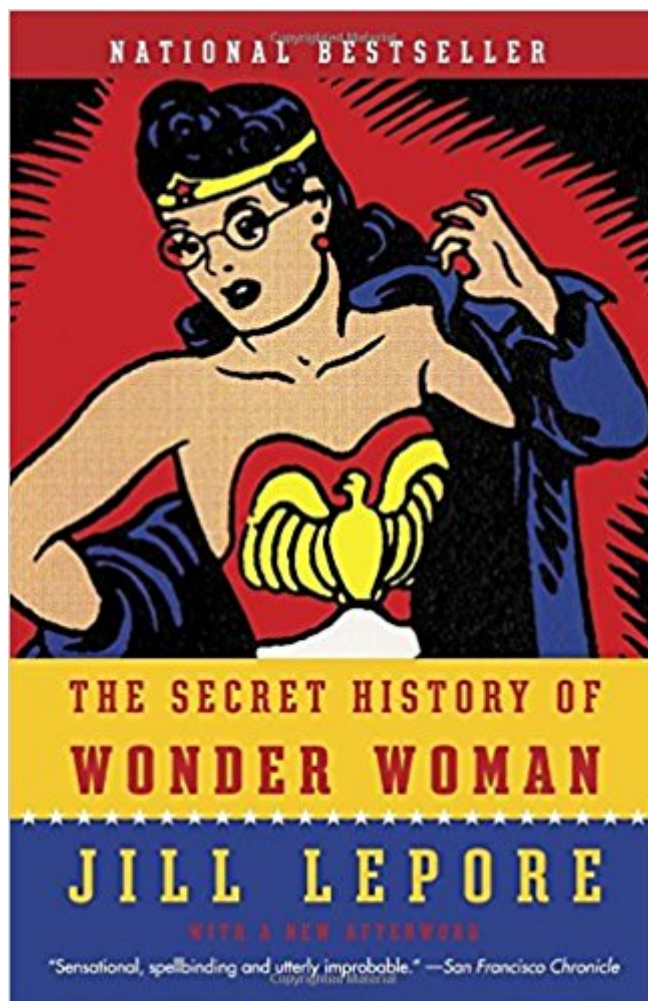


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The Secret History Of Wonder Woman



Synopsis

A riveting work of historical detection revealing that the origin of Wonder Woman, one of the world's most iconic superheroes, hides within it a fascinating family story—and a crucial history of twentieth-century feminism. Harvard historian and *New Yorker* staff writer Jill Lepore has uncovered an astonishing trove of documents, including the never-before-seen private papers of William Moulton Marston, Wonder Woman's creator. Beginning in his undergraduate years at Harvard, Marston was influenced by early suffragists and feminists, starting with Emmeline Pankhurst, who was banned from speaking on campus in 1911, when Marston was a freshman. In the 1920s, Marston and his wife, Sadie Elizabeth Holloway, brought into their home Olive Byrne, the niece of Margaret Sanger, one of the most influential feminists of the twentieth century. The Marston family story is a tale of drama, intrigue, and irony. In the 1930s, Marston and Byrne wrote a regular column for *Family Circle*, celebrating conventional family life, even as they themselves pursued lives of extraordinary nonconformity. Marston, internationally known as an expert on truth—he invented the lie detector test—lived a life of secrets, only to spill them on the pages of Wonder Woman. *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* is a tour de force of intellectual and cultural history. Wonder Woman, Lepore argues, is the missing link in the history of the struggle for women's rights—a chain of events that begins with the women's suffrage campaigns of the early 1900s and ends with the troubled place of feminism a century later. This edition includes a new afterword with fresh revelations based on never before seen letters and photographs from the Marston family's papers. With 161 illustrations and 16 pages in full color

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Customer Reviews

“Lepore’s brilliance lies in knowing what to do with the material she has. In her hands, the Wonder Woman story unpacks not only a new cultural history of feminism, but a theory of history as well.” —Carla Kaplan, New York Times Book Review

“Ms. Lepore’s lively, surprising and occasionally salacious history is far more than the story of a comic strip. The author, a professor of history at Harvard, places Wonder Woman squarely in the story of women’s rights in America—a cycle of rights won, lost and endlessly fought for again. Like many illuminating histories, this one shows how issues we debate today were under contention just as vigorously decades ago, including birth control, sex education, the ways in which women can combine work and family, and the effects of violent entertainment on children. The tragedy of feminism in the twentieth century is the way its history seemed to be forever disappearing,” Ms. Lepore writes. Her superb narrative brings that history vividly into the present, weaving individual lives into the sweeping changes of the century.” —Carol Tavis, The Wall Street Journal

