

**You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, I show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief, I'm Eric Molinsky.**

**In March, the super mega hyped Batman vs. Superman lands in movie theaters. I'm both obsessed with this movie, and very wary at the same time. It's got my favorite superheroes, although I'm not sure I'm going to like the interpretation. But there is one thing I am really looking forward to – finally seeing Wonder Woman on film.**

**Bringing her to the big screen has been a long, tortuous process. I won't go into the production history but there is finally going to be a stand-alone Wonder Woman movie in 2017 starring Gal Gadot as Wonder Woman, after she makes her debut in Batman vs. Superman.**

**One of the big reasons why Wonder Woman has had a troubled history is, well, sexism. But there's been plenty of male writers who approached her with the best intentions but couldn't make it work. The reasons why are much deeper and stranger than many people realize. It all goes back to her origin story. Not just the one in the comics, but the one in real life.**

**In the early 1940s, comic books were skyrocketing in popularity. But they were also corrupting the youth – according to many concerned adults.**

**One day, a comic book publisher named MC Gaines was reading an article in the magazine Family Circle about a journalist named Olive Byrne who went to see a psychologist, William Moulton Marston, to ask him if it's okay to let her children read comic books.**

JL And he says sure they should, they're great, they're the folk stories of our age, there's nothing wrong with them, comic books are great.

**That is Jill Lepore. She wrote "The Secret History of Wonder Woman."**

JL: So MC Gains the publisher of All American Comics, a precursor to DC, brings Marston in and says I want to hire you as in house consulting psychologist because he's fighting battle against censorship, Marston says you have editorial advisory board, and they continue to talk and Marston says what you really need – because criticism of Superman is that he's a fascist and Batman for a while has a gun and is super violent, and he says you need female superhero and she needs to repudiate violence and she needs to

solve problems with love, and she needs to solve problems with truth, justice, and equality.

**And she can punch Nazis. Gaines is like this is great! This meeting couldn't go any better, right?**

**Well, there's a lot he didn't know about Marston. Remember that interview in Family Circle magazine? It turns out, the reporter, Olive Byrne, was no stranger to Marston. She was actually part of a polyamorous relationship between him and his wife Elizabeth Holloway. The three of them were actually raising their children together. Marston had been blacklisted from Harvard and Columbia because of his deviant sexual beliefs.**

**He'd been fascinated by gender and sex since he was in college, during the heyday of the women's suffrage movement. His partners, Olive Byrne and Elizabeth Holloway, were deeply involved, and they were very close with Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood – who was a big influence on Marston. When he submits his ideas for a new female superhero – he borrows heavily from the feminist literature he read in his youth.**

JL: The character has a backstory that she's really Princess Diana, she's daughter of Queen Hippolyta, the queen of Amazons, who in the world of ancient Greece, the Greeks of legends, escaped the enslavement of women by Greek men to an island called Paradise Island, where she was given by Aphrodite eternal life and peerless strength in exchange for never seeing another man again. Then one day a US military plane crashes and Steve Trevor is injured and someone had to bring him back to US because the US the last best hope for equal rights for women and that's why the queen's daughter's Princess Diana becomes Diana Prince who becomes Steve Trevor's secretary.

*(Laughs)*

JL: So that sounds like okay there's Batman and Bruce Wayne, and there's Superman and Clark Kent, and this is Marston's girl version but not the case at all. That entire story about WW's origins comes from feminist utopian fiction beginning in 1880s and right through version Charlotte Perkins Gillman's utopian novel Herland. If you read Herland it is Wonder Woman's backstory. So Marston presented this to DC comics in the 1940s as cool, original, great origin story for superhero by then people forgot this feminist utopian fiction from progressive era, but anyone alive in progressive era would recognize that – oh yeah, that's Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Like he just ripped it off!

*Could you describe to me more feminist utopian fiction? What kind of storylines would typically happen and the different worlds?*

JL: There is this weird thing anthropologists postulated that historically there used to be a matriarchy, before rise of patriarchy civilization – this is male anthropologist – with civilization and sedentary life, domestication of agriculture that human societies lived in matriarchy. One way that feminist play with this is by writing fiction about, it's like *The Leftovers*, these left behind places, *So Her Land*, or *Angel Island*, it's often island. There will be remote deserted island where women rule the world didn't get memo that patriarchy came along and women rule the island and they'll create new children by parthanagenesis, or have some weird magical powers so still have children, live in harmony control childbirth and all equal and never have wars, because women are so good and along comes disaster in *Angel Island* there's a shipwreck men wash up on shore and on *Angel Island* the women are so good they've grown wings, men wash up they have wings fly away from us, devise crazy plan, they capture the women and cut off wings, like it's this bloody gruesome thing because they want sex with them, and force have children, it's this deep rich thing but it's the furthest thing from the people who write *Superman*.

