



Vixens, Vamps & Vipers: Lost Villainesses of Golden Age Comics

Mike Madrid

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“Mike Madrid is doing God’s work. . . . mak[ing] accessible a lost, heady land of female adventure.” — *ComicsAlliance*

Between the covers of *Vixens, Vamps & Vipers*, fans will rediscover the original bad girls of comics—as fierce and full of surprises as they were when the comic book industry was born. From murderous Madame Doom to He-She, dubbed by *io9* as “the most unsung comic book villain ever,” Mike Madrid resurrects twenty-two glorious evildoers in fully reproduced comics and explores the ways they both transcend and become ensnared in a web of cultural stereotypes.

Among the deadly femme fatales, ruthless jungle queens, devious secret agents, double-dealing criminal masterminds, and gender-bending con artists are some of the very first women of color in comics. These women may have been overlooked in the annals of history, but—like their superheroine counterparts in *Divas, Dames & Daredevils*—their influence, on popular culture and the archenemies that thrill us today, is unmistakable.

Mike Madrid is the author of *Divas, Dames & Daredevils*, a *ComicsAlliance* and *ComicsBlend* Best Book of the Year, and *The Supergirls*, an NPR “Best Book To Share With Your Friends” and American Library Association Amelia Bloomer Project Notable Book. A San Francisco native and lifelong fan of comic books and popular culture, Madrid also appears in the documentary *Wonder Women! The Untold Story of American Superheroines*.

Vixens, Vamps & Vipers: Lost Villainesses of Golden Age Comics Details

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From Reader Review *Vixens, Vamps & Vipers: Lost Villainesses of Golden Age Comics* for online ebook

Whitney says

Review written for and published by Portland Book Review on January 26th:

Vixens, Vamps & Vipers: Lost Villainesses of Golden Age Comics is an interesting look at villainesses that have long since vanished from comics and graphic novels. With names as outlandish as their heroic counterparts, the villainesses in these pages use their beauty, wits, and sheer determination to see their heists and evil machinations come to light. From seeking world domination through death and mayhem, or just seizing control of the world's makeup supply, these villainesses come from every walk of life and seek just one thing – to end up on top.

Author Mike Madrid has broken up the villainesses in this book into four groups: Vicious Viragos, Beauties & Beasts, A Rainbow of Evil, and Crime Queens. The start of each section includes a short essay discussing comic tropes and trends of the time, even pointing out the sexist, misogynistic, and racist themes often prevalent in these early comics. However, Mike Madrid does a wonderful job of putting these issues in context by emphasizing how world and cultural events of the time held such sway over the type of comics created.

“Villains commit sins and perform forbidden acts. Watching them gives us a vicarious thrill, and when they are inevitably punished, we are reassured that society will always thwart the evildoers in our midst. Villains show us the road that we should not take: the consequences of unbridled desires.”

Each section in the book also includes a single story for each character taken from the original comics where these villainesses were portrayed, as well as a brief introduction to the villainess in question. This allows readers to not just read about these characters in a scholarly sense, but to enjoy reading the comic so they can see for themselves. Despite the age of the comics, and the sometimes poor quality of the original printing, the comics included in the book are all legible and engaging, although often far too short.

While some of the included villainesses were only considered evil for their race or upbringing, there are plenty of murderers, thieves, and seductresses within these pages. *Vixens, Vamps & Vipers is a short study of Golden Age villainesses, and does a wonderful job of presenting the material. This is a great book for comic book fans, or anyone genuinely interested in learning more about the history of the medium.*

Matthew Gardiner says

I received the book for free through Goodreads First Reads.

The book was a lot of fun. It's a funny bunch of cheesy, violent, sometimes sexist, retro coolness. A lot of unique and evil women. Surprising levels of violence and cruelty from Golden Age comics. Book never got boring.