“After years of sifting through unpublished letters and diaries, Lepore has written the authoritative work on William Moulton Marston, a Harvard-educated psychologist best known for two things: inventing the lie detector test and creating the world’s most famous superheroine. Lepore’s careful detective work reveals a man of fascinating contradictions. . . . The Secret History of Wonder Woman is the fullest and most fascinating portrait ever created about the complicated, unconventional family that inspired one of the most enduring feminist icons in pop culture. . . . In [Lepore’s] hands, The Secret History of Wonder Woman is its own magic lasso, one that compels history to finally tell the truth about Wonder Woman—and compels the rest of us to behold it.” —Laura Hudson, Los Angeles Times

“The Secret History of Wonder Woman relates a tale so improbable, so juicy, it’ll have you saying, ‘Merciful Minerva!’ . . . an astonishingly thorough investigation of the man behind the world’s most popular female superhero. . . . Lepore has assembled a vast trove of images and deploys them cunningly. Besides a hefty full-color section of Wonder Woman art in the middle, there are dozens of black-and-white pictures scattered throughout the text. Many of these are panels from Marston’s comics that mirror events in his own life. Combined with Lepore’s zippy prose, it all makes for a supremely engaging reading experience.”

•Etelka Lehoczky, NPR

“If it makes your head spin to imagine a skimpily clad pop culture icon as (spoiler alert!) a close relation of feminist birth control advocate Margaret Sanger, then prepare to be dazzled by the truths revealed in historian Jill Lepore’s *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*. The story behind Wonder Woman is sensational, spellbinding and utterly improbable. Her origins lie in the feminism of the early 1900s, and the intertwined dramas that surrounded her creation are the stuff of pulp fiction and tabloid scandal. . . . It took a super-sleuth to uncover the mysteries of this intricate history, hidden from view for more than half a century. With acrobatic research prowess, muscular narrative chops and disarming flashes of humor, Lepore rises to the challenge, bringing to light previously unknown details and deliberately obfuscated connections.

•Audrey Bilger, *San Francisco Chronicle*

“On the one hand, the story [*The Secret History of Wonder Woman*] relates has more uplift than Wonder Woman’s invisible airplane or her eagle-encrusted red bustier. It’s a yea-saying tale about how this comic book character, created in 1941, remade American feminism and had her roots in the ideas and activism of Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood. On the other hand, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* is fundamentally a biography of Wonder Woman’s larger-than-life and vaguely creepy male creator, William Moulton Marston. . . . [Lepore] fully tells Marston’s history for the first time, as well as the complete history of how so many crisp feminist ideas made their way into Wonder Woman comics. It’s complicated material that she capably explores. . . . There are many profitable detours in this book: the history of female cartoonists; the moral panic over comics and juvenile delinquency; a history of the feminist movement.

•Dwight Garner, *The New York Times*

“Lepore specializes in excavating old flashpoints forgotten or badly misremembered collisions between politics and cultural debates in America’s past. She lays out for our modern sensibility how some event or social problem was fought over by interest groups, reformers, opportunists, and thought leaders of the day. The result can look both familiar and disturbing, like our era’s arguments flipped in a funhouse mirror. . . . Besides archives and comics Lepore relies on journalism, notebooks, letters, and traces of memoir left by the principals, as well as interviews with surviving colleagues, children, and extended family. Her discipline is worthy of a first-class detective. . . . Lepore convinces us that we should know more about early feminists whose work Wonder Woman drew on and carried forward. . . . A key spotter of connections, Lepore retrieves a remarkably recognizable feminist through-line, showing us 1920s debates about work-life balance, for example, that sound like something from *The Atlantic* in the past decade.

