

The making of an Amazon in Mormonville

RAISING WONDER WOMAN IN MAN'S WORLD

By Ben Christensen

THE RECENTLY-PUBLISHED *WONDER WOMAN* #600 introduces a new storyline that radically alters the title character's look and history. The Greek gods manipulate time in such a way that, in the new history, Wonder Woman's Paradise Island was destroyed when she was a baby. Thus the young Princess Diana had been raised in the outside world—Man's World, as her sister Amazons call it. This new storyline has received mainstream attention largely for its cosmetic changes to Wonder Woman. Reflecting her new urban upbringing, the heroine has a new look, complete with trendy haircut, leather jacket, and, most notably, pants.

While most commentators focus on the costume change, Gloria Steinem, who has long promoted Wonder Woman as a strong role model for girls, is more concerned with the change in Wonder Woman's history than in her clothes. "It's an exact copy of Superman who came as a baby from the exploding planet Krypton," Steinem says. "This destroys her home, her Amazon mother and sisters, and gives her no place to go to gain strength and create an inspiring storyline."¹ I've been reading superhero comics for long enough to know this story with its altered timeline won't last more than a year or so, but Steinem raises interesting questions about exactly what makes Wonder Woman the powerful character she is.

Wonder Woman has always been a character of contradictions. Her earliest adventures in the 1940s, written by her creator, William Moulton-Marston, are dominated both by images of female strength and female bondage—the primary reason the heroine carries a lasso seems to be so villains can use it to tie her up. In a 1962 issue of *Justice League of America*, Aquaman notes, "While we don't have a permanent chairman—when it comes to cleaning time, we all agree Wonder Woman is boss."² Yet ten years later, Steinem fea-

tured Wonder Woman on the cover of *Ms. Magazine*,³ holding her up as a symbol of feminism. In recent years, *Wonder Woman* writers have incorporated this sense of contradiction into the character's in-story portrayal. She is an ambassador for peace who will fight viciously, even kill when necessary, to achieve that peace. She is a harsh critic of "Man's World" who wears (until recently) a symbol of that world, the American flag. She carries a lasso she uses to force victims to reveal the truth but hides her own identity, disguising herself as government agent Diana Prince. I like this portrayal of Wonder Woman because it seems the only honest way to approach the character, and it makes her complex in a way that Superman and Batman are not.

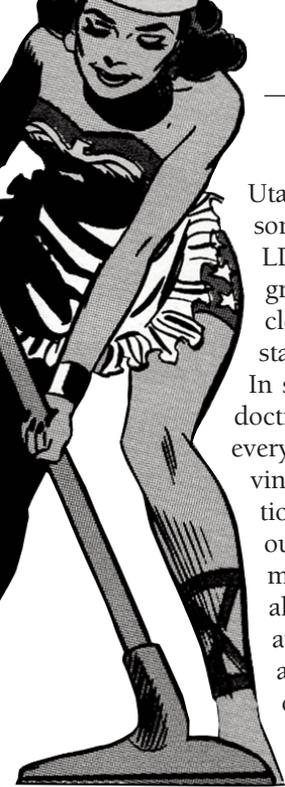
Steinem's criticism of the revised history, that it duplicates Superman's history, makes me wonder whether Diana's upbringing on Paradise Island is a necessary part of what makes her Wonder Woman. After all, the Amazons themselves embody many of her contradictions: warriors for peace, a matriarchal society of women who wear bracelets to remind them of their past bondage to men, an island nation created to transform humanity who remain isolated from all but a select few. "Three thousand years they stayed on their little tropical island while women were treated like cattle all over the world," observes a character in a recent story written by long-time *Wonder Woman* scribe Gail Simone.⁴ Considering her upbringing in this society of contradictions, no wonder Diana grew up to be the complex character she is.

Is it possible, then, for a Wonder Woman raised in Man's World to be the ideal of womanhood Gloria Steinem has lauded in the past? Or will her new background as an orphan spirited away from her dying homeland make her a pale copy of Superman? I'm eager to see how the storyline plays out—whether writer J. Michael Straczynski can convincingly prove Steinem wrong, or if in fact Wonder Woman without Paradise Island is not Wonder Woman at all.



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MY WIFE, JESSIE, and I have three children: two daughters and a son. In order to be near extended family, we're raising them in Utah. And not just



Utah, Utah Valley—home to BYU, the MTC, and some of the busiest OB/GYNs in the world. The LDS Church permeates everything here, from grocery stores that proudly advertise being closed on Sundays to new homes that come standard with basement food storage bunkers.

