

that the superhero's young sidekick represents a homosexual fantasy. (The charge comes from comic books' greatest arch-enemy, psychiatrist Fredric Wertham, whose 1954 book, *Seduction of the Innocent*, is an unintentionally hilarious and lamentably long-out-of-print screed against the form.) Clay, himself gay and troubled by that fact, thinks to himself that it isn't a gay love relationship that the hero-sidekick dyad represents to young comic book readers in the '40s. It is the fantasy of a healthy, loving, dedicated father-son relationship in a time—during World War II and afterwards—when American chil-

dren were largely apt to lack it.

The father/superhero figure may well be part of the superhero's enduring appeal, especially among adolescent boys—an image of a heroic father figure who is not only able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, but someone to pal around with between adventures. Such a fantasy may seem unbearably childish; it is, in fact, merely human and underwrites any number of universally acclaimed novels. Literature mavens may groan, but doubtless more people worldwide have been moved by Bruce Wayne's relationship with the orphaned Dick Grayson than have been

touched by Holden Caulfield's search for a responsive father figure.

Heroes Unlimited

Superheroes infect the imagination of more than just comic book artists. It's a cultural conceit that can be found in all manner of creative expression—from rock videos (such as 3 Doors Down's recent song "Kryptonite," which features aged superheroes on one last mission) to literary short stories in *The Atlantic*. ("Super-assassin" by Lysley A. Tenorio, from the October 2000 issue, is about a comic-

William Marston's Secret Identity

The strange private life of Wonder Woman's creator

By Nick Gillespie

From their inception, comic books, like other forms of mass entertainment, have had detractors. None is more famous—or more fondly remembered—than Fredric Wertham, the child psychiatrist and author of *Seduction of the Innocent*, who charged that comic books turned their readers into juvenile delinquents and sexual deviants. If Wertham, who died in 1981, hadn't existed, he would have surely been invented by a clever sati-

delicate, refined fare. Shakespeare, he fretted, just couldn't follow Superman.

If Wertham was the Lex Luthor of comics, hell-bent on their total annihilation, then William Moulton Marston was their Man of Steel, dedicated to championing their cause. Marston was a Harvard-trained psychologist who had a law degree to go along with his Ph.D. In the '20s and '30s, Marston was best known as a tireless advocate of the polygraph—he developed

In 1941, under the pseudonym Charles Moulton, Marston created the first great female comic book hero, Wonder Woman, a displaced Amazon princess who helped the Allies defeat the Axis Powers while seeking romance on the side. (Unsurprisingly, Wertham was appalled by the character, which he denounced for its "lesbian overtones.") Unlike most intellectuals, Marston celebrated the popularity of the comic book form and saw it as an opportunity to get kids to read—and to circulate radical feminist notions. Writing in Phi Beta Kappa's journal, *The American Scholar*, in the early '40s, he noted: "It's too bad for us 'literary' enthusiasts, but it's the truth nevertheless—pictures tell any story more effectively than words... If children will read comics... why isn't it advisable to give them some constructive comics to read?"

For Marston, the most "constructive" comics were those that laid the groundwork for what he insisted was the coming age of "American matriarchy" in which "women would take over the rule of the country, politically and economically."

As Les Daniels recounts in the fully enjoyable and always fascinating new book, *Wonder Woman: The Complete*

Marston, a Harvard Ph.D., created the first female superhero, an Amazon princess who helped the Allies win the war and sought romance on the side.

rist looking for a sex-obsessed, puritanical foil.

A true arch-enemy of the form, Wertham's critique of comics went beyond criminological concerns: Comics didn't just pervert children, you see, but ruined their ability to appreciate fine literature and art later on in life. He argued that tales about Batman—not to mention *Tales from the Crypt*—were like heavily seasoned food that destroyed young aesthetic palates before they could be trained to appreciate

an early lie detector machine—and he lobbied unsuccessfully for its use in the courts.

Never one to slough off publicity, Marston even appeared in a 1938 Gillette razor blade advertisement that used a lie detector test to discover men's "true" feelings about various shaving aids. (The "scientific shaving tests," which measured subjects' subconscious reactions, overwhelmingly found that Gillette blades minimized the subtle "emotional disturbances" caused by competitors' products.)

book-obsessed kid who starts to injure people in the name of justice.) The superhero motif regularly fuels big-money Hollywood summer extravaganzas, from 1978's *Superman* to 1989's *Batman* (both of which gave rise to a series of increasingly absurd and shoddy sequels) to 2000's *X-Men* to this summer's *Spider-Man*.

