

Cultural Daily

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Hey Comic-Con! Meet America's Superwoman

Sophia Stein · Thursday, July 18th, 2013

Wonder Women: The Untold Story of American Superheroines, directed by Kristy Guevara-Flanagan, is a brisk and dense chronicle of the evolution of Wonder Woman and other heroines in popular media from the 1940's to the present day. Guevara-Flanagan powerfully demonstrates how heroines from popular culture acutely reflect and shape the political and social values of their times.

Comic book superheroes, champions of the downtrodden, rose to popularity in the aftermath of the great depression. However, it was not until December of 1941, that Harvard psychologist and creator William Moulton Marston introduced Wonder Woman on the scene — a heroine to join the ranks that had hitherto been almost exclusively male. “Wonder Woman was the only game in town,” observes Gloria Steinem, “the only hero that made you feel good about yourself.” Marston predicted that within 100 years we would all be living in a matriarchy; Wonder Woman was the extension of his feminist utopian vision. Her weapon of choice, the golden lasso that forces men to tell the truth is “perhaps the scariest weapon that any man has ever faced,” shudders Wonder Woman collector and philanthropist, Andy Mangels.

With an intelligent array of interviews with critics, writers, feminists, and fans — along with some snappy animation and a jazzy soundtrack, the documentary champions women's empowerment. “We all need those iconic heroes that tell us we have the power to slay our dragons and that we don't have to wait around to be rescued,” defends Guevara-Flanagan.

The film ends with comic artist and writer Trina Robbins recounting the very poignant story of her own metamorphosis into a super-heroine. On the way to a conference one day, she decides to dress the part. Riding the New York subway in her homemade super-hero get-up, she suddenly feels completely ridiculous! But then, just as she is exiting the subway car, she overhears cries for help from a damsel in distress. She runs over to assist a blind woman to reach a telephone booth. “And she didn't even need a quarter for the call!” We are left to contemplate how an act of true heroism may be as simple as tuning into the humanity of another.



Sophia Stein: Kristy, were you a fan of Wonder Woman growing up?

Kristy Guevara-Flanagan: I discovered Lynda Carter's *Wonder Woman* on television when I was around 8 years old. I didn't have the words at the time to articulate why I thought she was so rad — but me and my girlfriends, we all loved her! It was the first time that there was this character we could emulate, this fantasy figure we could pretend to be when we were playing outside. You can't really pretend to be a princess; you just sit there and maybe put on a shoe. Wonder Woman was the

first woman who embodied this riveting physicality for us, as little girls. The idea that you could “spin-around” and become a super-hero. That was really important in our play.

S2: What are Wonder Woman’s essential hallmarks?

KGF: Wonder Woman comes from the land of Amazons; she is a matriarch. The Amazons are a self-governing, female population of athletic trainers, with physical process and strength superior to human beings. Wonder Woman was sent to man’s world to help solve their problems. In the 1940’s, of course, that meant World War II. Wonder Woman became involved fighting fascism and the Nazis. Wonder Woman is empathetic and only resorts to violence as a last measure. Only once in seventy years (in the comic book), did she kill someone, and it was controversial. Wonder Woman is interested in reforming her villains and sends them to Reform Island for rehabilitation. Also, Wonder Woman is invested in training other women. She is a nurturing, team player, who has a relationship with her mom. For a female character to have strong and healthy relationships with other women, to this day, makes her an anomaly. You see that theme in the original comics created by William Moulton Marston. Lastly, Wonder Woman is at the center of her own story in mythology. She is not a spin-off.

S2: In the documentary, you trace the development of the character from her inception in the forties to the present day. Could you describe this progression?