SmartBitches says

Full review at Smart Bitches, Trashy Books

Mike Madrid is an author who has written several books (all of which are on my TBR) about women in Golden Age Comics. Let me tell you, there were a lot of Smart Bitches in those early comics, and this particular book, about Golden Age villainesses, tells you all about them.

This book introduces each section with an essay about some aspect of villainous women in comics and then shows some issues as an example of what these people were up to. One thing it points out is that villainesses were free in a way that superheroines were not – no secret identities, no social conformities, and no limits.

The book also discusses the role that the Comics Code Authority had on female characters. The Comics Code said that villains couldn't be portrayed in a sympathetic light – so a character like Madam Muscle and Mable Reine wouldn't have been possible (they both have sympathetic backstories). Comics couldn't have too much sex or violence, so villainesses had to tone down their two favorite things. Above all, villainy couldn't be portrayed as glamorous – and if these women have one definitive trait other than ambition, it's glamour.

I love these older comics because the over-the-top insanity is so much fun. You never just have a giant spider – you have a giant spider that falls into a pit. And not any old pit! Oh no! An octopus pit! Because if you are going to go through all the trouble to draw a pit, honestly, why not put an octopus in it? Carpe Diem! YOLO! Go for the gusto!

- Carrie S.

Syd says

I received a proof copy of this book through a goodreads first reads giveaway.

A short but interesting examination of the roles women played in the earlier days of comics. There is a diverse cast of characters discussed and all of them were new to me.

Before I read it I had some concerns over what the tone of the book might be. Too often in the world of comics there are artists (usually men) that claim to be feminists or to support equality only to make disappointing remarks in interviews or to disrespectfully trash the storyline of a much beloved female character. But I was pleasantly surprised here. Mike Madrid discussed these characters with the respect they deserved as the sometimes great and admittedly frequently problematic villains that they were.

The Golden Age of comics were much more closely tied to the world of American politics than they are today. As the author points out, our culture has taken a heavy turn toward homogenization and even the suffering and joys experienced around the world rarely stand out for more than a few minutes. Everyone is an enemy and everyone is an ally. However, a great deal of villains from the Golden Age reflected the country's political fears; the Japanese, Communism, any faraway country seen as 'exotic', even women going off to seek work and worth away from home. If they had been introduced for the first time to a modern audience they would be completely rejected, but at the time they were created these ladies were fearsome

foes and I'm glad to see that being acknowledged.

Robert Bussie says

This book is a treasure of female villains from the golden age of comics. It has interesting biographies about the main female characters in each story followed by a fun black and white comic. What makes this such a treasure is that a bunch of these characters only appeared in one issue. With such a limited appearance the biography information is wonderful.

I would have given the book 5 stars , however the printing is poor. The book needs to be enlarged or the words more clearly printed. Due to the bad printing the words are hard to make out sometimes.

Todd says

Less fun than the other collection. Perhaps because there seems to be more racism and blatant sexism in this collection than the last. I found myself skimming some of the stories.

The art was not as Golden Age goodness as I hoped. Not as sexy as the cover would lead one to believe. A few decent panels but nothing amazing.

Nicola Mansfield says

Astounding look at female villains in Golden Age comic book history. Absolutely absorbing read! I've become increasingly interested in comic book history and am a newbie to work from this early period; so 98% of the comics discussed were new to me but my interest in them has been spiked a full 100%! Each chapter focuses on a certain type of villainess and starts with a lengthy commentary by the author/compiler which is then followed by several b/w issues of comics featuring several of the villainesses that have been discussed. All comics reproduced here are in the public domain, from the Golden Age, mostly from the 1930s & 1940s and all from before the Comics Code Authority of 1954. Absolutely fascinating commentary which had me intrigued and will have me reading further about the history of this time period of the comics industry. The comics themselves, when read within the context of the commentary, were a pure joy to read. Mike Madrid manages to place them within their era, societal views and explains why the comics he's chosen are excellent examples of stories which gave women positive, empowering roles for the time in which they were written. How they are typical of the time period, but also how these ones in particular were affirmative and ground-breaking. Chapter themes include: inherent evilness in women, the role of beauty (or lack of it) on women, positive portrayals of women of colour (black, asian, india, etc) and true-crime real-life female criminals.

