



A LEAGUE OF HER OWN

Doing Wonder Woman Justice

Michelle Johnson

A war is raging across the world, soldiers of all nations striving to survive and protect their values, even as others do all they can to find new and terrible ways to inflict terror. An American soldier named Steve Trevor washes up on a distant paradise shore hoping to find a way to end the First World War, only to find a hero unlike any we've seen before: A woman warrior who leads with love.

It's 2017, 75 years since Diana first leapt off the page to raise her sword in Man's defence, and Gal Gadot is leading DC's Wonder Woman to her cinematic debut. Let's just try that again: cinematic debut. It's an incredible prospect. We've consumed nine live-action Batman movies, swooned over seven big screen Superman outings, and marvelled (pun fully intended) with fannish glee as Hollywood studios go head to head with their summer season Comic Book rivalry.

In this brave new world of blockbusting superhero action, who wouldn't queue up to watch an Amazonian demigoddess fight Axis forces with a lasso? Yet this year's Wonder Woman origin story is the first female-led superhero film for more than a decade – the last was 2005's Elektra. While detractors quote audience demographics and the box office draw of a female lead, I'm sure I'm not alone in hearing a choir of Furies sing in triumph as Diana steps in to save Steve (Chris Pine – our thoroughly modern mansal in distress) from a hail of bullets with her gauntlets alone, or takes a soiree in stride with a sword strapped to the back of her goddess-like gown.

No matter how this latest incarnation of Wonder Woman does in the box office it feels, as with so much of Wonder Woman's historical impact, like a step forward. She has been a sword and shield, a suffragette and sex symbol ever since she first came to life in All Star Comics in December 1941, and that hasn't changed. Wonder Woman is, as always, exactly who the world needs her to be.

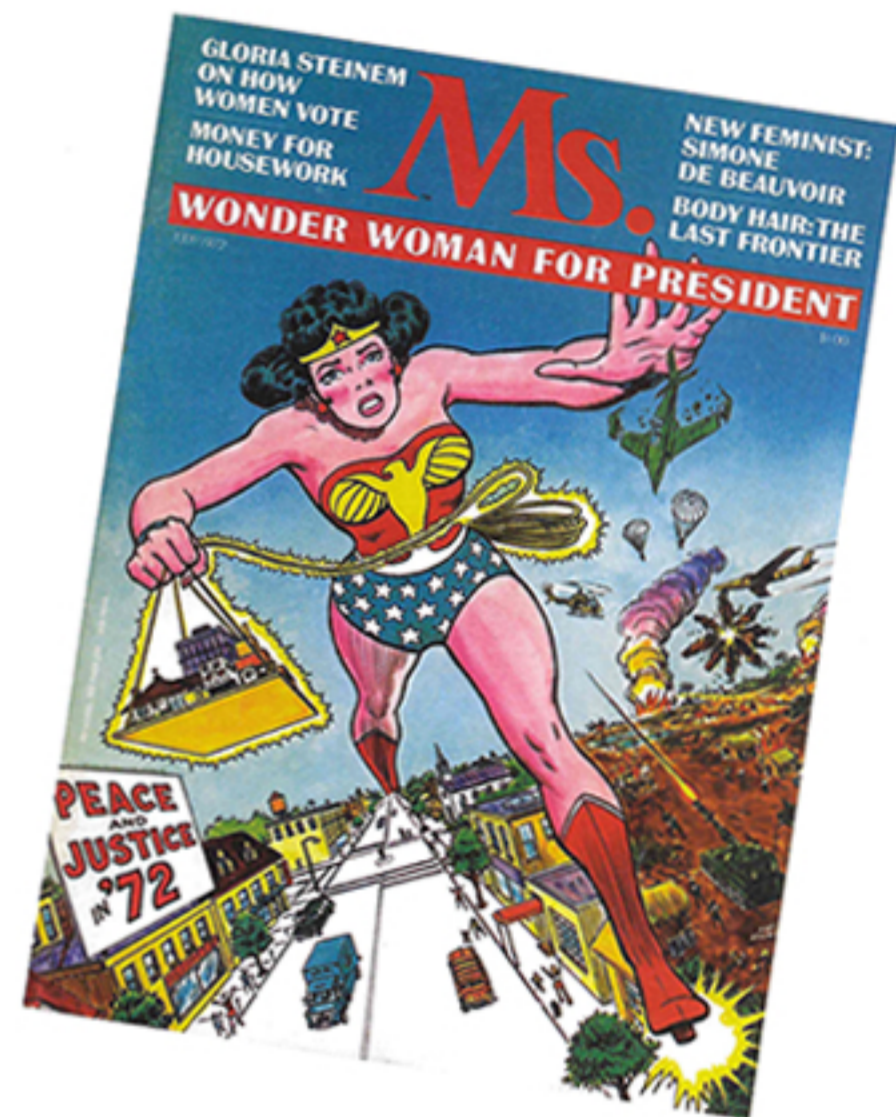
Wonder Woman was created in 1941 by prominent psychologist William Moulton Marston, who famously invented the polygraph test; his own Lasso of Truth. He wanted to create a new kind of superhero, one who would lead with love and compassion rather than his fists. Inspired by the women in his life, it was his wife Elizabeth who crystallised this vision when she told him: "Fine, but make her a woman", and Diana's image was further inspired by Olive Byrne, with whom the couple lived in a polyamorous relationship.