**So Marston had to make his case to the skeptics.**

*MARSTON: Wonder Woman is psychological propaganda for the new type of woman who should, I believe, rule the world. There isn't love enough in the male organism to run this planet peacefully. Woman's body contains twice as many love generating organs and endocrine mechanisms as the male. What woman lacks is the dominance or self-assertive power to put over and enforce her love desires. I have given Wonder Woman this dominant force but have kept her loving, tender, maternal and feminine in every other way.*

**Marston also believed that the Amazons, living on an island of women, were not asexual or heterosexual. He even gave Wonder Woman the signature phrase, "Suffering Sappho!" which is a reference to the island of Lesbos.**

JL: Marston was a great proponent of -- and one reason blacklisted from academia was he was a great proponent tolerance all forms of sexual expression, he whole unpublished manuscript – I'm sure he couldn't get it published 1931 about the difference between sex and gender, and how they didn't attach in any natural way, it's very forward thinking in our Caitlin Jenner moment. Marston was absolutely thinking about homosexuality a lot and writing about it and writing about transvestitism, having multiple partners, his mistress's mother didn't believe in marriage, Margaret Sanger and Ethel Bynre believed in free love, they were what historians would call sex radicals in the nineteen teens and

Marston carried that forward into weird kinky suburban life in Rye, NY and kept it hidden because it was not possible in the 1930s and 1940s to be out in that way.

JL: Another thing that's really striking about Wonder Woman that people are often distressed by is that Wonder Woman is often chained up, especially early episodes that Marston wrote in '41, '42, '43, Wonder Woman chained up and she breaks free of her chains and this was hugely scandalous at the time. People thought it was so fetishistic, it's so pornographic and Marston said look she's allegory for women's emancipation, but in fact showing women in chains signal move women marching right to vote in Chicago, they marched in chains, women holding candlelight vigil about White House asking Woodrow Wilson right to vote, chained themselves to gates of White House, it's because the suffrage descend abolitionist showed black men in chains to shock a reader, we shouldn't keep women in chains. And Suffragists said we shouldn't keep women in chains either.

***But Marston had a thing for women in – for submission.***

JL: Marston did have also have, right it's very multifaceted, so it's interesting, there's no denying that it's totally kink.

**Wonder Woman's famous golden lasso -- which forces bad guys to tell the truth -- was inspired by his invention of the lie detector test, and his fixation with domination and submission.**

**He thought if men incorporated submission into their sex lives – they would be purged of violent urges and wouldn't feel compelled to start wars. That's why Wonder Woman loses her powers if a man chains her up, but if a woman does. These comics are really fun, but not the kind of stuff you'd expect to hear in a 1940s radio play -- although that would've been awesome.**

*CLIP RADIO DRAMA*

**By the way, that dialogue is not coming from Marston.**

JL: He ends up hiring 19 year old girl, Joy Hummel, who is a student of his because he can't write slang, he's this old guy, little kids are reading books, she's uncredited, she's still alive amazing person, she wrote a ton, more than half WW comics attributed to Marston, this was commonly done, but I think even saying so clear Marston has this heavy ideological bent, actually Marston not writing half of those, so you're seeing something that isn't even there.

**The comic sold well – but Wonder Woman faced a backlash within the company. Like when the Justice League is formed, Wonder Woman is the secretary even though she’s clearly the best fighter. Marston was furious, but there was nothing he could do about it. And then he got sick.**

JL: Once Marston gets polio in 1944 that’s only 3 years into comic, then everything goes to hell in a hand basket, I wouldn’t defend comics after that, the early Marston stuff, one reason hard to deal with a character, Superman clearly borrows the conventions of sci-fi which has been around in pulp way since 1920s, very established it’s fantastic, it’s wonderful that stuff is great, so anyone throwing out plot idea for Superman whole genre to rely on. Batman completely relied on detective fiction. The golden age of pulp detective is the 1920s, so there’s a generation writers and artists who grew up on this stuff. Marston relying Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Elizabeth Caty Stanton and Margaret Sanger and Lu Rogers this feminist cartoonist, who influenced artist, other than Marston and Peter those guy are too young to remember that stuff from nineteen teens and people don’t go around reading feminist utopian fiction same way mass appeal of detective fiction or science fiction. They can’t continue storyline in genre they have no knowledge of whatsoever.