KGF: When Wonder Woman was created, she was a clear counterpart to the male superheroes of the era. William Moulton Marston wanted to create a heroine that girls could look up to, in the same way that boys looked up to Superman. Wonder Woman recruited women readers to become involved in the war effort with little blurbs at the end of her comics. “Join the Women’s Auxiliary.” Then the war ended, it was the fifties, and men needed their jobs back. There was a cultural shift, where women were told to go home. The cultural hegemony reinforced that message through popular culture. Television sets were becoming affordable enough that people could have them in their homes, so you had shows like *Leave It to Beaver* that centered women in domesticity — at home with the kids, raising the family, making dinner. Those were the kind of messages that we got. Around this time, William Moulton Marston dies, and there is nobody really in control of what are we going to do with this Wonder Woman character, so she loses her mooring. Her comics begin to turn more on romance. Instead of Wonder Woman carrying Steve Trevor, now he’s carrying her, and she’s blushing. She’s still a super-hero, just that other part of herself that is preoccupied with romance becomes more important than the super-hero part. Through the 60’s and even the early 70’s, there is a complete makeover of her character, and she eventually loses all of her super-hero powers. Wonder Woman turns into this globe-trotting spy, who wears fancy clothes and runs a shopping boutique. I think they were trying to imitate Emma Peel (*The Avengers*) and the Bond girls. Now Wonder Woman has a male-mentor, as opposed to the original cartoons where she had had female mentors from among her Amazonian sisters, ancestors, and in her mother. At the same time, the Women’s Movement is gaining traction, and in 1972, the creators of Ms. Magazine put Wonder Woman on the cover of their first stand alone issue; Wonder Woman becomes aligned with the feminist cause. Ms. Magazine also republishes the original Wonder Woman stories in book form, setting it all up — why this was important, why this was unique, why this narrative should be preserved. I had a copy.

S2: How about female heroes in film and television today; which characters do you identify as significant?

KGF: Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games* — Katniss is not sexualized; she is definitely coming into her own identity as an adolescent and as a leader; and she is politically motivated. On the downside, the story is really violent against kids. So that is pretty controversial. But in terms of

a strong female figure, she's probably the most important female character out there today. In today's marketplace, serialized characters have a lot of cultural weight. We are so bombarded with pop culture, you need a character who is going to stick around for a while — one movie is not going to do it. I loved Tim Burton's remake of *Alice in Wonderland*, with an empowered Alice; however, that film didn't enter the popular consciousness as much, because it was the retelling of only that one story. *Brave* is complex; the idea of a girl giving up power through marriage still has a lot of resonance. I think the cartoon industry in general, and Pixar, in particular, is paying attention to pushback from parents who are demanding, "Where are the freakin' female characters? Where are the girls in these stories?"

S2: Are there qualities that you would like to see in heroines on screen, that you have not yet seen?

KGF: Women can be strong and smart, but their power is often mitigated by the way they look and love interests. I would like to see a character who is not overtly sexualized or preoccupied with romance.

S2: You talk about imitative versus transformational heroes in the documentary, that there was a time where women heroes were merely imitating male heroes rather than transforming the ideal. Where do we fall on the spectrum presently?

KGF: One character who was able to expand what we think of as a hero was Buffy Summers in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The fact that there were so many episodes, allowed artists involved to develop a complex character and narrative arc. You don't want a woman character who only has powerful masculine traits. For example, Wonder Woman is empathetic, mentoring, and doesn't act as a lone wolf. Those are characteristics that I think of as transformational in terms of broadening the definition of heroism to include female attributes.

S2: I have to confess, the Wonder Woman costume of Lynda Carter was always a non-starter for me. I admit to watching *Charlie's Angels* and even *The Bionic Woman*, but aesthetically, I just couldn't get past that hyper-sexualized Wonder Woman costume — super-patriotic, with such a traditional 1950's silhouette. Who were Wonder Woman's fans?

KGF: Young girls — I think that above a certain age, you were bound to be more critical. Yeah, Wonder Woman had the most ridiculously narrow waist. Looking back at it, it does not feel very empowering today. Whereas, if I consider the Bionic Woman, I do think, wow, she was doing some interesting stuff, and she was less overtly sexualized. Interestingly enough, however, all of these action heroines were just puny. None of them were physically imposing. None of them looked capable of doing any of the feats they performed. It seemed as if they had no muscles whatsoever! There were a lot of men and boys with whom I spoke who confessed, "Wonder Woman was my first crush." Wonder Woman was a sex symbol for many young boys.

S2: Wonder Woman also has a following among gay men?