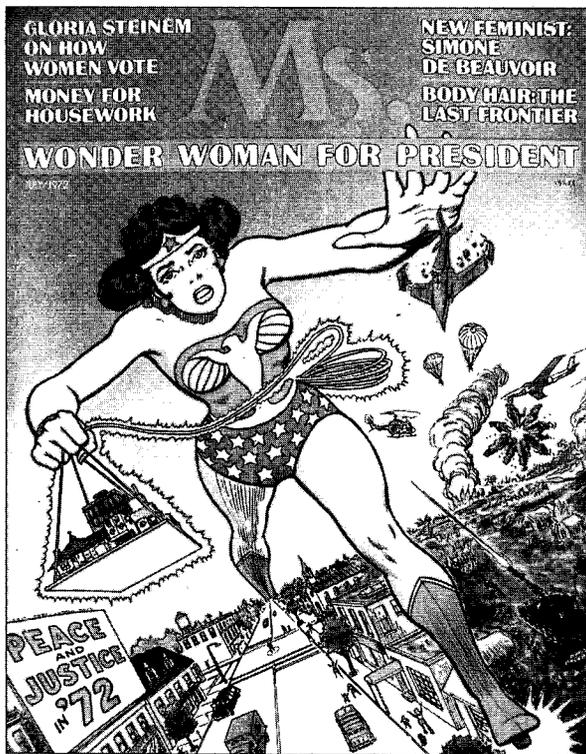
Last December, M. Night Shyamalan, a film director known both as a box office God and an accomplished auteur after the commercial and critical success of *The Sixth Sense*, essayed the superhero trope in a quieter way—so quiet that the movie's ad campaign sloughed over the film's main

idea entirely. Shyamalan's *Unbreakable* tells a classic comic book superhero origin story: What happens to a real man when he discovers, through the intersection of a horrible accident and the intrusions of a mysterious stranger who happens to be a comic book fanatic, that he might have powers far beyond those of mortal men?

Bruce Willis, under the unwanted prodding of Samuel Jackson as the comics fan, gradually becomes a vigilante. Both the futility and glory of such acts in a brutally real world are played out in a straightforward and intelligent way. Shyamalan,

like others before him, suggests there is something about obsession with comic books that can lead to twisted behavior, especially if the fan tries to apply comic book scenarios of heroism and justice to the real world.

Shyamalan uses more realistic storytelling than is typical in comic books to relate his superhero tale. There is more focus on the hero's relationship with his family, more concern for the real-world legal and ethical implications of a vigilante beating up criminals. Playing with how the superhero idea might work in something more closely resembling our real world has



History (Chronicle Books): "Marston believed women were less susceptible than men to the negative traits of aggression and acquisitiveness, and could come to control the comparatively unruly male sex by alluring them.... He was convinced that as political and economic equality became a reality women could and would use sexual enslavement to achieve domination over men, who would happily submit to their loving authority."

Such notions, suggests Daniels, help explain some of Wonder Woman's crime-

fighting accoutrements, especially her "magic lasso" that—shades of a lie detector!—forces men to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

Marston's personal life was every bit as unconventional as his ideas about matriarchy; if nothing else, the details make one wonder about his fixation on liberated women. In 1915, the same year he graduated from Harvard, Marston married a Mt. Holyoke grad named Elizabeth Holloway, who went on to earn an M.A. and law degree, and to assist him in his psychological research. In the late '20s, when teaching at

Tufts University, Marston met a student named Olive Richard, who moved in with him and his wife.

Marston had two children by each woman and he and his wife formally adopted his children by Richard. "It was an arrangement where they [all] lived together fairly harmoniously," one of Marston's sons told Daniels. A business associate vouched for Marston's offbeat arrangement, remembering him as "the most remarkable host, with a lovely bunch of kids from different wives...all living to-

gether like one big family—everybody very happy and all good, decent people."

Whether Marston's feminist utopia, which Daniels calls "simultaneously daring and touchingly naive," has come to pass, his contribution to popular culture has endured. By the time of his death in 1947, Wonder Woman was already a household name (and a cottage industry), appearing in various comic books and newspaper strips; she remains a vibrant part of popular culture, whether as a feminist icon, the hero of a campy late-'70s action-adventure show, or the subject of *Strength of Will*, a graphic novel by Alex Ross coming this fall from DC Comics.

Marston made at least one other contribution to popular culture that, while perhaps less eye-catching than his full-figured, superpowered Amazon, is no less significant.

In influential venues as diverse as *The American Scholar* and *Family Circle*, he anticipated, in what might charitably be called comic book prose, much that is taken for granted among contemporary scholars of cultural studies. He argued that mass forms such as comics deserve something other than opprobrium and scorn—and he suggested that like other, more accepted forms of creative expression, comics can sometimes touch "the tender spots of universal human desires and aspirations...[and] speak to the innermost ears of the wishful self." ◆

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been common even in comic books since the mid-'80s, when it was done to spectacular effect by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons in the DC series, *Watchmen*. Even Scott McCloud praised *Watchmen* for "breaking nearly every one of the tried and true rules." But however sophisticated an adventure story *Watchmen* was, in terms of audience expansion it was a dead-end. "Sophisticated" superhero comics remain insular works whose resonance relies greatly on a previous understanding and interest in the comic book medium. One most enjoys seeing conventions subverted when one understands the conventions. Indeed, this may help explain why *Unbreakable* didn't match the popular success of *The Sixth Sense*. *The Sixth Sense* played with the conventions of horror and psychological thrillers and was hence far more accessible to moviegoers.

