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'Powers of a squirrel, and also a girl': Squirrel Girl and alternatives for women in superhero comic-books – an interview with Ryan North

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Abstract

Ryan North is a Canadian author who writes a host of comics, most notably Dinosaur Comics*,* Adventure Time *(winner of both an Eisner and a Harvey Award),* The Midas Flesh *and* The Unbeatable Squirrel Girl (R. North and E. Henderson, 2015)*. North is also the creator of* To Be Or Not To Be*, a choose-your-own-adventure version of Hamlet funded through Kickstarter, published as a book and also as a computer game*.

Keywords

Introduction

In *Studies in Comics* 5.1 (2014), I published an article about a relatively obscure Marvel superheroine called Squirrel Girl who had appeared in a handful of comics between 1992 and 2012. As the article went to print, however, it was announced that SG was to star in her own title, *The Unbeatable Squirrel Girl* (R. North and E. Henderson, 2015), written by Ryan North with art by Erica Henderson. Reviews have been positive, with *IGN* describing its premier issue as 'one of the best new debuts of recent memory' and *Entertainment Weekly* stating that '*Unbeatable Squirrel Girl* (2015) is another quietly bold move for Marvel – a

female-centric comic that's intended to appeal equally to canon-heads and newcomers'. Endorsements translated into strong sales, with the first issue ranking 29th for January 2015 with sales of 41,693 according to Comichron.[1] This interview investigates the ways in which *The Unbeatable Squirrel Girl* (2015) plays with the character's complex history while making her accessible and engaging to new audiences.

Questions

Michael Goodrum: Why were you interested in developing Squirrel Girl for her own title?

Ryan North: I wasn't, initially! My editor Wil e-mailed me asking if I'd be interested in pitching on her, and at first I thought 'Man, isn't she the one who has the squirrel powers? I dunno…'. I took a weekend to read up on her – read all her comics, research her, that sort of thing. By the end of the weekend I knew two things: that I really wanted there to be a Squirrel Girl comic; and that I really wanted to be the person writing it.

MG: In what ways were you motivated by existing superheroines?

RN: I had just finished up my 35-issue run on *Adventure Time*, so I was very much in that mindset. In *Adventure Time* you've got Finn and Jake, both guys, but they're in a world where princesses (and vampire queens) have all the real power in the world, and are to a large extent the most well-developed characters.

I wanted a comic that I could read, and there are a lot of comics that are less friendly to new readers: lots of continuity, lots of backstory. I was inspired by the LEGO Marvel games a lot: they assume some basic knowledge of the Marvel Universe, but they don't care if you know what Iron Man has been up to for the past twenty years. You can just start having fun right away. I wanted a comic that felt the same: that would have rewards for the canon-heads, but that would also be accessible and fun. Fun comics! I like 'em.

MG: Were there any other factors that shaped the way you approached the character?

RN: My first version of the first issue had Squirrel Girl beating Kraven the Hunter with, in the final version of the comic, one of the techniques she just *imagines* beating him with: she stuffs squirrels down his pants. Obviously debilitating, right? Wil wrote back and said something like 'I kinda see Squirrel Girl helping Kraven out, rather than just beating him up. Is there a problem she can help him with here?' and it was stunning. It was like reading the answer key at the back of the book. Of *course* Squirrel Girl would help Kraven solve his problems! That's what she does: she's Squirrel Girl. And that's been the core of how I've written her ever since: she's got these powers, she's really tough and awesome and can talk

to squirrels, but she's also someone who's empathic. She just wants to help people. And that includes bad guys, if she can!

MG: Do you have an idea of an audience when creating The Unbeatable Squirrel Girl*?*

RN: I pitched it as all ages, and when I say that I usually follow up with 'and that doesn't mean for children'. For me, something for children talks down to them, assumes that they're – well, kids. And I think kids are pretty smart. So to write all ages, I just write for myself – an adult – and make sure everyone keeps their clothes on and nobody swears. It's the same thing I did with *Adventure Time*. You can still talk about big important things, and kids aren't stupid: they'll figure it out.

MG: How did the character's past complicate or contribute to your own ideas for her? You explicitly play with her 1992 debut appearance in #2, for instance.

