

JILL THOMPSON, GAIL SIMONE, & BARBARA KESEL in a Pro2Pro interview!

BACKISSUE!



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TM



LIBERATED LADIES!

**BIG BARDA • MS. MARVEL • PHOENIX
SAVAGE SHE-HULK • STARFIRE • VALKYRIE**

BTE



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Volume 1,
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*Celebrating the
Best Comics of
the '70s, '80s,
'90s and Beyond!*

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BACKISSUE
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The Liberated Ladies Issue



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Mega-Rod Maven! ■ Inspired by Lainie Kazan & Roz Kirby!
Beloved of Scott Free, Mister Miracle! ■ Daughter of Breeda!

FlashBack!

Big Barda

Furious Female

She's hot,
she's sexy
and she's
liberated

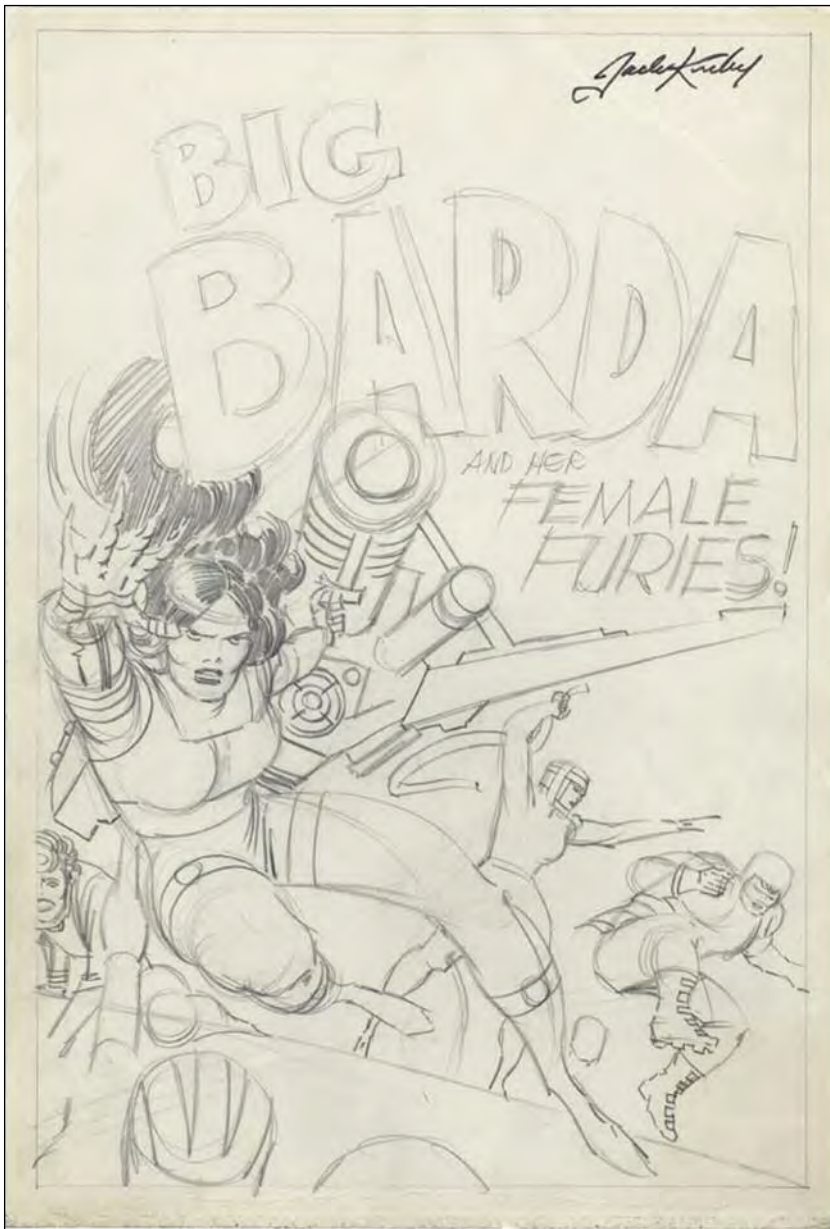


by Jim Kingman

This article's title contains three perfect descriptions of Big Barda: strong, sexy, and liberated. She was also rough, tough, and smart, and would not take flak from anyone. Though in peerless command of her emotions due to relentless military training, she was capable of displaying great sensitivity and naivety. She was not above confronting what she felt was personal weakness to make herself a better person. In the early 1970s, she

may have been the most physically and emotionally balanced of all the characters in writer/artist Jack Kirby's Fourth World, published by DC Comics (then National Periodical Publications) in four ongoing titles: *Superman's Pal Jimmy Olsen*, *The New Gods*, *The Forever People*, and *Mister Miracle*.

Big Barda was an extremely beautiful woman, whether traipsing around in a weapon-adorned red



Big Plans

(above) Courtesy of *The Jack Kirby Collector*, Kirby's unfinished splash for his proposed *Big Barda* spin-off book, circa 1972.

TM & © DC Comics.

bikini while hoisting up a large cannon, lunging into battle in full Apokoliptian military attire, or leaping into the fray in a comely skirt to protect friends from harm. Looks were not everything, of course. Barda's loyalty was fierce, her sense of humor biting, her maternal instincts impressionable, her desire for peaceful moments commendable, her love for battle insatiable, and her temper quick to ignite. Foremost of all was her unconditional devotion and love for Scott Free, Mister Miracle.

Yet Barda was not raised and trained to be emotionally balanced, or a pin-up girl, or a liberating force. She was molded in Granny Goodness' "orphanage" on the planet Apokolips to be a warrior woman supreme, and her leadership qualities won her command of the Female Furies, an elite military unit in the service of Darkseid, the epitome of evil in Kirby's Fourth World saga. This service did not last long, however, because Barda was meant for greater achievements. She has attained all but two: her own comic book and her own ongoing back-up series, although in both instances she certainly came close.

REJECTING HER DARK SIDE

Big Barda's statuesque body and strong facial features were inspired by actress and singer Lainie Kazan, while aspects of her personality came from right at home, that of Kirby's beloved wife, Rosalind (Roz). "One thing notable about Barda," explains Charles Hatfield, comics scholar and author of *Hand of Fire: The Comics Art of Jack Kirby*, "is that, like Medusa of the Frightful Four/Inhumans in *Fantastic Four*, she began as a sort of anti-heroine, or at least someone with a checkered past. Medusa is a good point of comparison, because in both cases Kirby played up sensuality in the character's design: for all of Barda's fearsomeness, when she's first introduced it's with a strong element of sexual titillation (just look at her first scene with Oberon, in *Mister Miracle*



FlashBack!

THE RIDE OF THE VALKYRIE!