This doesn't mean work dedicated to playing with aesthetic convention is necessarily aesthetically inferior—great novels from *Don Quixote* to *Madame Bovary*, for instance, do precisely this. Different communities of readers always understand things differently; comic book fans will appreciate *Kavalier and Clay* and *Unbreakable* (and *Jimmy Corrigan* and *David Boring*) in ways that non-fans won't. Those acquainted with or obsessive about details of a form's history will always see things others won't. And artists of serious comic book stories, like Ware and Clowes, are probably inspired to use the superhero as a postmodernist metacommentary on their own form—and also because, as comic artists, they doubtless have that idea infecting their imagination.

Which suggests the real reason comics haven't yet escaped the artistic ghetto that McCloud decries: Anyone who even aspires to being a comics artist in an American context will by necessity have been steeped in the superhero motif. Ultimately, McCloud's argument about superhero dominance is similar to what economists call a path-dependence argument, by which "inferior" products are believed to sometimes wrongly rise to dominance in a given market. McCloud grants that the dominance of comics by a single genre might have been inevitable, but stresses that it didn't have to be the superhero genre. That, he contends, is simply a lamentable historical accident. This line of

thinking suggests that the triumph of the superhero over, say, the funny animal comic, is not so different from the way QWERTY keyboards or VHS videotapes won out over superior alternatives.

But there is something suspicious about using path-dependence arguments to say that things ought to be different than they are, and are only that way because of a circumstantial lock-in of a supposedly inferior product. As economists Stan Liebowitz and Stephen E. Margolis have shown, claims that a dominant product does not deserve its market position are often self-interested and fail to appreciate the ways in which a castigated product serves consumers. For instance, the source of the idea that the QWERTY keyboard is inefficient was the creator of a rival keyboard (who used spurious studies to bolster his case); QWERTY critics also routinely fail to ask whether the relative benefits of switching to a new keyboard are worth the effort.

So it is with the superhero comic. Indeed, in this case, one might add something more to the mix: Far from choking off the vitality of the comic book, superheroes may be precisely that which has kept the form alive, albeit on a smaller scale than decades ago. Look at the fate of another form of pop entertainment that, along with comics, had a huge following in the 1940s: radio drama. There was no one unique thing that it provided better than any other art form, and it died.

Though McCloud tries to deny it, the serialized superhero comic provides something unique, something that other art forms can't quite match, even when they try to. (Few familiar with both the comic book and film *Batman* would disagree that the former is more dramatically satisfying.) As one of the publishers in *Kavalier and Clay* puts it while looking at *Kavalier's* crazily eye-catching art, "Half bad is maybe better than beautiful." Such an inexacting but heartfelt standard may be key to superhero comics' unique value and long-lasting appeal: They are attractive and inspire passion because they provide a structurally *different* kind of aesthetic/storytelling experience than other, more respected storytelling forms.

The sort of non-superhero comics for which McCloud cheerleads do exist, and can be found in most comic shops (and

even in many megabookstores). The market has made room for them. It's just that no one seems to want them on the same scale they want Spider-Man or Superman. Despite a solid audience, no huge popular fan base is crying, "Make Mine McCloud!"

The Enduring Superman

Both Michael Chabon and Chris Ware showcase the image of the superhero falling to his death. Are they wishing for the death of the icon that so dominates the form they clearly love? Or are they infusing the superhero with a new power, to move adult readers' hearts and minds? At the very least, Chabon has proven that comic books can inspire what virtually anyone would grant is true art, an imaginative reflection of deep human concerns and experiences.

Since its birth, the superhero has been seen as a symbol of America's innocent vitality, of its barely repressed sexual confusion, and of its incipient fascism. It has been the vehicle for sui generis American geniuses such as Jack "King" Kirby and for numerous anonymous hacks. The superhero comic can be incandescently great and grimly idiotic, but even at its worst, it playfully evokes a wonder-inducing sense of fantastic human invention, of a fertile reworking of eternally appealing myths of beings with powers far beyond those of mortal men.

Chabon's novel and other works discussed here show that there is a rich vein of pathos and insight to be mined from the gold first discovered by Siegel and Shuster. As an American icon, the comic book superhero shares some of the legendary values of the nation of its birth—he is brash, energetic, wildly imaginative, unbound by Old World standards of propriety and gentility.

