

Wonder Woman Returns

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Last week SciFi.com reported a delicious rumor that Joss Whedon, creator of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel* and *Firefly*, is in talks to write and direct a *Wonder Woman* movie.

To say I'm tickled pink (or is it red, white and blue?) at this prospect would be an understatement. It's about time the superhero genre's own Princess Di had her feature-film debut. And if the Fates have their way, it's Whedon's destiny to bring this about.

Most people are familiar with the 1970's TV version of *Wonder Woman*. Personified by Lynda Carter, the theme song reminded us that our hero was "fighting for her rights, in her satin tights." But devoted geeks know that the Amazon princess has been around far longer than Carter's satin-wrapped legs.

Created in 1941 by psychologist William Moulton Marston, *Wonder Woman* was a contemporary of *Batman* and *Superman* in a time that historians now refer to as the "golden age" of comics.

Marston was a renaissance man; as a doctor, lawyer, writer, consultant and inventor of the lie detector test, he proved to be a savvy and unconventional intellectual. After paying tribute to *Detective Comics* (aka DC) executive M.C. Gaines in an article for the women's magazine *Family Circle*, Gaines hired the psychologist as an editorial advisor for DC -- a position that ultimately led to the birth of *Wonder Woman*.

The psychologist had fairly radical ideas about sex and gender -- ideas that were subversively expressed in the comic itself and overtly expressed in his other publications. Marston believed that

women were the superior sex and that men should submit to what he called "their loving dominance."

"Frankly," he wrote in a letter to comic historian Coulton Waugh, "Wonder Woman is psychological propaganda for the new type of woman who should, I believe, rule the world."

Though the ideology was delightfully bizarre, he practiced what he preached. Marston willfully submitted to the women in his life and lived quite happily with his two wives and their four children until his death in 1947. Both "wives" claim to be the inspiration for Wonder Woman. They probably both were.

But beyond the unconventional nature of his personal life, Marston recognized the power of stories to influence children. He believed that the accessibility of the comic medium could be utilized as a method for building self-confidence in women -- and as a way of changing male ideas about societal roles for women.

His self-proclaimed formula for the Wonder Woman series consisted of a beautiful woman with both physical and emotional strength -- a woman who fought for the greater good of humanity through an altruistic love.

Marston wanted to show that any young girl could become a "Wonder Woman," but his peculiar social agenda makes a clear feminist reading of Wonder Woman difficult, at best. That does not mean, however, the icon can't be utilized as a role model in ways that are fitting for contemporary times or for feminist values. In fact, Gloria Steinem adopted the super heroine as a champion of the feminist movement, stressing the connection between modern feminist values and those the original Wonder Woman encouraged in her adventures with other women.

The values of strength, self-reliance, peacefulness and support are relevant for any age, and here is where Whedon comes in.

Few creators of popular culture seem to understand the female hero as well as he does. Whedon recognizes the cultural need for women and men to see a heroic female warrior on screen (just as

Marston recognized a similar need for the comic medium). He also has an uncanny ability to reflect and refract our cultural ideas back at us through the various mediums of popular culture.

"Each generation makes the fictional heroes it needs," writes Danny Fingeroth in his book *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us about Ourselves and Our Society*.

Like Marston before him, Whedon had a social agenda for his generation with the creation of *Buffy* (though where Whedon's agenda is altruistic and empowering, Marston's bordered on kink). Both these brilliant men wished to create a heroic archetype that could upend constrictive and stereotypical views about women.

A return to the mother of feminine heroism -- especially as envisioned and directed by Whedon -- would be a welcome and empowering full-circle enterprise. Especially because it was the creation and intention of a Wonder Woman that enabled an evolution of the female superhero that resulted in a *Buffy*. Wonder Woman is a role model that can be re-imagined to fit with our time, to be relevant to changing attitudes about gender roles and female heroism. I can think of no one more capable of this endeavor than Whedon. I can also think of no one more worthy.

And hey, it's only taken 65 years to make it to the big screen.