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Crimes by Women and then Some: Female Empowerment in 1950s

American Comic Books

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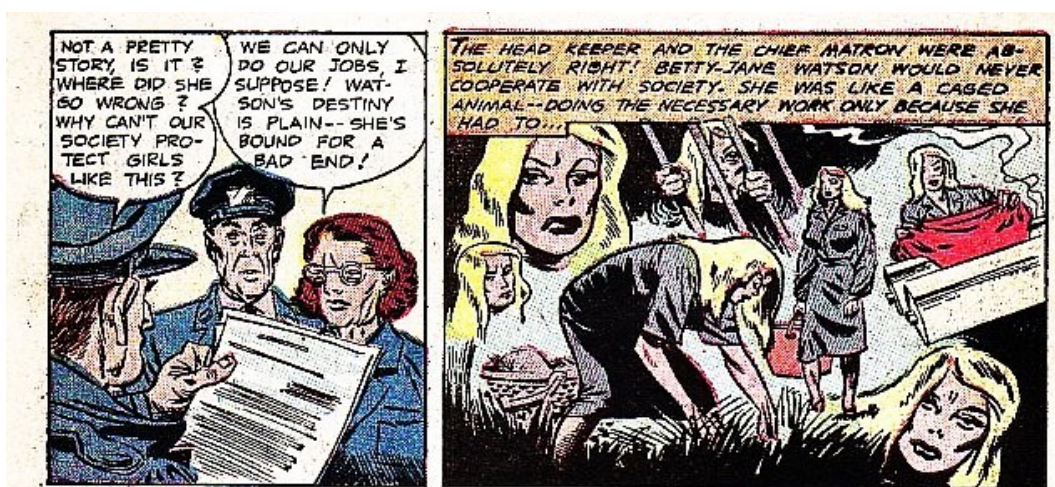
Many historians have noted the cultural “retreat” of women into their domestic spheres at the end of World War II. From riveting Rosies to spirited bobbysoxers and zoot suitors, women were socially contained in rigid gender lines during the early Cold War.¹ Nevertheless, an undercurrent of dissatisfaction flowed beneath the polished floors of idealized housewives. The personification of restless women was exemplified as femme fatales in film noir and its literary twin, the pulp novel.² On the flip side, overly feminine women, such as the voluptuous Marilyn Monroe, have also threatened to upend the social order.³

However, unlike the regulated movie industry, mainstream comic books fell under the radar in the early Cold War. In comparison with pulps, comics, such as *Crime Does Not Pay*, outsold Raymond Chandler by millions per month, were illustrated in full color, and were accepted as disposable entertainment for kids. Although a rudimentary regulatory body for comics existed since the 1940s, it was largely symbolic. As a result, the industry had free reign to exploit the anxieties of the Cold War.

Women in crime comics highlighted those tensions. Crime comics debuted in 1942, but after the war, they increased in number and in violence. Bad women were determined, devious, and dominated their male partners. In one sense, male creators used women as a manifestation of their own insecurities: masculinity itself was challenged by the increasing bureaucracy, anonymity, and luxury of the fifties. How can playboys in paradise combat communism when they, too, were contained in middle class family life?⁴

As a result, the subversion of gender roles in crime comics made women doubly dangerous. Not only did they break free from their contained spheres, they trampled men along the way. Judge Elych Adlow, Chief Justice of the Municipal Court of Boston wrote to the *Atlantic Monthly* lamenting, “Unfortunately, a good many mothers who left home for a job

[during World War II] are still working, and their families are expected to bring themselves up the best way they can.” Journalist Max Lerner agreed, writing in 1943 that “women are busting out of the mold in which we sought to fix them.”⁵ That a woman could leave hearth and home and neglect her basic function as a mother was, well, criminal.⁶ In *Prison Break #4*, “Betty-Jane Watson, the Jail-Breaking Tigress” personified the woman trying to subvert society. “It’s probably the usual – violence, robbery, mugging, terror!” sighs an aged jail matron.⁷ The caption confirmed: “Betty-Jane Watson would never cooperate with society. She was like a caged animal – doing the necessary work because she had to,” such as laundry, scrubbing, and other domestic duties: prison really was a “Big House.” (Figure 1)



