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## “I think that fun, poppy, feminine, colourful stories can change the world”: an interview with Sarah Kuhn

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### ABSTRACT

In October 2023, as part of the Superman’s Cleveland series of events celebrating 85 years of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster’s creations, we sat down at the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame with Sarah Kuhn, writer of the recent *Girl Taking Over: A Lois Lane Story* (with artist Arielle Jovellanos). Kuhn shared her personal story growing up with comics as a young girl and her journey into working with the medium today. She reflected on her process working as part of a creative team and how she sees comics scripts as a living document. Kuhn also discussed the making of both *Shadow of the Batgirl* and *Girl Taking Over*, her readers, and the goals for children’s and young adult literature. Finally, we ended thinking about colour in comics and we had a brief discussion of the iconic Taylor Swift.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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**Vera Camden and Valentino Zullo:** Thank you for meeting with us and thank you to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame for hosting this conversation. Let’s get started by throwing out the first question: you have written for different media forms including novels, audio dramas and more, but can you tell us a bit about your journey into comics? What appealed to you about the form growing up and later as a writer?

**Sarah Kuhn:** I grew up in a small town in rural Oregon. It was a very tiny, one traffic light kind of town. And I was one of the only non-white faces in my town, so I always felt like I didn’t quite fit in. I was always kind of looking for, some kind of escape or some kind of promise that there was a bigger world out there for me, and so a lot of the stories I was naturally drawn to were superhero stories and fantasy stories. I loved comic books and I loved the fantasy section at the library, which was just a big wall of mass market paperbacks. I think there was something about those stories that showed me there was a bigger world out there where I could possibly grow up to be a superhero who could shoot fire out of her hands or something.

I was naturally drawn to those stories when I eventually became a writer because that was just something that always appealed to me. I always had aspirations of writing comics because I had grown up reading them. I read Archie, I read X-Men, I read Superman.

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I remember when I got my first deal for my first prose book, *Heroine Complex*, which turned into a series, I thought, I'm going to need to spend some time writing these, so it might take me a couple of years to really get into writing comics. But then – I was part of this sort of greater nerd community in Los Angeles with a lot of geek girls— we would get together at conventions and we had a squad. One of the members of the greater community is an editor named Janelle Asselin and she wanted to start a line of romance comics to hearken back to the romance comics of the olden days, but with a bit of a modern spin. She and I had this conversation one night about why we love romance novels and it was very passionate, it was very intense, we got into a lot of detail. She emailed me one day and said, 'I'm starting this romance comics anthology, *Fresh Romance*, would you like to pitch on it?' And I really have no chill. I'm not like a cool person. I'm not very laid back. I emailed back immediately with lots of exclamation points and I was like, 'Yes, please, let me pitch!' So that actually ended up being my first comic and it was kind of a perfect introduction because it was short and I was among a team of different people in the anthology – some were very experienced and some were new like I was. It was just a really delightful experience. I also had some nerves about, 'Do I know how to do this? Do I need to take classes or how do I learn how to write comics?' While I was writing my first script, I looked at a lot of examples other people had sent me and I realised that because I had grown up reading comics, I already had an idea of how that sort of visual language works, how a page turns work, how you craft a story over a limited number of pages. So, it was just really exciting, it was really fun. It was a great way to get into it. And after that I started getting a lot of requests to pitch more work. It all took off from there.

**Camden and Zullo:** Super interesting. It's like when we spoke with Raina Telgemeier recently, she shared a bit about how she became attuned to the rhythm of comics and how she writes in beats or in moments and how she now listens for those in her everyday life, too. Can you say more about how coming from the perspective as novel writer, how you translate those pageturns into a visual language? Can you also say more about the role the artist and the rest of the team that you work with on a comic make that happen?

**Kuhn:** Oh, for sure. I would give a lot of credit to the artists and the editors I've been lucky enough to work with – they really helped me learn how to make use of that visual language. I've worked with my editor, Sara Miller, on both *Girl Taking Over: A Lois Lane Story* (Figure 1) and *Shadow of the Batgirl* (Figure 2), the Cassandra Cain book. She's wonderful. She's one of the best editors I've worked with in prose or comics and she was someone who I think really took my comics writing to another level. I already knew how to do a page turn, but she taught me how to make that page turn count. She taught me how to make every panel, every beat count.

