

# Sex Workers in Comic and Graphic Novels

Armin Lippitz\*

## Abstract

Sex workers in comics and graphic novels are usually marginalized and generally depicted negatively. Most frequently, a stereotypical image of sex workers as victims of society is perpetuated from a patriarchal viewpoint. Violence against prostitutes often constitutes the central theme for graphic novels. Characters in comics that are, or used to be, prostitutes are almost exclusively victimized or vilified. Even powerful, authoritative, and independent female sex workers, are usually at the mercy of even more powerful male figures.

In 2011 the Canadian cartoonist Chester Brown tried to counter this prevalent misogynist depiction of prostitutes in his graphic novel *Paying For It*. The autobiographical story centers on him as a 'John', a client of sex workers, for several years, and explains his experiences with escorts in a somber, dry, methodical, and unembellished style. My paper focuses on the portrayal of prostitutes in Chester Brown's *Paying For It* and compares various comics and graphic novels also featuring sex workers to it. I will show that *Paying For It*, although partly flawed, is an important work for the portrayal of prostitutes in comics, and a valuable contribution in the debate about the decriminalization of sex work.

*Key words:* comics, graphic novels, sex workers, Chester Brown

---

\* Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt; armin.lippitz@aau.at

Comics and graphic novels have gained in popularity in recent years. The success of movie adaptations of popular comics stories, heroes and franchises has helped in this respect. The notion that comics are primarily produced for children is outdated and the medium has grown up to include serious subject matters. In this paper I am going to focus on prostitutes, or sex workers as they are mostly referred to nowadays, and their representation in comics and graphic novels. I will present a short array of examples and their various different approaches of depicting people working in the sex industry as prostitutes. Before an analysis of various comics texts and their portrayal of sex workers, let me give you a short explanation of the terminology I am going to be using.

Prostitutes or 'sex workers' are people who exchange "money for sex acts and services of various kinds" (Overall 1992, 709). This definition includes people working as street prostitutes, escorts, 'exotic dancers' or strippers, telephone sex workers, and porn performers. For the purpose of this paper I will use the terms 'sex workers' or 'prostitutes' referring exclusively to people exchanging money or other valuable commodities for physical interaction of a sexual nature. I am going to investigate the portrayal of sex workers in comics and graphic novels. It is not my intention to find a blueprint for the 'typical sex worker' or how they came to be working in that profession. As Dalla argues:

[u]ndoubtedly, entry into prostitution and continued work in the sex industry results from the cumulation of multiple interdependent personal and contextual factors; none of which may exist in the same form or to the same degree for all women who prostitute themselves. A 'profile' of the prostituted woman (or one who will eventually turn to prostitution) does not exist. (Dalla 2000, 345)

I will instead highlight the most common depictions of sex workers in comics and graphic novels.

There are numerous examples for comics and graphic novels featuring characters trading sexual favors for money. Sex workers are usually marginalized and generally depicted in a negative light. Two different depictions of female sex workers in comics and graphic novels stand out, one being the nymphomaniac, or hypersexual seductress, and the other being the victim to be preyed upon. Both these images are most often perpetuated from a patriarchal viewpoint and used to vilify or victimize female sex workers. In addition, these two approaches have become shorthand, or a convention of the medium, as stereotypical images of prostitutes.

Chester Brown in his graphic novel from 2011 *Paying For It*, tries to break this pattern and provides a fresh perspective on female sex workers. In this paper I will focus on the portrayal of prostitutes in comics and graphic novels and will compare various comics and graphic novels also featuring sex workers to Chester Brown's *Paying For It*. The primary texts I have chosen to examine in contrast are the comics series *Uncanny X-Men* (2001–2003) among others by Joe Casey and Tom Raney and related comics, the graphic

novel *From Hell* (1999) by Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell, as well as one work from the series of graphic novels called *Sin City* by Frank Miller, namely *Sin City: The Big Fat Kill* (2010). The main focus, however, will be on *Paying For It*. I will show that this text, although partly flawed, is an important work for the portrayal of prostitutes in comics, and a valuable contribution in the debate about the decriminalization of sex work in Canada.

As already mentioned, two different depictions of female sex workers are most common in comics and graphic novels, the victim and the oversexualized, flirtatious temptress. The former is much more prominent and is used more frequently than the latter. However, even some victimized characters sometimes develop sexually alluring behavior, usually to get out of dangerous situations. In this way, they are using their sexuality to save themselves from harm or trauma.

