

The Great Women Cartoonists: Not So Great

by Kate Rockwood

Imagine walking into a bookstore, hoping to find a good mystery or historical novel, and discovering the store carries nothing but Westerns. Upon inquiry, a clerk points out that they do actually carry some mysteries, but the few he shows you are crowded on a bottom shelf together with the other non-Western titles and are printed on cheap paper without color covers. The bookstore is out of the particular mystery you want, the clerk informs you. They only ordered two copies of it, he adds, because, as everyone knows, mystery book readers don't go into bookstores. Of course, logic tells you, mystery book readers won't go into bookstores that carry only Westerns," writes Trina Robbins, author of "The Great Women Cartoonists," a book full of splashy pages and comic cut-outs.

The metaphor seems more apt for a book exploring the barriers women cartoonists face and the changes that should be made than for Trina Robbins's dry chronicle of women cartoonists across the ages, a journey that starts out slow and laborious, gaining speed and interest only as the book comes to a close. Divided into six parts, the book details the women cartoonists in each era, from the "Queens of Cute" at the beginning of the twentieth century to the "Chicks and Womyn" of the eighties and nineties.

Unfortunately, not much of interest was happening for women cartoonists before Part Four of the book: *Blonde Bombers and Girl Commandos*. As Robbins explains, "There were a plethora of Dollies, Dotties, Dimples and Darlings in print at the beginning of the twentieth century...The stories follow a familiar pattern: Adorable children getting into trouble." In what feels like an effort to fill the chapter, Robbins lists each female cartoonist working at this time, as well as their hometown and marital status. For those women who had stories to offer aside from marriage and children, Robbins writes in detail. "Rose O'Neill [creator of the *Kewpies*] often seemed to be two different people. She dressed and looked like a pre-Raphaelite heroine, yet she was divorced twice in an age when divorce was regarded as a domestic heresy second only to adultery. With her sister, Callista, she held salons at her studio in Greenwich Village attended by most of New York's bohemian crowd; indeed, she was the inspiration for the song *Rose of Washington Square*. This writing, though not particularly interesting, isn't alarming until the end of the book when it's clear that the 1980s and 1990s, a time when more women cartoonists were creating than ever before, will be crammed into one section.

While Rose O'Neill and her social life cover page after page, the abundance of material Robbins has to work with from the nineties means that everything is quickly covered and superficially included. "One of the most creative syndicated strips...*Six Chix*" in which six different women cartoonists share space and alternate publication gets a measly paragraph. Alison Bechdel and her groundbreaking strip "*Dykes to Watch Out For*" receive less than a full sentence. "The Great Women Cartoonists" is unbalanced in its coverage, sometimes too indulgent, often skimpy.

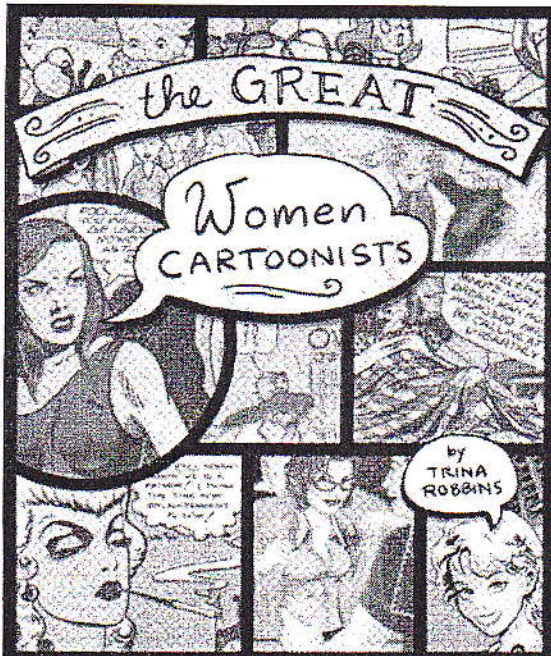
The only section of the book that seems to balance the artwork and the artist well is Robbins's coverage of the *Blonde Bombers* and *Girl Commandos*, particularly Dale Messick, creator of "*Brenda Starr*." In the 1940s "the country was ready for a strong, action-oriented heroine, and Dale Messick was at last in the right place at the right time with *Brenda Starr*, her red-haired, starry-eyed girl reporter," writes Robbins. It is this section that could salvage the book. Here Robbins allows herself the space to focus on Messick's cartoons, which were

"strongly influenced by Nell Brinkley's, romantic and feminine. She drew excellent action scenes and offered the reader a memorable cast of supporting characters: Flip Decker, a teenage leader of an all-blonde girl gang; the Nameless Doll, a pouf-haired Robin Hood; Palava, the albino Polynesian princess; and, of course, the handsome, one-eyed Mystery Man."

Yet Robbins also allows herself enough space to detail Messick's personal life—with an important difference. In contrast to the cartoonists of the early twen-

tieth century, Messick has a story of interest to offer. She submitted sample strips to Captain Joseph M. Patterson, publisher of the *New York Daily News* and chief of the *Chicago Tribune*—*New York News Syndicate* and was rejected by him. In an interview he later explained that, "He had tried a woman cartoonist once...and wanted no more of them." Robbins writes that many of the earlier women cartoonists had received little criticism or met much challenge because they confined their work to "comparatively light [topics]—cute animals and kids, pretty girls without a care in the world, grandmas spouting homespun philosophy. But with *Brenda Starr*, Messick was trespassing on male territory." She goes on to describe Messick's struggle and victory against the gender barrier she faced. Here Messick offers her first criticism of the cartoon industry, buried in the middle of the book.

Trina Robbins, for all of her research and writing, would have benefited from an editor bold enough to force her to delve where the material is deep and skim where the cartoonists are skimpy.



Perhaps, then, the rest of the book will be chock-full of insight and entertaining stories? Comics with titles like *Wimmin's Comix* and *Tit&Clits* were hitting the stores, as was the idea of women-only comic books. Yet Robbins seems so overwhelmed by the number of women cartoonists, by the range of their subject matter and their venues of publication that the last section comes across like a catalogue rather than a discussion. Instead of choosing a few, wildly different cartoonists and covering them in moderate depth, Robbins instead splashes a few quotes from different women on the page and hurriedly moves to the next publication. "Our work, originally, was a reaction to the glut of testosterone in comics," says Lyn Chevely, creator of *Tits&Clits*. "As most of us know, sex is a very political business. All we want to do is equalize that by telling our side. Our original commitment was to concentrate on female sexuality, and our titles indicate that." Unfortunately, that's all the reader learns about this probably interesting comic book and the supposedly interesting cartoonist behind it.

Trina Robbins, for all of her research and writing, would have benefited from an editor bold enough to force her to delve where the material is deep and skim where the cartoonists are skimpy. Instead, her need to balance the book based on decades rather than contributions results in a frustrating read that oscillates between too much and too little. For those readers interested in expanding their female comic collection, a trip to an alternative comic book store will probably prove more useful than a trip through these pages. FP

Kate Rockwood is a second year in the College concentrating in Gender Studies. *Dykes to Watch Out For* and *Lenore* somehow form the perfect combo to make her happy.