

Nadel, Dan and Frank Santoro, eds. *Return to Romance: The Strange Love Stories of Ogden Whitney* with an introduction by Liana Finck. Pp. 120. New York: The New York Review of Books, Inc, 2019. US\$ 19.95. ISBN: 9781681373447.

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Romance comic books had already become popular by the time that Ogden Whitney started contributing to them. The genre appeared when Jack Kirby and Joe Simon created *Young Romance* for Prize Comics in 1947. Attempting to give women readers a comic of their own, Simon modeled the style and content of the comic on that of the confession-style magazines that his wife enjoyed (Simon 110). The comic book took off, with Prize selling 92 percent of its first print run (Gagné 198). Many comic book publishers took notice and published their own romance imprints. Many now-celebrated greats of the comics industry (e.g., Kirby, Stan Lee, and Steve Ditko), as well as lesser-known writers and artists, contributed to the genre.

Though content and focus could vary between publisher, writer, and artist, stories predominantly stressed how women found self-fulfillment and true happiness in romantic love that resulted in marriage or the promise of it. Soon, love was everywhere, with romance comics' widespread readership becoming a topic among worried adults, professionals and (later) feminists (Nolan 43-44; Heifler). The genre started to lose popularity during the seventies, eventually dying out, due to its increasingly unrealistic depictions of women and their romantic lives.

Romance comics have since experienced something of a revival with the publication of several reprinted collections of stories from romance comics. These usually feature work created by notable artists (for example, the many volumes of Simon and Kirby's *Young Romance*), or those stories that are notable for their outlandish qualities (such as IDW's *Weird Love* volume series). *Return to Romance: The Strange Love Stories of Ogden Whitney* fits neatly into both categories. Ogden Whitney's contribution to the comic book world has been recognized; he was inducted into the Will Eisner Award Hall of Fame, as a "Judges Choice" in 2007 (Comic-Con.org). He is perhaps most widely known for co-creating Herbie comics and his work on science fiction and horror comics. However, he also began a notable contribution to the romance genre during the late 1950s.

Whitney's romance work was typical of the genre in its oft-sexist portrayals of women, which included unrealistic expectations regarding looks and domestic skills (illustrated particularly well in the volume's first story, "Return to Romance!" from which it gets its title). However, as this volume highlights, Whitney goes beyond the predictable course of the tried romance trajectory, which renders his work both interesting and significant enough to reprint in a collected volume.

Yes, his women fall in love and spend their time trying to get the attention of men, but they also have strong interests outside of love. This theme was an emerging one in the romance comics of the 1960s, but unlike his contemporaries, Whitney was less focused on ending stories with women announcing that their marriage was more important than their careers. In "I Want a Real Man!" the leading lady runs a successful fashion company; in "It's Never too Late to Love!" the female protagonist becomes the VP of Merchandising for a department store. In his illustration, he varies his depiction of women: they are not always beautiful, serene, or ladylike. His men, likewise, do not consistently embody traditional idealizations of masculinity that appeared in many romance comics of the late 1950s and 1960s. In "I Want a Real Man!" protagonist Ken Harrison's female boss emasculates him; in "Courage and Kisses!" Dan Baker has several extreme fears. For instance, he screams in fright and clings to his girlfriend when he sees a caterpillar (97). Men, and their experiences, are often a focus of Whitney's, which sets his work apart from the many comic book creators that use male characters as romantic props to facilitate women in their romantic journey.

Both Whitney's men and women experience complex emotions outside those associated with love and romance. Almost every story in this volume features a character with some sort of neurosis, compulsion, or other psychological disturbance, something depicted in both written and visual narrative (which is mostly likely why Whitney's work appears throughout IDW's *Weird Love* series). Women characters (and men), as a result, are featured feeling emotions other than those inspired by romantic bliss or anguish. Plots are often more outlandish than the standard fare of romance comics, veering off into wild, sometimes silly, tales. The married couple in "Return to Romance!" gets divorced and the male protagonist in "I Want a Real Man!" murders his boxing opponent—both pretty bold developments for romance comics of the 1960s.

Ogden Whitney was undoubtedly not the only romance comic artist or writer to generate "strange" romance comic stories, but he consistently produced them, and his work deserves to be collected in a volume. The volume itself is physically accessible in terms of size and format. It is easily handled, and provides an experience that is closer to reading an actual comic, especially when compared to the feeling one gets from reading comic stories from large, glossy volumes. It contains nine of Whitney's stories, a small but compelling sample. The foreword, written by Liana Finck, highlights a paradoxical relationship between Whitney's trite sexism and original, complex characters. Dan Nadel's thoughtful and informative afterword sheds light on Whitney's life, artistic style, and contribution to the comic book world.

This volume also marks a necessary effort toward including women-focused publications in the mainstream discourse around comics and comic book history. As mentioned, Whitney was only one of many artists and writers who contributed to romance comics. As a genre that once dominated the market, it deserves broader attention and recognition within academic scholarship and the fandom.

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