

# Graphic...

Magazine • Think pieces



With the universal appeal of block-buster comic book adaptations, comics are no longer simply for pimply-faced adolescents. But when one looks at the sexualized women kicking butt and taking names, it's clear they never were. From mainstream ladies like Wonder Women to more niche characters like Vampirella, comic book babes have always been daringly desirable.





FEMFORCE

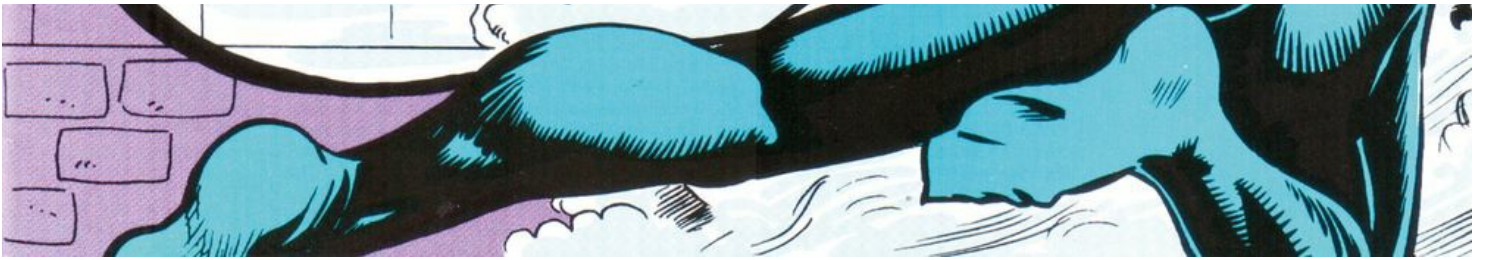


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# Fem FORCE





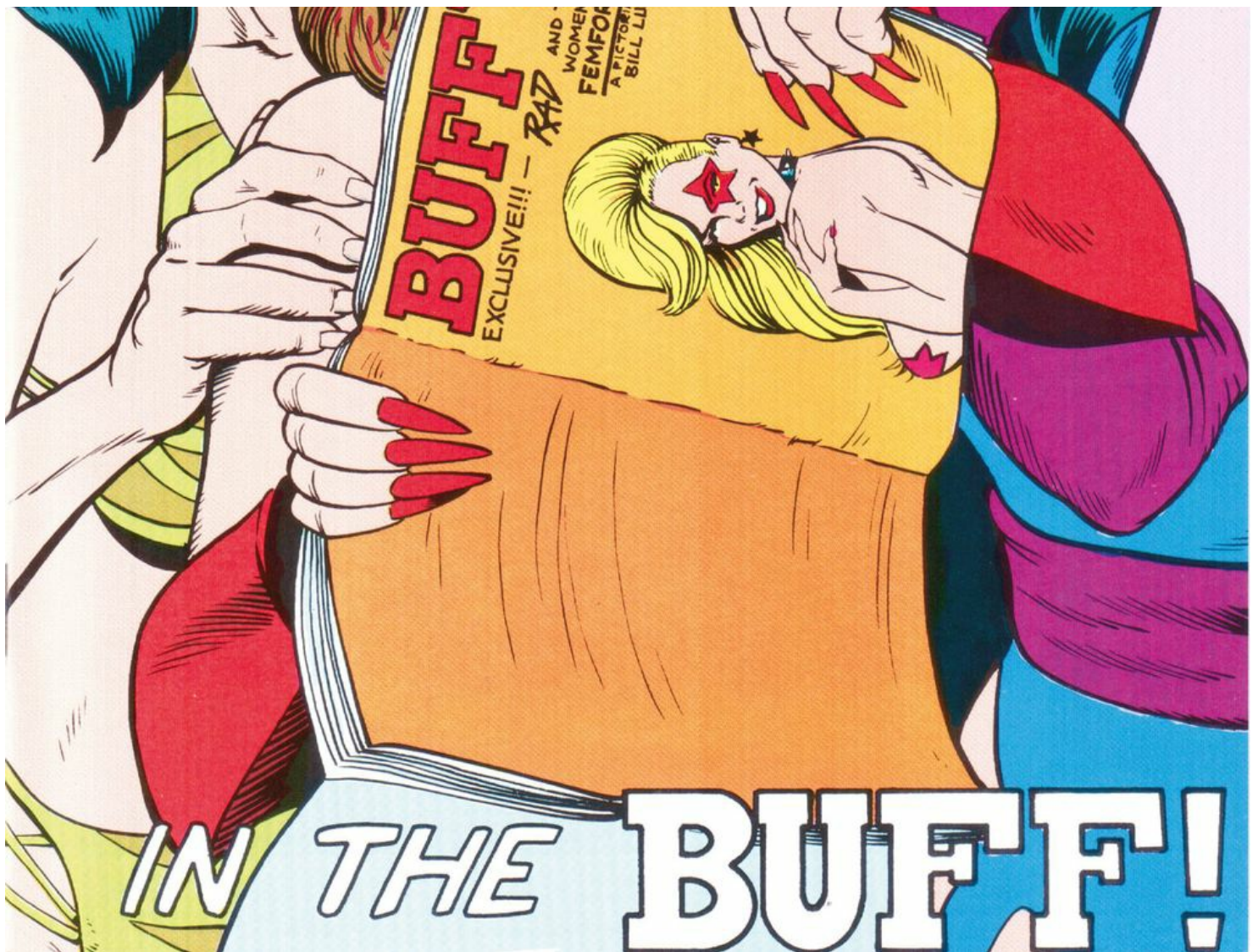


It's been a long time since comics were just for kids. And even when they were, they kind of weren't. From their inception, sex was as integral an ingredient to escapism as exotic adventures and, eventually, superpowers. Following the lead of pulps, comics were populated with rough-knuckled he-men. But the ladies of comics have long since shed the trappings of distressed damsels.

The long line of powerfully erotic women in comics starts years before Wonder Woman's star-spangled bloomers hit the page with Sheena, Queen of the Jungle. Protector of the wilderness, Sheena oozed sex in her skimpy leopard skins as she snatched her male companion from the jaws of danger. Created by comics legend Will Eisner, she was the first female character to ever lead her own title.







In the 50s, a psychiatrist named Frederic Wertham published *Seduction of the Innocent*, which vilified comics – going so far as to suggest that Batman and Robin were gay. The book led to the creation of the Comics Code Authority, which essentially bankrupted the great EC Comics and limited “suggestive and salacious illustration.” The Golden Age heroine Phantom Lady, for example, went from wearing a cleavage-bearing halter and up-to-there skirt to a much more conservative crew neck (DC Comics eventually put her in a more revealing costume than ever). Some publishers shirked the Code by printing large-format magazines like *Vampirella*, who favored a barely-there bodysuit.