In contrast, women who maintained the status quo suffered. In *Crime Must Pay the Penalty!* #18’s “Headline Hunting Hoodlum,” housewife Effie is loyal, hardworking, and earns age lines for her efforts. Her deadbeat husband, Charlie, hooks up with nightclub minxes. Charlie dies by the issue’s end, but Effie endures life as a “widow the hard way,” trying to blot him from her memory; the good wife, like the criminal, pays a penalty.⁸ In *Men Against Crime* #4, young Rita is held for ransom so that her boyfriend Terry will throw the heavyweight championship. Rita escapes and Terry wins the fight, but he is murdered in the shower.⁹ Policewomen also lived

in regret and misery: in *Justice Traps the Guilty* #42, detective Anne Borden cracks a case and then gives blood to the ailing bad guy. Her partner is stumped: “Why, Anne? Why, when the best he can hope for is twenty years imprisonment?” Borden gasps, “Because I want to, Ryan! Because even though I’m a cop ... I’m a woman, too! Because ... I love him!” Both Borden and baddie will spend a lifetime with aching hearts.¹⁰ Being good just doesn’t pay. (figure 2)



Lady lawbreakers and “female Capones,” on the other hand, were bad, beautiful, and weren’t afraid. In *Gangsters and Gun Molls* #3, readers meet “Juanita Perez, Gypsy Killer,” who sports a blonde hairdo under an alias June Pollard. Perez runs a dope empire, cuckolds men, and uses her body for maximum exposure. Until the brutal end Perez is living in luxury. Ethnic overtones shadow the issue as Juanita and her lieutenant, Tony Arrolla, are foreigners, but race adds little to crime comics except an exotic veneer over their Anglo disguises. Nevertheless, their violent ascent as Horatio Alger figures exemplifies the same American dream for the middle-class ideal held by white gun molls and readers alike.¹¹

The affluent 1950s and the desire for glamour and excitement pervaded all women in crime comics. A mere dissatisfaction with home-life easily becomes a slippery slope for social descent. *Crimes by Women* #5 spotlighted the sordid case of Mary Spratchet who resented her dull husband. “When it comes to going out for a good time you’re always in!” Her husband, Walter, prefers to dream of postwar domestic bliss: “One day, Mary, you’re going to grow up and then maybe we can have a little home life together.” Mary refuses to mature. Instead, she and her boyfriend, Elbert, plot Walter’s death. When Elbert hesitates to kill Walter, Mary seizes the weapon from the “chicken-hearted coward” and kills her husband herself. The two are betrayed later by older, conservatively-dressed women who rely on feminine intuition (“I never did trust that woman”), leading to Mary’s downfall.¹² In *Justice Traps the Guilty* #18’s “Fall Guy,” the frame-up is arranged by the misnamed Sandra Natural, who bends her weak-willed husband, district attorney Andre Cassine, and frames detective Guy Castle for murder. Twenty years later, Cassine wises up to his wife’s unnatural lifestyle: “I can’t believe it! My wife – the head of the syndicate – a cold-blooded law-breaker! What a fool I’ve been!” Natural agrees, “Ha, yes! You’ve been a fool! From here on in, you take my orders!” Thankfully, Castle bursts in and reasserts Cassine’s masculinity through his own last name: a man’s home is his castle.¹³

However, because women were still the “fairer sex,” a double standard existed in some stories. Women criminals were hardboiled, but they were also portrayed in ways that male criminals could not. In *Crime Does Not Pay* #63, editor Charles Biro printed his editorial policy to prove to critics that his comics were kid-friendly. Such policies included:

“1. In the illustration of women and girls, regardless of character, no scarcity of clothing will be accepted, and no attempt to exercise sex appeal will be permitted for publication.”

9. “Gun molls and female criminals must not be made too attractive. They should, instead, be made typical and as relatively varied in bone-structure as male characters.”