**Wonder Woman was about to spend a long time in the wilderness until she’s finally rescued – not by the character Steve Trevor. That’s just after the break. My very first underwriting break!**

>> UNDERWRITING BREAK <<

**The backlash against comics gained momentum in the 1950s to the point where there was a hearing in Congress.**

**To survive, the comic book industry adopted a retrograde code. Batman went from film noir to candy-colored fantasia. Wonder Woman stopped punching bad guys and became obsessed over whether her boyfriend Steve Trevor would propose to her. She even lost her powers in the ‘60s, and became a fashionable spy.**

**Jeanette Kahn ran DC Comics for 27 years. She says growing up in the ‘50s, she never read Wonder Woman. In fact, she didn’t know Wonder Woman existed.**

JK: It all depends on what your local five and dime or soda shop carried. And I don’t remember them carrying Wonder Woman, we would go there and read as many as we

could before we had to pay and were chased out of the store but I don't remember Wonder Woman being among them.

**And then when she was an editor at DC Comics in 1972, Jeanette got a call from Gloria Steinham. She wanted the right put Wonder Woman on the cover of the first issue of Ms. Magazine.**

JK: Gloria was an enormous fan. She grew up on the wrong side of the tracks in East Toledo, Ohio, and she thought there was no way out short of becoming a Las Vegas showgirl, and then when she was 7, Wonder Woman was published. And here was this beautiful independent woman who liked men but was independent didn't feel that she had to be married. Who was a compassionate humanistic but also had tremendous power, and Gloria so treasured this early sense of Wonder Woman because she read Wonder Woman and thought there is a way out that on the cover first issue of Ms. she got the rights from us at DC Comics and there was Wonder Woman striding the metropolis stopping crime with dispensing food to the hungry with the other and that's very much who Wonder Woman was and is.

**That Ms. Magazine cover had reverberations within the DC universe. Wonder Woman got her powers back, and her classic costume. She became part of the Super Friends cartoon show, and of course the hugely popular live action show with Linda Carter – which inspired a generation of girls to twirl around in their living rooms.**

*CLIP: LINDA CARTER*

**There were never enough women writing the comics, but when you ask fans which writers did the best job, they often point to a guy -- George Perez -- who wrote Wonder Woman in the 1980s.**

**But her comics never sold very well, even when the folks at DC thought they were doing everything right. So they kept tinkering with her back-story, her origins and even the nature of her character.**

JK: The comics, the Wonder Woman comics have never been big sellers and you ask why not fan as a child, there weren't many Wonder Woman comics around, only one title while Superman has six titles a month, Batman has four titles a month and many graphic novels and Wonder Woman at best coming out once a month she never had the fan base or the enthusiasm that our male superheroes had, but comics have always been more about male fantasy.

**In 2011, DC decided to reboot their entire universe. Some characters were barely affected, but others got complete reboots. Not surprisingly, Wonder Woman was reimagined again. This one was pretty radical, and controversial, but I thought it was intriguing.**

**Artist Cliff Chiang and writer Brian Azzarello were inspired by Neil Gaiman's Sandman series, which imagined the gods as squabbling siblings. This is Cliff.**

CC: In our story Wonder Woman raised with idea that she'd been crafted with clay by mother.

*Which had been her origin?*

CC: Which was her origin for decades and we wanted to twist things up a bit from where she was still born out of love, a very tragic situation where her mother had fallen in love but because of Zeus's marriage to Hera, who he was no longer in love with they were unable to let people know about it, so the story of her birth with the clay statue was concocted in order to hide her true parentage. So it became a very human story because it was about Hera's anger towards Hippolyta, Wonder Woman's mother, and Wonder Woman's confusion of her origins, her identity essentially being pulled out from under her, but she immediately then became part of much larger family, this bigger pantheon of gods, and how would she grow to accept her place there?