KGF: Wonder Woman is kind of a drag queen. She has a huge following among gay men. She is so over-the-top, flamboyantly female that I think it captures that aspect of their sense of play and whimsy. I don't know that I have ever gotten to the bottom of it, but Trina Robbins wrote a great article about that subject.

S2: Do you think that images in film and television exacerbate violence against women in our society?

KGF: Clearly images reinforce stereotypes. But can they change our minds and persuade us?

Despite gains from the women's movement, there is still incredible amount of violence against women today — and I am just thinking nationally, let alone globally. Interestingly enough, some of the female heroes you see, are heroes because of violence enacted on them. They naturally would not be heroes or leaders without that motivation. For example, Lisbeth in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, she is the victim of terrible violence; in response, she sets out to enact violence in the form of retribution. It is risky for women to only be seen as assertive when people have walked all over them, but by the same token, we do want to see images of women and girls standing up for themselves.

S2: Recently, I spoke with director Tanya Wexler (*Hysteria* with Maggie Gyllenhaal), and Wexler specifically stated that it is her dream to make a *Wonder Woman* narrative feature. Why do you think the studios have shied away from a *Wonder Woman* feature film?

KGF: I think there are a few different reasons, some of them are excuses. “Women at the box office just don’t pay off.” They are convinced that a kick-ass female character, around whom everything revolves, will not sell internationally — unless it is carried by a celebrity like Angelina Jolie, who in their opinion, is the only woman who can play those characters. I don’t think that is true! You see a lot of successful films with women at the center. The *Twilight* series, for example, was a huge box-office success with a young female lead — granted, not a very empowered lead. Things are perhaps a little too clear cut in the world of *Wonder Woman*. Batman as portrayed in the feature films over the past two decades has this darker side that, I think, resonates more with us culturally today. *Wonder Woman* is patriotic, which is a tough sell today (especially internationally). Yet how many times has Superman been remade? You would think that they would have done *Wonder Woman* already. It seems like it would be a no brainer to at least try to get it right.

S2: What film genres do you prefer?

KGF: I like independent films. More quiet, quirky films. But I do like science fiction films that show how we are imaging the future. There is some poetry I can find in those types of blockbusters.

S2: Women are neither the chief consumers of action movies nor comic books, so I am curious about your choice to focus the exploration of female heroes around those two genres. Do you think there is an inherent gender bias to these particular genres?

KGF: There might be. Although, some of our stronger female characters have emerged in the science fiction genre, in a future time when we can imagine things being different. When we watch these films, we are hopeful that we will have greater equality in our culture.

S2: How did you finance your documentary? Is being a documentarian your day job?

KGF: We wrote a lot of grants. We did a couple of kick-starter campaigns, which was a great way of accessing our audience and identifying those people who would want to see us finish the film. It was slow going; we had to start and stop, multiple times. It was under half a million. The documentaries I make are professional. They are not just labors of love, but I am not able to support myself as a documentary filmmaker. So I teach film and video at Diablo Valley College.

S2: What do you think it will take to give more women access to financing and the means of production?

KGF: It needs to start early on. Girls need to be told that they can pick up the camera, they can program the computer, or write the game. You are beginning to see a lot more young women

interested in those technologies. I am surprised that the enrollment in the college filmmaking classes I teach, still ends up being predominantly male. It remains challenging for the women who do enroll. Boys are socialized to just pick up something and to start playing around, and girls are not. Girls are still rewarded for good behavior and not transgressing, the downside being sometimes they are not curious enough to stick their hand in cookie jar, to play around and get that feeling of ownership that is really important with technology. Exclusively female learning environments can sometimes be helpful. The Reel Grrls Summer Video Camp (Seattle, Washington) that we show in my film provides a safe learning environment, where there is no struggle over who is going to lead, because each girl is assured of having an opportunity to lead. We are developing a social issue game component based on some of these themes from the film. There was a study that came out recently where high profile, successful women and men were asked: "Do you contemplate entering into politics?" Most women answered "No"; whereas most men responded, "I do think about it." Men are used to seeing themselves as leaders. Women need to step up, especially now that we make up such high proportion of the workforce and population in higher education. Yet still, we are not rising up the leadership ranks in ways that will change the way media is produced or the way politics is conducted in this country.



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