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Everything You Need to Know About the Radical Roots of Wonder Woman

Her enigmatic creator believed women were destined to rule the world. 10 facts about the iconic heroine.

Christopher Zumski Finke

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All these things are true about Wonder Woman: She is a national treasure that the Smithsonian Institution named among its 101 Objects that Made America; she is a '70s feminist icon; she is the product of a polyamorous household that participated in a sex cult.

She comes out of the feminist movements of women's suffrage, birth control, and the fight for equality.

Harvard historian Jill Lepore claims in her new book, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*, that Wonder Woman is the "missing link in a chain of events that begins with the women's suffrage campaigns of the 1910s and ends with the troubled place of feminism fully a century later."

The hero and her alter ego, Diana Prince, were the products of the tumultuous women's rights movements of the early 20th century. Here are 10 essential elements to understanding the history and legacy of Wonder Woman and the family from which she sprung.

Wonder Woman first appeared in Sensation Comics #1 in December 1941.

Since that issue arrived 73 years ago, Wonder Woman has been in constant publication, making her the third longest running superhero in history, behind Superman (introduced June 1938) and Batman (introduced May 1939).

Wonder Woman's creator had a secret identity.

Superheroes always have secret identities. So too did the man behind Wonder Woman. His name upon publication was Charles Moulton, but that was a pseudonym. It was after two years of popularity and success that the author revealed his identity: then-famous psychologist William Moulton Marston, who also invented the lie detector test.

William Moulton Marston was, as Jill Lepore tells it, an "awesomely cocky" psychologist and huckster from Massachusetts. He was also committed to the feminist causes he grew up around.

By 1941, Marston's image of the iconic feminist of the future was already a throwback to his youth. He saw the celebrated British suffragist Emmeline Pankhurst speak in Harvard Square (she was banned from speaking at Harvard University) in 1911, and from then on imagined the future of civilization as one destined for female rule.

Actually, the whole Marston family had a secret identity.

The Marston family was an unconventional home, full of radical politics and feminism. Marston lived with multiple women, including his wife, Sadie Elizabeth Holloway, a highly educated psychologist, and another lifelong partner, a writer named Olive Byrne, who was the niece of birth control activist Margaret Sanger. He had four children, two by each of the women, and they all grew up oblivious to the polyamorous nature of their parents' relationships.

Marston, Holloway, and Byrne all contributed to Wonder Woman's creation, a character that Marston explicitly designed to show the necessity of equality and advancement of women's rights.

Wonder Woman was an Amazon molded from clay, but she was birthed out of feminism. Princess Diana of Themyscira, or Diana Prince (Wonder Woman's alter ego), comes from the land of the Amazons. In Greek mythology, the Amazons are an immortal race of beauties that live apart from men. In the origin story of Wonder Woman, Diana is the daughter of the queen of the Amazons.

She's from Paradise Island (Paradise is the land where no men live), where Queen Hippolyta carves her daughter out of clay. She has no father.

Wonder Woman has been in constant publication, making her the third longest running superhero.

She comes out of the feminist movements of women's suffrage, birth control, and the fight for equality. When Marston was working with DC Comics editor Sheldon Mayer on the origins of Wonder Woman, Marston left no room for interpretation about what he wanted from his heroine.

"About the story's feminism," historian Lepore writes, "he was unmovable. 'Let that theme alone,' Marston said, 'or drop the project.'"

Wonder Woman fought for the people—all the people.

The injustices that moved Wonder Woman to action did not just take place in the world of fantasy heroes and villains, nor was she only about women's rights. She also fought for the rights of children, workers, and farmers.

In a 1942 issue of *Sensation Comics*, Wonder Woman targets the International Milk Company, which she has learned has been overcharging for milk, leading to the undernourishment of children. According to Lepore, the story came right out of a Hearst newspaper headline about "milk crooks" creating a "milk trust" to raise the price of milk, profiteering on the backs of American babies.

For the Wonder Woman story, Marston attributed the source of this crime to Nazi Germany. But the action Wonder Woman takes is the same as the real-life solution: She leads a march of women and men in "a gigantic demonstration against the milk racket."

There's a whole lot of bondage in Wonder Woman.

