

## Book review

### THE SECRET HISTORY OF WONDER WOMAN

Jill Lepore

Despite what the title and the colorful cover may suggest, this book is far more than a history of the first female comic book superhero who arrived on the scene in December, 1941. *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* provides a fascinating look at how the militant political activism of women suffragists at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century led to the availability of safe, legal birth control as well as votes for women, dramatic changes in the way all American women are able to engage with the world today. But what makes this a “fun read” is how these changes were illustrated by the lives and careers of Wonder Woman creator William Moulton Marston and the two most important women in his life, Elizabeth Holloway Marston and Olive Byrne.

William and Elizabeth met in 8<sup>th</sup> grade and married after graduating from college in 1915, he from Harvard and she from Mount Holyoke. As college students, both William and Elizabeth were strong advocates for women’s rights, including suffrage, and legal access to contraceptives and embraced thoroughly “modern” ideas about sex and sexuality. After graduating, both William and Elizabeth obtained law degrees. While a student at Harvard, William’s studies in psychology focusing on various ways to detect deception led to his invention of the first “lie detector” machine; when studying law he was most interested in the rules of evidence and developing ways of evaluating the reliability of witness testimony. In 1921, he obtained a doctorate in psychology from Harvard and during his last year of graduate school, he started several small ventures, hoping to find ways to publicize and make money off his “lie detector” machine, but none were successful.

Soon afterwards, William Marston began an academic career as he began to develop theories on the mechanics of emotion and human sexuality as well as the detection of deception, holding faculty positions at several prominent universities including Tufts. There, in 1925 Olive Byrne, niece of birth control pioneer Margaret Sanger, became his undergraduate research assistant and continued to work closely with him on various research projects while studying for her doctorate in psychology at Columbia, though she never finished her dissertation. During that time, Olive and both the Marstons were part of a group of about ten friends who were part of a “cult of female sexual power” meeting at the home of William Marston’s aunt, a nursing supervisor at a Boston hospital who held rather “New Age” religious views. How seriously the three of them took all this is hard to say, but in 1928 after the Marstons decided to start a family, William asked Olive to move in with him and Elizabeth. Though initially she had doubts, Elizabeth, by then a senior editor for the latest revised edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* who had no intention of quitting her job to stay at home with children, thought this might do.

Over the next four years, Olive and Elizabeth each had two children with Marston, though Olive, claiming to be a widow, never told her children the truth of who their father was. This arrangement seemed to suit them all and they formed a close family until Marston’s death in 1947. Olive cared for all the kids so that Elizabeth, the full-time breadwinner, could devote herself to her career while William pursued his research, writing and occasional consulting gigs, becoming renowned for his theories on the detection of deception as well as human sexuality, the mechanics of emotion and feminism.

Olive also was a staff writer for the new woman’s magazine *Family Circle*, contributing a number of interviews with “the world’s most famous consulting psychologist,” Dr. William Marston (without disclosing to her readers their relationship). In one such interview, she asked him to weigh in on the appropriateness for children of the new comic book phenomenon of the 1930s. (He thought they were fine.) Later after being hired as an expert consultant by a major publisher of comic books to help fend off public criticism of the effect of comic book violence on children, the publisher encouraged William to create the enormously popular Wonder Woman, the comics’ first female superhero, in 1941. It was enormously successful. Along with Superman and Batman, Wonder Woman was one of the few superheroes of the period to have her own comic book.

After the death of William Marston in 1947, Wonder Woman went downhill. Carried on by writers who didn't "get" Wonder Woman, she became more and more submissive, eventually even losing her superpowers, a reflection of the decline of the feminist movement after the end of World War II. In the early 1960s the women's movement underwent a revival starting with the advent of the birth control pill and the 1963 publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*; and culminating in the establishment of *Ms Magazine*, whose first cover featured Wonder Woman herself. But as discussed by Lepore in the Epilogue, this revival stalled in the late 1970s and 1980s, while an interest in scholarship in women's history exploded. Though this happened in my adult lifetime, I would have appreciated a more detailed discussion or analysis of the events and conditions that led to this decline.

Elizabeth and Olive continued to live together for the rest of their lives, Olive dying in 1990 and Elizabeth in 1993 after living together for sixty-four years. Theirs was an incredible story.