The Secret History of Wonder Woman: She was a feminist, created by a man who lived with two women

Wonder woman

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THE SECRET HISTORY OF WONDER WOMAN

Jill Lepore

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By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER/Special to The Oregonian

In 1937, William Moulton Marston told reporters that one day women would prevail in a battle of the sexes. "Women have twice the emotional development, the ability for love, that man has," Marston declared. "And as they develop as much ability for worldly success as they already have ability for love, they will rule business and the nation and the world."

Marston had already come to public attention as the inventor of the lie detector. In 1941, at age 48, with lots of help from the two women with whom he lived (and had had children), he began writing and publishing Wonder Woman comic books. As beautiful as Aphrodite, as wise as Athena, and as strong as Hercules, Marston's Wonder Woman appears "from nowhere to avenge an injustice or right a wrong!"

In "The Secret History of Wonder Woman," Jill Lepore, a professor of history at Harvard and a staff writer at The New Yorker, tells the fascinating story of Marston, Elizabeth Holloway Marston and Olive Byrne (the niece of Margaret Sanger, the founder of the birth control movement in the United States) and uses it to demonstrate that Wonder Woman was a product of the suffragist and feminist movements of the early 20th century. She suggests, a bit less persuasively, that it became a source for the "second wave" of women's liberation in the 1960s and '70s.

In the 1940s, Lepore indicates, Wonder Woman comics attracted millions of readers. And each copy had a four page centerfold feature entitled "Wonder Women of History" -- a biography with a feminist slant. Distributed to high schools, the series profiled the likes of Sojourner Truth, Madame Curie, Susan B. Anthony, and Amelia Earhart.

Lepore also recounts the criticism leveled at Wonder Woman. Would-be censors fumed that the heroine was scantily clad. And in the 1950s, in testimony delivered to a congressional committee investigating the impact of comic books on impressionable youth, psychologist Fredric Wertham denounced Wonder Woman as the worst superhero of them all. She was a lesbian Batman, he proclaimed. And Wertham found her "advanced femininity," with its absence of...
Ironically, by then Wonder Woman had changed. Marston died of cancer in 1947 and Holloway and Byrne no longer had a role with the comic book. Wonder Woman became a baby sitter, a fashion model, and a movie star, who wanted nothing more than to marry her boyfriend. In the 1970s she got her own TV show, but feminists scoffed at it as a sellout.

Lepore prefers the original Wonder Woman. And she prefers a more robust feminist movement. It may be more likely to gain strength, she concludes, if its history doesn't disappear.

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