With a novel, a lot of times I'm trying to write to a certain point where I can end the chapter and I want to end the chapter at a place where you want to turn the page, you're so excited you're just going to keep going in the story, you're not going to put it down, you're going to stay up all night reading the book – which I have done many times as a reader. I could think of things sort of in those terms, like the page turn is

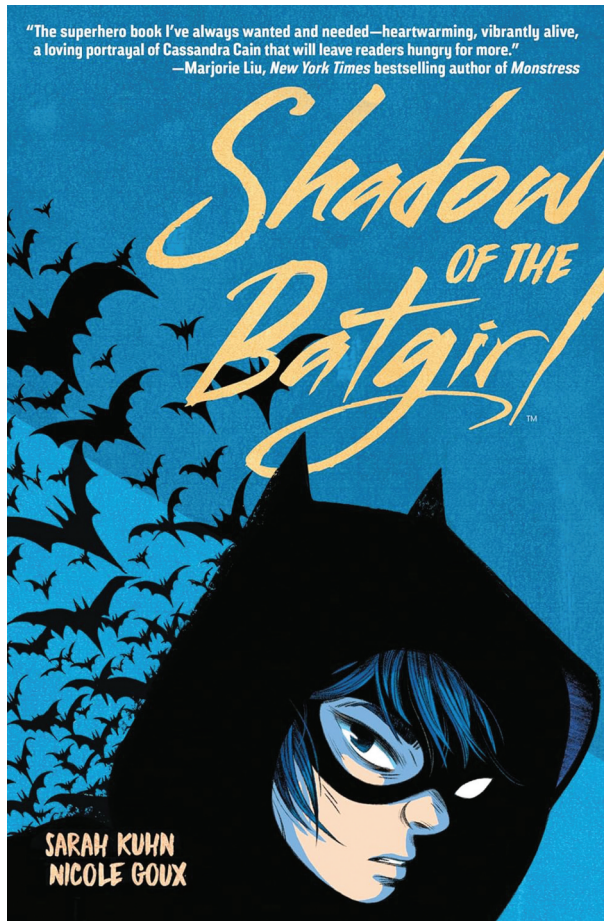


**Figure 1.** Cover art by Arielle Jovellanos for *Girl Taking Over: a Lois Lane Story*. ©DC Comics. Reprinted with permission.

almost like a little mini chapter break. I would get really excited, for example, when we thought of things like – Sara, my editor, and I are both big romance fans, and we always wanted the really dreamy splash page to be a kissing page. I think we have that in both *Batgirl* and *Lois Lane*. So, we get excited thinking about how are we going to build to our kissing splash page? How are we going to make sure we have done the math so that we can have that take up the whole page? How can we make this the most exciting? Some of it is a little bit of math, some of it is a little bit intuitive, and some of it is just doing it over and over and over again. And working with a really passionate team so you're excited to build to those beats and to figure out how to get the most out of your story.

**Camden and Zullo:** To follow up on that, we've done a lot of work on the use of the thought bubble in comics, which conveys a certain sense of interiority. In romance comics there's a lot of interiority displayed: inner thoughts, conflict, desire, fantasy. One of the things you were saying last night was when you saw the art of your artist,





**Figure 2.** Cover art by Nicole Goux for *Shadow of the Batgirl*. ©DC Comics. Reprinted with permission.

you sort of pulled back a little bit on the language and said, ‘oh, I’ll, let this go to the artist.’ But how do you bring within these comics the profound internal struggles that you’re going experience as preliminary to romance, preliminary to acting on desire and so forth? How do you convey that in comics?

**Kuhn:** That is a great question. I try to write a script. That was again something I had to learn both by just doing it and also by seeing how other people I admire were doing it. I was on a panel a while ago with Judd Winick and he said something like, “I’m always thinking about my first draft of a script as a letter to the artist.’ Like as the writer, I am composing a letter to the artist and I’m telling them what I’m trying to convey, what we’re collaborating on, the feeling we’re trying to get across.” I really love that idea because I love how a comic script is a living document. It is not something like maybe a novel where I finish my copy edits and my proofs and I’m like, ‘OK, it’s done; it’s finished.’ When I write a comic script, even when you’re getting into revisions, even when you’re

getting into what is maybe a final draft, I'm thinking this is still a living document. This is still something that is going to morph and change as each person comes into it, from the artist to the colourist to the letterer. It becomes this beautiful, very alive thing.

When I'm writing a script, a lot of times in the descriptions and the parts that are not dialogue, I'm saying things like, 'This person is feeling this or this person has an expression like this and we're trying to convey this emotion.' Sometimes I get a little bit wordy and a little bit specific with those descriptions because I really just want the artist to know what I'm feeling. It's like we're writing love letters back and forth. To take the romance metaphor one step further, Arielle Jovellanos, who is the artist on *Lois Lane* – who I had a beautiful collaboration with – we both of had our first kind of big comics work in that *Fresh Romance* anthology I mentioned. We were on different stories in the anthology, though, so we would talk at events about how we saw each other across the room but it was across the pages of a book and we had what in romance is called 'instalove.' We were just like, 'Oh, I love this person. I don't know them at all, but I just feel something. I feel like we are connected. I feel like we are going to work together really well.' So, when I was writing a script and I felt like I was writing it directly to Arielle, it was kind of like I was writing her a love letter. Then when she would send her art back, that was her love letter to me. I think that's something that's really beautiful that only happens in comics.

