



Wendel (left) and Ollie
from the Howard Cruse
comic strip *Wendel*.
Courtesy Howard Cruse.

Comic Strips and Cartoons

by Teresa Theophano

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Comic strips and graphic books have only recently been acknowledged as a serious art form, but in both mainstream and underground culture, they have served for decades as a powerful tool of satire and humor; and in their representation of glbtq people, they also serve as a barometer of shifting attitudes toward gay subcultures. Comic strips remain an important contribution of the alternative print media to popular culture.

Today numerous queer comic artists create strips, books, collections, and graphic novels that are available through both mainstream and underground channels in both printed and electronic media. Nearly every gay and lesbian newspaper features at least one comic strip that chronicles the joys and pain, the dilemmas and delights of daily life for ordinary glbtq people.

Censorship and the Emergence of Gay Comics

In the 1950s, most forms of media were subject to severe censorship that included specific regulations against the depiction of homosexuality. It comes as no surprise, then, that comic books were affected by this kind of censorship.

The adoption of the Comics Code Authority in the 1950s ensured that the state of queers in the funny papers would not advance beyond what it had been in the 1930s and 1940s--when representation was limited to the occasional offensive stereotype in mainstream comics such as *Dick Tracy* or *Terry and the Pirates*.

The Code, established in the aftermath of United States Senate hearings examining comics as a cause of juvenile delinquency, reflected the era's attitude toward homosexuality and effectively barred the portrayal of overtly gay characters in mainstream comics.

Gay and lesbian readers continued to speculate about the real relationship between Batman and Robin and between Wonder Woman and her Amazons, but the creators and distributors of these strips were prohibited from developing those relationships.

This prohibition did not stop Tom of Finland from creating his sexually explicit gay male comics in the 1940s and later circulating them in the gay underground and privately among friends. Nor did it prevent *Drum* magazine from running a humorous erotic comic strip, a satire of James Bond-style espionage tales--called "Harry Chess: That Man from A.U.N.T.I.E.," by A. Jay--pen name of Al Shapiro--in the 1960s.

Joe Johnson's similarly campy strips *Miss Thing* and *Big Dick* were soon run in *The Advocate*, until that newsmagazine undoubtedly concluded that they presented gay men in too stereotypical a manner for a gay venue that was growing increasingly serious and respectable. But if any characters in commercial strips were gay, no one was supposed to know about it.

Comics from Stonewall to the 1980s

The Code's grip loosened considerably as gay liberation flourished alongside women's liberation. Tired of the lack of authentic lesbian representation in both mainstream and feminist comics, Mary Wings produced the first overtly lesbian book *Come Out Comix* in 1972.

Roberta Gregory then came out as a lesbian cartoonist in 1974 via *Wimmin's Comix*, which had until then published only the work of straight women and their (perhaps misguided) visions of what lesbianism entailed. Two years later, Gregory self-published her lesbian comic book *Dynamite Damsels*, which reached a national audience. That same year heralded an underground gay male anthology called *Gay Heart Throbs*, published by Larry Fuller.

Men continued to produce gay comics in larger numbers than women through the 1970s and early 1980s. One of the distinguishing features of *Christopher Street*, perhaps the most sophisticated of gay publications in the 1970s, was its intelligent and often hilarious cartoons, many of them by Rick Fiala, who also created cartoons under the names "Lublin" and "Bertram Dusk." Fiala's cartoons captured with great wit and élan the complexities of gay and lesbian urban life in the years before AIDS.

Rupert Kinnard, an African-American gay male artist, created a strip called *Cathartic Comics* in 1977, which appeared in the newspaper of his alma mater, Iowa's Cornell College. His characters Brown Bomber and Diva Touché Flambé made history as comics' first out, queer Black characters.

That year also introduced gay character Mark Slackmeyer in Garry Trudeau's syndicated *Doonesbury* strip. A flaming liberal, Slackmeyer is in a relationship with a die-hard conservative. Another *Doonesbury* character, Andy Lippincott, who came out in the strip in 1976, died of AIDS in 1991.