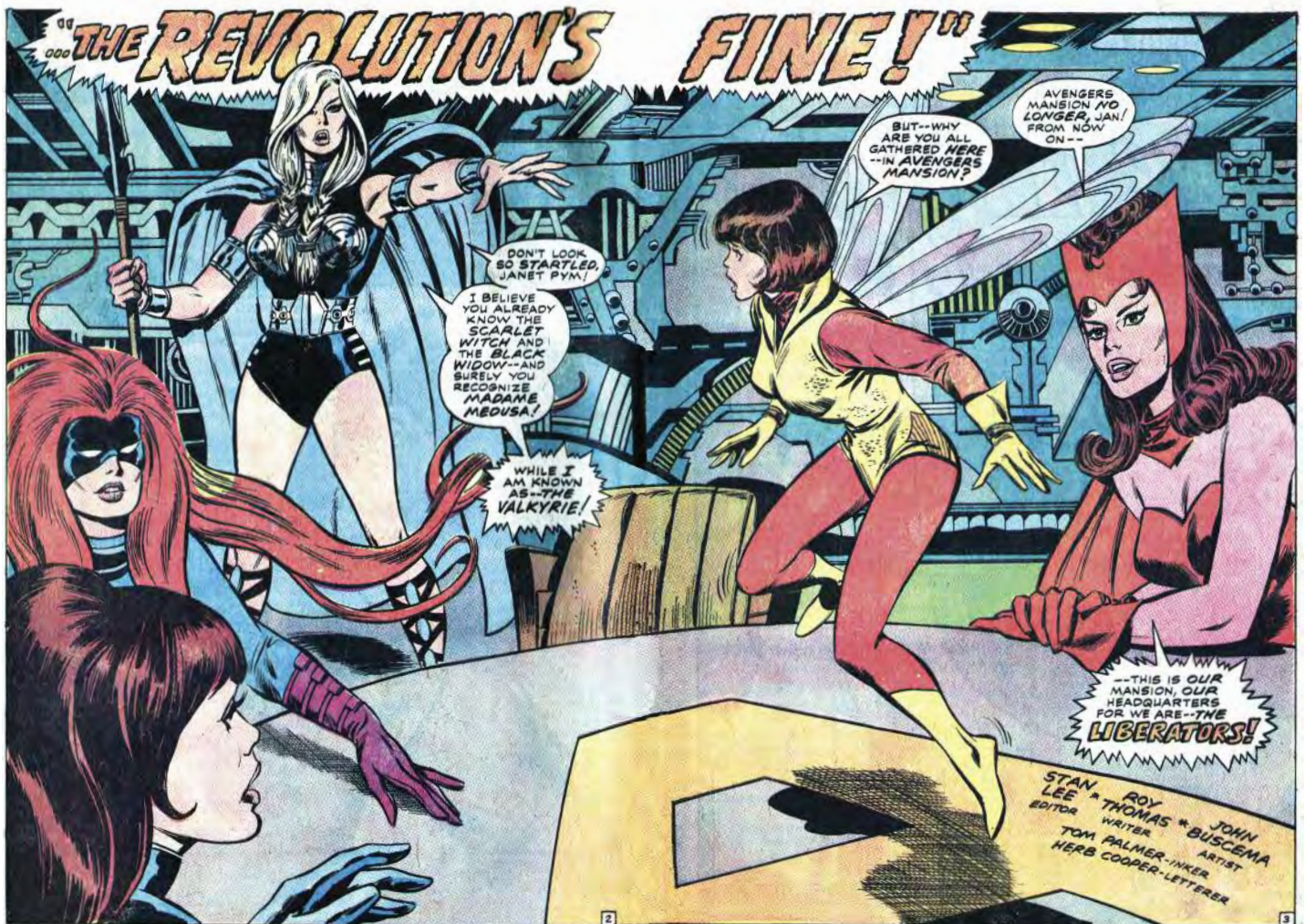


Valkyrie! Valkyrah!

Detail from John Buscema and Frank Giacoia's cover art gracing *The Defenders* #4 (Feb. 1973).

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by Jonathan Miller



Marvel Comics' Valkyrie made her first appearance on the cover of *The Avengers* #83 (Dec. 1970), an iconic image that heralded a new age in mainstream comics in terms of the depiction of women in the medium. Flanked by a quartet of A-list Marvel heroines, the Wagnerian warrior stood over the defeated forms of the male Avengers and announced that the era of their predominance had passed. Inside ("The Revolution's Fine"), she related her origin—a typical comic-book tale of a scientific laboratory accident, but in this case one facilitated by male chauvinism and arrogance—and converted the heroines to her cause, namely the humiliation and defeat of their male counterparts. Her argument used nothing more than the way female characters such as themselves had historically been sidelined, ignored, or dismissed altogether, and in truth her claims were hardly exaggerated.

LADY LIBERATORS

So motivated, the newly formed Lady Liberators surprise their men friends at Rutland, Vermont's famous Halloween parade and proceed to thoroughly kick the crap out of them. It is only following this that Valkyrie's story, motives, and indeed her very identity are revealed to be entirely false, a ruse perpetrated by longtime Avengers nemesis and perennial femme fatale the Enchantress, recently jilted by erstwhile partner-in-crime the Executioner and looking to revenge herself on the entire male population. Their newly found cause celeb thus betrayed, the heroines must then quickly

reverse their positions and rally to their fellow good guys' side. Although the final panel has the Scarlet Witch defiantly proclaiming that their movement towards equality would not be sundered by the betrayal of their leader, the status quo of gender roles seemed comfortably in place once more by the next issue.

Cultural critic and author of *Ink-Stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors* Jennifer K. Stuller takes issue with the characterization of feminism, particularly the way "the Wasp walks in and refers to their group as a 'Powderpuff Protest Meeting'—again suggesting that women who seek better treatment in the workplace are simply girly-numbskulls who ask too much and don't know their place, and even women think so, too. But as the Valkyrie monologues about her origin story and her mistreatment at the hands of men, the women, including the Wasp, are quickly recruited into Valkyrie's cause. As they jump to become the Lady Liberators, we are given the impression that women are easily brainwashed and will do anything for a seemingly abstract concept they call sisterhood. And brainwashing it is ... or at least in this case, magic.

"Though ironically, most of what the Valkyrie says to convince the women to band together is true: The male heroes grab all the attention for themselves, men write newspaper headlines that neglect contributions of women allies, and that the Black Widow is just a female Spider-Man (something she herself has already admitted elsewhere). Though the girls pony up, it is later revealed, as it so often is with depictions of other

Sisters Doing It for Themselves!

(above) The very first appearance of Valkyrie also gave us the singular appearance of the Liberators! Art by John Buscema and Tom Palmer from *The Avengers* #83 (Dec. 1970).

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LIBERATION & CONSTRAINT
PROGRESSION & REGRESSION

FlashBack!

MS. MARVEL

A Binary Life

One of the most difficult things about writing (and writing about) superheroes that have existed for decades is that it's hard to continually recapture the context and zeitgeist surrounding their creation. If comic books are mirrors for society, and their characters reflect specific historical moments and movements, then superheroes start losing a bit of their relevance as soon as the moment of their creation is over. Dazzler, Luke Cage, and even Superman are very much products of their time. Some have worn better than others because their symbolism is more enduring or better able to adapt.

by Alex Boney

Danvers Defiant!