An archetypal example for the seductive harlot is Miranda Leevald, better known by her mutant name Stacy-X, introduced by the writer Joe Casey and illustrated by Tom Raney in the *Uncanny X-Men* comics series.<sup>1</sup> She has the power to control her pheromones and stimulate other people's body functions while secreting her pheromones upon skin-to-skin contact. This ability allows her to cause nausea, vomiting, rectal malfunctions, or orgasms in the people she touches. With no job skills or money she turns to prostitution as a source of income, first on the street, later in the fictitious Nevada brothel called the X-Ranch, which is a reference to the actual 'World Famous Mustang Ranch' brothel in Nevada, USA. Because of her powers she supposedly does not have to have sexual intercourse with any of her clients, but her flaunting and provocative demeanor reveals that she is not ashamed of and might even enjoy what she is doing. While working with and going on several missions with the X-Men, she tries to seduce two members of the group, Archangel and Nightcrawler. To emphasize her seductive nature, her American creators, instead of regular skin, gave her snake-like scales. The religious connotation of the snake tempting Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is unmistakable and emphasizes her villainous identity even though she is, for a time at least, a team member of the so-called "good guys". The allusion to religious themes is emphasized considering that the two X-Men she is trying to seduce are both theologically connoted as well.

Sex and seduction are second nature to her. She uses her mutant power to control pheromones for her own gain and sexual gratification, as well as to tease her fellow X-Men about their sexual desires. The ability to influence people with their own lust is her strongest weapon and she makes use of it gratuitously. However, in one of the many convoluted and tangled story-arches of the Marvel comics universe she loses her mutant powers, which hits her pretty hard. The only option she sees to survive without

---

<sup>1</sup> The series changed writers and artists several times. The issues I am referring to were created by Joe Casey and Tom Raney (Casey and Raney 2001–2002) as well as Chuck Austen and Ron Garney (Austen and Garney 2002–2003) respectively.

her abilities is to work as a street prostitute again, this time as a “regular” sex worker. The British comic book writer Paul Jenkins, who is responsible for her loss of mutant powers in his series *Generation M* (2006), turns her former villainous identity into the predominant depiction of sex workers in comics, namely the victim.

This portrayal of sex workers is self-explanatory. It shows them being the mark for tragedies or being oppressed and attacked by society and more powerful characters. They usually cannot escape their grievous fates and are made out to be at the bottom of society. They are at the mercy of others, most commonly male figures of authority, and generally do not have strong personalities or extraordinary skills or attributes.

One of the best examples for a graphic novel in which female sex workers are victimized is *From Hell* (1999) by the English writer Alan Moore and the Scottish artist living in Australia Eddie Campbell. It tells the story of a conspiracy revolving around an illegitimate child of the royal family at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and its cover-up. When a group of prostitutes – who are aware of the baby – blackmail the foster father of the child to get rid of a gang of thugs harassing them, the royal physician Sir William Gull is instructed to silence the women threatening to expose the crown’s secret. Thus, Gull, with the simpleton driver John Netley as an accomplice, begins brutally murdering the sex workers and in doing so becomes the notorious serial killer Jack the Ripper.

Much of the story of *From Hell* alludes to, and comments on, factual events, documented by official records on the Whitechapel murders in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as by prominent sources in what has become known as ‘ripperology’, the study and analysis of the Jack the Ripper cases. So, portraying prostitutes as victims is the whole point of the narrative because it references the non-fictional events of a serial killer murdering sex workers. However, there are numerous examples of fictitious elements which express the same notion. One example would be the outburst of the leading Detective Inspector Frederick Abberline in chapter eleven in which he curses at a sex worker and calls her “this dirty little scrubber” and “[f]ilthy fuckin’ whore” before ordering a constable to arrest her for soliciting (Moore and Campbell 2015, XI–15<sup>2</sup>). The point of that sequence is to show this character’s change of perspective on prostitutes, who previously was seemingly tolerant of the profession, and is, according to the author himself, “a fabrication for story purposes” (Moore and Campbell 2015, Appendix I-36). This incident is just one example of the constantly looming atmosphere that all prostitutes in the story are at the mercy of more powerful, usually male, figures. This is highlighted by them perpetually and desperately scraping for money to be able to get food and shelter, their dependency on and fear of violent street gangs, and obviously by the gruesome murders themselves.

