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Girlhood Modified in "Susan of St. Brides" in Girl magazine (1954-61)

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Abstract

This paper is to study the earliest movement of reforming children's comics in Britain in the 1950s and the pioneering gender-role reconstruction done in Ruth Adam's comic strip series, "Susan at St. Brides". Intending to correct the gender stereotypes in the comic strips of aggressive males and victimised heroines, Ruth Adam originated a modern type of girl heroine, who is witty, brave, career-wise, a little rebellious, but meanwhile a practical model for all juveniles. Ruth Adam was so far the first women writer who had proved it possible to market feminism to the non-feminist reading public, especially, children and growing up girls.

Keywords: children's comics, juvenile literature, femininity, girlhood

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In the late 1940s British children's comics were badly printed, told stupid stories and were written in feeble and hybrid language.[1] Still worse, some were actually sadistic. In 1948 the better printed Canadian and Americans "shockers" rushed into the market and quickly outnumbered the native comics. A great difference between even the most bloodthirsty English magazines and the imported ones was that now "you get real blood-lust, really gory description of the all-in, jump-on-his stomach style of fighting, which has been perfected by people who brood on violence."[2] Their popularity alarmed thoughtful parents. In 1949 a Lancashire vicar and father of four young children, the Rev. Marcus Morris, started a campaign against imported horror comics, which he found to be "deplorable, nastily over-violent and obscene."[3] Meanwhile, he launched the first of his brand of "clean comics," *Eagle*, which broke into the market with a million copies in the spring of 1950. Within a year or two, careful parents and conscientious head teachers were making a point of limiting their children's comics to the four Hulton papers (*Eagle, Girl, Swift* and *Robin*) and no others. The four safe comics were permitted in exclusive boarding-schools, as well as in go-ahead Secondary Moderns, and reaped a circulation which forced other publishers to imitate them or be left behind in the race.[4] The collective efforts of the anti-horror-comics campaign resulted in the

1 "Comics and Shockers," *Church of England Newspaper* (C.E.N.) 30 Jan. 1948.

2 Quoted in "Creating an Aggressive Image," *Church Weekly Newspaper Series* (C.W.N.) 1 June 1973.

3 Marcus Morris, ed., *The Best of Eagle* (London: Hulton, 1977). For the life and work of Marcus Morris, see Sally Morris and Jan Hallwood, *Living with Eagles: Marcus Morris, Priest and Publisher* (London: Lutterworth P, 1998).

4 "Clerics and Comics," Church of England Newspaper (C.E.N.) 22 Sept. 1961.

1955 Children and Young Persons (Harmful Publications) Act, that prohibited the importation of crime comics.

The Rev. Marcus Morris launched *Girl*, *Eagle*'s sister paper, in 1951. Then a mother of four young children and an accomplished writer herself, Ruth Adam (1907-1977)[5] started to compose for *Girl* the series of "Lindy Love" stories from April 1954 to August 1955 and "Susan of St. Brides" from September 1955 to December 1961. As in *Eagle*, the best artists were used and named in *Girl*– "that way they would produce their best possible work."[6] Its intended readership was children and secondary school girls. The story writer had to make goodness attractive through producing appealing plots that girls would want to read. He/she was also required to observe certain rules of clean comics. Ruth Adam recollected her experience of writing for *Girl*:

> The main difference between what used to be called the "Hulton comics" and their predecessors, was the belief that standards mattered as much as circulation. This made it a unique office to work in and was, I think, perplexing at first to staff who came into it from other firms. Any letter of criticism from a teacher, a parson, youth leader or a single conscientious parent was taken seriously. . . .
>
> There was a framework of social and moral values within which writers were expected to fit their stories. For instance, the good characters were not permitted to deviate from the very strictest honesty. Whatever desperate situation they were in, they must never act a lie or be insolent and aggressive. Within the framework, they had to have all the weaknesses of an ordinary child, and be able to admit themselves wholly in the wrong without indulging in any extravagant remorse. . . .
>
> Writers were expected to avoid not only vice and violence but any kind of

[5] Born a vicars daughter in Nottinghamshire, Ruth Adam was a professional journalist, a novelist, a biographer and a social historian at her life time. Her most noted works are *Beatrice Webb. A Life* (1967) and *A Womans Place* (1975).