In some ways, this is good. I like the Church's doctrine of personal revelation, which allows every woman and man to commune with the divine. I like that Mormon culture values education and the arts. But I can't ignore the fact that our daughters will grow up being taught that men have presiding authority over them while also hearing testimonies about how women are more spiritual than men. How can Jessie and I possibly raise our children with healthy concepts of gender equality in this environment? In many ways, Utah Valley is the epitome of Man's World.

To make matters worse, despite Jessie's and my conscious rejection of the more sexist aspects of Mormon culture, many of our life choices seem to reinforce them. For example, I am an uncloseted gay man who has chosen to marry a woman and raise children with her. Jessie is a straight Mormon woman who has chosen to marry a gay man and raise children with him. Although our first daughter, Sophie, is not yet old enough to have the vaguest idea of her dad's sexual orientation, eventually she will be, and I can't help but wonder how she will interpret her parents' decision to marry, and how it will impact her identity. Will she view her parents' marriage as evidence of their dedication to the patriarchal model and "traditional marriage"? Will her mother's decision to marry a gay man teach her that being sexually attractive to her partner is unimportant? Will her father's decision to marry a woman teach her to devalue her own sexuality? These questions haunt me.

Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, a memoir in graphic-novel form about Bechdel's relationship with her closeted gay father, gives me a captivating peek into what Sophie's life might be like. It would be shortsighted and even sexist to assume I can read Bechdel's past as a precise map of Sophie's future—reducing each to "the daughter of a repressed gay man" limits the two women to a single aspect of their lives, defined by their relationship with a man—but there is value in examining the parallels, particularly when it comes to the commonalities their fathers share beyond sexual preference. Maybe I can learn from the elder Bechdel's mistakes, benefit from his daughter's insights. For example, Bruce Bechdel is a repressed man who vents his frustration through angry outbursts, often directed at his children. A particularly poignant passage describes Bechdel's labyrinthine house as a metaphor for her father's unpredictable moods:

PANEL 1

CAPTION: My mother, my brothers, and I knew our way around well enough, but it was impossible

to tell if the Minotaur lay beyond the next corner.

ILLUSTRATION: Her father angrily throwing a plate from the dinner table, with a small caption pointing out the permanent scar it made on the linoleum.

PANEL 2

CAPTION: And the constant tension was heightened by the fact that some encounters could be quite pleasant.

ILLUSTRATION: Her father reading to her at bedtime.

DAD: ...and at each pull the elephant's child's nose grew longer and longer.

PANEL 3

CAPTION: His bursts of kindness were as incandescent as his tantrums were dark.

ILLUSTRATION: Her father silhouetted in her bedroom doorway, having just turned off the light.

DAD: ♪ . . . won't you be my pony girl? Marry me, carry me, far across the sea. ♪

YOUNG ALISON: Don't turn out the hall light.⁵

Before I became a parent, I was never a short-tempered person. Even now, in my interactions with coworkers and the consultants I supervise, with my siblings and parents, with Jessie, I very rarely get angry and never raise my voice. Yet, with my children, I am all too often the Minotaur Bechdel describes her father to be. I stop short of throwing dishes, but it seems to me at least that my anger is just as destructive. I yell at the slightest aggravation, furiously demanding that my children respect and obey me. I know the things I say hurt them, and I do it anyway. Perhaps I'm giving my actions too much weight, but when I imagine them from a child's perspective, each angry word seems to shake the world with the force of a bomb. Once I walked into the bathroom to find Sophie laughing because she had hit her brother's head against the bathtub wall, making him cry. I was appalled at how she could find humor in his pain. "That's not human," I muttered, knowing she could hear. A few minutes later, as I helped her dry off, I asked if she knew what she had done wrong.

"I hit Timo."

"And?"

"And I laughed at him when he was crying."

"And what does it mean when you laugh at someone who's crying?" I asked, hoping she would remember how I had previously explained that this tells people you don't care about their feelings.

"It means I'm not a person," she said matter-of-factly. My heart dropped into my stomach.

I suspect that as Bechdel says of her father, my moments of cruelty are made all the more distressing by my moments of tenderness. When I am in control of myself, I try to compensate for my minotaurness by pouring on the compliments, the hugs, the time spent reading to Sophie while she rests her head on my chest. What does this bipolar parenting style do

to a child? Does it teach her that she has to tiptoe over broken glass, to perfectly please the Man for fear of his wrath?

Another commonality I share with Bechdel's father is perfectionism. And like him, I extend this demand for perfection to my children. I compulsively point out every trivial failure. "Sit properly." "Close your mouth while chewing." "Why are you crying? The reason you're crying isn't logical." "Why can't you remember not to put your toothbrush upside down in the cup? That's disgusting." Unsurprisingly, Sophie has adopted my perfectionism. The distress this causes her sickens me. I suspect the reason she's crying is not the illogical reason she's managed to vocalize through tears but despair at yet again having failed to live up to my impossible standards. I can see how desperately she wants to please me, yet I don't acknowledge, nearly as often as I should, how completely she does please me. Perhaps the worst is that I'm teaching her that her value is determined by how much she pleases the male figure in her life.