A melange of Ms. Marvel imagery. Main figure is our heroine detailed from the cover of *Ms. Marvel* vol. 1 #18 (June 1978), and background triptych (from left) is Carol Danvers in her spiffy new costume (cover, *Ms. Marvel* #20, Oct. 1978); as Binary (cover, *Uncanny X-Men* #164, Dec. 1982); and her modern-day threads (standing in as her guise as Warbird) from the cover of *Ms. Marvel* #12 (Apr. 2007). First three are by Dave Cockrum and last is by Greg Horn.

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has suffered differently. Despite all of this—perhaps even because of it—Ms. Marvel has remained one of the most resilient, enduring, and determined heroines in comic-book history. And when it comes to “liberated ladies” of comics, she provides a useful and instructive case study.

CAROL DANVERS

Although Ms. Marvel debuted in the late 1970s, Carol Danvers had already been a part of Marvel continuity for nearly ten years. Carol debuted in *Marvel Super-Heroes* #13 (Mar. 1968) as a background character in the story that introduced Captain Marvel (or Mar-Vell—an alien officer who was sent by the technologically advanced Kree Empire to spy on Earth’s space-age capabilities). General Bridges, a commander at an unspecified Cape (presumably Kennedy at the time), introduces Carol Danvers in the following way: “Dr. Lawson, this is Miss Danvers! Man or woman, she’s the finest Head of Security a missile base could want!” This was high praise for a woman who had achieved such a lofty military position in the 1960s, and it established Carol as a tough, independent career woman from the very beginning.

When Captain Marvel graduated to his own ongoing series a couple months later (May 1968), Carol came with him as a recurring part of his supporting cast. She was not just strong-willed, but almost precognitive. Carol immediately distrusted Dr. Walter Lawson (Mar-Vell’s stolen secret identity), who she correctly thought was hiding a secret. While her initial skepticism was based largely on intuition (and Lawson’s suspicious behavior), it was also egged on by Lawson’s regressive attitude toward women in power. In *Captain Marvel* #5, Lawson tells Carol that her wariness is “perfectly obvious! You’re a woman—a lovely woman, in fact! And you’ve been given a very masculine role in life!

Naturally, psychological conflicts must arise when a beautiful young woman is asked to play at policeman!”

This sort of condescension was part of the humorous wink/nudge appeal of Carol’s role in those early issues. While she was strong and professional, she occasionally acted “like a skittish girl” (*Captain Marvel* #6) and served as a love interest for Mar-Vell during the book’s first couple years. She continued to distrust Lawson while fawning over Mar-Vell—a romantic-triangle dynamic that changed considerably in *Captain Marvel* #18, which proved to be a major turning point for Carol Danvers. When Yon-Rogg (another Kree officer) travels to Earth to attack his arch-foe Mar-Vell, Carol is caught in the middle of the battle. She finds herself trapped in a cavern when a Kree device

Danvers’ Debut (above) The future Ms. Marvel was first introduced within the Marvel Universe as foil for Captain Marvel, the Kree warrior, in *Marvel Super-Heroes* #13 (Mar. 1968). Words by Roy Thomas and art by Gene Colan and Paul Reinman.

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But when time passes, and American society shifts toward new interests and concerns, creators struggle to make extant superheroes keep up with that change. Sometimes they take drastic measures to keep characters relevant, and sometimes the heroes end up worse for that wear.

One of the characters who has experienced some of the greatest, most drastic, and most troubling transformations over the last 35 years is Carol Danvers. Originally created as a bit supporting character for Marvel’s 1960s *Captain Marvel* series, Carol went on to become Ms. Marvel, Binary, Warbird, and Ms. Marvel (again). In some ways, Ms. Marvel is the Marvel equivalent of DC’s Power Girl. Both characters were created during a rising tide of feminism in the 1970s, both have been powered up and depowered frequently by male creators, and both have suffered extraordinary physical violations including rape and mysterious supernatural pregnancies.

It’s easy to make the case that superheroes (male and female alike) have suffered various forms of horrible torment over the decades. After all, torment creates drama. But there’s something peculiar and almost fetishistic about the gendered nature of the torments devised for Carol Danvers—a character who was created to be an embodiment of feminine strength and willpower. Carol hasn’t necessarily suffered more than her male counterparts. But she



“This Female Fights Back!” (right) John Romita, Sr.’s art graces this bust-out, navel-gazing cover for *Ms. Marvel* #1 (Jan. 1977).

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BARBARA RANDALL KESEL

GAIL SIMONE



Trio of Titanic Talent

(from left) Barbara Randall Kesel, Gail Simone, and Jill Thompson in photos taken this summer on the convention circuit by Shannon E. Riley.

They've made significant contributions to the world of comics, making inroads for other female creators and leaving their own personal mark on some of the biggest icons. Now, the always brilliant, funny, and passionate Barbara Randall Kesel, Gail Simone, and Jill Thompson talk to BACK ISSUE in an exclusive "Pro2Pro" interview—sharing their thoughts on the industry, the power of Barbara Gordon, and the rise of social media.

— Shannon E. Riley

SHANNON E. RILEY: *Barbara, let's start with what I think is one of the best stories I've ever heard about breaking into the comics industry. You wrote a ten-page letter to DC editor Dick Giordano about the portrayal of women in comics—and he was so impressed, he hired you! Tell me about that letter and how it came about.*

BARBARA RANDALL KESEL: Well, it starts with an attempted abduction. Mine. No, really. When I was in college, a tiny, little thing who looked much younger

than I was, I worked at the library in Pomona, California. I was early and walking along the row of antique stores on a closed-off section of street when this guy ran up behind me, put his arm around me, and cheerfully told me how happy he was about our trip to the mountains. This was before the first *Terminator* movie, but I had the eerie experience of "seeing" instructions in the air in front of me kind of like the Terminator POV: "Stay calm, keep responding to keep him talking, you have 100 yards to get away from him and safe or he'll catch up to you," and "Oh, by the way, all of these stores are closed." Then I saw an open door on the left and bolted. I ended up inside a used bookstore with a startled couple behind the center desk. I raced into the stacks shouting, "I'm not here and you don't see me!" The guy followed me in and asked them if they'd seen his girlfriend. They told him she'd gone out the other door into the parking lot. They then locked that door behind him and asked if I needed the police. Well, today? Instant AMBER Alert.

women in comics roundtable

MONEY JILL THOMPSON



by **Shannon E. Riley**
conducted throughout May, June, and July 2011

Back then? I said no, because even though I *knew* I was in serious danger, he never spoke a direct threat, he carried no weapon, and I wasn't even sure I could describe him. I was afraid that the only result would be an incident report with my name and address on it that he might be able to get his hands on somehow. "But I'll take one of every one of those comic books on the rack behind you," I said. I was just under 20, and I'd never lived near a store when I could buy new comics *every month*. I'd found new ones on road trips and used ones from the little used bookstore next to the Kroger in Seabrook, Texas, but never had a reliable source before that. That store must have gotten half my salary for the next couple of years.