Jerry Mills premiered his *Poppers* series in the early 1980s, via a sex magazine, *In Touch*. The comic often focused on male sexual hijinks and promiscuity.

In 1987, Extraño, an effeminate Hispanic gay man was introduced in D.C. Comics' *Millennium* and continued for a brief run in *New Guardians*.

In Germany in the late 1980s, Ralf König began publishing his *SchwulComix* (Gay Comics), both individual comic strips and cartoons and comic stories, that would ultimately make him Germany's most famous cartoonist. He soon moved from comic strips to best-selling comic novels, several of which were made into successful films.

A real breakthrough was the founding of the annual publication *Gay Comics*, which debuted in 1980 as *Gay Comix* and ran for 25 issues. First under the editorial leadership of the prolific Howard Cruse, the comic continued through the 1990s with Robert Triptow and then Andy Mangels at the helm. Its wide appeal made possible the bridging of the gap between underground and mainstream comics.

The 1990s and the State of Gay Comics Today

While we are still unlikely to find widespread or accurate portrayals of ourselves in the Sunday funnies, there are numerous comic books and graphic novels--ones veering toward the mainstream, with wide distribution--that feature realistic and openly gay characters.

Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez's cutting-edge series *Love and Rockets*, published by Fantagraphics and successful throughout the 1990s, attracted queer audiences with its lesbian and gay male characters. Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* series, published by Vertigo/DC, introduced several queer characters as well, and remained phenomenally popular from its inception in 1989 until its demise in 1997.

In 1992, a teenage male character named Laurence Poirier actually came out in the syndicated strip *For*

Better or for Worse by Lynn Johnston. And *Alpha Flight's* Northstar, a Marvel Comics hero, announced his homosexuality that same year, at last nulling Marvel's 1980 statement that gay people simply did not exist in the "Marvel universe." Transsexual themes also surfaced in the 1990s in D. C. Comics' *Legion of Super-Heroes* and *Camelot 3000*.

Several lesbian comic artists gained popularity in the 1990s and continue to attract large female readerships today. The groundbreaking Roberta Gregory, whose work continued to appear in publications such as *Gay Comics* in the 1980s, began her sex comic strip *Artistic Licentiousness* in 1990. She went on in 1991 to start a quarterly called *Naughty Bits*, starring her infamous characters Bitchy Bitch--an extremely cranky straight woman--and, later, Bitchy Butch, an out lesbian character. The comic has been collected into four bound books.

Meanwhile, *Dykes to Watch Out For*, a long-running series by Alison Bechdel, has been a hit since its emergence in New York feminist paper *Womanews* in 1983. The hilarious series portrays a down-to-earth circle of lesbian friends with all of their accompanying dyke drama, and currently runs biweekly in over forty papers. Bechdel, who has published several *Dykes to Watch Out For* books, remained a true icon of the lesbian underground by refusing a 1994 offer by the Universal Press Syndicate to run the strip in mainstream daily papers. She remarked that she had no desire to "speak to the mainstream."

Another hugely popular lesbian comic strip is Diane DiMassa's *Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist*. With her publishing company, Giant Ass, DiMassa began producing individual comic books featuring Hothead and her cat Chicken in 1991, and went on to publish the comic strip quarterly. Hothead, who takes a hands-on approach to lesbian feminism by castrating rapists herself, is a hero of lesbians everywhere. After publishing two collections, DiMassa compiled all of the Hothead comics into *The Complete Hothead Paisan* in 1999.

Other successful lesbian and bisexual female comic artists creating today include Kris Kovick, who has published a book of her own and whose work has appeared in numerous queer anthologies; Jennifer Camper, who published the book *Rude Girls and Dangerous Women* (1994) and is currently at work on a new series called *subGURLZ*; Erika Lopez, the author of a popular illustrated novel trilogy starring her alter ego, Tomato Rodriguez; Andrea Natalie, creator of the *Stonewall Riots* strip and founder of the Lesbian Cartoonists Network; and Fish, a leatherdyke artist who specializes mainly in illustration.