•*New York Review of Books*

“Even

non-comix nerds (or those too young to remember Lynda Carter) will marvel at Jill Lepore's deep dive into the real-world origins of the iconic superhero with the golden lasso. The fact that a polyamory enthusiast created her partly as a tribute to the reproductive-rights pioneer Margaret Sanger is, somehow, only the fourth or fifth most interesting thing in Ms. Woman's bizarre background. New York Magazine's "With a defiantly unhurried ease, Lepore reconstructs the prevailing cultural mood that birthed the idea of Wonder Woman, carefully delineating the conceptual debt the character owes to early-20th-century feminism in general and the birth control movement in particular. . . . Again and again, she distills the figures she writes about into clean, simple, muscular prose, making unequivocal assertions that carry a faint electric charge . . . [and] attain a transgressive, downright badass swagger. Slate's "Deftly combines biography and cultural history to trace the entwined stories of Marston, Wonder Woman, and 20th-century feminism. . . . Lepore, a professor of American history at Harvard, a New Yorker writer, and the author of *Book of Ages* is an endlessly energetic and knowledgeable guide to the fascinating backstory of Wonder Woman. She's particularly skillful at showing the subtle process by which personal details migrate from life into art. Christian Science Monitor's "This captivating, sometimes racy, charming illustrated history is one part biography of the character and one part biography of her fascinating creator, psychologist and inventor William Moulton Marston, an early feminist who believed, way before his time, that the world would be a better place if only women were running it. . . . In the process of bringing her superhero to life in this very carefully researched, witty secret herstory, Lepore herself emerges as a kind of superheroine: a woman on a mission as energetic, powerful, brilliant and provocative as her subject. Meredith Maran, *Good Housekeeping*'s "This book is important, readable scholarship, making the connection between popular culture and the deeper history of the American woman's fight for equality. . . . Lepore restores Wonder Woman to her rightful and righteous place. Jeffrey Ann Goudie, *The Kansas City Star*'s "Jill Lepore's generously illustrated *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* impressively links the iconic superhero's 1941 creation by William Moulton Marston (also the inventor of the lie detector) both to the aims of mid-twentieth-century feminism and to the influential Marston family's deep domestic intrigues. Elle's "An engaging, well-researched look at the unconventional family behind the character and stories of Wonder Woman. Lepore handles her potentially thorny topic well and manages to avoid being

salacious or gossipy. . . . Fans interested in the background of the character and readers who appreciate well-written popular history will enjoy this thought-provoking volume. —*Library Journal*

“Relegated to second-class status in her kitschy later years, long overshadowed by her male colleagues in the Justice League, the exiled goddess is rescued and recast as the missing link of the feminist movement. She was created by William Moulton Marston: rogue psychologist, inventor of the lie-detector test, and head of a polyamorous household that included the niece of birth-control pioneer Margaret Sanger. In wartime, she was a Rosie the Riveter in actual combat. It’s an origin story far deeper, weirder, and kinkier than anything a cartoonist ever invented. —*Vulture*

“The story of William Moulton Marston, the Harvard-trained psychologist, inventor of the first lie-detector test, and creator of Wonder Woman for DC Comics, is at once inspiring and disheartening. His unlikely career shows us (among other things) that the qualities that make it possible to innovate — swagger, cleverness, tenacity — are the same ones that can render a person hopelessly out of sync with the reigning strictures of the times. —*Bookforum*

“Fascinating . . . often brilliant. . . . Through assiduous research (the endnotes comprise almost a third of the book and are often very interesting reading), Lepore unravels a hidden history, and in so doing links her subjects’ lives to some of the most important social movements of the era. It’s a remarkable, thought-provoking achievement. —*Alden Mudge*

“The Marston family’s story is ripe for psychoanalysis. And so is *The Secret History*, since it raises interesting questions about what motivates writers to choose the subjects of their books. Having devoted her last work to Jane Franklin Mecom, Benjamin Franklin’s sister, Lepore clearly has a passion for intelligent, opinionated women whose legacies have been overshadowed by the men they love. In her own small way, she’s helping women get the justice they deserve, not unlike her tiara’d counterpart. . . . It has nearly everything you might want in a page-turner: tales of S&M, skeletons in the closet, a believe-it-or-not weirdness in its biographical details, and something else that secretly powers even the most serious feminist history — fun. —*Entertainment Weekly*