And I got to know Carl and Frances Pfeiffer and some of the cast of store regulars enough to grouse about how lame the women in some of the stories were. Frances was the one to suggest I write in and tell them my opinion—it hadn't occurred to me that they were happening *now* and I could comment! So I only

ever wrote six letters before the big one. In the lettercol of one of the Batman books, a writer had asked how come DC's women weren't as complicated as characters as the men, and suggested DC hire more women creators. Dick Giordano's editorial reply was that he didn't think it mattered. So I wrote a tome. I was at Cal Poly getting my theater degree at the time, so I outlined a dozen things they could do to make their characters better—tricks we use as actors, playwrights, and directors, and how they could apply to comics. So Dick called me and asked how far Diamond Bar was from San Diego, and could I come to the convention there to meet him? He hired me to write the Batgirl back-up in *Detective* when I didn't take the job he offered me because I wanted to finish off my degree. After I graduated, I took the next editorial opening. Tah dah! So ... I'm in comics because I didn't end up as a body in a canyon. Or a refrigerator!

RILEY: *Speaking of which ... Gail, your website "Women in Refrigerators" similarly cast a light on*

WRITER / EDITOR

BACKISSUE!

DATA CARD



Beginnings:
Batgirl back-up stories in *Detective Comics* #518–519 (Sept.–Oct. 1982)

Milestones:
The Fury of Firestorm / Hawkman / Secret Origins / Batgirl Special / Teen Titans Spotlight / Who's Who in the Legion of Super-Heroes / Hawk & Dove / Who's Who in the DC Universe / Spelljammer / Comics' Greatest World: Golden City / Ultragirl / WildC.A.T.s / Superboy / Superman: Lois Lane / Elseworld's Finest: Supergirl and Batgirl / Meridian / Sigil / The First / CrossGen Chronicles / Aqua / Rogue Angel: Teller of Tall Tales

Works in Progress:
Working with Cat Staggs on a new character for the Womanthology project / Graphic novel to be announced soon

Cyberspace:
Find Barbara Kesel on Facebook

BARBARA RANDALL KESEL

immediately what I was talking about. There was a *Green Lantern* story where the hero came home and found his very likable and interesting girlfriend chopped up and stuffed in a fridge, and there was also the shooting of Barbara Gordon, Batgirl, in the industry classic, *Batman: The Killing Joke*. [**Author's note:** Kyle Rayner's girlfriend, Alex, is killed and stuffed into a refrigerator by the villain Major Force in *Green Lantern* #54 (Aug. 1994).]

It's silly on one level—it's all just stories, right? But at the same time, all these guys were wondering online all the time, "Why don't women read comics?" And the sheer immensity of the violent and often sexualized portrayals really weighed down on me as a reader—I quit reading for a good while. Male heroes sometimes died, but not in the same manner ... the girls were being killed just to make the hero's quest for vengeance more justified. It got hugely boring on top of being nasty as a gender issue.

We should have started with a fun question!

RILEY: *Were you surprised by the response you got from fellow fans and creators in the industry?*

SIMONE: Well, not from creators, a lot knew exactly what I was asking. Some disagreed, that was fine, but almost all were very respectful. As for fans, I've heard so much nonsense that isn't on the site over the years—for example, the site is asking a question, not stating a proposition, you know? And the words "sexist" and "misogynist" are never used. But I'm still being called vile names from people who never even read the site all these years later. It's good fun, I have to laugh at it now. But at the time, I think it was an unexpectedly powerful bit of almost unintentional activism. The phrase has gone far beyond comics and is used in other media, as well.

And it made a difference, I wouldn't have said it did for a long time, but I have been in high-level meetings at comics companies where it came up, and the people there didn't even know I'd made the site. It made people aware, at least a little bit, that there *are* female readers, something that just wasn't really acknowledged for a long, long time.

RILEY: *How do you think things have changed since "Women in Refrigerators"?*

SIMONE: Oh, it's better. The trope still exists, but now we have enough female creators, editors, and readers that even the goofiest of goofs has to admit they're part of the readership.

JILL THOMPSON:

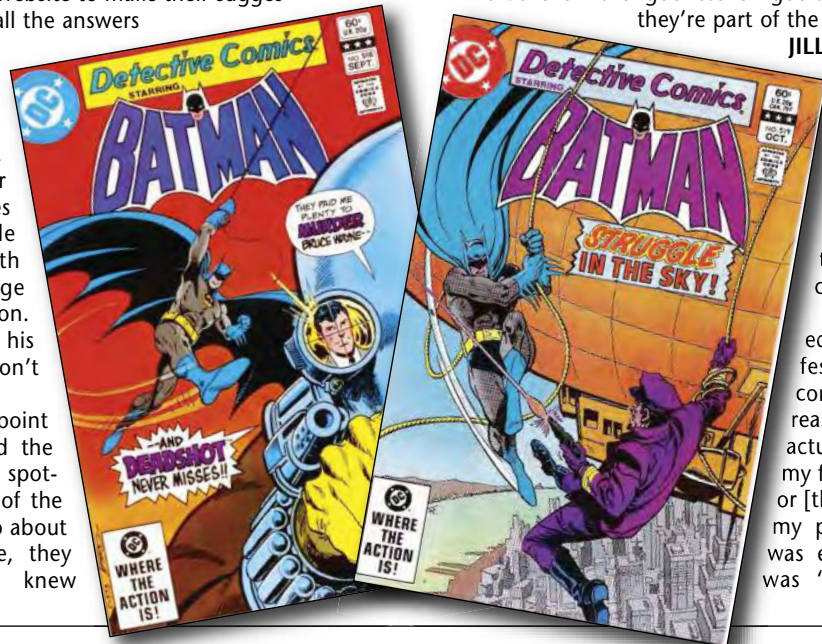
There are more women [working in the industry]. They may not be working necessarily at the two bigger companies...

When I started working professionally in comics, one of the reasons that I was actually able to get my foot in the door or [that] people saw my portfolio was, I was easy to spot. I was "that girl that

the treatment of women in comics. You generated an extensive character list and their respective fates—starting with "All of Savage Dragon's girlfriends (dead)" to "Zatanna (powers severely limited)." Was there a specific storyline that prompted you to take action and let your voice be heard?

GAIL SIMONE: There were a couple, but I should add here that I think the list is the weakest part of the site ... I didn't write it, I asked readers at the *ComicBookResources.com* website to make their suggestions and not all the answers

fit the criteria established, as much as one would hope. Erik Larsen, for example, takes understandable umbrage with the Savage Dragon mention. I haven't read his work, so I don't really know. However, the point of the list and the site was pretty spot-on, and most of the pros I talked to about it at the time, they agreed, they knew



Detective Debut

(inset right) Barbara Randall got her start as writer in the comics field scripting Batgirl back-ups in *Detective Comics* #518 & 519 (Sept. and Oct. 1982, respectively). Cover art by Jim Aparo.