Then in *Shadow of the Batgirl*, the challenge was we had a character who doesn't really speak, especially for the first 50 pages; that's part of the character of Cassandra Cain. So, I tried to still have that vibe of, 'This is what she looks like, this is what she's thinking, this is what the body language says in the script.' But I had also written this kind of voiceover narration of Cassandra Cain narrating her story from a future point in time – she's telling you what she's feeling, she's telling you what she's thinking (Figure 3). But when I saw Nicole Goux's art – she and I also had a really beautiful collaboration together writing love letters back and forth – it was so expressive and she told the story all in the face and the body language, and so we actually cut a lot of those captions. We cut a lot of that narration because we didn't need it. The story was already in the expressiveness of the art. That's another example of how a comic script is like a living document.

**Camden and Zullo:** Can you say more about how a story has shifted because of the collaboration together? Do you have a moment that stands out to you where something just changed in your *Batgirl* or *Lois Lane* book?

**Kuhn:** With the DC books, we create them in four parts. I do an outline of the whole story, but then we break that into parts, and we do the script in four parts. Then the artist and I can be working at the same time – I'll be writing part two while they're drawing part one and so on. With both Arielle and Nicole, there was something that I saw in that first section of art that really inspired me. And I felt like we were inspiring each other, back to that love letter thing. We were inspiring each other back and forth. With Nicole and *Shadow of the Batgirl*—after I had written the script, I realised, wow this is a story in Gotham City, but it takes place mostly inside. It's in all interior locations. It's in a library – even the final big boss fight in that book is in the library. It's in a ramen shop, it's in an apartment. They're not really out in Gotham City very much, which was



**Figure 3.** From *Shadow of the Batgirl*, p. 67. By Sarah Kuhn and Nicole Goux. ©DC Comics. Reprinted with permission.

a bit of a shame because it's such a beautiful, evocative backdrop. I noticed that in some of the early art, Nicole had a thing she liked to do where she would draw an establishing shot looking into a window of an interior location from the outside, and that was a way that she brought the exterior of Gotham City into the story and I loved that. I felt like it was so atmospheric. It made the book so much more interesting. It was visually beautiful. I think we had one splash page eventually towards the end where I said something like, 'This is Cassandra Cain and she's looking out at Gotham, just like Luke Skywalker looked out at Tatooine. This is the moment where we feel the yearning of our young protagonist.' (Figure 4). In the later sections of the script, I started writing things where it was purposely set up so that Nicole could draw an establishing shot where we're outside looking in through a window or looking in through a building. I thought that was really cool.





**Figure 4.** From *Shadow of the Batgirl*, p. 108. By Sarah Kuhn and Nicole Goux. ©DC Comics. Reprinted with permission.

Then with Arielle, we have very similar sensibilities. We love all things girly, all things fun, all things shiny and rainbow-coloured. And so one thing I noticed with her is she always had a really cool interpretation of a double page spread, something that brought to mind almost an old school teen magazine, those spreads where in one corner there is ‘20 Tips for Getting Rid of a Zit’ and then the other side is ‘20 Top Heartthrobs from Music’ or whatever. So, in that book, I started writing to that. One of my favourite spreads in that book is a montage – I always put at the top, ‘Yes, it’s time for a montage!’ – and in this montage, it’s supposed to show that Lois Lane and her best friend have created this site that is going viral, this website that’s sort of speaking to girls of their generation. So, to show that the website is taking off, we had this spread where they’re texting back and forth about story ideas and we see the comments coming in about how popular they’re getting and we have little excerpts from different stories they posted and then people reacting to it (Figure 5). I was so excited about that because when I wrote it, it was the wildest, most bananas thing. Those script pages were so long and wordy. I thought, ‘This is going to take a lot of work, but it’s going to look amazing.’ When she finished it, it was



**Figure 5.** From *Girl Taking Over: a Lois Lane Story*, pp. 114–15. By Sarah Kuhn and Arielle Jovellanos. ©DC Comics. Reprinted with permission.

just beyond anything I could have expected. I think I started writing things that would lend themselves well to those kinds of spreads because I knew after seeing her other work that it was just going to be the most amazing part of the book.

**Camden and Zullo:** Shifting gears a little bit: you work on Lois Lane, who embodies that sort of iconic *His Girl Friday* journalist figure. If you look at the early movies, the female journalist was one of the few careers that were open to women who had a desire to use words. Her character is so precious in the history of American culture, but the environment for journalism is obviously also very different today so, in some ways, Lo has to fight for the opportunity more than, certainly, Rosalind Russell in *His Girl Friday*. She was already on the beat. But your Lois Lane really has to scramble and become a detective (another great tradition: the female detective). In your imagination because you started as a journalist, how do you navigate between that kind of legacy of Lois Lane and then the contemporary young journalist and inheriting not only this great character but this great tradition?