“Hugely entertaining. . . . Lepore calls Wonder Woman the missing link between the first and second waves of feminism, as they’re known — that is, between the suffragist era that so inspired Marston and the 1970s women’s-liberation movement. . . . She’s right that the imagery of waves and troughs overlooks the complicated ways that movements make advances even when no one’s looking — even as daily lives seem stuck and society seems to be moving

backwards. *The Atlantic* “Lepore has an astonishing story and tells it extremely well. She acts as a sort of lie detector, but proceeds through elegant narrative rather than binary test. Sentences are poised, adverbs rare. Each chapter is carefully shaped. At a time when few are disposed to see history as a branch of literature, Lepore occupies a prominent place in American letters. Her microhistories weave compelling lives into larger stories. *The Daily Beast* “In the spirited, thoroughly reported *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*, Jill Lepore recounts the fascinating details behind the princess’ origin story. . . . [Lepore] seamlessly shifts from the micro to the macro. . . . A panel depicting this labor unrest is just one of scores that appear throughout Lepore’s book, further amplifying the author’s vivid prose. *Newsday* “A Harvard professor with impeccable scholarly credentials, Lepore treats her subject seriously, as if she is writing the biography of a feminist pioneer like Margaret Sanger, the founder of the birth control movement—which this book is, to an extent. . . . Through extensive research and a careful reading of the *Wonder Woman* comic books, she argues convincingly that the story of this character is an indelible chapter in the history of women’s rights. *Miami Herald* “The *Secret History of Wonder Woman* is as racy, as improbable, as awesomely righteous, and as filled with curious devices as an episode of the comic book itself. In the nexus of feminism and popular culture, Jill Lepore has found a revelatory chapter of American history. I will never look at *Wonder Woman*’s bracelets the same way again. *Alison Bechdel*, author of *Fun Home* “Jill Lepore’s obsessively researched book on *Wonder Woman*, the four-color embodiment of the women’s rights movement, reveals that the life of the character’s creator, Dr. William Marston—inventor of the lie detector, charming crank, ardent feminist and secret polygamist—was waaay more colorful than any comic book superhero. *Suffering Sappho!* “Art Spiegelman, author of *Maus* “An absolutely unputdownable book. The life history of polymath charlatan and/or genius (I couldn’t ever decide) William Moulton Marston, who worked his way through law, movie scenarios, lie detection, ménage à trois, free love, BDSM and polygamy before creating the first feminist super-person had me saying “wow” practically every other page. And that’s not even mentioning the tough-as-nails women he exalted, lifted from and, uh, shared who make up the molten core of this newly-revealed story. Rocketing from the suffragism of the 1910s to the ERA of the 1970s on a wave of home-spun pop culture righteousness, this story’s head-spinning weirdness ultimately makes you question your own accomplishments, aims, and—almost like a great modern novel—your real

motives. • Chris Ware, author of *Building Stories* “Lepore restores Wonder Woman to her rightful place as an essential women’s rights icon in this dynamically researched and interpreted, spectacularly illustrated, downright astounding work of discovery that injects new zest into the history of feminism.” • Booklist, starred review “It’s an irresistible story, and the author tells it with relish and delight.” • Kirkus Reviews “Wonder Woman, feminist hero, was the creation of a husband and wife who led, on the surface, average existences. Behind the mask, however, they had extraordinarily unconventional lives. It takes Harvard professor and New Yorker writer Lepore to dig into the complicated story behind the lasso (of truth), and forgive me for sounding like Upworthy, but it’s true: what she uncovers will shock you. Let’s just say that Wonder Woman’s S&M subtext was there for a reason.” • Flavorwire, 25 Must-Read Books for the Fall

Jill Lepore is the David Woods Kemper ’41 Professor of American History at Harvard University and a staff writer at *The New Yorker*. Her *Book of Ages* was a finalist for the National Book Award. She lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Here is the internal dialog I had going at one point while reading this book. Me: “So the inventor of Wonder Woman was a psychology PhD who also invented the first lie detector.” Also me: “Neat.” Me: “Get this, he was also a pretty hardcore first-wave feminist and based a lot of Wonder Woman’s stories and characteristics on Margaret Sanger, the birth-control pioneer.” Also me: “That’s pretty cool.” Me: “He also lived with three women, had children with two of them, and balanced this unusual lifestyle fairly gracefully in way that his wife, Halloway, could fulfill her ambition to maintain a full-time job, while his mistress, Olive Byrne, could do what she wanted and raise the kids, while the third woman, Hurston, could come and go as she pleased. I should mention that Byrne wore thick silver bracelets, while Hurston and he were really into bondage.” Also me: “That’s pretty crazy, I mean especially for the early twentieth century...” Me: “You’re still not getting it: kick-ass first-wave feminist sensibilities, thick silver bracelets, bondage, and making people tell the truth.” Also me: “Oh God, that’s Wonder Woman’s whole gig, truth-telling lasso and all. Wow.” So if after that little exchange you find yourself intrigued instead of bored, check this book out. It really is more of a biography of William Moulton Marston (WW’s creator) than of the character, but it really is pretty interesting and naturally puts Wonder Woman’s development into a more complete context. And the detailed research that went into digging this story out of DECADES of deliberate obfuscation is simply