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wanted to draw comics," because I was pretty much that one girl. There were maybe five of us, and if we weren't at the same convention at the same time, [it was] "There's that one girl with the portfolio!" [laughs] Now I'm so happy that there are little girls that come up to me and show me their comics. They say that I inspire them. I've met so many girls now that come up to me at comic conventions, which I would have never had years ago. The last convention I was at [I had] 12 girls—which was amazing to me—they said they are going to the American Academy of Art because I went there. It makes me feel great—they're *my* kids! And they want to draw *comics*. It's like, they want to learn all about illustration and stuff, but they *love* comics. And manga, too, but they really, really love this form of storytelling no matter what the style is. That's what I'm really proud of.

RILEY: *Barbara, how about since you wrote your letter to Dick Giordano?*

KESEL: Well, there's been one extraordinary change: 30 years ago, [if you] did a lineup of comics creators and had 30 people in line, you had 29 white males and one "other." Nowadays, if you take a random selection of comics creators and you line them up, you can still set it up [so] that you only get a lineup of 30 white males, but there's so many more voices represented. Technology has allowed so many more people to tell their own stories. Technology's been the biggest change, since pretty much anyone can produce a four-color comic on their Mac and then send it off to the same printer the big boys use. The only barrier is money.

There's [also] a hugely broader accepted range of what makes a comic book. The biggest change has been from the point of educators and librarians. The same people who historically pooh-poohed comic books as "not literature" have grown up, have done

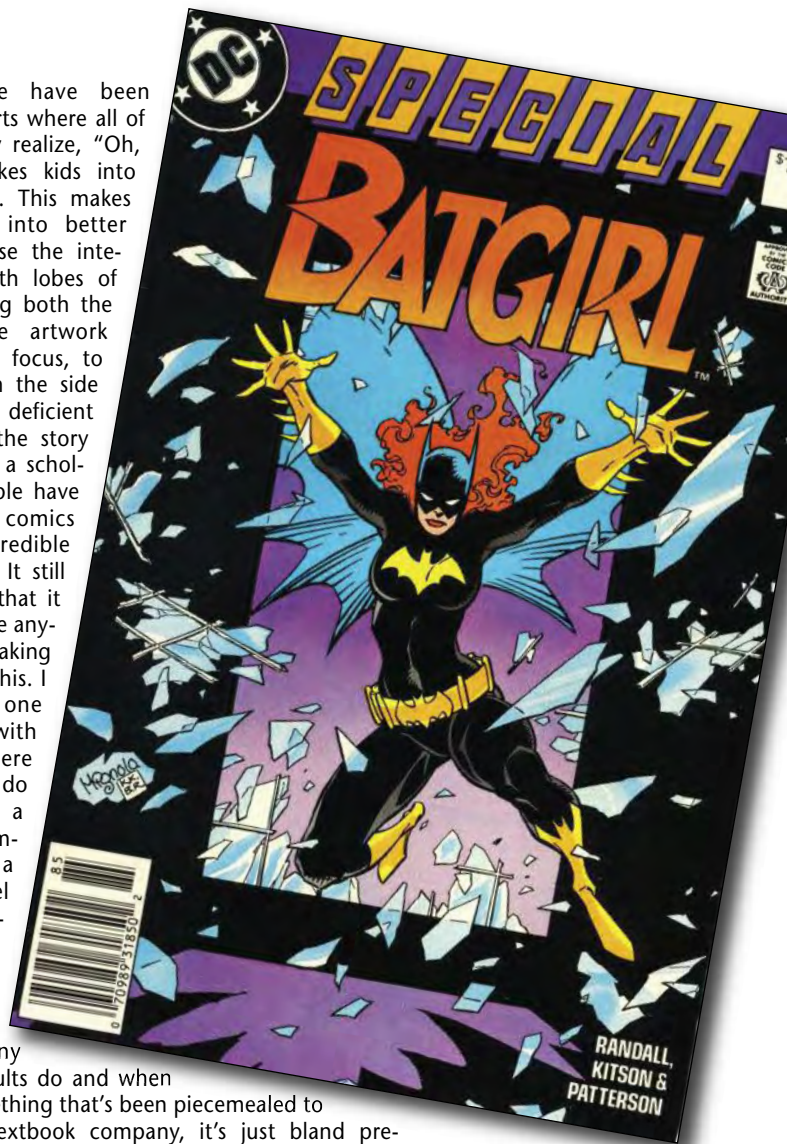


studies, there have been scholarly reports where all of a sudden they realize, "Oh, sh*t, this makes kids into better readers. This makes slow readers into better readers because the integration of both lobes of the brain using both the text and the artwork causes you to focus, to figure through the side where you're deficient and sum up the story better," so on a scholarly level people have realized that comics [are] this incredible teaching tool. It still frustrates me that it doesn't feel like anybody is truly taking advantage of this. I worked on one property with Marvel where they tried to do this through a textbook company [with] a graphic novel for kids' programs. That's fine, except kids don't like to read crapy stories any more than adults do and when

you have something that's been piecemealed to death by a textbook company, it's just bland pre-chewed food. There may be some good ideas in there, but it's [watered down] out of fear that someone will be offended. I mean, *Harry Potter* has shown us you can find a dozen people who will be offended by any one thing [in the series], and yet it's this extraordinary, rich story that has a whole spectrum of different kinds of characters involved in it. This is my particular passion: I want to do comics that are socially complicated without being overtly sexual or overtly violent so they will fit comfortably in any school library ... but I don't want to do them through any kind of textbook company because I want to be able to do them with character peculiarities. Then I want to graft teaching materials onto that where you have information that's both been embedded in the comics to be used that way or inspires people to come in and say, "Oh, look, you can pluck *this, this, or this* out of it," and create a teaching tool there that somebody might actually really enjoy being taught by.

Right now you have a lot of kids learning from comics. If they're looking at mainstream comics, what they're mostly learning is violence and death, violence and death, violence and death ... which is exciting and dramatic and, you know, it's been a staple of saga and opera and stories for the entire life of human beings, but there's plenty of smaller drama not being explored, those first moments of embarrassment or disappointment or betrayal.

Oh, and I don't want to be dumping on the comics



Barbara by Barbara

Many a BRK fan first encountered Barbara Randall Kesel's work during her memorable stint writing *Batgirl*. Here's her *Batgirl Special #1* (1988) with cover art by a young Mike "Hellboy" Mignola. Barbara's artist partner on her first stint chronicling Barbara Gordon's heroics was Trevor von Eeden, who drew the piece at left.