Olive, the daughter of birth-control pioneer Ethel Byrne and niece of Margaret Sanger, so much inspired the character that William even incorporated her favourite twin bracelets, which would later become our heroine's much-analysed gauntlets of submission; both women had children by William, and bucked convention again by remaining together even after his death in 1947, raising all four as a family.

Artist Harry G. Peter brought Diana to life on the page, and William described the fulfilled heroine as "psychological propaganda for the new type of woman who should, I believe, rule the world".



"THE NEW TYPE OF WOMAN WHO SHOULD, I BELIEVE, RULE THE WORLD" – WONDER WOMAN
CREATOR WILLIAM MOULTON MARSTON



If William had any doubt that his feminist heroine would be an instant success it didn't last long. Within a month, Wonder Woman was gracing the cover and lead of Sensation Comics as well as a daily newspaper strip at the height of the Second World War. She survived the slump in popularity faced by so many wartime caped crusaders by adjusting, and Wonder Woman's alter-ego Diana Prince dabbled in mod fashion, romance writing and Hollywood aspirations as she continued to fight crime through the 50s and 60s, both in solo panels and as a founding member of the Justice League. But it wasn't until 1972, when Gloria Steinem put Wonder Woman on the cover of US magazine Ms that Diana was solidified as a feminist icon, reaching out to the reader beneath a banner proclaiming 'Wonder Woman for President!'

"Looking back now at these Wonder Woman stories from the forties, I am amazed by the strength of their feminist message," Gloria wrote. "Wonder Woman symbolizes many of the values of the women's culture that feminists are now trying to introduce into the mainstream."

As the longest running female-led comic book strip in history (and third only to Batman and Superman overall, launched in 1938 and 1939 respectively), Wonder Woman has changed and adapted with the times. She's caused controversy – whether it's the hemline of her skirt invoking furious debate or the subtext of bondage and sexual experimentation that was so ahead of its time and still rages in some circles. In her history she has been derided by haters as a dangerously anti-male lesbian; now her sexuality is celebrated, with DC writer Greg Rucka winning great praise from fans in September when he confirmed that the current version of the superhero is "obviously" bisexual.

Last year, Wonder Woman was invested as an honorary UN Ambassador for the empowerment of women and girls, only for a petition to strip the scantily-clad hero of her title two months later. "Although the original creators may have intended Wonder Woman to represent a strong and independent 'warrior' woman with a feminist message, the reality is



that the character's current iteration is that of a large breasted, white woman of impossible proportions," the petition read.

But despite these controversies over the years, the character's core message has shone through and fans can trust that, as a new age of diversity and representation begins to ink the pages of our favourite comics, Wonder Woman will undoubtedly lead as she always has: with love.

Lynda Carter, now 64, played a voluptuous, star-spangled Diana in the brightly coloured TV series from 1975-1979. "She was accessible," she has said about the appeal. "She lives in us. There's a part of her that is the secret self, the unrecognized self that we all have."

New girl on the block Gal Gadot, 31, agrees and says the character appeals across generations, particularly as a role model for women. The Israeli star – who excelled in her national service before becoming a model and actress – has even credited the role with inspiring her eldest daughter Alma, five.

"For girls, it's always the princesses being saved or being passive and finally Wonder Woman, she's fearless, she's proactive, she believes in herself," Gal said during the press for Batman Vs Superman.

This is our Wonder Woman, then. Not a man-hating monster chipping away at the fragile shell of masculinity, nor a simple sex kitten coercing the truth out of her foes with her extensive feminine charms and lasso skills. Wonder Woman is what we all have at some point strived to be regardless of gender, sexuality, race or mythical pantheon: equal, confident, courageous and kind. Assured in our own worth. An adversary to fear, and an ally to rival any spandex-suited hero. Diana Prince's job might change as often as her hemlines, her love life (just as easily titled Batman Vs Superman) hitting headlines as much as any modern day female celebrity, but, for me, those contradictions have never diluted the core lesson of this bold, mould-breaking hero's inner strength. Telephone booths are replaceable, but Wonder Woman? Never.

