

DISCOVERING WOMEN OF WONDER

Some months ago, Kristine Kathryn Rusch asked me to write a guest blog for her www.womeninsciencefiction.com site. I could tackle any subject, as long as it had something to do with my own history and the influence of women on science fiction or me. While I pondered the myriad directions this essay could take, I read a submission by James Alan Gardner—a story called “The Mutants Men Don’t See” that you’ll find on p. 42 of this issue. Suddenly, all my ideas morphed into a slightly longer version of the essay you’ll find reprinted below:

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Among my few golden middle school and early high school memories are the Sunday afternoons spent perusing the comic book shelves of a local drugstore with my brother Bobby. My brother loved *Superman* and *Superboy*, *Batman*, *the Fantastic Four*, *the X-Men*, and the *Justice League of America*, as well as anthology comics like *Adventure* and *Action*. We each received an allowance of a quarter per week, and the comic books cost at least 12 cents. Although he was a year and a half younger than me, Bobby was an excellent student. He’d done the math and knew he needed to enlist my help to get his comic book fix. If we pooled our allowances, and perhaps if I threw in a bit of my paper route and babysitting wages, we’d have enough reading material to tide us over from one Sunday to the next. I liked the superheroes just fine, but I wasn’t convinced until he showed me that *Adventure Comics* contained stories about Supergirl. Wonder Woman and Lois Lane already had their own comics, and the Black Canary was on the verge of joining the JLA. Soon I was just as addicted as he was.

The late sixties and early seventies was an exciting time for a young girl’s immersion in comics. *Superman’s Girl Friend, Lois Lane*, which mostly depicted Lois as a man-chaser, had been running as a humor comic since 1958. In 1968 it experienced a makeover. Lois went “mad and mod,” ditched her wardrobe, and reappeared as the hard-charging journalist we love today. There was some slippage—Lois still appeared in fantasy issues where she removed her office nameplate the moment Superman or Clark Kent proposed marriage, but mostly she seemed to become a more modern and independent character investigating social issues and having her own adventures.

Just as Lois was becoming more empowered, Wonder Woman’s superpowers vanished and she entered her “white phase” as “Diana Prince.” She lost Steve, left the military, and stopped wearing her signature red, white, and blue costume. Now dressed mostly in white, she opened a “mod” boutique and learned marital arts from “I Ching,” her Chinese mentor. Like Batman, Diana now resolved crises with physical strength and dexterity. This remains the version of Wonder Woman that I love. She was still descended from Amazons, still more than human, but the ideals that she and Lois espoused seemed somehow more attainable.

That didn’t mean I lacked an appreciation for super powers. I was thrilled when Supergirl received her own comic book in 1972. I had already followed the career of Superman’s cousin Kara in *Adventure Comics*. I drew dozens of outfits for a costume redesign contest. I never got my entries into the mail so had no one to blame when I found myself unimpressed with the winners.

Although my tastes ran more to DC heroines, I enjoyed the adventures of Marvel’s *Fantastic Four*. Still, I could never get into the character of Sue Richards. As a twelve-year-old, I couldn’t relate to her desire to have children or her decision to step back from the FF. I was also frustrated by her invisibility superpower. I knew that she could generate force fields as well, but it seemed to me that when the going got tough,

Sue mostly just disappeared. I was passionate about the misunderstood Inhuman, Medusa, though. Even when Medusa played the villain, I loved the chaos she wreaked with her prehensile hair.

My interest in comics waned about a year before I started college. Medusa had been redeemed, Wonder Woman got her powers and costume back in 1973, and she forgot all about the now deceased I Ching. Lois Lane and Supergirl's independent magazines were discontinued in 1974. My brother was making money at his own after school jobs now and no longer needed help subsidizing his habit.

Still, the strength and resolve of these super women stayed with me. Like Kara, Diana, and Lois, I was able to strike out on my own. Unlike Supergirl, I never visited another planet, but I did manage to live in London for a year. Like Wonder Woman, I left a small enclave where everyone knew me for a fresh start in a large city—in my case, St. Louis and then New York—and like Lois, I eventually pursued a successful career in publishing. A couple of weeks before my own wedding, a well-known SF writer asked if I'd quit my job once I married. Shocked, I told him that I'd never even considered the idea, but that the question had suddenly reminded me of Lois Lane and her imaginary wedded life with Clark/Superman scenarios. The author then explained that his query was actually a euphemism for, "did I plan to have children." I answered that children were an open question, but my career was not.

Later, though, like Sue Richards I discovered that balancing a family and an occupation is no picnic. With two children of my own, I find Sue far more sympathetic and interesting now. Yet, somehow, I've managed to pour my energy into both paths. Although those women of wonder weren't real, reading about their fantastic exploits and grace under pressure helped instill a confidence and a sense of adventure that pushed me forward. I'll be taking my daughters to New York's Comic Con soon. Perhaps they'll find some inspiration for their own life choices while we're there.