In this book, female prostitutes are the lowest class of people, a group literally to be used and abused at the whims of men. Their visual portrayal, however, shows a maturity

---

<sup>2</sup> The Roman numeral in the reference indicates the chapter in the book, the Arabic number refers to the page count within that chapter.

missing in many Jack the Ripper fictions, which either exaggerate their sexuality by making them overly beautiful, desirable, and promiscuous, or they are shown as diseaseridden and repulsive. Alan Moore makes a point of their depiction in the extensive appendix, writing:

The physical appearance of the four women here is drawn from written descriptions, published sketches by police illustrators and, where appropriate, from morgue photographs. These women were neither the sultry, wanton beauties that they are depicted as being in the more exploitative Ripper movies, nor the disfigured and toothless hags that some writers have described them as. They were ordinary women, who, despite their deprived and unhealthy situation, were trying to look attractive for the only job that society had seen fit to offer them. (Moore and Campbell 2015, Appendix I-8)

The attempt to picture the female sex workers in this book as ordinary women is basically the only common characteristic *From Hell* shares with *Paying For It* in regard to the portrayal of prostitutes.

The strong notions of classism and sexism punctuate the female sex workers' victimization in Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell's book. They are hopelessly trapped in their position at the bottom of society without any prospects for improvement of their situation. The continual threat of violence by street gangs, the perpetual possibility of contracting diseases or getting pregnant, as well as the chance of being arrested by the police are all indicative of an undesirable lifestyle. The sober demeanor towards their occupation, however, reveals that they seemingly have accepted their fate, because none of the women in the graphic novel show any signs of wanting to change their circumstances. They are not perpetuating a defeatist sentiment though, but rather one of compliance or even restrained agreement. In this sense, they are rather weak characters which emphasizes their victimization even more. The American comics creator Frank Miller takes a different approach in his depiction of sex workers in the *Sin City* series of graphic novels.

While the prostitutes in *From Hell* are victims through and through, at first glance the sex workers in *Sin City* are strong, independent women. They have established themselves as a self-governed force in Old Town, one of the city districts, where they are the law and nobody, not even the police, dare to interfere. In the second installment of the series, *Sin City: The Big, Fat Kill* (2010), the sex workers unknowingly kill a hero cop and start to panic, fearing for their autonomy and relative freedom. They expect retaliation by the police, and the mafia to take over their district and subsequently exploit them as slaves. The only character who keeps a cool head and actually devises a plan to help them out of their dilemma is, of course, Dwight, the male hero of the story. Thus the image of the sex workers being free, independent, strong women in charge of their own destinies is undermined and turned on its head. In actuality, they are again portrayed

as victims at the mercy of more powerful figures, like the police or the mob, and are dependent on male interference to save them. Frank Miller makes this particularly clear in one sequence in which Dwight orders the panicked prostitutes to give him a car so he can take care of the situation with the dead policeman. Threatened in her authority, Gail, the sex workers' leader, pulls a gun on Dwight, commanding him to stay out of it. He smacks her in the face and after a tense few moments, she, surprisingly, kisses him passionately. She appears to appreciate his dominant behavior and even thanks him for treating her that way. The scene reveals Frank Miller's misogynistic view of female sex workers and establishes the patriarchal power structure of the narrative.

In *Paying For It*, Chester Brown takes a radically different approach on various levels. First, his narrative is autobiographical and thus much more closely connected to real life events than the previous examples, even the semi-fictional story *From Hell*. As a result, all depictions, actions, and situations in his work set out from a premise distinctly different from the aforementioned artifacts. In typical Canadian, diplomatic fashion he cautions his readers: "While I've recounted the incidents and conversations that make up this graphic novel in a manner that's reasonably faithful to my memories, you should keep in mind that memory is not precise" (Brown 2011, viii).

Secondly, Chester Brown not only broaches the issue of the visual representation of sex workers in his comic book but also their behavior, social circumstances, and personalities, without compromising their anonymity. He regrets that he had to withhold much of what the sex workers had told him "about their families, their childhoods, their boyfriends, and other aspects of their lives", because "it would have brought the women to life as full human beings and made [*Paying For It*] a better book" (ibid, vii). For the sake of protecting their identities he decided against including any material that could potentially jeopardize their anonymity. Brown is conscious that he is tackling a controversial subject and his respectful, apologetic approach emphasizes that.