It will probably turn out, to the consternation of McCloud, that comics, even if they are freed from the shackles of superherodom, will remain a niche market, a weird little sub-eddy in the ocean of popular entertainment. As the very necessity of a book called *Understanding Comics* admits, many perfectly literate adults just can't grasp comics storytelling—they literally don't know how to read them, aren't versed in the grammar. There may be no

explosive renaissance ahead for comics; they are unlikely to dominate cultural production the way the novel did in the 19th century or film did in the 20th. But artists like Ware and Clowes will continue to do fascinating work, and their audiences will find it, even if it doesn't conquer all.

And the caped shadow of the superhero will doubtless, in various ways, continue hanging over comics for a long time to come. ♦

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Shrink Control

The limits of a psychiatrist's skepticism

By Jacob Sullum

Just when you thought that Bill Maher's insipid talk show had given political incorrectness a bad name, along comes Sally Satel to redeem the concept. She is only partly successful.

It doesn't help that Satel's publisher treats political correctness as if it were a new concept. The cover of her book refers to it twice, and even though the subtitle tells you what *PC* stands for, *olitically* and *orrect* have been inserted in small type next to the *P* and *C* in the title. Someone at Basic Books clearly was worried that browsers would mistake *PC, M.D.* for a science fiction novel about a computer that prescribes antibiotics.

The cover, of course, is not Satel's fault. But what's inside—a psychiatrist's warning about the corruption of medicine by ideology—sometimes leaves readers wondering how meaningful it is to call Satel's opponents politically correct. The phrase was originally used by leftist academics to describe people who shared their political outlook, a perspective that emphasized the grievances of oppressed groups and the collective guilt of white heterosexual men. By the late 1980s, *politically correct* had become a term of derision, referring to the stifling intellectual atmosphere that prevailed on campuses dominated by former '60s radicals and to "progressive" standards of speech and behavior emanating from the academy.

Much of what Satel attacks in *PC, M.D.*—for example, the assumption that differences in health between whites and blacks must be due to racism—is reminiscent of ideas criticized in books ranging from Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education* to

Alan Charles Kors and Harvey Silverglate's *The Shadow University*. But while the professors and administrators described in those books rein in dissenting students and faculty members through stigma, re-education, and Kafkaesque disciplinary proceedings, many of Satel's targets are gad-

PC, M.D.: How Political Correctness Is Corrupting Medicine, by Sally Satel, New York: Basic Books, 285 pages, \$27

flies rather than Torquemadas, challenging orthodoxy rather than enforcing it. Dismissing their concerns, Satel ends up defending authoritarian policies that go beyond anything practiced even at the most intolerant universities.

Satel, a fellow of the American Enterprise Institute and a lecturer at the Yale University School of Medicine, is most persuasive as the voice of calm reason, dissecting the abuse of science for ideological purposes. Some feminist critics of conventional medicine, for example, promote "therapeutic touch," a form of quackery that has gained acceptance at many nursing schools. The technique involves waving your hands a few inches from the patient's body to adjust his "human energy field." Satel's debunking of therapeutic touch goes beyond a rhetorical eye roll. She discusses the technique's appeal (which includes the close, prolonged attention it entails), the relevance of the placebo effect, and the potential harm of steering patients away from other thera-

pies. Satel does not reject out of hand the possibility that there might be something to learn from alternative medicine, but she insists that its remedies be held to rigorous scientific standards.

Satel is similarly careful and thorough when she considers racial differences in disease and mortality rates. She shows that many factors need to be considered before any part of these gaps can reasonably be attributed to discrimination, whether by doctors or by society in general. She is likewise skeptical of claims that women are at a systematic disadvantage, both as patients and as health professionals, because of their sex. In both cases, Satel acknowledges historical grounds for such suspicions, including the infamous Tuskegee Syphilis Study and the casual prescription of hysterectomies. But she argues convincingly that continuing to focus on race and gender obscures the dramatic progress that has been made in the last several decades. This preoccupation with oppression is also apparent in the psychotherapeutic approaches that Satel criticizes, which assume that people's problems are rooted in their status as members of disadvantaged groups.

With her chapter on psychotherapy, Satel ventures beyond her avowed focus on medicine, but she is still dealing with a profession where politics ordinarily plays no obvious role. Not so with public health, which sits at the intersection between epidemiology and government. Politics cannot be eliminated from public health any more than it can be eliminated from public finance. Since defining the field's parameters helps define the scope of appropriate state action, Satel is rightly worried about efforts to equate public health with "social justice."

According to "social production of disease" theory, capitalism makes people sick: In a market economy, the poor are unhealthy not only because they lack the means to live comfortably and obtain good medical care but because they suffer the stress of knowing that others are wealthier. "Even if those living on the lowest rung of the social ladder had sufficient material resources," says a physician quoted by Satel, "their health would still suffer because they are deprived relative to others." The solution is the usual set of welfare programs and income redistribution