“10. ... Blood must not be shown flowing from the face or mouth of a man and no blood to be shown flowing from women.”¹⁴

Despite Biro’s disclaimer, that issue featured a young man being manipulated by double-crossing tempresses.¹⁵ A more poignant example occurs in *Crimes by Women #7*, with “red headed Ruth Dock and her trigger happy boyfriend,” Mike Fern. Although Ruth is initially wary of the police, she soon takes charge: “I’m through with you! No man is going to blame me for his own stupidity! Get going before I really lose my temper!” Mike simpers, “Aw gee, baby, I was just a little sore! [...] I wouldn’t do nothin’ to hurt ya! Come on back!” Ruth soon usurps Mike’s masculinity as a criminal mastermind. During a big heist, Ruth bashes a victim’s head. Mike is woozy: “*OOOH!* How can ya do that, Ruth? [...] That’s too *cold blooded* for me!” Even the police agree that Ruth is in charge: “I’ve been hearing that red head is apt to pull anything!” His partner agrees: “When dames go in for crime, they sure go overboard!” (figure 3)



Ruth is captured and she tries to turn state's witness. However, the police don't buy it. Mike sizzles in the chair, but Ruth, despite her bashing heads in and the cops' acknowledging her leadership, gets life in prison "where she is today, the long weary years stretching ahead of her." She loses her freedom, but retains the ear rings and the snappy clothes she sported throughout the issue.¹⁶ Similarly, Juanita Perez, after her rampage of murders and drug rackets, also lands a jail sentence. Some women, such as Mary Spratchet, did receive the highest penalty but more numerous were conclusions that affirmed women's traditional place, behind their male counterparts.¹⁷ In *Crime Does Not Pay* #100, Gale Summers, wanting the usual independence, falls in with the wrong crowd, but Lieutenant Jim King still believes in her. By the issue's end, Summers receives a suspended sentence and a marriage proposal. King's wedding knot will presumably chain Summers at home over a stove, but that was fine. The caption, acting as an

omniscient commentary that knows the past and future of the characters, informs the reader:

“Needless to say, they lived happily ever after!”¹⁸ (figure 4)



The freedom for these women criminals was short lived. Despite the overwhelming numbers of women – ranging from policewomen to housewives – who read and approved these tales, critics saw the comics as too dangerous for impressionable children. In a Senate hearing, the four-colored pulps were deemed immoral.¹⁹ Led by Fredric Wertham, critics attacked female characters as too masculine: the dames sprayed their loaded tommy guns against social norms.²⁰ As a result, in 1954, a beefed-up Comics Code Authority rendered women back into the domestic sphere. After eliminating lust from the stories, the Code dictated that “the treatment of love-romance stories shall emphasize the value of the home and the sanctity of marriage.”²¹

Nevertheless, censorship could not wipe out the undercurrent that allowed female criminals to flourish in the first place. In the code-approved *After Dark* #8, detective Mark Fabian is hired by Frank Adell to find his missing daughter Betty. Fabian finds Miss Adell

playing piano for a gambling den. Fabian busts up the joint and confronts Betty: “Your father is half out of his mind worried about you ... a nice family ... a *home!*”

Betty: “You don’t know Papa! He never let me have any fun! All he knew was school! And work! Practice the piano! When he finds out I flunked ...!”

Fabian nods understandingly: “Young girls running away from home find more trouble than they can cope with!” Then, turning to Dad, Fabian lectures, “She’s young! And when you’re her age, you’re entitled to some fun ... some friends! You kept her like a prisoner ... and that’s the kind that breaks loose with a vengeance!”

Papa assures his daughter: “I don’t care about the flunking! Your Papa ... he was a dumbbell at school! Come – Mama and the children are waiting for you!”²² (figure 5)



Betty goes home, yet, as Fabian had pointed out, the constrained gender roles for women during the 1950s threatened to wreck the family home “with a vengeance” lest women have some “fun and friends.” That the writers and artists were male suggests that men were aware of

the “disease that has no name,” even if the Comics Code prohibited them from displaying it. Although submerged, the swelling of discontent would burst in the form of *The Feminine Mystique* and the women’s movement. Ironically, in the seventies, detractors of feminism would gleefully note the increasing number of women arrests: the “pop” sociological rationale asserted that granting women liberation encouraged them to confront the law.²³ The Cold War consensus was cracking in the latter twentieth century, but conservative social guardians remained adamant that any reconfiguring of gender roles, like the comics in the “complacent” fifties, was a crime.