RN: Oh, it's great! It means she's not a blank slate, and gives us things we can play with. It gives her a history too, which means if I get stuck on what she'd do in a situation, I can look back and see what she's done in the past. I like the idea that this character has been there running around in the Marvel Universe for years, but this book is the first time we've got to

see what she's been doing. It helps make the whole storytelling universe more vibrant, you know?

MG: With the Squirrel Girl theme tune in #1 (borrowing a tune from Spider-Man) and Doreen's struggle to be a student and a superhero, to what extent is Squirrel Girl explicitly 'riffing' on existing Marvel heroes?

RN: One of the great joys of working in the Marvel universe is you get to play with all their toys. So if I want to reference Spider-Man, I can! That's so much fun. And the great thing about the Spider-Man theme in particular is that it's been around since the 60s and so many people know it and it has a really unique lyrical structure: 'Hero name, hero name/Friendly neighbourhood hero name'. Put that all together and it's a rare opportunity to have music in comics, an otherwise silent medium. I put the Squirrel Girl theme in the first issue and everyone could hear it in their head as they read it! That's great!

I'm not so much trying to riff on other heroes – remember my idea of not assuming too much knowledge of the Marvel Universe on the part of the readers – but there are a lot of things that come up that you can have a lot of fun with. I think Doreen is really sensible, so she makes sensible decisions a lot of the time – and in a world where the usual context is world-destroying space gods and rage monsters running around, 'sensible' can be an interesting change of pace!

MG: *As the series has developed it seems as if it is extending previous attempts at commentary into a broader satire of comic-book conventions. Issue 5 is full of overblown acronyms, for instance, and the plot structure deals with the same themes as the classic* Batman *story 'The Batman Nobody Knows' (F. Robbins and D. Giordano, #250, 1973). Is this playful approach to continuity an affectionate critique of it?*

RN: Oh, it's totally me having fun with it. If you know 60 years of comics history, you can see all the things being riffed on there, but if you don't, you get to see all these different ways of telling stories, ways of viewing characters, all through the lens of Squirrel Girl – which is hopefully a lot of fun. One of my favourite types of music is out-of-genre covers, and this was sort of the same thing. We know who Squirrel Girl is, but what if she existed in these other worlds, these other cultural contexts? What changes, what stays the same? And having Nancy (Squirrel Girl's roommate) there to be increasingly outraged at how incorrect these stories are kept it grounded.

MG: *In* GLA: Misassembled *(2005), Squirrel Girl acts as a metatextual critic. Did you see it as necessary for the success of the comic to remove that from her and yet, through your comments in the footer, retain it as a function of the comic-book as a whole?*

RN: In my original pitch, I gave the 'break the forth wall and address the readers directly' power to Tippy-Toe, Squirrel Girl's best (squirrel) friend. And it didn't really work! Whenever you break the fourth wall, you're reminding the reader that what's happening is in a comic,

and so it's fake. It's all made up. It undermines the tension, because you know that even in the most dramatic life-or-death scene, the character could turn to the camera and say 'get a load of this guy, am I right'?

I'm not saying it doesn't have its place – I think it worked really well in *GLA: Misassembled*, since SG was just one part of the story there. But when she's a leading character, I wanted the stakes to feel real, so I ended up dropping all fourth-wall breaks from Tippy.

The text beneath the comic gets to have fun with that though, because it's (physically) removed from the story, and so obviously not a part of it. It's like the title text that appears when you hover over one of my *Dinosaur Comics* (www.qwantz.com) – something extra that can be part of the comic, commentary on the comic, extra lines of dialogue – anything that's funny and that adds to the comic as a whole.

This is maybe a fine distinction but I think it's an important one.

MG: You used Squirrel Girl's unconventional battle tactics to good effect in The Unbeatable Squirrel Girl *#1 in her interaction with Kraven, in #3 with her use of the squirrel army, and in #4 with the power of friendship. Is this something you plan to keep, and why?*

RN: Yep, absolutely! In previous comics a lot of Squirrel Girl's victories occurred off-screen, or between panel breaks. You can do that a few times when she's a supporting character, but in her own book it would get real frustrating real fast if every time she had a fight we just cut away to her afterwards, brushing off her hands. So a lot of the fun in writing is figuring out how someone with squirrel powers would be so unbeatable.