I haven't read much from this time period before and found it very "out there". I thoroughly enjoyed the comics gathered here but do not think I would enjoy them as much without some type of commentary or annotation included as is presented here. I always thought that the Comics Code Authority was a joke and an overzealous, prudish product of the fifties but these comics here actually shocked me with the startling violence they contained. I mean it's nothing like today's blood and gore, but much more cold-blooded and surprised me with how it just came out of nowhere. There are scenes such as criminals blatantly turning

around, shooting and killing police officers, a scene of a woman being hanged in the background, a little battle going on and then yikes someone is speared right through the body and another through the hand, another guy gets the ant treatment from natives: buried to the head in the ground, covered in honey and the ants go wild; later on someone trips over his skull. Maybe this doesn't sound so bad but taken in context, with the campy action, "clean" dialogue riddled with 30s/40s slang, it does come as shock when the coldblooded violence is so casual.

If you read my reviews regularly you'll know one of my favourite topics is true-crime and serial killers so I was fascinated with the last section which contained comics from the comic book "Crimes by Women" from the 1940s. These were pure exploitation comics but soooo fun to read. I did find myself looking up these lady criminals though and out of the 5 included could only find information about two of them (but they were pretty gruesome serial killers!). The stories weren't exactly true to life though so whether these other "crimes" were real or not I don't know but I may just look up this comic and read more from it and others like it.

Here are the two female serial killers covered I found: Bell Gunness (
<http://murderpedia.org/female.G/g/gun...>) (very gruesome pictures) and "Shoebox Annie" Smith (<http://unknownmisandry.blogspot.ca/20...> me a while to find her as this is an alias)

This author has previously written a companion book on heroines which I would just adore to read as well!

Charlie (NJBiblio) says

Women have not often been portrayed in comics in the most positive light, if even at all. It is only in recent years that we have seen the emergence of strong female characters who were not spilling out of every stitch of skintight leotard they put on. Many times, they are shown as assistants, secretaries, or the damsels that need our hero's saving. Not so, in Vixens, Vamps, and Vipers!

Looking at comics published before the implementation of the Comics Code in 1954, Mike Madrid's Vixens, Vamps, & Vipers shows us that while these Golden Age comics in no way promoted sexual equality, they did give us many strong characters, especially the baddies! These women were cunning, ruthless, smart, seductive, independent, diverse, and very outspoken. Everything we think women of the 1940s were not! Mike Madrid's brilliant and thoroughly researched commentary makes these characters come alive in the context of their times, but also how they relate to and helped influence today's female villains and heroines. In addition, stories referenced for each character are reproduced in full, giving the reader a wonderful insight into early comics, the 1940s, and brilliant stories they may have never seen otherwise.

Highly recommended for anyone interested in comics history, women's studies, or mid 20th century history and culture.

Erika says

This book deals with an era of comics I know very little about, and what I do know is usually the male heroes such as The Shadow so it was gratifying to read about the women in this genre instead.

The writing was very engaging and I really appreciated the authors insight into the guiding influences behind the creation of the female villains and how they were used, he didn't try to justify or politicize it, he just pointed out the cultural influences of the time and how they played out in these characters.

I really, really appreciated the inclusions of a full comic for each character described as it made the characters feel more fully realized and understandable. The authors descriptions of each character covered were well done and gave a good feel for who they were but it was so much more effective getting to see them actually being used.

It was a bit hard to read about, and see in action, the racism and sexism of the time but that is when you have to remember they were a product of their time and the author made several good points about this. About how there was some postive in these depictions as well as negative, without being an apologist or justifying anything.