[6] James Slattery, Introduction to *Dan Dare and Frank Hampson: Space Fleet Reviewed.* (London: Hulton, 1979).

> gloom or squalor as well. Snobbery and class-consciousness were alike forbidden. No individual whose skin was black, brown or yellow was ever to be held up to ridicule, or used as villain. Any kind of "Jim Crow" dialogue was sternly blue-penciled. . . .[7]

While trying to cater to the readers interests, Morris had successfully accommodated the commercial needs of the publisher, the concern of teachers and parents, and the educational purpose of the paper. *Girl* was taken into schools and teachers organisations for feedback prior to its launch.[8] It was then welcomed in schools and middle-class homes and eagerly read by children and juvenile readers.

Generally speaking, the comic stories in *Girl* observed the common convention of girls literature, i.e., to address the readers desire for power, independence and excitement, without too overtly challenging patriarchal interests and the prevalent discourse of femininity.[9] Unlike those magazines, said to be "trend followers," which satisfied and enhanced the young girls desires and fantasies of romantic love and star dreams, *Girl* thought that secondary school leavers were too young to talk about sexual/romantic love. It tended to promote the middle-class idea of strong-minded girls yearning for independent careers. *Girl* conveyed this message either through fantasies or real life stories. The cover story of its first issue (2. Nov. 1951) was "Kitty Hawke and her all-girl air crew," in which the first sentence was "Well, here we are again, gang, with one more job chalked up to the all-girl crew to prove to Dad that we can operate his planes as efficiently as the glorious males." There were real life stories featuring prominent women in history, such as Florence Nightingale, Marie Guerre and Elizabeth Gilbert. Even in romance strips, the heroines were of the Jane Eyre type, refusing to degrade themselves to please their lover.

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7 "Clerics and Comics," C.E.N. 22 Sept. 1961.

8 Penny Tinkler, *Constructing Girlhood: Popular Magazines for Girls Growing up in England 1920-50* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1995) 66.

9 Ibid, p.5. See also Birmingham Feminist History Group, "Feminism as femininity in the nineteen-fifties," *Feminist Review*. 3 (1979) 48-65; and Vernon Bogdanor, ed., *The Age of Affluence 1951-1964* (London: Macmillan, 1971) 321-338.

Most popular girl stories seem cut off from the external world, having little relevance to the present. It is easier to construct a liberated adolescent girlhood in fantasy (e.g. the all girls plane crew) or in a closed female world of boarding school where the jolly schoolgirls are allowed to bring out "the best" that was locked inside them without male dominance.[10] In contrast, Ruth Adam preferred contemporary settings in order to build the idea that everyday life could be an adventure as fascinating and exciting as science fiction fantasies like Dan Dare.[11] She wanted her heroines to be realistic ones with whom her readers could identify and follow. Both "Lindy Love" (1954-55) and "Susan of St. Brides" (1955-61) depict true-to-life next door type figures, fresh school-leavers embarking on adulthood. Both stand for the typical altruistic heroine who has the wit, sympathy and courage to help others but they are not prigs. They both have bad moments of misjudgment and weakness like ordinary girls. And in consequence, their downfalls make their adventures more exciting and then themselves of course more accessible models. Even more significant was Ruth Adam's intention to offer practical guidance, useful to girls of any class. Lindy Love is a girl who has just left school and stays at home to look after her family while Mummie is away. And Susan Marsh is one of those young student nurses who were in great demand in the late 1950s and 60s. Girls at that time could see advertisements for nursing as a career in several national newspapers. And any girl of 18 with a School Certificate could easily be accepted into training. They could get promoted to become Sisters or Matrons if they were ambitious enough. Besides, in Ruth Adam's view, nursing was probably the safest career investment for girls because they could easily return to it after marriage. The life of a student nurse, and situations in hospital wards were accurately presented in "Susan of St. Brides." *Girl* readers could rely on what they read, (although it was inevitable in a comic strip that the author needed to present the humorous and uplifting side

[10] See Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig, *Youre A Brick, Angela! A New Look at Girls Fiction from 1839-1975* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1976).