amazing. The author, Jill Lepore, deserves a round of applause for finding this amazing story and bringing it to the public in such an engaging way. This book integrates the history of feminism, comic books, psychology, social shifts in both sexuality and gender, and in the process gives us a nuanced look at some truly interesting people. Marston was a competent but spotlight-loving academic who couldn't resist sabotaging his own successes (in that way he is similar to his predecessor, *À* The wizard from Vienna: Franz Anton Mesmer). Hallway, the wife and rock of the relationship(s) who wanted to give life her best as a working woman but still be able to raise a family. Byrne, the (seduced) graduate student who worked on much of WMM's projects anonymously and raised the Marston family to compensate for her own lonely childhood. And there are many others. Suffice to say - this is an engaging read for anyone interested in the history of feminism, comics, and (naturally) Wonder Woman herself.

WOW - this is one of those long complicated tales that shows just how convoluted humans can be. The link between the suffragettes of early 1900s, the Birth Control movement and the Wonder Woman of the 1940's is just amazing. Lepore does the subject justice and I'm amazed at how she teased some of these 'skeletons' into the light. I don't give out a lot of 5 Stars, but this book earned them.

This book is more about the creator of the fictional wonder woman than the comic female hero. However, Marston's life style was more than interesting as was his psychological fantasies about his achievements. Marston was a lazy "wanna be" hero and inventor---of which he was neither. He took credit for so much of which he was a failure and did it so boldly and publicly that it was obvious the man had absolutely no shame about anything. An amazing story of a man who would be the character of Mars (Marston) in his Wonder Woman comics. It was a great read because Marston's life was so decadent yet interestingly warped. Jill Lapore was able to "unwrap" all the "convolutions" in this man's life and move the story forward in a straight line so the reader could follow both the comic hero and the strange creator of that hero.

I did a project on Wonder Woman for a comic book class this past semester, and this book was a TREMENDOUS help. It's majorly a biography of Marston, but his life is incredibly intriguing by itself. It's not until close to the end that the book starts talking about Wonder Woman and her beginnings. But the history behind it -- the feminism, Marston's life, Marston's wife and lover... it's all incredible. If you've got at least a passing interest in Wonder Woman, then you need to check this book out.

Reading the "Secret History..." reminded me how much culture takes place under the radar of so many. I was reminded of the Beats, Kerouac, Ginsberg, Cassady, Burroughs, Huncke, et, al.,; while the rest of America was participating in the economic revival following WWII, and the black community continued to swelter under Jim Crow, the Beats took an entirely different path, one considered "deviant" by those outside the movement. The non-traditional marriage arrangements in LePore's book were an example of the never ending combinations humanity makes up in the search for contentment. An altogether satisfying read. I've loved every Jill LePore book I've read.

This book fascinated me due to my interest as a historian and the fact that Wonder Woman was one of my childhood favorite comic books in the late 1940s. The story of the man who developed the female character of WW and his personal female companions make the women's history research I undertake even more interesting.

Interesting history of Wonder Woman. Like most super heroes, she was created basically to provide an income stream for those involved in the day-to-day production of the comic, in this case Marston and his family and employees. The author does an excellent job of describing the backgrounds of the the creators and the set of opportunities which led to her creation. So, even though the author goes into lots of detail, everything she covers has some bearing on the initial version of Wonder Woman that graced the Marston issues of the 1940's. The included illustrations and other research notes add greatly to the overall feeling of authenticity. Great job.

An amazing work and story not only of the origin of how Wonder Woman came to grace the pages of comic books but also of the incredibly complex man who created her. Thoroughly researched and compelling storytelling make this book a must read. Enjoyed it tremendously and, whether you're a superhero fan or not, an important book too on women's history and their efforts for equality. Just an outstanding book.

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