In Issue 4, Squirrel Girl faces off against Galactus after three issues of buildup. The very first page is her sitting on top of his chest, victorious, and then we go to the letters pages, and then we say 'okay fine here's what happened': that was me having fun with the expectations that she'd win 'between panels', and also getting to play with the comics format some. Why not, right? It'll be fun!

MG: *Squirrel Girl has previously called attention to practices of sexualization in superhero narratives. It seems like* The Unbeatable Squirrel Girl *is consciously engaging with that, especially through Erica Henderson's art. What thinking went in to how Squirrel Girl was going to be depicted?*

RN: When we started the book Erica sent some sketches over of different costumes, and I kept them up as I wrote because they really captured what Squirrel Girl looks like. Erica's said before that she likes it when physical female super heroes look like they actually have muscles, because you wouldn't want to be able to defeat them just by sitting on them. I think that's where it comes from!

I love how she looks and I love how her character design says 'this is a book anyone can read', which is exactly what I'm trying to write.

MG: This is not to say that USG *does not draw attention to Squirrel Girl's body particularly, after stuffing her tail into her trousers, her 'conspicuously large and conspicuously awesome butt' and the fact that Doreen is identified as '89 per cent curvier' than Tony Stark by his Iron Man armour. Such depictions have found favour with women and the cover of #3 heralds* USG *as the recipient of the Comics Alliance 'Nuts About That Booty' award. Do you think that you and Erica are developing a new way of representing the female body in superhero comics?*

RN: I hope so, I guess! I hope that there's more of it. All we're doing is showing a woman with a particular and very common body shape. Her body is different than most female super heroes, but that's only because most female super heroes have all been the tall, thin, leggy, busty, skinny waist body type for so long. Nothing against tall, thin, leggy, busty, skinny-waisted people, but there are other shapes of people out there too, you know?

It's been great that there's been such a terrific response to it, and I hope we see more of it in other comics. I come from more of an indie/webcomics background where you see diversity represented more routinely, so we're just continuing that here.

MG: Have you encountered any resistance to the new version of the comic on Twitter or elsewhere?

RN: A little, sure! But it's not really unexpected. If you're going to be mad that an imaginary squirrel woman is drawn in such a way that this imaginary squirrel woman isn't as sexually attractive to you as she used to be, I'm not sure what to say to you. Sorry, I guess? But not really, because the images of the squirrel lady that got you way horny before – they're still there. We haven't erased them from the Internet or anything.

It'll be okay, angry Internet commentator.

MG: What do you make of the fact that twelve of the top 25 advance reorder titles for February 2015 were female-fronted titles?

RN: I think it's great! I think female-fronted titles are a great step towards better diversity in mainstream comics and to attracting (back!) a larger audience that may have drifted away in the past couple decades. We have this idea in the larger culture of 'comic reader' being 'weird socially awkward guy', and that's awful for a bunch of reasons. I think the more people that read comics the more that stereotype will fade, will be seen to be false, and the more comics itself will be seen as just another medium and not this weird niche genre for

shut-ins, you know? Because comics is a medium, not just a genre, and mediums can do anything! anything.

It drives me crazy when someone says 'I don't like comics', because they don't even mean what they're saying. They'd never go around saying 'I don't like books'. They'll say 'I don't like romance novels' – which is fine! – but to dismiss an entire medium because you don't care for the few or only genre you've seen in that medium is crazy. It's crazy! You can tell all sorts of really meaningful stories in comics, with all sorts of characters and creative teams, and the more we see a wider variety of comics the happier I am.

MG: What plans do you have for the series going forwards?

RN: Oh gosh, lots of stuff. Squirrels, mostly. Oh, and we're working on getting her to cross over with Howard the Duck. Because why not? I can see them getting along really well, at least briefly.

The Unbeatable Squirrel Girl (2015) is published by Marvel, written by Ryan North with art by Erica Henderson and colour art by Rico Renzi.

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[1] Figures retrieved from http://www.comichron.com/monthlycomicssales/2015/2015-01.html.