[11] *Dan Dare, Pilot of the Future,* featured in the *Eagle*, was declared to have been the best written and drawn comic strip produced anywhere after the war (James Slattery, Introduction to *Dan Dare and Frank Hampson: Space Fleet Reviewed* [London: Hulton, 1979]).

of life). The author's creative ingenuity transformed the dull and very often grief-stricken hospital into an interesting work place and the hard-working nursing profession into an enviable vocation where girls could exercise their heroic potential.

"Susan of St. Brides" ran for seven years. In the late 1950s, it gradually became the most-read strip cartoon in Britain in its day,[12] gripping the hearts of both children and adults. In a BBC radio talk, Ruth Adam recollected the excitement of receiving diverse reader's responses:

> My popular character was a student-nurse, the front-page heroine of a girl's comic. Her name was Susan of St. Brides, and she had a run of seven years [1954-1961]. It is the strangest sensation, to have a brain-child who gets famous. I never got used to seeing her picture all over the place. The worst thing about owning Susan – or rather, about Susan owning me, as she did in the end – was that if you write hospital stories, you are under fire from the whole nursing and medical profession. Once, I made the staff-nurse rather short-tempered, and all the staff-nurses in a London hospital got together and made one of the doctors on the Platt Committee write to the editor to complain. Next time I had a pompous and difficult doctor in the story and a famous consultant grumbled that if he was writing the story, he'd always make patients the villains. I did that. But next time I went to a hospital to get background material, I found the matron frowning over a pile of Susan episodes on her desk. She said, I wish you hadn't introduced this unsympathetic patient character, when we try so hard to build up a good relationship between patients and staff. Meanwhile, the children were always begging to have more "really horrid people, please." But just after that, *Susan* was part of a take-over bid, and her new proprietors decided to scrap her. I don't mind so much about losing Susan. At the end of our seven years of mutual dependence, no-one seemed to think that I might be able to write

[12] "In 1953, 94 percent of 11 to 13-year-olds read either *Girl, Girls Crystal,* or the *new School Friend*. . . . *Girl* still printed 310,000 weekly copies by 1962. . . "(Mary Campbell and Flann Campbell, Comic Love, *New Society* 14 [1962]: 24-25).

> any other kind of story except a Susan story. . . . It will be too awful if it turns out that they're right. . . . maybe I cant, by now.[13]

Ruth Adam thought that 'Susan of St. Brides' was the biggest success of her writing career. To many children growing up in the late 50s, the girl Susan billed on all the large posters in her blue nurse's uniform[14] was a clear spot in their memories.[15] However, this highly praised strip series has since been lost in the history of popular magazines for girls.

It is understandable that there is no trace of Ruth Adam's "Susan of St. Brides" in any book on the history of children's/juvenile literature. Most of the studies of girls popular magazines focus on the general ideology of a magazine, formulated mostly by the editor. Ruth Adam's contribution to comic strips needs to be discussed within the Rev. Marcus Morris editorial policy of "clean comics." The weekly *Girl* had 20 pages, eight of them in full colour, for 4 1/2d (in 1951), designed to be read by children and mostly by girls in secondary schools. It had fashion and cookery to elucidate lessons in femininity. It had record news and posters of pop stars to satisfy the young readers star dreams and desire to consume. Yet these were outweighed by the other strip-stories designed to stir the girls ambition for self-improvement. It gave no space to the current passive femininity the girls were exposed to: the desire for men and marriage for their total fulfillment. It was "clean" in the sense that it presents in graceful language and kept the embarrassing subject of puberty and sexuality out of the way. The ideal of girlhood it supported was of enthusiastic learners, courageous, altruistic, integrated, and preparing themselves for a serious career. Without doubt Ruth Adam's Susan's adventure series outshone other comic strips in that task and helped girls to perceive themselves in this way. She originated a modern type of girl heroine, a student nurse who was sweet, compassionate, a little rebellious and headstrong, but meanwhile admirably witty and brave. And she was

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13 Ruth Adam's talk on "Woman Hour", a BBC radio programme. 24 Nov. 1961.

14 Siding with the Underdog, CWN SERIES 17 Oct. 1975.

15 Mark Nolan, now aged 42, still remembers clearly the series of "Susan at St. Brides", and so do many of his contemporaries. He first read it when he was seven or eight.

not too good to be enjoyed by her host of fans.