Gay male artists still produce comics in abundance as well. New York City artist Howard Cruse, who continued to contribute to *Gay Comics* until its final issue, also created an early strip called *Barefootz*--a kind of "softer, gentler" comic that helped address gay issues to the mainstream.

In 1983 Cruse introduced *Wendel*, a comic strip whose eponymous protagonist was a "real" gay man depicted in everyday life; the strip appeared in *The Advocate* until 1989.

D.C. Comics published Cruse's 210-page graphic novel *Stuck Rubber Baby* (1995), a major artistic accomplishment that met with wide critical acclaim and was reprinted in November 2000. Cruse continues to create various new comics, including *Wendel* books.

Tim Barela's first comic was published in 1976 in a weekly paper called *Cycle News*. After a stint working for "motorcycle-oriented publications," he developed his comic strip *Leonard and Larry*, which features a domestic gay couple in a situation comedy format. The strip was first run in *Gay Comix*, then made its way into the pages of *The Advocate*. *Leonard and Larry* also ran for many years in *Frontiers* magazine, and has been collected into several books.

Gerard Donelan's first cartoon premiered in *The Advocate* in 1977 and he went on to create that magazine's "It's a Gay Life" page for 15 years. Known simply as Donelan, he has also illustrated calendars and greeting cards, as well as publishing two collections of his comics. His work has appeared in *Frontiers* magazine and in several volumes of the gay comic anthology, *Meatmen*.

Eric Orner is the creator of *The Mostly Unfabulous Social Life of Ethan Green*, which has been collected into four separate books published in the 1990s. Orner, who sold his first cartoon in 1977 to the Chicago *Daily News*, has since had his comics appear in *The Washington Post* and the *New Republic*. *Ethan Green* offers a realistic look at gay life as it follows the unglamorous Ethan's quest for commitment from his on-again, off-again boyfriend Doug. It currently runs in numerous weekly papers across the United States, Canada, and Britain.

Queer Nation touted itself as "the only regularly published queer superhero comic in existence--on or off the web." Its creators Chris Cooper and John Dennis established www.queernation.com in January of 1999 and updated the site weekly until its demise in 2003. Cooper is a writer and former editor at Marvel Comics, and Dennis has done work for almost every major comic publisher in the United States.

Also creating gay male comics today are Ivan Velez Jr., creator of the series *Tales of the Closet* (1987-1993), whose work has also appeared in *Gay Comics*, *Details*, and *HX Magazine*; Dave Brousseau, who has been creating his strip *A Couple of Guys*, which is syndicated in 25 papers in the United States, since 1996; Glen Hanson and Allan Neuwirth, whose comic strip *Chelsea Boys* first appeared in New York City's *Next* magazine in 1998, and runs regularly in gay papers and magazines in the United States, Canada, Great Britain, and South Africa; and Andy Mangels, who was the editor of *Gay Comics* for eight years and has written *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* books in addition to nearly a hundred comic books.

In addition to these cartoonists who have achieved national or international distribution are many who draw strips and cartoons for local gay and lesbian newspapers, such as Ron Williams who draws a strip entitled *Quarter Scenes* for New Orleans' *Impact*. These local cartoonists often confront local issues and topics peculiar to their locales.

Gay and lesbian characters will likely continue to proliferate in mainstream comics as well. One sign of this development is the recent reincarnation of Marvel Comics' Rawhide Kid as a gay character. A Marvel character since the 1950s as both a main and secondary character, the Rawhide Kid was not originally homosexual. However, in a new series inaugurated in 2003 with *Rawhide Kid: Slap Leather*, the hero revealed his homosexuality in a series of campy double entendres.

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