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In the pages of Batman #1, way back in 1940, the Caped Crusader encountered a brand-new villain for his rogues gallery. Unlike the Joker or Riddler, though, this one was a woman. Selina Kyle, the Catwoman, a femme fatale in the shape of a talented cat burglar. Over the years, Batman and Catwoman have seen their stories overlap in new and interesting ways, and their characters interpreted and reinterpreted countless times.



Comics

Catwoman

DC Comics

Interviews

At 77 years old, Catwoman is one of the female characters appearing in superhero comics, and she continues to headline her own stories to this day. But her story isn't without its gaps or its highs and lows. Now, in a new book, author and comics historian Tim Hanley is charting at history for fans young and old.

The Many Lives of Catwoman: The Felonious History of a Feline Fatale, in addition to its alliterative title, traces the history of one Ms. Kyle, investigating her many incarnations from the page to the big and small screens, and shedding new light on one of comics' most beloved characters.

SYFY WIRE sat down with Hanley to discuss this new venture and what sets Catwoman apart from the characters he has focused on in the past, and to find out which version of the feline felon is his personal favorite.

SYFY WIRE: This is your third book. Why did you decide to focus on Catwoman this time around?

Tim Hanley: I've been a Catwoman fan for as

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long as I've been a superhero fan. I got into the genre through Batman, and I was 6 when *Batman Returns* came out and *Batman: The Animated Series* premiered. Catwoman was a huge part of both of those properties and was always a pivotal part of the Bat-mythos for me. As I got older and dug more into the history of comics, I noticed how many different takes on Catwoman there were and how her role was constantly shifting. She's been a constant presence in superhero media since her first appearance in 1940, but each incarnation of the character was different in compelling ways, some of them cool and progressive and some of them troubling. I thought she could offer a unique perspective on the role of women in superhero comics, and so I dove in. Plus, writing a book on Catwoman meant I got to rewatch *Batman Returns* and *Batman: The Animated Series* a bunch!

Your previous books traced the history of Wonder Woman and Lois Lane. Wonder Woman is very much a hero. Lois Lane is a different kind of hero, but also a supporting character. Catwoman is an antihero. How do those types of characters compare to each other?

While Wonder Woman and Lois are very different characters in a lot of ways, the broad strokes of their historical arcs follow a similar path, one that largely mirrors the role of women in American society. Catwoman does not. Her antihero role makes her a perpetual outsider, and the rules and expectations always seem different for her. Sometimes she was liberated and independent, showcasing unparalleled agency while heroic female leads were trapped in limited roles. Other times, she was sexualized and objectified in ways that went far beyond what her primarily male creators could do with female superheroes. There's a cycle of empowerment and exploitation to Catwoman's history that's wholly hers and unlike any other character I've looked at.

What was the most surprising thing you learned while researching this book?

Her lengthy absences caught me by surprise. Anytime Catwoman got too controversial or problematic for DC Comics, they dropped her like a hot potato. For example, she disappeared from comics for 12 full years after 1954, most likely because she was linked to allegations of homoerotic

undertones in *Batman and Robin* comics. It was only the popularity of Julie Newmar's Catwoman on the *Batman* television show in 1966 that allowed her to finally return. And there were shorter gaps after that, breaks of several years where it seemed like no one knew what to do with her or how to write her. She's such a well-known and beloved character, but she often found herself in the sort of trouble that scared off the publisher.

I know you like to read letter columns to get an idea of the fan response to these characters. What was that response like early on?

Catwoman was actually in the middle of her first lengthy hiatus when letter columns debuted in the early 1960s, so there wasn't really anything written about her early on. DC went out of their way to ignore her existence.

How did it change over time?

When she finally came back in 1966, fans were ecstatic to see her again, and for the next couple of decades, any guest appearance from Catwoman was met with near-universal excitement. Fans also had a

clear idea of who the character was, and were very vocal anytime a story didn't meet their standards. But they weren't upset at the character for behaving badly, they were upset at the creative team for not doing her justice. She was a fan favorite all around. Later on, when she got her own series in the 1990s, the letters were more split. The book was well written, but the art was hyper-sexualized, and its letter column showcased this tension, especially when female fans wrote in to question the mixed messages.