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SWORDS & SCIENCE &

STARFIRE



by **Andy Mangels**

Although the Women's Liberation movement was in full swing by 1976, one would hardly have noticed it in the world of comics. Female lead characters were few and far between. Although *The Secrets of Isis* ruled Saturday mornings, and *The Bionic Woman* and *Wonder Woman* had recently been born in primetime, as of comics cover-dated in July, only six female characters headlined books: *Blondie* (Charlton), *Little Lulu* (Gold Key), Red Sonja in *Marvel Feature* (Marvel), *Tigra* in *Marvel Chillers* (Marvel), *Vampirella* (Warren), and *Wonder Woman* (DC).

Young visitors to the newsstands might have been quite surprised then to see *Starfire* #1 (cover-dated Aug.–Sept., but on sale in May), an all-new title from DC Comics that featured a sword-wielding Asian female—"A Woman Rebel in an Enslaved World!" promised the cover copy—standing over a defeated-but-thuggish male warrior. The tagline promised "A New Epic of Swords & Science," heady words in a pre-*Star Wars* community.

Starfire would last eight issues, ending abruptly with an Oct.–Dec. 1977 cover-dated comic that promised further adventures to come. But although one person stayed consistent through all eight issues—penciler Mike Vosburg—nothing else stayed the same. Four writers, two editors, two inkers, cast members disposed of almost every issue, costume changes ... to say that *Starfire* was a comic in flux is an

understatement. Assembled in the article to follow are the recollections of almost every living creator who worked on *Starfire*, explaining where the concept came from, and how it became such a patchwork quilt.

From Beyond Space and Time!

Detail from a beautiful Mike Vosburg commission piece, featuring our heroine, the siren of swords and science, Starfire!

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STARFIRE ORIGINS

The creation of Starfire can clearly be credited to writer David Michelinie, who scripted the first two issues of the series. "As I recall, I was asked by [editor] Joe Orlando to come up with a female sword-and-sorcery character to be DC's answer to Red Sonja," the author says today. "It's always fun and challenging to create new characters, especially when you get to create a new world to put them in. But I was already writing a fairly traditional sword-and-sorcery book at the time in *Claw the Unconquered*, and I also had no desire to [copy] Red Sonja and simply put new names on the characters. So I came up with the sword-and-science angle, putting the series more in the realm of fantasy than barbarian action. I wanted a tone that was more in line with Edgar Rice Burroughs' Mars and Venus books, than with Robert E. Howard's muscle and magic epics."

DC was publishing multiple fantasy/barbarian books at the time, including *Claw*, *Stalker*, *Beowulf*, and the on/off *Warlord* series. Was *Starfire* an attempt to open the market specifically for female characters? "I really wasn't in on DC's corporate reasoning or decision-making," says Michelinie. "My impression was that the company wanted to put more titles on the stands, and hoped to tap into the Conan market that was doing well for Marvel. I assume they wanted a female character because Red Sonja was popular, and they already had several male characters in fantasy books."

Prior to *Starfire* #1, penciler Mike Vosburg had worked for Gold Key and Charlton, and regularly done books for Marvel including *Deadly Hands of Kung Fu*, *Savage Sword of Conan*, and two *First Issue Special* comics for DC ("Starman" and "Return of the New Gods"). "I had very little to do with the creation of *Starfire*," he admits today. "As I recall, I was working exclusively for Marvel at the time, and the companies were always looking for ways to entice the new talent away from each other. So when I started talking to DC, *Starfire* was what they had in the works that fit for me. Roy Thomas once told me years later I'd been in the discussion for Red Sonja since the female characters were my specialty; fortunately, they went with Frank Thorne."

In creating *Starfire*, Michelinie did add one element to the visuals and characterization that was unusual for the generically whitebread world of comics: *Starfire* herself was half-Caucasian and half-Asian. "It was purposeful, but there was no grand scheme behind it," Michelinie says. "I just thought it would be cool and a little different. I had also recently dated a Chinese-American woman, so that may have been a factor as well." Michelinie also reveals that the character was originally called "Akanda," "Probably because it sounded like 'anacanda.' Fortunately, clearer heads prevailed and the more commercial 'Starfire' was eventually substituted."

As for the rest of the look of the character, and her world, Vosburg was totally in control. This included the asymmetrical costume *Starfire* wore, which included a cut-out over her breasts in the style of Wally Wood's design for Power Girl. "I was very big into the European cartoonists: Moebius, Carlos Jimenez, Victor De La Fuente, Esteban Maroto, Paul Gillon, and many others," says Vosburg. "In fact, the only bad advice that



DAVID MICHELINIE



Joe Orlando ever gave me was: 'You're looking at those European guys too much.' But one of my big influences was Guido Crepax and his character Valentina. As I've explained in other interviews, one of the costumes he dressed Valentina in was the inspiration for *Starfire*'s costume." As for the sexy aspects, Vosburg also references Howard Chaykin, Barry Windsor-Smith, and Frank Brunner. "I'm afraid my stuff was pretty tame by comparison. DC would have probably preferred that I push it a lot further. If I had, maybe *Starfire* would be in issue #500 by now and I would have missed out on a lot of fun in Hollywood.

"On the first issues I was able to design all of the characters, which was a lot of fun," Vosburg says. "I do remember one of the creatures was a lot like something I saw in Victor De La Fuente's *Haxtur*. The male lead wore something right out of Errol Flynn's

Pointer Sister

Cover of the first issue of *Starfire* (Aug.–Sept. 1976), with art by Ernie Chan, pencils, and Vince Colletta, inks.

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PHOENIX

RISING 

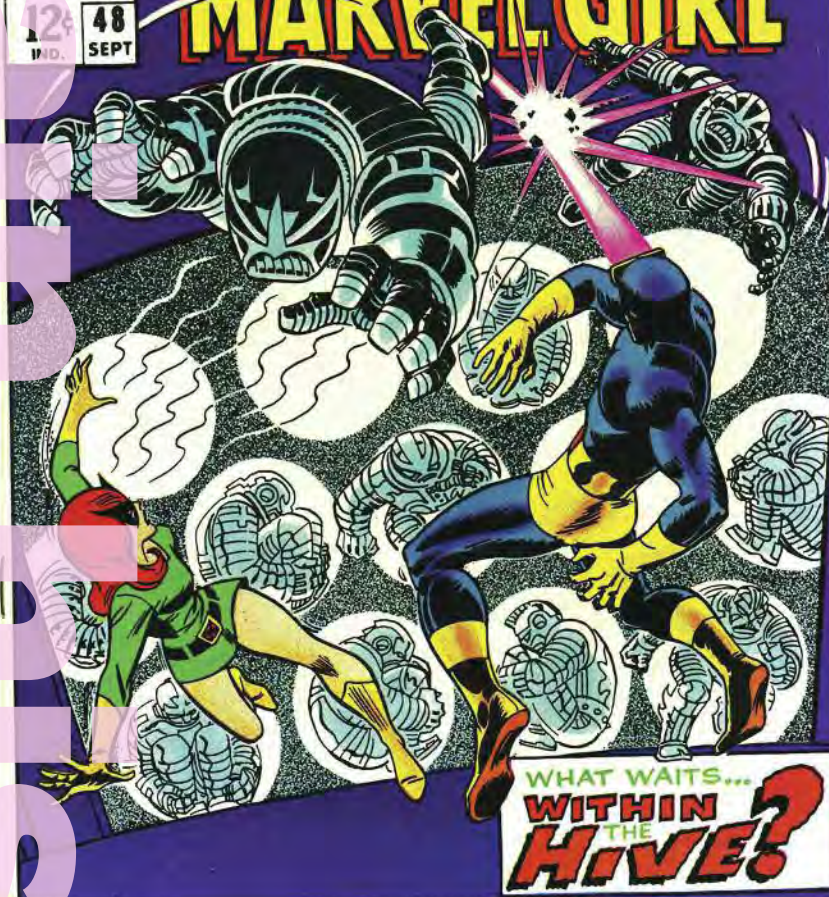


by *Jim Ford*

Bring on the
epic!
Guys!