**Kuhn:** That's a great question. Lois Lane was always one of my favourite characters. I grew up with Christopher Reeve's Superman movies and I love Margot Kidder. She was one of my favourites. And that Margot Kidder Lois Lane, to be honest, as a kid, I always

thought she was the main character because we're discovering Superman through her eyes. She is the human. She is our point of view to go into that world and discover he's a superhero. She's always trying to figure out who Superman is, like we are. She wants to know why Clark Kent looks so familiar. Is he just Superman wearing glasses? I just loved her. And I think she was probably part of what inspired me to become a journalist. She was always asserting herself and she refused to be a supporting character, the sort of 'girlfriend character.' She was always taking up space, and she was always very persistent in her pursuit of the truth, in her passion, and her drive, and her tenacity. Those are all things that I tried to bring to this portrayal. In interviews, Arielle and I have talked a lot about the key parts of Lois Lane and I have always thought it was that she takes up space and refuses to be anyone's supporting character, and then also the tenacity, the drive, the determination to find the truth no matter what. Those are things that I think exist in all portrayals of Lois. So, no matter how different she is, no matter what time period she's in, I think you can always tell it's Lois Lane and that was something that was really important for us to preserve.

So when we put her into a modern setting for the DC Young Readers line – these are YA graphic novels aimed at teenagers, they are newer, more modern portrayals of these legacy characters and the characters are usually in some kind of teenage coming of age moment – we wanted to show Lois Lane becoming the Lois Lane we know. We wanted to show Lois Lane falling in love with journalism. Lois Lane realising that she can use her voice for the greater good. Lois Lane discovering herself. And then we also put it in a more modern kind of journalistic setting where she's so excited to start her first internship right before college at this hip, cool website. Then, of course, when she gets there, it's been taken over by a large corporate entity that does not care about anything except making money. I thought it would be an interesting challenge for her in the pursuit of finding her voice and figuring out how to get at that truth. When the book starts there's this question of why she wants to do this. Why journalism? And her answer is always 'because I'm the best at it, because I'm so good at it.' But then later she has to figure out, but why does this matter to her? And that turns into her realising that she can pursue the truth and she is the best at it, but she is pursuing the truth to expose things she's passionate about or to fight for justice or to right wrongs that she sees happening (Figure 6). I thought that would be a really interesting story: this is a very recognisable Lois Lane, but she is also in a new environment as she becomes the person that we all know and love.

**Camden and Zullo:** To that point, can you say more about the ways in which you have to navigate all that history of these characters. Were there elements of previous stories you wanted to explore more or even correct?

**Kuhn:** With this Lois, I definitely went back to Margot Kidder. I kept talking with Sara, my editor, about how there's that moment in *Superman II* that I sort of imprinted on: Lois has been on this kick where she wants freshly squeezed orange juice because she's heard it's healthy and then at the end of the movie, she basically orders Clark to go get her a fresh orange juice and a hamburger with everything on it. He points out that it's 9 a.m.





**Figure 6.** From *Girl Taking Over: a Lois Lane Story*, p. 87. By Sarah Kuhn and Arielle Jovellanos. ©DC comics. Reprinted with permission.

She's like, 'Yeah. Go.' And I was like, 'Oh, you're my new hero.' I kept telling Sara, this is the vibe I want. I want the Lois Lane who would do something like that. Maybe we have to show her getting to that point, maybe she doesn't start there, maybe that is an arc she has.

I think with Cassandra Cain, it was not that we were trying to correct anything but that we were trying to tell a full story from the perspective of an Asian American teenager, which was maybe not as much in some of the portrayals of her before. Even though we were such big Cassandra Cain fans because of all the stories that had come before, we wanted to tell a different kind of story with her.

In terms of influences, with Lois, I know Arielle kept talking about Rumiko Takahashi and that pure energy, that expressiveness, that sense of movement – that was something she wanted this Lois to have, something that was maybe a little bit different from some of the portrayals we've seen in the past. She had a certain kind of choreography that Arielle came up with.

And Sara and I talked about – in terms of setting, story, characterisation – very classic single girl in the city stories because this is Lois coming from a small town where she spent her entire life and now this is her first time in the big city. She is convinced this is going to give her everything she wants. She’s falling in love with the city. She’s falling in love with the energy. She’s falling in love with this kind of faster paced lifestyle where she has to find herself for the first time (Figure 7). So, for me, the classic single girl in the city is another Midwestern heroine, Mary Tyler Moore. That was something I thought about a lot when Lois was going through her first internship. Lo also has spunk like Mary. And then some modern references we discussed were shows like *The Bold Type*, which was about young women in New York having these dreams about working for a magazine and also working on their friendships and finding themselves. *The Carrie Diaries*, which was *Sex and the City* junior, young Carrie Bradshaw figuring out what she wants to do with her life. *Tuca & Bertie*, the animated show, which was very much about being a young person and figuring out who you are and having this best friend that you’re sort of attached at the hip with. What does that mean? How does your relationship change and grow? I think we tried to marry that kind of classic single girl in the city story with these young, modern coming of age stories.