Since comic strips were a form of entertainment, whether you liked it or not, part of everyday life for children in the 20th century, banning comics was never a solution. Ruth Adam suggested that the best compromise was to select regular comics and to push the publishers to produce unharmful ones. Near the end of her life in 1973 she wrote three articles for *Christian Weekly Newspaper* (CWN Series), which were meant to be a guide to parents about what comics to choose. What was remarkable in these articles was her historical review of the post-war development of children's comics, her personal experience of composing stories for *Girl* and above all, her penetrating feminist criticism of the false gender ideology differences that the current comics were passing onto their young readers.[16]

Ruth Adam observed that in the field of children's comics, sex discrimination did not begin until around eight years old. The nursery periodicals were, on the whole, unisex. But by the time the comic paper addicts reached the age of both choosing and reading comics by themselves, their periodicals were so male-orientated that one simply could not imagine the two million boys who subscribe to such papers as *Tiger* and *Lion and Thunder* and *The Victor* ever swapping them with two million girls who patronise *Bunty*, *June and Pixie* and *Debbie*. She complained further that the current 1970s comics for girls were offering false models and unhealthy emotional aspirations:

> So "Beth-all-alone," whose business-man father is constantly travelling, is left in the care of his "housekeeper" who keeps her locked up in the approved cruel – stepmother fashion, and "Jo-Ann the girl tennis star" is ill-treated and exploited by a cruel auntie, and "Tina Drop-Outs" cruel aunt knocks her down with a single blow. . . .
>
> I appreciate the delicious melancholy of identifying with these victimised heroines. (After all, this is what classics like Jane Eyre are about.) But I do think that Women's Lib has a point in complaining that these magazines

[16] These three articles are: "Comic – for Better or for Worse," 19 Apr. 1973; "Comics/Victimised Heroines and Pop Stars," 27 Apr. 1973; "Creating an Aggressive Image," 1 June 1973.

> concentrate too much on girls' emotional relationships and too little on what they can achieve in life – for instance in the way of a worth-while career. . . .
>
> In the comics for younger schoolgirls, the love interest is confined to pop stars. The details about their lives and careers is harmless enough but of stupefying boredom. . . .
>
> But as soon as you move on to the comics for teenagers it is assumed, as a matter of course, that sex is the most important interest in a girl's life and outweighs all others. (No such assumption is made in the comics produced for boys of the same age.) . . .
>
> It is mostly quite wholesome and sensible, and appropriate enough for a teenage girl who thinks about boys and love affairs for a great deal of her time. But would she have these quite so much on her mind if the girl's comics hadn't supplied this diet of emotional relationships and nothing else, since she learned to read? [17]

Ruth Adam agreed that the first task of a children's comic, of course, was to please the reader. However, she also believed that the publisher also had a social obligation to see that the paper contained one or two strips which set a true model before the readers -- an ideal which was worth following and really practical. For instance, *Girl* had a long back-page serial about the missionary and child rescuer in China, Gladys Aylward, and a regular front page about training to be a hospital nurse. And Ruth Adam's own serial, "Susan of St. Brides", was another practical example.

Of course, Ruth Adam had been well-aware of the strong influence the comics industry may have on the children's gender-consciousness. Though, never calling herself a feminist and not associated with any feminist organizations, Ruth Adam is probably one of the pioneering writers who had applied feminist perspectives to the reformation of girlhood and gender stereotypes in comic industries. What is worth pondering from Ruth Adam's overwhelming success of "Susan of St. Brides" is the

[17] "Comics/Victimised Heroines and Pop Stars," CWN SERIES 27 Apr. 1973.

challenge feminist writers have to face: how to market feminism and to create up-to-date modern juvenile heroes/heroines to outreach the millions of non-feminist boys/girls?

Once a primary school teacher and a parent herself, Ruth Adam had become familiar with children's psychology and the conventions of children's literature. Moreover, she was always a conscientious researcher of the topic in hand and also well-informed about contemporary market trends. She wrote:

> At the time when I first started to earn a living by writing strip-stories for school girls, the child psychiatrist employed to advise the firms writers told me that if I wanted my story to be popular I should get the heroines mother out of the way before anything started, leaving the daughter with Daddy's undivided attention.
>
> "I gather, from my study of the current comics that this excellent piece of advice still holds good. Looking through them, one can hardly find a single mother alive and well and getting on with the housework" ("Comics/Victimised Heroines and Pop Stars," CWN SERIES 27 Apr. 1973).