*It looks like that's going to be her origin in the movie, or Zack Snyder said that.*

CC: Right I think one of the producers mentioned that, that will be interesting, it's funny to think of anything we've done being put up on screen, that's never something we considered but I think what they do with Wonder Woman is going to be important for whole generation the same way that the TV show is a touchstone for a lot of Wonder Woman fans.

*For me, my biggest problem with Wonder Woman is Greek gods, there's an old saying don't mix mumbo jumbo, you got gods, how can Green Lantern and Wonder Woman exist in the same universe?*

CC: That's why we tried to contain it all and tell our own story in the book instead of crossing over with everyone else, we didn't ever have Superman show up, even though halfway through it was decreed they'd get together. We tried to keep our stories as pure as we could.

*It was decreed, what was your feeling?*

CC: I thought it was so predictable.

*Really?*

CC: Yeah, I rolled my eyes, I don't think Wonder Woman needs to be with anybody, why isn't Batman with someone? Not a question that's necessary to her story.

**Some fans didn't like their new origin story because Wonder Woman was no longer molded from clay and given life by a goddess. Now she has a Dad and Mom, and gets caught up in the Mount Olympus to the point where the Amazons -- her traditional support network -- are hardly in it.**

**But what I loved was the artwork itself. Cliff draws with very thick black lines, which means you don't get lost in the little details. Everything pops off the page. He drew fantastical stuff like a Poseidon-type sea god, which reminds me of Miyazaki's animation – but most of the gods are drawn as otherworldly people wearing modern fashion. And when he draws Wonder Woman, she looks solidly badass.**

CC: Part of Wonder Woman's appeal is that duality, where she is dressed up in bathing suit, or dressed up as a pin up model but she represents being free of that at the same time, so her clothing or lack thereof is really a challenge to what a woman should wear, it's what makes Wonder Woman really complex and really in a way also difficult to use as visual symbol because we all associate Wonder Woman with that costume but means different things to different people.

*When I met you at ComicCon last year, I said there is so much cheesecake, you never drew her -- she's very sexy but never drew her intentionally.*

CC: We never, Brian and I never saw her as being an object, we really went for her as character first, as a result there were never scenes required cheesecake or extra titillation because they were about what she was thinking, they were about her acting, I try not to put my characters in positions where its clearly a male gaze, I think that's uninteresting story wise, for Wonder Woman particularly there's no reason to subject her to vulnerability.

*It's amazes me the quote unquote camera where you place it, it's up at her crotch*

CC: Strange how that happens.

*Yeah, Yeah. Your style of the thick line, I love is that deliberate?*

CC: I've heard people equate it to the art on Greek vases, which I thought was funny confluence. I prefer thicker lines, there's something immediately readable about it, when using thicker lines less likely to get lost in tiny ones.

*I told you I was immediately drawn to it and many of my screensavers are your covers, it's crazy when I feel I need a boost of empowerment, and I'll switch my screen saver to her thrusting sword, blocking arrows, I love those, those make me feel strong in a weird way.*

CC: Yeah, things I had direct control over, the covers were something I'm very proud of, because there's publishing history of Wonder Woman on covers as a damsel in distress, as someone being dominated, these aren't situation one wouldn't draw Batman or



Superman in. So whenever suggested have Wonder Woman do this or that, make sure Wonder Woman drawn coming from place of power, even if say she were tied up as she was on one cover, she's very defiant of being tied up, it's not submissive squirmy sexual thing.

**He thinks the most important thing to keep in mind when drawing Wonder Woman is body language.**

CC: Someone who's strong and confident but doesn't necessarily once she's leaning against wall or something doesn't become pin up model, it's someone who comes into room but commands it, but doesn't have overbearing masculine quality, if you've been on subway woman over six foot, all eyes go to her, when someone comes into a room, and is that physically imposing your eyes go to them, and with Wonder Woman have that sense of being almost unearthly, controlled but quiet the way a confident person doesn't need to be all over everybody.

**Whenever a comic book character gets rebooted for comics, TV or film – the creative usually like to go back to the original comics for inspiration. And when you go back to the early Batman or Superman, there's so much to draw upon and re-interpret. But the reason why Wonder Woman keeps getting tinkered with is because if you go back to her origins, you have to deal with Marston.**

CC: It's difficult when see superheroes as being a medium for kids to address things in Wonder Woman like the idea of submission and bondage, the idea of a really sex positive comic is interesting, particularly with a female lead, there's something very liberating about that, and unfortunately it's not something you can do very easily with an all ages book.