**Camden and Zullo:** As you’re talking, an interesting question comes up about who you are writing for and who reads these works? We bring this up because you mentioned earlier a really interesting idea about children’s literature having the important role of being both a window and a mirror for different readers. Can you say a bit about your audience and what you want them to take away from your works?

**Kuhn:** Of course, so what we were talking about last night is in kid lit, young adult fiction and stories for kids of all ages, there is something that scholar Rudine Sims Bishop says about readers needing both mirrors and windows. They need to be able to see themselves reflected so that they’re validated and seen. But they also need windows into other experiences because that’s what helps us develop empathy. That’s what helps us perhaps realise that there is no default main character, it can be all kinds of different people and we should be able to go on that ride and experience that story with them and understand what they’re going through even if it’s not what we’re going through. That’s something I think about a lot with my stories.

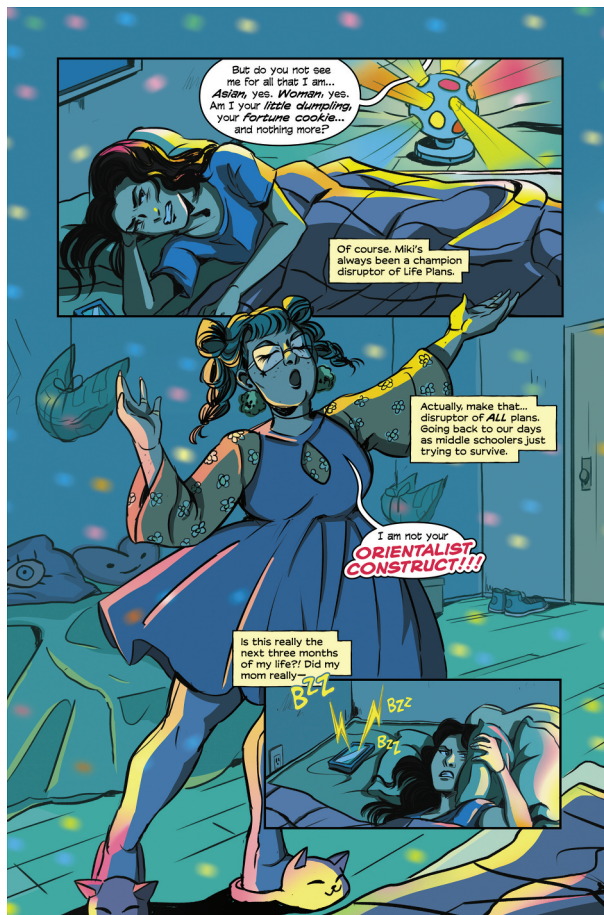
It took me honestly a really long time to see myself as a writer, to see myself as the main character. When I first started writing fiction, I was writing mostly white main characters because that was what I had always seen. I had not seen someone like me at the centre of a story, as the main character. When my first book, *Heroine Complex*—which is my Asian American superheroine prose series – was coming out, I talked a lot about how not writing Asian American characters almost made me a supporting character in real life too. I always saw myself as supporting someone else’s story. When I finally started writing Asian American main characters, when those stories started getting published, when they started to become successful, I realised that supposed conventional wisdom was not true and that we do need stories about all different kinds of people and that yes, I can be a main character, too, both in a story and in my actual real life (Figure 8).



**Figure 7.** From *Girl Taking Over: a Lois Lane Story*, p.101 by Sarah Kuhn and Arielle Jovellanos. ©DC comics. Reprinted with permission.

That was my character arc, that was what took me so long to get to, I now feel like the audience I'm writing for first and foremost is myself or the person I used to be, a kid like me. I like to write stories mostly for my main audience as women of colour, young women of colour having their experiences seen and validated and just put out there like, 'Yes, you are a main character, you can be a main character, too, both in a story and in your life.' That's something I'm always thinking about and then, secondarily, of course, I want everybody to enjoy my stories. I hope they're entertaining enough that if that's not someone's experience, they are having that window into whatever the experience of the character is. I think both Arielle and I usually like to have kind of very large casts of characters, so we get to include a lot of different kinds of characters, a lot of different identities, a lot of different experiences. Hopefully, a lot of people can see themselves reflected in those stories.

**Camden and Zullo:** Your focus on girls and girly things comes through! In line with this focus on girls and women, in *Girl Taking Over* you have this mother figure, who is kind of



**Figure 8.** From *Girl Taking Over: a Lois Lane Story*, p. 11. By Sarah Kuhn and Arielle Jovellanos. ©DC Comics. Reprinted with permission.

interestingly prominent in the story at least via the screen. Would you say that is sort of conscious a reflection of a veneration of mothers within Asian culture, sort of like a tiger mom? We wonder if you could talk about that because again that was a choice you made to bring the mom into the room and to use her as a voice of support and instruction. It was quite moving actually.

