

Negligent but not Evil: Mark Millar's Comics vs. Rape Culture

by Jeremiah Wishon, Facebook [posting], Aug. 18, 2013

- ¹ When the 2012 Dundrum International Comics Expo in Ireland secured an impressive lineup of comic creators, Irish Comic News (ICN) excitedly published the guest list. Among the speakers was Kelly Sue DeConnick, whom ICN listed as the wife of Matt Fraction. DeConnick's fans and colleagues were displeased with this introduction, as DeConnick is a prolific and talented comic creator. The backlash was swift: colleagues and fans began identifying themselves in relation to DeConnick's husband. "Not the wife of Matt Fraction" became a popular self-identification and Matt Fraction changed his profiles to "Mr. DeConnick" to parody the blunder.
- ² Comic books, creators, and fans have clearly progressed since your grandfathers read them but sexism lingers in the industry. Female comic creators are underrepresented and infrequently recognized for their contributions. Female characters are rarely written with the care given to male characters. Often, they exist only to serve as victims when lazy writers wish to place male heroes in emotional jeopardy.
- ³ Writer Mark Millar – no stranger to controversy – has recently been singled out as a particularly egregious perpetrator of this sexism, on account of his overuse of rape as a storytelling device and an indicator of villainy. The website TheVHive counted 16 distinct instances of depicted, threatened, or implied rape, with perhaps another dozen cases they could recall but not cite.
- ⁴ Millar is not his own best advocate when it comes to explaining his storytelling decisions. In a recent interview, he invalidly paralleled sexual violence with extreme non-sexual violence, ignoring the fact that readers might have very real experiences with one and not the other. Several years before, he dismissed concern over sexualized artwork in comics, saying that TV and films offer equivalent depictions, that both male and female superheroes are essentially "painted nudes," and that readers recognize the fantasy involved. His unconcerned demeanor and poor phrasing provoked strong reactions in both cases. Several articles criticized Millar for trivializing sexual violence and promoting rape culture, while numerous online commentators suggested that Millar's writing exposes his underlying sexually predatory nature.
- ⁵ Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, against these charges Mark Millar is not guilty. Several depictions of rape in his comics are unnecessary and should **not** have been in the books. These infuriating scenes appear, though, because Millar saturates his works with levels of violence and profanity that desensitize readers and he writes himself into a corner. When he really needs to depict extreme villainy, his option is extreme taboo. Millar's shortcomings are weaknesses in storytelling and recklessness with the emotional well-being of his readers, not malice or misogyny. In fact, Millar is vocal in demanding strong female characters and produces them in his comics. In 2012, Millar learned that a sexist cyber-bully was targeting female comic creators (including DeConnick) with harassment. Millar asked fans for help, encouraged the victims to complain to the police, and hired a lawyer on their behalf.
- ⁶ Millar's work has one notable transgression into rape culture – a disappointing scene in *Wanted*, in which the reader is supposed to root for celebrity-raping Wesley Gibson. Even though *Wanted* depicts a dystopia, the scene is indefensible and Millar should be ashamed, regardless of his intent.
- ⁷ With this sole exception, Millar's comics starkly contrast with rape culture, which apologizes for sexual violence by implying that ordinary men can commit these acts without being bad people, that the victims are to blame, that light punishments are adequate, and that victims should just

“get over” such attacks. In Millar’s books, by contrast, only unambiguously bad people rape, perpetrators get severe punishment for their crimes, and sexual assaults cause undeniable harm. The *Kick-Ass 2* scene now provoking outrage actually illustrates how non-trivial he considers the act: Millar’s villain guns down children as his *buildup* to the grand finale of sexual assault on the hero’s love interest.

