femininity. In “The Cult of the Cat”, Nicola becomes terrified she is turning into a cat (“everything’s changing—my nails, my eyes...”). In “Hush, Hush, Sweet Rachel”, Lisa discovers she is the reincarnation of a young girl after a series of lapses where she finds herself behaving like a child and speaking in baby talk. In “Wolf Girl”, adopted Lona learns she was raised by wolves, and tries desperately to control her animal urges. She is unable to fit in with either human society or the wolf pack she adopts, until she finds another lost baby, and makes the decision to bring it back to society.

The heroines in *Misty* are often isolated or trapped in some way, and gradually realise this is due to magic or the supernatural. They may be tempted by dangerous acts or magical objects, or discover they have a special power or gift. In the resolution, they may learn a moral lesson, such as self-control or resisting temptation, but often they must simply reconcile with themselves and accept their situation, even if this brings a negative or ambivalent outcome. As heroine Sally concludes, “I think that’s as normal as I can ever hope to be ... but it’ll do!”

*Misty*’s urgings to “be brave” amidst the “shuddermakers” of the world helped girls accept the darker parts of themselves. Her brand of supernatural mystery spoke to readers at a liminal stage in their lives, recognising girlhood as an uncanny experience, acknowledging its fears, and becoming a companion to all her sisters of the mists.

### **Acknowledgements**

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### **Biography**

Julia Round is an award-winning writer and scholar whose work explores the intersections of Gothic, comics, and children's literature. Her books include *Gothic in Comics and Graphic Novels* (2014), *Gothic for Girls* (2019), and the co-authored *Comics and Graphic Novels* (2022). She is an Associate Professor of English and Comics Studies at Bournemouth University, UK, and one of the founders and editors of *Studies in Comics* journal and the *Encapsulations* book series. You can find her on Twitter [@hypnojo0](https://twitter.com/hypnojo0) and read more of her work at [www.juliaround.com](http://www.juliaround.com).