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“Lasso of Truth”: Rediscovering the Forgotten History of Wonder Woman

Review of Wonder Woman Unbound: The Curious History of the World’s Most Famous Heroine by Tim Hanley.

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In a period witnessing the increasing popularity of superhero franchises, comic book historian Tim Hanley sheds light on the forgotten history of the world’s most famous female superhero, Wonder Woman. Tim Hanley’s Wonder Woman Unbound: The Curious History of the World’s Most Famous Heroine, as its title suggests, aims to explore the curious path of Wonder Woman: from the creation of the character to her contemporary iconic status. The book is comprised of three sections that follow the eras of American comic books: Golden Age, Silver Age and Bronze Age. Hanley starts off with Wonder Woman’s origin story, associating it primarily with the life and work of her creator, psychologist William Marston. The story begins when an American pilot, Steve Trevor, crashes on the hidden Paradise Island and is found injured by Diana and her fellow Amazons. Paradise Island is the home of mythical Amazons guided by goddesses Aphrodite and Athena. Their world is an only-female utopia situated far away from the outside, violent, world of men. However, while Amazons live in peace, the outside world is bursting with war and Steve needs to return to America to fulfill his soldier duties. The Amazon goddesses decide to send a warrior, Diana, to help Steve through his journey. That warrior later becomes a superheroine known by the name of Wonder Woman.

As Hanley rightfully notes, unlike some other superheroes’ origin stories of that time, Wonder Woman’s origin story is not tragic or violent in any way. She “had no past tragedy to resolve, no

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anger or sorrow burning deep within her. Instead, she grew up in the world's most idyllic environment and became a hero to help others and spread Amazon values" (20). Hanley further explores the utopian genesis of Wonder Woman primarily in relation to Marston's work. William Marston, at the time most known for his DISC theory, was an unconventional psychologist and polygamist whose ideas about the innate superiority of women can be found in almost all of his works. Hanley takes a detailed look at Marston's most controversial theories only to conclude that the Wonder Woman comic book was indeed as a reflection of Marston's idea on the coming of matriarchy. Towards the end of the first section, Hanley moves a bit further from the authorial intent and places Wonder Woman in the context of Golden Age superhero comics. Particularly interesting is his comparison of Wonder Woman with other female characters of the DC superhero universe. Even though Lois Lane, Julie Madison, Catwoman and others, were not superheroines per se, they were typical female characters of the period. They all fell under the good girl/bad girl paradigm and were defined exclusively in relation to their male love interests, unlike Wonder Woman, who subverted traditional gender roles being at times stronger and more capable than her male peers. However, Hanley doesn't avoid mentioning the issue of fetishism in Wonder Woman comics. While it was nothing unusual for superheroes to end up bound from time to time, the bondage imagery in Wonder Woman was vast and extensive. Needles to say, Hanley looks at bondage imagery mainly as metaphors for Marston's theories. He refrains from any other interpretation and draws a rather simplistic conclusion claiming that, after all, Wonder Woman got loose each time and that was "undoubtedly feminist, empowering, and redemptive" (71).

The second part of the book discusses the incarnations of Wonder Woman during the Silver Age of comics. With Marston no longer in the picture, Hanley turns his attention to Robert Kanigher, new writer of Wonder Woman comics. At the beginning, Kanigher's work on Wonder Woman was pretty much an impression of Marston's work and it wasn't until Wonder Woman #98 that Kanigher made some serious changes to the story. But Wonder Woman wasn't the only superhero who underwent changes during that time. In the 1950s, the comic book industry faced severe criticism regarding the negative influence of comics. As a result, Silver Age superheroes gradually went from indestructible heroes in a quest for vengeance to stable family men. The tragic origin, so common in the Golden Age, almost completely vanished. Kanigher's Silver Age Wonder Woman followed

these trends in all aspects but one: her new origin story had a tragic element. In the Silver Age, her superpowers were turned to divine gifts and she became the Princess of the Amazons. Kanigher completely erased the utopian aspect of Wonder Woman and, not worrying about mythological consistency, he even added male characters to the story. The Amazons now had husbands, brothers and sons. According to Hanley, Kanigher's origin story completely undid Marston's messages about female superiority. The Amazons were no longer mythic, powerful warriors but stay-at-home wives, and Wonder Woman, instead of wanting to change the world, wanted to settle down with Steve Trevor. However, despite her lack of female superiority, Silver Age Wonder Woman was still a superhero, while that was not the case in the Bronze Age.

The third, and final, part of the book, deals with the revitalization of Wonder Woman in the Bronze Age era. In this period Wonder Woman was altered even more drastically as she became a human woman with real-world problems and without superpowers. Interestingly, as women began fighting for their rights in the 1960s and the Bronze Age heroines started to follow their lead, Wonder Woman went in an opposite direction. She gave up her powers and returned to America to be with the man that she loved. As Hanley notices, the Bronze Age story revolved entirely around Steve Trevor and Diana's effort to be the woman Steve desired. Her visual appearance was also altered. Diana, now the owner of a fashion boutique, abandoned her well-known uniform and bracelets in favor of more colorful and modern outfits. Fortunately, Wonder Woman returned as a superheroine in 1972. At that time, Wonder Woman was also doing well outside of comic books as her character got her own TV show and was championed as the icon of the liberal feminist movement. This was a period when Wonder Woman was, once again, portrayed as a strong and powerful character.

The final chapter focuses on the Modern Age incarnations of Wonder Woman: from Pérez's re-launch in 1987 to The New 52 in 2011. Hanley briefly mentions George Pérez's version that, according to him, retained Wonder Woman's feminist message combining all the best elements from the Golden Age and the Silver Age story. Although Pérez's story was critically acclaimed, Hanley notes that not even this version was without its problems since Wonder Woman was represented as an unattainable ideal that no ordinary women can reach. Basically, every version of Wonder Woman was at the same time progressive and problematic but as Hanley states, "[S]he isn't a great character despite her contradictions but because of them" (246).

In conclusion, Wonder Woman Unbound is a well-researched book that takes a detailed look at the history of Wonder Woman. Regrettably though, Hanley spends much of the time discussing Wonder Woman in the Golden and Silver Age, almost leaving no space to explore her Modern Age incarnations. While Wonder Woman Unbound provides important insights into the historical process of creating the character of Wonder Woman, it generally lacks deeper analysis of her representations as well as critical interpretation. Much attention is devoted to Wonder Woman's writers and their intentions, almost leaving no space to discuss her cultural impact. However, the author does a great job of not only contextualizing Wonder Woman's development but also exploring the evolution of other comic book characters. All in all, Wonder Woman Unbound is a great book for those interested in the representation of gender in comic books and graphic novels, as well as for those interested in the history of comic books and comic book studies in general.



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