Lastly, although it is not explicitly stated in the story or in the extensive appendix, it is clear that Chester Brown has an agenda, namely to change the public perception of people involved in the sex industry. His message to decriminalize sex work, at least in Canada, is very prominent throughout the graphic novel. While it might be a part of the reason, it does not seem to be his main motivation to justify his decision to regularly pay for sex, but he seems genuinely interested in the sex workers and their conditions and circumstances. In other words, he is not primarily concerned with improving or defending his own experiences as a 'john', a client of sex workers, but he rather wants to increase understanding and acceptance of all people involved. Ultimately, he aims to remove the prevalent social stigmas against sex workers and their customers.

Chester Brown puts prominent emphasis on the fact that the women he pays for sex are human beings, and that they should be treated with the same respect and dignity as any other person. He tries, with varying degrees of success, to make them relatable to his readers. Brown shows them as ordinary people with needs, problems, and personalities. Even though he conceals their faces, by strategically placing speech-bubbles or by clever

framing and perspectives, each sex worker has her own character traits and identity. These features may not be accurate representations of their real identities, yet for the sake of the narrative they at least feel plausible and approachable. He regretfully states in the foreword that he was not able to “[give] a better sense of their personalities”, because he did not want to share any details that could potentially expose their real identities.

That is also the reason for the visual representation of the sex workers in the book. Although, according to Brown, he met women of several different ethnicities, all the sex workers have the same general appearance – they are white with long black hair. He abstains from drawing any tattoos or piercings and only occasionally highlights details of physical appearance, like the size of their breasts or dimpled skin. Most of the sex workers in the book share the same body type, which might just be Chester Brown’s preference, but in later chapters it feels like a vignette with slightly changing hairstyles. Despite their similar appearance he still manages to give each sex worker a unique identity though, especially the ones he meets repeatedly. This does not change the fact that the visual representation of prostitutes in *Paying For It* is questionable.

What is particularly interesting about this book is that it does not exclusively feature Chester Brown’s point of view. Admittedly, it is the most prominent voice in the narrative but he provides space for other opinions, often countering his, as well. The graphic novel tackles several controversial issues in relation to sex work, like under-age prostitution, drugs, love and romantic relationships, language barriers, prevention and contraception, the female period, sex worker review websites, laws and legislation, physical attractiveness and sympathy, or sex-slavery and human trafficking. Many of these topics are investigated and commented on from different perspectives, and all of them are covered and dealt with in the extensive appendix. The reflective, respectful, and differentiated manner in which sex workers are considered in *Paying For It*, is a refreshing change and improvement of their depiction in the medium, albeit not without shortcomings and flaws as well.

Although some aspects, like the visual representation of the prostitutes, are problematic, it is definitely a step in the right direction regarding the depiction of sex workers in comics and graphic novels. In addition, it makes a compelling argument for decriminalizing sex work in Canada by raising awareness of important issues revolving around the subject. Chester Brown’s graphic novel is unique and gives a refreshingly new perspective on female prostitutes, which will hopefully influence future depictions of the profession in this and other media.

## References

- Austen, Chuck and Ron Garney. 2002–2003. *Uncanny X-Men #410–422*. New York: Marvel.
- Brown, Chester. 2011. *Paying For It*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly.
- Casey, Joe and Tom Raney. 2001–2002. *Uncanny X-Men #399–409*. New York: Marvel.
- Dalla, Rochelle L. 2000. “Exposing the ‘Pretty Woman’ Myth: A Qualitative Examination of the Lives of Female Streetwalking Prostitutes.” *The Journal of Sex Research* 37 (4): 344–353.
- Jenkins, Paul. 2006. *Generation M*. New York: Marvel.
- Miller, Frank. 2010 [1994]. *Sin City: The Big, Fat Kill*. Milwaukie/OR: Dark Horse.
- Moore, Alan and Eddie Campbell. 2015. [1999] *From Hell*. Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Production.
- Overall, Christine. 1992. “What’s Wrong with Prostitution? Evaluating Sex Work.” *Signs* 17 (4): 705–724.