Through the 80s and 90s, the Code’s dictum that the women of comics bare less skin and be drawn without exaggerated physical assets seemed to be growing ever more lax. Characters from Red Sonja, with her chainmail bikini, to the all-female super-squad Femforce, with their low-cut unitards and thigh highs, continued to titillate as they kicked ass from panel to panel.









Nowadays, the Code is an abandoned relic. However, there is a line between sexualization and objectification, and it's one that the comics industry sometimes crosses. Last year, Marvel cancelled a *Spider-Woman* cover by Milo Manara that put the hero in an impractical, ass-centric pose. *"That particular cover was all about satisfying this deformed male gaze that has everything to do with objectifying women and reducing them to their body parts,"* said Marjorie Liu, who's written titles like *X-23*, *Astonishing X-Men* and the upcoming *Monstress*. *"It wasn't powerful, it was submissive."*

The erotic nature of women in comics tends toward the notion that power is sexy. Batman's Harley Quinn, who was recently empowered enough to bail on her toxic relationship with the Joker, wields more sex appeal than ever. Sacrificing none of Diana's beauty, Cliff Chiang's recent run on *Wonder Woman* presented a fierce warrior rather than a sex kitten. It boils down to simply that powerful women are super hot.

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Words **Robert Tutton** — All images courtesy of **AC Comics**

**Issue:** [Spring/Summer 2015](#)