Still, I can't help smiling when I see how fully she's adopted some of my values. Once I found her vehemently arguing with her cousin over whether or not there's any such thing as "boy toys" and "girl toys." He didn't want to play with what he deemed were girl toys, but Jessie and I had taught Sophie that girls and boys can play with whatever kinds of toys they want. This explains why it's not uncommon to see her in a princess dress, superhero cape and mask, pink purse hanging from her arm while she plays with trucks in the mud.

In my efforts to raise a strong, independent, healthy young woman, I'm my own worst enemy. My efforts are as schizophrenic as those of Wonder Woman's creator who couldn't decide whether he was writing a female empowerment narrative or a bondage fetish fantasy. In Wonder Woman's case, later creators molded these contradictions into a wonderfully complex character, similar to the way Alison Bechdel has drawn from the shortcomings in her relationship with her father to create a beautiful narrative about identity and redemption.

Like Wonder Woman, Bechdel is a champion of truth. Instead of a golden lasso she uses black ink on white paper, but the result is just as magical. She captures the contradictions of the world with her pen and forces them to reveal the truth. When I read about Bechdel growing up in a small Pennsylvania town no less Man's World than Utah Valley, and with a father no less complicit in that world than I, and I see the strong woman she's become, a powerful truth emerges: Sophie will not forever be defined by me. Just as Alison Bechdel far surpasses the limitations of her upbringing, so will Sophie.

AS I READ *Fun Home*, I am touched by Bechdel's mercy toward her father. Even while enumerating his failures, she expresses a palpable love for him. Throughout the narrative, she references the story of Icarus and Daedalus, noting at the beginning that "In our particular reenactment of this mythic relationship, it was not me

but my father who was to plummet from the sky."⁶ The final page of the book returns to this metaphor:

PANEL 1

ILLUSTRATION: Front grill of the truck that killed Bechdel's father.

CAPTION: He did hurtle into the sea, of course.

PANEL 2

ILLUSTRATION: Bechdel as a child, jumping off a diving board into a pool where her father waits with open arms.

CAPTION: But in the tricky reverse narration that impels our entwined stories, he was there to catch me when I leapt.⁷

In this final image, Bechdel recognizes that, like her father, she too will sometimes fail. At once, she shows mercy for his failures that have hurt her and allows him to show that same mercy toward her. This kind of give-and-take mercy rings true to me—there is not one perfect being doling out the mercy but a web of imperfect beings freely exchanging it.

I see this same mercy from Sophie. I might be yelling at her one minute but the very next minute, she accepts my apologetic hug and tells me she loves me. The least I can do is show her the same mercy when she fails to meet my high expectations. I always do eventually; what I need to do is get there more quickly, showing mercy in the moment of transgression. But even as I recognize what I need to do to improve, I also recognize that even my best efforts will fall short. Sophie's mercy helps me feel better about my shortcomings, but it does little to actually make up for them. How then can I succeed in raising a Wonder Woman within the Man's World of my own creation? To answer this question, I look to the mercy humankind shows by not forcing me to raise my daughter in a void, with only my influence to mold her. Were I to apply Bechdel's Rule (originally applied to movies in her comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*⁸) to my portrayal of Sophie's life thus far, my narrative would not pass muster:

1. Does it have at least two women in it? Well, I've at least mentioned both Sophie and Jessie.
2. Do the two women talk to each other? Based on what I've shown thus far, they apparently do not.
3. Do they talk about something besides a man? Uh oh. My entire account of Sophie's life focuses on her relationship with me. Let me check. . . Crap, I'm a man.

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The problem is that this is a personal essay, therefore I am the protagonist, the center of attention, but this isn't an accurate presentation of reality. In real life, the world doesn't

revolve around me. The protagonist of Sophie's life is Sophie. I am but a supporting character—thankfully one of many.

Chief among the women Sophie interacts with is her mother. Jessie embodies that complexity I admire in recent portrayals of Wonder Woman—not because she's the ideal woman or the perfect parent, but because she's not. Like all human beings, or at least the interesting ones, Jessie is a jumble of contradictions. On the one hand, she loves to cook and bake, serves faithfully in whatever calling the Church gives her in Primary or Relief Society, and finds that being a mother brings her a lot of joy. On the other hand, she has a master's degree in Spanish and teaches college courses, she actively participates in Mormon women's literary communities such as Segullah and Exponent II, and is generally uncomfortable around children. She incorporates her passion for learning into her parenting by teaching our kids about the literature, culture, and cuisine of a different country every week. At the same time, sometimes she just wants the children to go away so she can have some peace and quiet while reading blogs. She consciously lives principles of the gospel that many mainstream Mormons don't do so well at—demonstrating responsible stewardship of the Earth and its natural resources, eating meat sparingly, and treating all human beings according to the Golden Rule, regardless of religion, race, nationality, or sexual orientation. Still, every now and then she abandons her green, neo-hippy liberalism and drives the kids to McDonald's for Happy Meals. Jessie is not the living example of womanhood that Sophie should aspire to become. She's just one woman.