APPROVED
BY THE
COMICS
CODE
AUTHORITY

X-MEN FEATURING: CYCLOPS AND MARVEL GIRL



Mutants in Love!

Teammates Scott (Cyclops) Summers and Jean (Marvel Girl) Grey officially became an item in the pages of *X-Men* #48 (Sept. 1968). Cover art by John Romita. (inset right) *X-Men* co-creator Jack Kirby and inker Chic Stone's pin-up from *X-Men* #9 (Jan. 1965).

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"Hear me, X-Men!" Jean Grey shouted as she soared into the sky. "No longer am I the woman you knew! I am fire! And life incarnate! Now and forever—I am Phoenix!" Bathed in a corona of fire, her mind burning, Jean then plummeted unconscious and barely alive in *X-Men* #101 (Oct. 1976). That she had survived at all was miraculous. That she was now transformed, a Phoenix forged from solar flame, was unimaginable.

Jean was a mutant with the talents of telepathy and telekinesis. She was kidnapped in *X-Men* #98 (Apr. 1976) and found herself, along with Wolverine and other members of the X-Men, held captive aboard an orbiting space station. Cyclops, the leader of the X-Men, had led a team to rescue her. Their space shuttle was critically damaged. Solar flare activity, unusually heavy and especially haz-

ardous, surged toward the station, threatening them all. Jean piloted the shuttle while the X-Men were secured inside a shielded compartment. She hoped that her talents would allow her to survive the solar flares long enough to get home. In *X-Men* #100 (Aug. 1976), Jean gave her life so that others might live. It would not be the final time that she would have to make that choice.

OLD SCHOOL

Jean was introduced in *X-Men* #1 (Sept. 1963) as the newest student to the Xavier Institute for Gifted Youngsters. She was given the name Marvel Girl and learned that she was among four other students who all had special mutant talents. Together they would become the X-Men.

As the only young woman on a team with five other men (including her teacher, Professor Xavier), Jean was the center of attention. It was Cyclops, a reserved 18-year-old, who caught her eye. Jean was 17. She started flirting with him in *X-Men* #3 (Jan. 1964), but he was painfully shy, afraid of the devastation his uncontrollable optic blasts could cause should he relax his guard.

Jean, with Cyclops, whose real name is Scott Summers, continued their nervous flirtations until after Jean had left the team for Metro College. A flashback in *X-Men* #138 (Oct. 1980) showed that they had proclaimed their love for each other behind the scenes of *X-Men* #32 (May 1967), but they were not shown as a couple until *X-Men* #48 (Sept. 1968).

Marvel Girl's talents were subtle, even demure. She was able to lift small objects using telekinesis. Later, with experience, and as the demands of the story required, the strength of her telekinesis grew and she was given the power of telepathy. Marvel Girl may have been the weakest of the X-Men. All that changed.

ALL-NEW, ALL-DIFFERENT

A new creative team took over the series with Giant-Size *X-Men* #1 (1975). Writer Len Wein and artist Dave Cockrum were the architects of the new team of X-Men. Chris Claremont became writer with the first regular issue, *X-Men* #94 (Aug. 1975). Cyclops remained as the only original member while Jean unceremoniously left her life as Marvel Girl behind in that issue. Wein told Peter Sanderson in an interview for Fantagraphics Books' 1982 volume *The X-Men Companion (TXC)*, "She was meant to come back in just a few months. The two of them couldn't stay apart and she was going to show up again ... with redesigned powers. We were going to revamp her not quite into what Phoenix became, but make her a different character, because we all thought she was a wimp, that she wasn't worth it. We had to pretty much reconstruct Jean Grey as a character."

As for her redesigned powers, the final page of *X-Men* #100 suggests Jean was bombarded with cosmic rays. The "tac-tac-tac" sound effect is reminiscent of *Fantastic Four* #1 (Nov. 1961), when cosmic rays penetrated the command capsule of Reed Richards' rocketship. The original intention may have been that her mutant powers would be augmented by the same means as the *Fantastic Four* received their powers.



Cockrum initially did five different versions for Phoenix's new costume: all-white with gold gloves, boots and sash. The all-white costume was rejected by then-editor-in-chief Archie Goodwin because readers would be able to see the opposite printed page through the costume. Goodwin directed Cockrum to use Marvel Girl's original light-green colors for her costume. "I was really miffed about it for a long time," Cockrum admitted in *TXC*. He wanted Jean, who was a green-eyed, redhead, "...to look terrific and be terrific, and she kind of got clichéd—became a cliché—unfortunately." Cockrum explained, "Because before Farrah Fawcett became big she was doing Wella-Balsam commercials and things like that and occasionally appearing in [*Cosmopolitan*] and I thought she was terrific, and so that's who Jean became. And then she had to un-become Farrah Fawcett after Farrah became a big deal." Recalling that Jean had become a bathing-suit model when the team disbanded in *X-Men* #48, Cockrum further explained that they all wanted her to be more flamboyant than what she had been as Marvel Girl.

"First, Dave and I deliberately set out to make her more independent and attractive before we made her into Phoenix," Claremont said in *TXC*. "I saw no reason why a young, intelligent, attractive, courageous, heroic young woman should look like a Republican frump." Claremont was building a reputation for writing strong women. One such woman was Misty Knight, a supporting character from *Iron Fist*. Misty had moved into a fashionable apartment with Jean in New York's Greenwich Village and welcomed Jean's release from the hospital in *Iron Fist* #11 (Feb. 1977). Perhaps Claremont intended to suggest that Jean's newfound style was influenced by Misty Knight.