¹ On bobbysoxers, see Ilana Nash, *American Sweethearts: Teenage Girls in Twentieth-Century Popular Culture*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006). For zoot suitors, see Luis Alvarez, *The Power of Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance During World War II*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008). For women in general, see Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War*. Twentieth anniversary edition. (New York: Basic Books, 1999); *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*. Ed. Joanne Meyerowitz. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

² For pulp novels, see: Leonard Cassuto, *Hard-boiled Sentimentality: The Secret History of American Crime Stories*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

³ See Ed Sikov, *Laughing Hysterically: Screen Comedies of the 1950s*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 65-73 For instance, critic William Mooring, in his testimony before the Senate investigations for juvenile delinquency, expressed concern with Marilyn Monroe's *The Seven Year Itch* (1955): "I would scratch it if I could, because, while it may very well be filled with laughter and opportunities for laughter by sophisticated people, I think it is generally bad influence, that we laugh at the wrong things. There are certain things in my book, there are certain things at which we do not laugh. We do not laugh at God. We do not laugh at the law if we are good citizens." He concludes that "chastity and fidelity are not to be laughed at, even in a motion picture." United States Senate, *Hearings before the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Committee on the Judiciary* (Motion Pictures), 80-81.

⁴ Bill Osgerby, *Playboys in Paradise: Masculinity, Youth, and Leisure-style in Modern America*. (New York: Berg Publishers, 2001).

⁵ Quoted in Jon Savage, *Teenage: The Prehistory of Youth Culture, 1875-1945*. (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 395.

⁶ Women criminals were, unsurprisingly, lousy mothers. The number of criminal mothers were rare in number, but the most oft-told story was adaptations of Ma Barker. "Stand still the lot of you! Stand still! So I can break every bone in your bodies!" she raves against her brood. "I'm beatin' you because you got caught! Not because you got in trouble!! Every time you get caught from now on ... I'll beat you black an' blue!" See "The Incredible Ma Barker," *Gangsters Can't Win* #3. (D.S. Publishing, June-July 1948). Ma Barker appeared in other titles, see: Charles Biro and Fred Guardineer, "Mother of Murderers," *Crime Does Not Pay* #49 (Lev Gleason, January 1947); Jack Kirby, Joe Simon, and Howard Ferguson, "Mother of Crime," *Real Clue Crime Stories* 2:4 [16]. (Hillman, June 1947). For a synopsis of Barker's cultural legacy since the 1930s, see Mary Elizabeth Strunk, *Wanted Women: An American Obsession in the Reign of J. Edgar Hoover*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 53-84. The most notorious example of the neglectful mother ended with the young daughter shooting Dad and framing Mom so she can go live with her caring old-maid aunt. See: Al Feldstein, Jack Kamen, and Marie Severin, "The Orphan," *Shock Suspenstories* #14 (EC Comics, April-May 1954). In contrast, compare Barker to the pitiable mother who explains to her gambling husband why the kids are crying: "For weeks they've been eating bread crusts and whatever else I can find in the garbage cans! What do you expect them to do, laugh?" Her husband slaps her three times in two pages for her backtalk. See: Leonard Starr, "Lesley Ketchell," *Crime and Punishment* #3. (Lev Gleason, June 1948).

⁷ Mort Lawrence, "Betty-Jane Watson, the Jail-Breaking Tigress," *Prison Break* #4. (Avon, July 1952).

⁸ "Headline-Hunting Hoodlum," *Crime Must Pay the Penalty!* #18. (Ace Magazines, February 1951).

⁹ "Murder – and the Crowd Roars," *Men Against Crime* #4. (Ace Magazines, April 1951).

¹⁰ "Scandal Sheet Breakdown!" *Justice Traps the Guilty* #42. (Prize, September 1952).