As it turns out, many of the supporting characters in Sophie's life are women. Among Jessie's and my closest friends, to whom Sophie has and will continue to be exposed throughout her life, are a survivor of rape who has managed to turn her tragedy into an appreciation of the beautiful world around her; a PhD candidate who somehow grew up in Utah Valley and come out both ardently feminist and Mormon; and a mother of five young children who is actively pursuing her dreams of acting and singing professionally. Among Sophie's aunts are a nurse who works for Planned Parenthood and marches for gay rights; a dance instructor who runs a successful studio together with her husband and children; and women with various other successes achieved both in and out of the home. Sophie has no shortage of strong female role models to learn from. As I contemplate the various women in Sophie's life, I begin to think it is not so important that I shield her from the imbalanced concepts of gender she'll inevitably pick up from Utah Valley Mormonism and myself. More important is to provide her with multiple influences that together form a balanced concept of gender. Sophie is an intelligent little girl. She doesn't need me or Jessie or anyone to teach her the one true definition of womanhood; as she grows up surrounded by women who each approach their lives differently, she'll

figure out her own definition.

Perhaps the secret to the success of the current Wonder Woman storyline will be found in a detail Steinem has overlooked. She says that Diana's new origin has destroyed “her Amazon mother and sisters.” But although the queen of the Amazons is dead in this revised history, early chapters make it clear that several of Diana's Amazon sisters survive as refugees in Man's World. In fact, it is her Amazon sisters who have raised her. Wouldn't these women pass on the wonderful contradictions of the Amazons to their young charge? It is not so much where Diana grows up as who she surrounds herself with that makes her Wonder Woman. In the introduction to a Wonder Woman book published in 1972, Steinem asks, “[Do] women really have to live in a community by themselves—a separate country like Paradise Island—in order to be both happy and courageous?”⁹ Perhaps it is better for the Amazons to be integrated into Man's World. With enough Amazons, it might cease to be Man's World. Bearing this in mind, I have hope that J. Michael Straczynski's experiment might produce an interesting Wonder Woman after all. And to a much greater extent, I hope that Sophie will learn from the Amazons in her life what she can't learn from the Man's World she's growing up in.

Meanwhile, I will keep trying to be a better parent, or at least to reduce the instances of being an actively bad one. And I will continue to enjoy the moments of mercy, the times when I'm able to overlook Sophie's imperfections and when she forgives me mine, when we're able to cuddle up on the couch and enjoy an issue of *Super Friends*—a children's comic that, to my delight, features a broad-shouldered yet curvy, strong, feminine Wonder Woman who would never ever act as chairwoman of housekeeping for her fellow superheroes.

NOTES

1. Cited in Jocelyn Noveck, “Wonder Woman's New Duds Spark Interdimensional Ire,” Associated Press, 2 July 2010, <http://www2.tbo.com/content/2010/jul/03/wonder-womans-new-duds-spark-interdimensional-ire/> (accessed 23 July 2010).

2. Gardner Fox, “The Origin of the Justice League!,” *Justice League of America #9* (February 1962). Reprinted in *Justice League of America Archives Volume Two* (New York: DC Comics, 1993): 63–89.

3. You can buy a poster of this cover at <http://store.msomagazine.com/mswonderwomanposter.aspx>. The cover reads “Wonder Woman for President.”

4. Gail Simone, “Depths, Part Five: Early Release,” *Secret Six* 14 (December 2009). Reprinted in *Secret Six: Depths* (New York: DC Comics, 2010): 143–165. Incidentally, *Secret Six* is an excellent series that has been nominated for a GLAAD Award for its portrayal of a lesbian lead character.

5. Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (New York: Mariner Books, 2007), 21.

6. Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 4.

7. Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 232.

8. Reprinted with a little background on the origin of the rule at <http://dykestowatchoutfor.com/the-rule>. Bechdel credits a friend, Liz Wallace, for the rule itself, so maybe it would be more accurately called Wallace's Rule.

9. Cited in J. Caleb Mozzocco, “Gloria Steinem on Wonder Woman (Pt. 3),” *Every Day is Like Wednesday*, 22 March 2010, <http://everydayis-likewednesday.blogspot.com/2010/03/gloria-steinem-on-wonder-woman-pt-3.html> (accessed 23 July 2010).

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