Do you have a favorite letter that sticks out in your mind?

In the mid-1980s, DC published an event comic called *Crisis on Infinite Earths* that featured several high-profile deaths, including big names like Supergirl and the Flash. It was a time period when no one was safe. While this was going on, Catwoman was struck by lightning in a cliffhanger ending of an issue of *Batman*. Readers were apoplectic. The letter column was full of fans flipping out, deeply concerned that Catwoman was dead. One reader swore he'd cancel all of his Batman subscriptions if she didn't make it. The universal rallying around

the character and genuine fear for her safety was delightful.

Why have you decided to focus specifically on female characters in your work?

Because the boys get all of the attention everywhere else. They star in most of the movies, television shows, and comic books, and even are the subjects of the bulk of historical research. It's such a male-dominated genre, across the board, so much so that the fascinating histories of female characters are often forgotten. Which is a shame, because they're usually a lot more interesting than the guys.

What do female characters offer that male characters do not in terms of this kind of work?

They offer a different perspective on the genre. We're used to seeing the male hero out front, leading the narrative, and everything is centered around him. With *Wonder Woman Unbound*, we were able to switch things around and see the genre through a female lead. With *Investigating Lois Lane*, we were able to look beyond the hero and focus in on a pivotal supporting

character who's been a key part of the genre from the very beginning. And now, with *The Many Lives of Catwoman*, we can see the genre through the lens of a sometimes villainous antihero who exists outside of the typical conventions. For good and ill, female characters have been treated differently than male characters over the decades, and tracing their histories always turns up intriguing insights on the world of superheroes as a whole.

When you're not writing books you have a column covering the state of women in comics. How are we doing?

Broadly speaking, female creator representation is doing relatively well. The numbers have grown slowly over the past six years, and the percentage of women working across the board at DC and Marvel (writing, drawing, coloring, lettering, editing) has risen from an average of 10% in 2011 to 15% today. It's still not a lot, but it's better than it was. Now, more specifically, 2017 has not been great. The numbers at both major superhero publishers are down from last year by a couple of percentage points, which is a fair amount given how low female representation is to begin with. So the big

picture is good, but zooming into right now the industry is in a bit of a dip, hopefully a momentary one.

What character are you planning to cover in your next book? Any chance you'll be switching over to Marvel?

I've got a few different ideas for where to go next, but nothing official to say as of yet. However, I can say that the next book will probably focus on more than one character. There aren't a lot of female comic book characters with lengthy enough histories to sustain a whole book, so I'm looking into teams, themed heroines, and legacy characters (ones where different women take on similar superhero guises) moving forward.

Favorite version of Catwoman?

In terms of adaptations, for me, it's a tie between Michelle Pfeiffer in *Batman Returns* and Julie Newmar on the 1960s *Batman* television show. They both capture what I love best about the character, an unrepentant commitment to her own desires and aims. Both of them like Batman well enough and flirt with turning away from

villainy, but in the end, no noble hero is going to sway them from what they truly want. They're both amazing in the roles, too. Pfeiffer is brilliant as Catwoman, and I think she should be up there with Heath Ledger's Joker for best-ever performance in a superhero film. And Newmar just owned the character from the get-go, defining her for a new generation of fans with such ease and style.

In terms of comic books, there are so many good takes on Catwoman, but my very favorite is probably Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale's Catwoman in *Batman: The Long Halloween*, *Batman: Dark Victory*, and *Catwoman: When in Rome*. Their Catwoman is crafty and plays both sides to her own advantage, while their Selina is elegant, clever, and endearing. In three books chock-full of the most famous, colorful characters in Gotham City, their Catwoman still manages to stand out from the crowd.

MORE CATWOMAN

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The Many Lives of Catwoman: The Felonious History of a Feline Fatale is available for purchase at bookstores and online retailers now.