Therefore, her Susan Marsh has a widowed father. We can see that she had managed well in dealing with the dilemma of catering to the needs of different readership. She used various writing tactics, both old and contemporary, to bring alive the modern life of girls and of hospitals in the 1950s. In the context of "feminism as femininity in the 1950s" when women accepted the fulfillment of the domestic role of wife and mother as paramount in life, the independent career as a nurse, moreover, posed no threat to any male profession, and its nurturing qualities were congenial to a girl's future role as mother and home-maker. Basically, Ruth Adam did not challenge the prevalent ideology that men and women were equal but different. The contribution she made in Susan series is that she proved it possible to solve the paradoxical conflict between the affirmation of women's maternal role and their need for liberation from confinement to that role. Ruth Adam's preference of realistic style to fantastic is because through 'authentic' setting up of backgrounds

and characters, the contemporary readers will easily incorporate what they read with their daily life. What they read is a 'fiction,' yet a fiction that is a dream could be realized. Moreover, she had deliberately chosen the nursing profession — a traditional women's profession that had been underpaid and denigrated but was under big reconstruction as a properly paid and respectable women's profession in the 1950s. Susan's popularity has brought a high profile and a new image of nurses. Proud of her nursing skills, Susan was praised and paid for her profession rather than posing herself like a self-sacrificing mother figure as the old tradition had demanded nurses to be.

In the context of 1950s when homemaking is still women's pride and occupation, for Ruth Adam the affirmation of maternal values/quality and demanding "paid" work for it is the first step to women's liberation. Instead of seeing maternal virtues as taxing/man-made values imposed by patriarchy to exploit women, Ruth Adam created an overwhelming popular comic character who can demonstrate heroism through maternal qualities. "Susan of St. Brides" had successfully marketed to non-feminist audience via 'social feminist' approach -- a peaceful and gradual way to women's liberation by the recognition of sexual difference, the endorsement of feminine and maternal values and at the same time helping women to regard themselves as active agents able to shape their lives rather than merely be oppressed victims.[18]

Is the endorsement of feminine and maternal values a regression to feminist movement? Maybe for some feminists, it is. Yet, Ruth Adam had negotiated well between the prevalent ideology of femininity and her keeping alive the independent feminist spirit, which had been at its nadir in face of the 1950s trend of homemaking. Not pining herself away for romantic love and pop stars, Susan , the nurse of St. Brides, is still alive in many people's memories as the daring adventurous witty girl, standing in her blue nurses uniform, fighting for good and justice. If the invasion of *Jane Eyre* into the reading market had caused an 'alarming

[18] For detailed discussion of social feminism, please read Naomi Black's *Social Feminism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1989).

revolution' of women's role in the nineteenth century; similarly, the popularity of "Susan of St. Brides" has vigorously imprinted on the readers' minds a vivid picture of a new type of girlhood -- an adolescent girl full of desire for career, independent, thoughtful, wise and strong, yet meanwhile an ordinary one, like any girl in our life. It uses no slogans of feminism, yet, it brought us new thinking of what a girl can do or be.

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聖布萊德醫院的蘇珊：《女孩》漫畫雜誌中的少女角色改寫

蔡淑芬*

提要

本論文略述在二次大戰後英國興起的一股改革青少年漫畫的運動, 以及參與此運動的路得. 亞當女士在 1950 年代襲捲漫畫界的大作,「聖布萊德醫院的蘇珊」。 路得. 亞當是英國戰後漫畫史上, 第一位以女性主義角度改寫少女角色大獲成功的作家。本文將分析「聖布萊德醫院的蘇珊」與當代少女漫畫的異同, 以及作者如何在女性主義滑落至谷底的 1950 年代, 運用各種技巧成功地平衡市場需求、當時的父權價值和女性主義標舉的獨立精神。筆者認為「聖布萊德醫院的蘇珊」給我們的最大啟示是如何將女性主義意識融入次文化文類以行銷給兒童、青少年和「非女性主義者」的大眾。

關鍵字: 兒童漫畫、青少年文學、女性特質、少女角色

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