Phoenix was more than simply Marvel Girl with a new look. Jean learned the full extent of her powers in *X-Men* #105 (June 1977) when Professor Xavier was attacked by Firelord, a former herald of the world-devourer Galactus. With a thought, Jean transmuted her clothing into her costume. She shot into the air, burning the atmosphere around her. She slammed Firelord with telekinetic bursts of incredible force and shielded herself from his starbolts, the same blasts of energy that had stopped Thor. "Dave and I kind of liked the idea that we had a female character who was cosmic," Claremont said in a 1979 interview with Margaret O'Connell in *The Comics Journal* #50. "No one else did. Len [Wein, then editor of *Thor*] objected strenuously to our using Firelord if Phoenix beat him. We couldn't have a lady character who's cosmic, because—well, his argument was that it made the rest of the X-Men superfluous." With her powers now rivaling that of gods, she felt an exhilarating—almost frightening—feeling of ecstasy. It was intoxicating, and had she allowed her emotions to dominate, she would have killed Firelord. "We got around it," Claremont continued, "by having the fight be a draw. And by making sure Phoenix got the last shot, which is blasting Firelord ten or twelve miles into New Jersey." Phoenix then demonstrated how cosmic she was by energizing a star-gate, allowing the X-Men to pursue their prey across the galaxies. Later, she even brought a meteor from outer space crashing to the ground. There seemed nothing she could not accomplish.

The plasma rippling around Phoenix manifested itself as a fiery raptor. "Well, I did the bird, but I didn't do it the way [John Byrne] does it, and I like his better," Cockrum said, again in *TXC*, talking about the unique

Phoenix effect he had created to represent Jean's power. "Mine was more Kirby-crackle, brush-scratch sort of thing, and he refined it into the very elegant, sweeping stylized bird that it is now." John Byrne replaced Cockrum as penciler with *X-Men* #108 (Dec. 1977), when the series began monthly publication. "My early Jean Grey was Raquel Welch," Byrne remarked in *TXC*.

On a planet in the distant Shi'ar Empire, Phoenix saved the universe in *X-Men* #108. The X-Men found themselves pawns in a galactic civil war. Within an extra-dimensional doomsday device called the M'Kraan Crystal, Jean was tortured by nightmarish visions of dying. She realized that she had already died and been reborn. "We agonized over what the hell she did," Cockrum said in *TXC*, "'Well, she can die and be resurrected with some super-power.' I don't know if we made it all that clear to the readers, but we knew she died up there and recreated herself, and later on we made it more clear, but beyond that it took us a long

A New Shade of Grey

(below) A whole new chapter begins for the team when Marvel Girl is transformed into The Phoenix. Cover art of *X-Men* #101 (Oct. 1976) by Dave Cockrum.

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HUMBLE

FlashBack!



BEGINNINGS

She stumbled out of the blocks, but the She-Hulk went from knock-off to actual character in the space of 25 issues

There are characters that make their entrances fully formed, exploding into comics pages or televisions or movie screens with definitive qualities that hook readers and viewers from the start.

by Douglas R. Kelly

It's hard to picture James Bond as anything other than a super-cool spy, Wonder Woman as anything other than a powerful Amazon princess, or Adrian Monk as anything other than a brilliant detective who's afraid of milk.

The She-Hulk doesn't fall into this category. In fact, when the decision makers at Marvel Comics decided, in the fall of 1979, to launch a new title based on the character, the only thing they knew for sure was that it would be a female version of the Incredible Hulk. "The genesis of the whole book was that Universal Television

was doing the Hulk TV show," says writer David Anthony Kraft. "Apparently, their attorneys or somebody over there thought they

had discovered a loophole and that they could basically spin the Hulk off without having to license it from Marvel. The word at the time was that Universal was working on some female form of the Hulk. So Marvel had to spring into action and Stan basically cranked out something really quick, just to get it out there."

In order to launch the character as quickly as possible, they turned to artist John Buscema, another storyteller in the Marvel fold who could turn out high-quality work as fast as the legendary Stan Lee. "Stan not only works incredibly quickly, he's somebody who can

Busting Out

Panel from the Stan Lee (writer), John Buscema (penciler) and Chic Stone (inker) story in *The Savage She-Hulk* #1 (Feb. 1980).

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Shaggy Lady

(above) A rare instance of John Buscema inking his own pencils on this, the cover of *The Savage She-Hulk* #1 (Feb. 1980). (inset) Cousin Bruce Banner shares his Hulk-ified blood with Jen Walters, who will become an emerald green giant herself.

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make gold out of straw," says Jo Duffy, who would become editor of the book beginning with issue #3. "Having Stan and John do it was a blessing, because think of what it could have been if it had been done by people who were not in love with the idea—an idea that did not grow organically, out of the creative force. And John Buscema—you couldn't get a better artist. If you're going to do something in a hurry and have it look heartfelt and brilliant, you get Stan and John to do it."

Reaction around the Marvel Bullpen to the idea of doing a female

Hulk was somewhat less than enthusiastic. "The whole idea was appalling to me," says Kraft. "We all groaned in horror. There was something so perverse about the situation that I got to thinking about it and the one thing I didn't want to see happen was [that we would] take the Hulk and just clone it as a female. So, because I have a strange way of looking at things, I thought, 'I need to do that book.' I actually went to [editor-in-chief Jim] Shooter and said, 'This is horrible, but if there's going to be a She-Hulk, I need to be on that.'"

KEEPING IT IN THE FAMILY

First, though, that Lee and Buscema premier issue of *The Savage She-Hulk* hit the stands with a cover date of February 1980, with Chic Stone's inks complementing Buscema's pencils. Lee wasted no time ensuring that readers would make the Hulk connection right out of the gate. He made the central character, attorney Jennifer "Jen" Walters, the cousin of Bruce Banner, alter ego of the Incredible Hulk. The issue begins with Banner visiting Jen in Los Angeles, where she's a practicing criminal lawyer. During the visit, Jen tells Banner that she's defending a hood named Lou Monkton, who's been accused of murdering the bodyguard of mobster Nick Trask. After the two of them are ambushed by a couple of thugs working for Trask, Banner saves Jen's life by giving her a blood transfusion (he is a doctor, after all). By giving her his own gamma ray-infused blood, he inadvertently creates the She-Hulk, and then leaves town the next day once he learns that she'll pull through.

When the thugs try to finish her off at the hospital, the stress of the situation triggers a monstrous change in Jen: She turns into a 7-foot, 300-pound raging behemoth and trashes the hospital room and elevator. When one of the hired guns yells, "It's like ... she's some kinda *She-Hulk!*" she responds, "You called me a She-Hulk! And a She-Hulk I'll be!" She chases down the thugs and hands them over to the police after one of them admits they were hired by Trask to kill Jen because Trask is afraid Jen would prove that he murdered his own bodyguard and framed Monkton.

Issue #1 closes with Jen realizing she has become a monster like her cousin. But she decides that "From now on, whatever Jennifer Walters can't handle, the She-Hulk will do!" Interestingly, there is no editor's or writer's message page in this first issue to kick off the new series, although the new series is briefly mentioned on the "Bullpen Bulletins" page as one of the many books slated to appear that month.

David Kraft perceived that first issue as an opportunity: "Stan gave her the Jennifer Walters alter ego. Beyond that, there really wasn't anything there. So I