In addition to law-abiding women, secretaries and sidekicks were, by definition, supportive of the social times. As a result, they were often lovelorn. For instance, detective Ken Shannon's perky assistant, Dee Dee Dawson, spent the majority of her time making smart remarks at femme fatales and slinky suspects who threw themselves at her boss while secretly pining away for him. It made for a fun series: See *Ken Shannon* #1-10. (Quality Comics, October 1951-April 1953). One woman who briefly headlined her own series, Scarlet O'Neil, was a bit too feminine: with the ability to turn herself invisible, O'Neil often found herself in states of undress without upsetting the censors too much. Even when fully clothed, her artist heavily outlined the buxom heroine's unseen attributes. See *Invisible Scarlet O'Neil* #1-3 (Harvey, December 1950 – April 1951). More titillating was Starr Flagg, an undercover agent whose identity – and body – were exposed in every issue. Flagg debuted in 1947 and briefly headlined her own series in 1952. See Ogden Whitney, *Undercover Girl* #5-7. (Magazine Enterprises, 1952-1954). Real-life policewomen and social workers offered testimonials confirming the comics' social worth, which the publishers prominently placed on the covers or inserted in the letter pages and in brief biographies. Housewives also lauded the publishers for the positive effects their comics had on their wayward children.

¹¹ "Juanita Perez, Gypsy Killer!" *Gangsters and Gun Molls* #3. (Avon, March 1952).

The table of contents for this issue claims that "the activities of this thrill-crazed murderess led her straight to the penitentiary and eventually to – death!" However, by the story's end, Perez is faces life imprisonment, not death. Ethnic pride in crime comics were virtually non-existent, as most women of minority aspired to a middle-class conformity. Even then, only women who could readily adapt white features, such as Juanita Perez's blonde wig. In contrast, black or Asian women rarely made for gun molls. Ethnic women had a greater presence in espionage comics, where their skin tones or facial features easily connoted their un-American-ness. These women were also more likely to be Communist dupes. In some issues, however, foreign women were domesticated to mimic their white American counterparts thanks to the G-man protagonists' charms.

¹² "Mary Spratchet," *Crimes by Women* #5. (Fox, February 1949).

¹³ John Severin, "Fall Guy," *Justice Traps the Guilty* #18. (Prize, September 1950).

¹⁴ Charles Biro, "A Message From —," *Crime Does Not Pay* #63. (Lev Gleason, May 1948). The policy reappeared in Biro's companion crime comic the following month. See: *Crime and Punishment* #3 (Lev Gleason, June, 1948).

¹⁵ Charles Biro and George Tuska, "Charles Sloper." *Crime Does Not Pay* #63. (Lev Gleason, May 1948).

¹⁶ "Ruth Dock, the Devilish Gun Moll," *Crimes by Women* #7. (Fox, June 1949).

¹⁷ For examples of women sentenced to the electric chair, see "Woman Hunt for Irene Dague," *Crime Must Pay the Penalty!* #6. (Ace Magazines, February 1949); "The Imperfect Alibi," *Crimes by Women* #9. (Fox, February 1950).

¹⁸ "Mission: Murder!" *Crime Does Not Pay* #100. (Lev Gleason, July 1951). See also Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, "I Worked for the Fence!" *Headline Comics* #28. (Prize, February 1948). Sentenced to three years of hard labor scrubbing floors in the Big House, Monica Bell grins that when she gets out, she and her cop-fiancé will "settle down [and] we'll have the *cleanest* house in the community!"

¹⁹ See Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998); William W. Savage, *Commies, Cowboys, and Jungle Queens: Comic Books and America, 1945-1954*. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998); Bradford Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); David Hajdu, *The Cent Plague: The Great Comic-book Scare and How It Changed America*. (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008); Jim Trombetta, *The Horror! The Horror!: Comic Books the Government Didn't Want You to Read!* (New York: Abrams, 2010). For an international perspective, see: *Pulp Demons: International Dimensions of the Postwar Anti-Comics Campaign*. Edited by John A. Lent. (Plainsboro, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Presses, 1999). "The Orphan" was singled out in the Senate Subcommittee as a prime example of a kid-corrupting comic.

²⁰ Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*. (New York: Rhinehart & Company, 1954).

In addition to his infamous indictment of Batman as a homosexual character, Wertham also accused Wonder Woman of lesbianism, as proven by her frightening masculinity and association with other female characters.

²¹ The Comics Code Authority. *Code of the Comics Magazine Association of America*. Inc. Adopted on October 26, 1954.

²² Mike Sekowsky and Mike Roy, "Find that Girl!" *After Dark* #8 (Sterling, September 1955).

²³ Judy P. Hansen, "Women's Rights and Wrongs," *The New York Times*, March 17, 1975, 29.