**Kuhn:** Thank you very much. Lois Lane's mom in this book is a very important figure. She has a lot of intense conversations with her daughter on the phone while Lois is moving through this new life. And, yes, that was very conscious. When we first were conceiving this book, when we pitched it, because Lois Lane's dad has been a big figure in other stories about her, he was actually originally a character in this book. Then as we were working on it, we thought, we don't need him like that. We can really focus on this mother-daughter relationship. And for me, that is very personal. My mother passed away when I was 22, so when I was just a little bit older than our version of Lois Lane. She was



a very important figure in my life. She was a second-generation Japanese American woman and she was also existing in this small community where she was a minority face, where there were not a lot of people like her and I think she was the one who taught me how to survive in the world. She taught me about racism. She talked me through different things that would happen to us out in the community. She was the one who gave me the tools to go through life. She was also the reason I knew about things like Japanese American incarceration during World War II. That was not something that was really taught in school and so she made sure I knew about that. She made sure I knew that my grandparents and the generation right above her had all been through that because they didn't like to talk about it. She was the one who made sure I knew my history. She was very passionate about that and she was a very strong voice in my life. I wanted to pay tribute to her.

In a lot of my work, I'm almost imagining the relationship we might have had later as adults and so the things that Lois's mom is worried about, is always calling her about, and is talking her through are the things she would say to me. She was worried about me being in the big city, wondering why I have not called her every day, worried because she read a news story about something that was happening near me. She would call like, 'Are you okay? I heard about this terrible thing happening near you. I just want to make sure you're safe.' A lot of the concerns that Lois's mom has were concerns that my mom had about me. I also wanted to make that character very tough, but very loving. I think there is something particularly about Asian and Asian American parents where sometimes they are portrayed as very stern and very taciturn, but we don't really see the other side. We don't really see where that is coming from. My mom was very tough on me. Sometimes she could be very stern, she could be very strict, but I think looking back, I can see where it came from. I can see the protectiveness; I can see the love. I can see that all of it was because she loved me so much. So, that was something I really wanted to get across. And I also wanted to make the mom cool, like I didn't want her to be dowdy or frumpy or wearing boring clothes. Arielle and I worked through designing her together. And I was like, 'Okay, I think her vibe is that she is a really cool art teacher in middle school and she's always wearing these bright colours and red lipstick with a cool bob and winged eyeliner.' Arielle, of course, ran with that. She's great at fashion. She created her character design and we had a lot of fun with it. But yeah, that was something that was very intentional and there is, I think, a special relationship between an Asian American girl and her Asian mom. That was something I definitely wanted to pay tribute to and just get out there.

**Camden and Zullo:** One of the things that you're really navigating in this text is the so to speak, very American narrative, right? There's no more American narrative than Superman yet as we should point out, Superman is the narrative of an immigrant. He's from Krypton and so by bringing in the mom, you're able to gesture towards a very conscious, deliberate Asian tradition and immigrant story and yet still be that story of the single girl with her friend in an apartment in the city trying to find her space as the Mary Tyler Moore figure. You succeed in bringing together both of these stories.

**Kuhn:** I love that. I love that way of putting it. I always hate when someone says, ‘Oh, this character just happens to be X, this character is “normal,” but they just happen to be X.’ No character ‘just happens to be’ anything because the person who created that character made those choices. If you are creating a character that is white, straight, male, whatever we think of as a ‘default character,’ those are all choices. And however that character is, whatever their identities are, those are going to affect them as they move through the world because the world is seeing them in a certain way. I write a lot of stories where the main character is an Asian American girl, and the story is not all about racism, it is not all about pain, it is not all about how her life is horrible because she has all these marginalizations. Yes, she has to deal with those things, but in my own real life, sometimes I have fun, too. I’m not just always dealing with horrible, painful things every day. That is part of the reality, but it’s not the whole reality. I like to show that totality of experience. Good times and fun are also part of the story. I love that specificity and I love sort of combining those different things to show a whole experience instead of just part of one.

**Camden and Zullo:** Reading your book, one thing that really struck us is that Lois doesn’t have a big bad, right? Like in the way that Superman has a big bad. What we mean by that is that she doesn’t have a Lex Luthor or a Darkseid, so you came up with a big bad for her, so how did you sort of think about creating this character? And why is this the big bad for Lois? Why is this character her opposite, an inversion of her character?

**Kuhn:** Okay, so if you haven’t read the book, Lois is going into her hip internship at this cool website called CatCo. She’s really excited, and then she finds out about the corporate takeover and the woman who is supposed to be her boss, who was our version of Cat Grant, is kicked out. We made Cat Grant a very cool woman of colour who has started her own website and is making moves in the media world. She’s being fired from the website that has her name on it – CatCo is being taken over by this conglomerate. So, Lois Lane’s new boss is one of the executives from that conglomerate and I don’t think we gave him an actual name at first. We called him ‘Big Bad Boss.’ Whenever they’re talking about him, they refer to him as Triple B.