Comics are a major part of our cultural heritage and they deserve to be studied and treated with respect and it is great to read someone who can do this both with love for the medium and an open eye to both its strength and weaknesses.

I.D. says

Interesting collection of forgotten comics and characters but nothing that you'd long for a reprint collection of. A fine sampler of how bad comics used to be before they became more than disposable. Valued history lesson for those who are into this sort of thing.

Steve Wiggins says

Mike Madrid has a fantastic way of finding social commentary in comic books with women as protagonists and antagonists. This book has some dark characters lurking in its pages, and Madrid always makes intelligent comments to accompany the reprinted comics. I recommend it. More about this and his other books may be found on my blog: Sects and Violence in the Ancient World.

Angela says

These were a collection of gritty hard hitting females that are extinct in modern comics. The art work and stories may have been subpar but it is an excellent example of how comics started, with a focus on strong females which is never a bad thing.

Catherine says

3+ stars. An interesting compilation of Golden Age comics villainesses, some of whom I would happily read more about. I thought the introductory sections were pretty well done, but could have perhaps done with

earlier notice about the various "heroic" and not so heroic sidekicks, who portray a range of racist stereotypes which are pretty jarring, at least to me. Madrid does mention this, but it's further into the book than the first few. That said, he definitely did his research on this and I'm inclined to read more of this series.

Gregory says

When I read Mike Madrid's first book, *The Supergirls*, it left me wanting to read some of the Golden Age comic books he'd described, although I wondered if they could be as entertaining as Madrid made them out to be. *Vixens, Vamps & Vipers: Lost Villainesses of Golden Age Comics* proves that yes, these comics are plenty entertaining, at least when placed in their proper historical context.

Vixens, Vamps & Vipers, provided to me as an advance reading copy through Goodreads First Reads, contains complete reproductions of 22 comics from 1940 – 1950, highlighting the diversity of the era's female antagonists. The quality of the stories varies--some are quite fun, others are more nonsensical--but taken together they offer a fantastic overview of how depictions of women and depictions of evil-doing overlapped in this period. Reading these comics today, several of the villainesses benefit from a degree of unintended sympathy. The ostensible heroes of these stories are quite often sexist and/or racist to such a degree that I found myself rooting for the villainesses, who are frequently transgressive in an era that needed more transgression.

The artwork is black-and-white, but given the limitations of coloring in the Golden Age, I don't feel much is being lost by presenting the comics in monochrome.

Madrid provides extensive annotations to give the historical and cultural context for each story. He's clearly knowledgeable about this subject and able to articulate how each character conforms to or defies the tropes of the era. At times, I would have welcomed a little more critical analysis; for example, near the end of the book, Madrid seems to be making the argument that the antiheroines in modern comics come up short compared to the Golden Age villainesses in his book. It's an interesting thought, but he doesn't provide much evidence for the claim. (It's also a bit disingenuous to compare the likes of Catwoman and Black Widow--characters that have had long histories and appeared in many versions in many different stories--to these Golden Age villainesses, many of whom were one-shot characters.)

If you accept that the author is more interested in celebrating these forgotten villainesses than offering an in-depth critical analysis of them, *Vixens, Vamps & Vipers* is a fascinating look at the various ways evil women were portrayed in Golden Age comics.

Gonzalo Oyanedel says

En respuesta a su estudio "Divas, Dames and Daredevils", Mike Madrid aborda a las villanas del período con resultados todavía más interesantes. Ocultas tras un disfraz o usando abiertamente sus atributos, las mujeres que viven al margen de la ley muestran a ratos una complejidad psicológica inusual para los criterios de la época, rompiendo el cliché de la seductora fatal para reclamar esa libertad que las imposiciones sociales le negaban; mención especial al apartado sobre las historietas criminales, donde la influencia Pulp deja lugar a protagonistas y motivaciones con muchos grises. Un estudio que aporta.