*That's interesting because if you want to take original intention behind Wonder Woman and modernize it, sex positive is what it's about as much as being feminist.*

CC: You have to touch on it lightly but needs to be discussed. We did try to work it in place but the idea of loving submission is key to Wonder Woman but hard to put on page in action.

CC: It's possible as the culture changes Wonder Woman could become more popular as people become accepting.

*She could become more fluid in her sexuality?*

CC: I imagine no question that she doesn't define herself so strictly.

*Interesting, once society more comfortable with that, DC more comfortable, and you could see bisexual Wonder Woman and everyone would be cool with that and more in line with origins.*

CC: Very forward thinking

*Too forward thinking?*

CC: For Time Warner, maybe

*Even comics?*

CC: Comics maybe not but tail doesn't wag dog, right?

**Marston didn't really think of her as a character as much as a symbol -- which is another reason why she's challenging to write.**

CC: She's a paragon of virtue, because she represents all women in a way, it makes it difficult to characterize her, what is a strong woman to you? It's a big burden for the character to carry and makes for different interpretations, but I think that's what's great about character, is that as much as we changed her, she still remains Wonder Woman, there's something in that core what writers are unknowingly exploring what is Wonder Woman and what isn't Wonder Woman.

*And what is the core of Wonder Woman? If you ask people who's Batman, who's Superman, they'll mention her costume.*

CC: How would you describe Superman?

*Positive, optimistic, belief in humanity not of it.*

CC: Right, the alien fights for humanity.

*Immigrant story*

CC: Yeah immigrant and Batman revenge?

*Come to terms with loss and grief over and over again to stop what happened to him happening to anyone else, you can talk about that. What is Wonder Woman motivation? Originally fight Nazis why does she do what she does?*

CC: The core of Wonder Woman's personality is compassion. It is compassion for other people despite war like nature, that's the reason she fights, she fights for equality, sees inequality drives her to action, so she's someone who's willing fight for peace she's a contraction.

*In fact, she seems to really seems to enjoy fighting for it.*

CC: You could interpret it like that, characterizing Amazons people gone through difficult times, recognize value of fighting back, I don't see Wonder Woman as an aggressor but seeks to balance the scales

*That's true, that's the most interesting thing about her, she has very strong great noble ideals is willing to fight for them but there's a part of her that really likes fighting, she is a born warrior and in a way if there were world peace she'd be out of business.*

CC: Yeah, that's a fun thing to play with, have her a hot head because of what she's fighting for, she fights passionately, I do wonder what Masters would think of that, certainly the modern interpretation pushes her towards fighting where Marston prefer she tied people up and solve things more peacefully.

**Through all her different incarnations, there is one quality that always comes through – her sense of compassion. Jill Lepore says that's why the character has endured.**

JL: I was sitting in my kitchen table with a 7 year old girl in foster care, taking care of for the day, not a lot to play with we have boys and she wanted girl stuff to play with, and we found a box I had of golden age of DC Comics postcards, and so we dumped them out on table, never seen them, didn't know anything about comics, she very carefully made two piles. One for all the Wonder Woman and the other pile for everyone else, and she took everyone else pile and put it back on box, took Wonder Woman pile and spread them out, and arranged them in order she liked. She asked me questions, who is this what does she do? Remind you this is little girl, one of five children taken from her mother and taken from custody of state, not sure where sleep two nights from now not sure ever see mother again been through a lot by age of 7, this is stupid question, because she recues people that's why I like her. She could see that just looking at covers, this is woman who rescues people, that's what she anted, that's how she found strength she didn't want to look at Superman or Batman, this meant something to her. I can say this story silly, or you don't this writer or that writer or the character so clumsy and story haphazard and the feminism is shallow but at the end of the day this character really speaks to young girls.

**That's it for this week. Special thanks to Jill Lepore, Cliff Chiang, Jeanette Kahn, Ellen Horne, Rex Doane and Arun Rath.**

**Next time, I'll talk more about Batman versus Superman, but focusing on the "versus" part. What's the fight about?**

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