In the years that Marston was writing Wonder Woman, bondage was everywhere. "In episode after episode," Lepore writes, "Wonder Woman is chained, bound, gagged,

lassoed, tied, fettered, and manacled." Even Wonder Woman herself expressed exhaustion at the over-use of being bound: "Great girdle of Aphrodite! Am I tired of being tied up!" she says.

She appeared on the first issue of Ms. Magazine, in 1972, with the headline "Wonder Woman for President."

There's little doubt that the sexual proclivities of the Marston family were in part responsible for this interest. A woman named Marjorie Wilkes Huntley was part of the Marston household—an "aunt" for the children, who shared the family home (and bedroom) when she was in town. Huntley was fond of bondage.

The theme was so persistent that an Army sergeant who was fond of the erotic images wrote to Marston asking where he could purchase some of the bondage implements used in the book. After that, DC Comics told Marston to cut back on the BDSM.

But that bondage was not all about sex.

The bondage themes in Wonder Woman are more complex than just a polyamorous fetish, though. Women in bondage was an iconic image of the suffrage and feminist movements, as women attempted to loosen the chains that bound them in society. Cartoonist and artist Lou Rogers drew many women in bonds, and Margaret Sanger appeared before a crowd bound at the mouth to protest the censorship of women in America.

Later, Margaret Sanger's Birth Control Review would use a similar motif. One cover image had a woman chained to the weight of unwanted babies.

Readers—boys and girls—loved Wonder Woman.

Despite the political and secretive history of Wonder Woman's creation, she was a wildly popular character. After Wonder Woman's early success, DC Comics considered adding her to the roster of the Justice Society, which included Batman and Superman and many other male superheroes. Charlie Gaines, who ran DC Comics, decided to conduct a reader poll, asking, "Should Wonder Woman be allowed, even though a woman, to become a member of the justice society?"

Readers returned 1,801 surveys. Among boys, 1,265 said yes, 197 said no; among girls, 333 said yes, and only 6 said no.

But Justice Society was not written by feminist Marston. After Wonder Woman was brought into the Justice Society, she spent her first episodes working as the secretary.

The feminist spirit of Wonder Woman waned for decades.

After the death of William Moulton Marston in 1947, DC Comics took the feminism out of Wonder Woman and created instead a timid and uninspiring female character. "Wonder Woman lived on," Lepore writes, "but she was barely recognizable."

The first cover not drawn by the original artist, Harry G. Peter, "featured Steve Trevor [Wonder Woman's heretofore hapless love interest] carrying a smiling, daffy, helpless Wonder Woman over a stream. Instead of her badass, kinky red boots, she wears dainty yellow ballerina slippers," Lepore observes. Without her radical edge, Wonder Woman's popularity waned until the rise of second wave feminism in the '60s and '70s, when Wonder Woman was trumpeted as an icon of women's empowerment.

Wonder Woman became president.

In a 1943 story, Wonder Woman is actually elected President of the United States. Marston was adamant that a woman would one day rule the United States, and that the world would be better when civilization's power structures were in the hands of women instead of men.

Women in bondage was an iconic image of the suffrage and feminist movements.

Wonder Woman's popularity soared as the feminist movement picked up in the late 1960s. Wonder Woman appeared on the first issue of Ms. Magazine, in 1972, with the headline "Wonder Woman for President." At that time, Gloria Steinem said of Wonder Woman, "Looking back now at these Wonder Woman stories from the '40s, I am amazed by the strength of their feminist message."

The impact of Wonder Woman continues.

Wonder Woman is in for a great couple of years. Ms. Magazine just celebrated its 40th anniversary, and Wonder Woman is back on its cover. Jill Lepore's book has been getting wonderful coverage (see her on The Colbert Report below discussing the kinks of the Marston Family), and Noah Berlatsky's *Wonder Woman: Feminism and Bondage in the Marston/Peter Comics* will be published in January.

She's also gearing up for her first-ever theatrical film appearance: Wonder Woman will appear in Zack Snyder's 2016 film *Batman vs. Superman: Dawn of Justice*. In 2017, she will be the star of her own film, to be directed by Michelle McClaren (*Breaking Bad*, *The Walking Dead*). Wonder Woman will be played by the Israeli actress Gal Gadot.

Let us hope that Gadot in the role conjures the spirit of the original creation of Marston, Holloway, and Byrne: a radical, independent, fierce woman and leader for all women and men to admire.

Christopher Zumski Finke blogs about pop culture and is editor of *The Stake*.

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