I think he just came about sort of organically as we were figuring out Lois’s challenge in this story. What is the conflict? What are the obstacles that she’s up against? What is sort of the worst situation we can put her in to promote that character growth? And so in thinking about this dream job which is turning out to be a nightmare, it’s completely not what she expected, it’s actually going to be horrible, we thought, ‘Well, she has to have the terrible boss. Who would this boss be?’ And he is what you think of when you think of like a big executive from a media conglomerate: this middle-aged white man who thinks he’s very woke, but is actually very out of touch. He says a lot of buzzwords. He probably invests a lot in cryptocurrency. He’s like that guy that we’ve all sort of gotten used to that always makes these terrible out of touch decisions while saying a bunch of buzzwords that don’t make any sense. We thought that he would just be a really interesting villain for Lois to go up against because that is kind of the opposite of everything she is. It is the opposite of everything Cat Grant is, and Cat is her idol. And it’s the opposite of what Lois



wants to be or what she thinks of as journalism, which is this crusade for the truth. He represents the obfuscation of the truth. Then when Arielle and I talked about the character design – a lot of times, I feel like when you have a villain like this, he then has to be represented as really unattractive and disgusting and we’re supposed to be repulsed by him. I said, ‘We should make him handsome, he should be sort of like Don Draper with this gorgeous hair and this big smile and these perfect suits and he represents everything that is kind of wrong with media right now.’ He did end up being the opposite of everything that Lois is and represents.

**Camden and Zullo:** Alright, one fun question before we hand it over to the audience. Reportedly, on social media, James Gunn endorsed the idea that Lois’ colour is purple. Please discuss.

**Kuhn:** I love that. We talked a lot about signature character colours in superhero books when our amazing colourist, Olivia Pecini, came onboard. Superman is red and blue, right? In our Lois Lane book, we actually dressed Lois a lot in different primary colours, different tones of red and blue, because that seemed sort of appropriate. But I love this idea of purple. When you have your box of crayons, it’s often the extra one, right? Like you have your red, blue, yellow, green, what we think of as primary colours, and then purple is the outlier, purple is the one that’s like the special colour that you’re excited by when you get it as a bonus in the box. To me, it also says, ‘magic unicorn,’ something that’s a bit unconventional. I like that for Lois. It’s also a very feminine colour. It does evoke those girly vibes. So, yeah, I could see that being quite appropriate.

**Camden and Zullo:** It’s also the colour of the passion. In the liturgy, it’s the colour of penance and we would be remiss if we didn’t mention Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* as well. There’s a kind of divinity to it. Superhero mythology is a mythology of being redeemed, rescued, saved from, from evil. It speaks to the moral mission at the core of so many of the superhero stories. Okay, before we go too far, let’s take some audience questions.

**Audience:** There is a Youtuber who has a thing called ‘Casually Comics’ and her favourite character is Lois Lane from it’s the Golden Age era where Lois is always getting married. Have you ever read those comics? And did it have any effect on you?

**Kuhn:** Yeah, I’ve always been a big Lois Lane fan. I’ve tried to read everything she is part of and when we were doing this book, of course both Arielle and I tried to kind of refresh ourselves on what Lois Lane had been through before. That goes back to what we were talking about earlier with how we sort of married the classic to the modern, and that version of Lois Lane as well, I think, has those qualities that are very Lois Lane. She’s tenacious. She’s passionate, she’s searching for the truth. Perhaps she’s passionate about

different things, like getting married. I think that's what's so interesting about her – you can put her in all these different forms, all these different incarnations, but you can always point to her and say, 'That is definitely Lois Lane.' And that is one of the things I really love about her.

**Audience:** Isn't purple also red and blue together?

**Kuhn:** It is. Yes!

**Camden and Zullo:** That is brilliant. We should have noticed that!

**Audience:** So how does that fit into Lois' character as a sort of synthesis of Superman?

**Kuhn:** I'm always writing the books where the main original male figure is not included. All of the DC Young Readers books exist in their own little continuities, so they are not really connected to main continuity. With *Shadow of the Batgirl* there was a discussion about, does Batman exist in this version of Gotham? And we thought about it a lot and eventually I said, 'I don't think so, because if he did exist, he's doing a really bad job. These streets are crime ridden. Part of the reason Batgirl has to emerge is because there are all these bad things happening. If Batman's around, he's being a really bad Batman.' So, in that case, we decided Barbara Gordon had actually originated Batgirl because she and her mom had this thing about bats and she decided she wanted to pick up the hero's mantle. And that was what Cassandra was inspired by to become Batgirl (Figure 9). I will say there were some segments of a certain kind of comic book fandom that did not like that, but I love that Batgirl was actually the original in that book and that there was no Batman. So, similarly, here, we don't have Clark or Superman, although some people have pointed out the love interest we designed for Lois has a certain Clark Kentish look. So, maybe she has a type. But I do think we were trying to pay a little bit of tribute to Superman having her dress at times in blues and reds and obviously having this intense drive for the truth. I also always love creating these new versions of characters that respect the past, that are paying tribute to certain things that are very classic but are also creating something that is hopefully entirely new. And so maybe that's also something the colour purple can represent where you have red and blue together – yes, it's inspired by these things that exist already, but when you see purple by itself, it's its own thing. It's just purple.