- ⁸ If Mark Millar isn’t a monster, what does that mean? Can this controversy be a “teaching moment” for a writer who can do better? Quite likely: the forum of Millar’s website, Millarworld.tv, recently discussed sexual violence in his comics. His fans *unanimously* disapproved of these scenes, John Romita, Jr., artist for *Kick-Ass*, expressed deep discomfort drawing one, and directors leave them out of film adaptations. In Millar’s recent *Supercrooks*, even the “greatest supervillain who ever lived” informs a henchman proposing rape that “I don’t approve of such behavior,” sparing his audience. Hopefully that’s the start of a trend.

Mark Millar on the Use of Rape in His Comics: “I Don’t Really Think It Matters”

by Joseph Hughes, ComicsAlliance.com, Aug. 7, 2013

- ¹ In an article posted on *The New Republic’s* website about his controversial body of work, Mark Millar — the writer of *Jupiter’s Legacy*, *Kick-Ass*, *The Authority*, and *Superman: Red Son* — was asked about the many depictions of rape in his comics. The writer, whose attitudes toward rape in comics have been called into question in the past, said simply, “I don’t really think it matters.”
- ² Here is the full quote:
- The ultimate [act] that would be the taboo, to show how bad some villain is, was to have somebody being raped, you know? I don’t really think it matters. It’s the same as, like, a decapitation. It’s just a horrible act to show that somebody’s a bad guy.*
- ³ It immediately follows, and stands in stark contrast to, a comment from former ComicsAlliance editor-in-chief Laura Hudson, who was asked for her thoughts on a scene from *Kick-Ass 2* in which a group of villains gang-rape a teenage girl:
- “There’s one and only one reason that happens, and it’s to piss off the male character,” she said. “It’s using a trauma you don’t understand in a way whose implications you can’t understand, and then talking about it as though you’re doing the same thing as having someone’s head explode. You’re not. Those two things are not equivalent, and if you don’t understand, you shouldn’t be writing rape scenes.”*
- ⁴ This is hardly a new position for Millar. In a 2011 interview, he described the discussion of sexism and negative portrayals of women in comics as “a tiny storm in a tea-cup”:
- I think it’s meaningless. A tiny storm in a tea-cup. And in ten years time I’ll copy and paste this again when the argument raises its head like it did a decade ago. The fact is that more women are reading comics right now than at any point in my life and they’re not picking them up because they feel they’re demeaning in any way.*
- ⁵ In a culture in which rape is undeniably endemic, Millar’s steadfast refusal to consider the potential ramifications of his work remains astounding, infuriating, irresponsible, and sad. In the United States, where the majority of Millar’s comics are published and sold, one in six women

has experienced an attempted or completed rape, only 16% of rapes and sexual assaults are reported to the police, and only about 5% of rapists will ever spend a day in jail. In Scotland, where Millar resides, incidences of rape and attempted rape increased by 15% from 2011-12 to 2012-13. These are not statistics one typically associates with decapitation.

- ⁶ The idea that rape in comics is just a way “to show that somebody’s a bad guy” also seems questionable. While I’ve not taken an official survey of the reading public, I doubt very many people read a comic featuring a villain robbing a bank or terrorizing a town and think “How do I know this guy is really bad. I mean, would he rape someone?”
- ⁷ To pretend depictions of rape and sexual assault in popular fiction play absolutely no role in further informing a culture that seems largely hellbent on not dealing with these statistics is, at best, willfully ignorant, a position adopted by a writer more concerned about the money he’s making than actually improving as a creator.
- ⁸ Notably, the aforementioned gang-rape in *Kick-Ass 2* will not be in the upcoming film adaptation. Christopher Mintz-Plasse, who plays one of the villains from that scene, was relieved when told that it would not be used: “The rape scene is not in it. There’s a version of it but there’s no rape. Thank God.” Millar had earlier said the scene would appear in the film, so its removal was likely to his chagrin. Because it doesn’t really matter.
- ⁹ All that said, I think one thing in his quote to *The New Republic* was accurate: when you read Millar’s comics, you walk away knowing exactly who the bad guy is.