**Audience:** What you have come into and inherited is a long tradition in which virtually all these scripts, movies and everything else, including comics were written by men. So, it was always men's way of thinking about Lois and how she fit into the story and what was important about her. So, I'd be very interested if you could share what you brought to this character from a woman's point of view. I think it's just wonderful, but could you say



**Figure 9.** From *Shadow of the Batgirl*, p. 112. By Sarah Kuhn and Nicole Goux. ©DC cComics. Reprinted with permission.

something about that? And if I could add a follow up, what about Wonder Woman? Did you ever get into Wonder Woman? And what do you think about her?

**Kuhn:** I love a lot of the classic legacy female characters. When I was a kid, the Lynda Carter Wonder Woman was another favourite. She follows me on Twitter right now, or X or whatever we are calling it. That was one of the thrills of my life to see that ‘Lynda Carter is following you on Twitter’ notification. It was amazing. I used to do the little spin where I would pretend I was changing into Wonder Woman. I love Wonder Woman.

That’s a really interesting question, though, and I think it goes along the lines of what we were talking about with bridging the past and the present and the future, where of course we wanted to be very respectful, we felt the responsibility of what the legacy of this character is, how important she is to so many people. I think there is something that is kind of beautiful about me being a child, being inspired by Lois Lane, and me becoming the intrepid girl reporter and then getting the opportunity to write that character from

my own experiences. Something Sara and Arielle and I all talked about was that this became a very personal book. It is still very recognisably the character of Lois Lane and has all of those things that make her Lois Lane, but as we were talking about this in the pitch stage, there were a lot of things that came into it from my personal experience. I was also a young Asian American girl growing up in a small town and thinking, 'Whatever I end up doing in life, it has to be something that I'm the best at,' but not thinking about, 'Okay, but why do you want to do that?' And it wasn't really until I went to college and started meeting a lot of different people and started really pursuing journalism and writing in earnest that I sort of figured out what I was trying to do.

I remember, I was doing my final senior project in college, which was a little zine I put together, and on the last page, it was just this drawing of an alien and he was waving bye. My professor asked, 'Why do you have that there?' I said, 'I don't know, I just think it's cool.' And he's like, 'Okay, something I worry about with you is you are very clever, but sometimes that's a substitute for you actually having to explain what this means or what it means to you or why you did it or why it's important.' And at the time, I was what, 21? I'm sure I was like, 'Whatever, I just like being clever. That's enough. That's fine.' But I had to really think about that later, especially when I started writing fiction. I had to think: why is this important? Why is this character important? Why do they do that? Where does that come from? And I think that's what led to me becoming hopefully a better writer. So anyway, I was able to put some of that experience into this book – both with my own personal character arc and with my experience of being a specifically biracial Japanese American girl who grew up in this small town and then went to the big city and started pursuing this career.

Another example would be the relationship with the mom, that was something that I think ended up being really cool and really unexpected and it is hopefully something that can speak to other people, both who have that experience and who don't. I think for me, it always feels very cool and galvanising when I'm able to see myself in a story. So, I hope that's something that I can give to people, too. And like we were talking about before, I think something that Arielle and Sara and I really brought to this was that sense of just unashamed girlyness. Embracing femininity, embracing these bright colours and these spreads that look like they're out of a teenage magazine – that was something that was really important to us.

I'll just end by sharing something that we were talking about last night. I write things that are very poppy, fun, very feminine, again with the bright colours and the romance and all of that. And when my first book came out—*Heroine Complex*, which was about an Asian American superhero – it starts with a battle against demonic cupcakes. It's not really taking itself super seriously, but the emotions are serious. I remember I got a couple of reviews from white male critics where they said something like, 'This is fun, but it's not earth-shattering.' I thought, 'But to me, it is earth-shattering. If I had seen this when I was 12, it absolutely would have changed my world.' It does for me now being able to create it, and hopefully it does for readers who are able to experience it. So that was really when I started to take myself seriously and I think that fun, poppy, feminine, colourful stories can change the world. That's something we hopefully brought to Lois as well.

**Camden:** I really am sorry to intervene here, but the reality is that Taylor Swift recently caused an earthquake. The reality is that the most girly, the most girly girl, did cause an earthquake in her performances and has basically saved our economy as the *Wall Street Journal* is the first to admit. So, girly things can be earth shattering and shake the world. The power of female purchasing is absolutely earth shattering as well as female creativity. And it doesn't take one iota from the brilliance of men. There's plenty to go around. The vision is one of fecundity and abundance and creativity and fun and joy. It's not one of deprivation or withholding. So that's my pitch as a psychoanalyst.

**Zullo:** Alright, well that seems like the perfect place to stop. So, thank you, Sarah and thank you all for coming today!

**Kuhn:** Thank you!

### **Acknowledgments**

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