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To cite this article: Vera J. Camden & Valentino L. Zullo (2018) Truth, justice, and the Amazonian way: an interview with Greg Rucka, Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics, 9:6, 621-633, DOI: [10.1080/21504857.2018.1540140](https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2018.1540140)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2018.1540140>



Published online: 18 Dec 2018.



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INTERVIEW



Truth, justice, and the Amazonian way: an interview with Greg Rucka

Vera J. Camden and Valentino L. Zullo

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Vera Camden (VC) and Valentino Zullo (VZ): Can we begin by asking the general question, why comics? You have written both novels and comics. Can you tell us a little about how the comics form works for you? Can you also share with us a bit about how you got into comics?

Greg Rucka (GR): I got into comics, I think, the way everyone does. I was a fan as a kid and I read them a lot. I was a novelist primarily because my novel career progressed before my comics work. The first comic I created, *Whiteout*, came out roughly about the same time as my third novel. I was always interested in comics and wanted to write in the medium. Speaking as a novelist, who writes primarily alone and in prose, I can't draw, so one of the things that has always appealed to me is the collaborative nature of comics. But it's also a unique form of storytelling. It's an incredibly powerful and potent form of storytelling. My wife, Jen Van Meter – who also writes comics – is teaching a comics writing course at the University of Oregon this semester, she was telling me about a conversation she had with a few of her students about the act of creating memes. Meme generators create a fumetti.¹ It's a fumetti, but it's a comic.

Comics as an artistic form, as a literary form, I just think it's a devastatingly powerful form. As I said, the first comics work I did that got published was *Whiteout*. I tried *Whiteout* as a novel. If you set a story in Antarctica the environment is crucial to the story. I can spend three thousand words trying to explain how cold, dry and inhospitable it is, or I can script it and an artist can capture it in four panels. One is more visceral and more efficient, if nothing else. It's interesting because at this point in my career I do comics, novels, screen-plays, video games, and more than once I've been asked to

adapt something in comics to the screen. A lot of the power is removed when you put it into motion. Issues of pacing become rather more pointed.

VC and VZ: This idea of memes is wonderful. When we start our comics courses we will discuss with students how so many of them are reading images in sequence daily even if they are not reading comics. For example, we will ask ‘so how many of you have gone to someone’s Instagram trying to find something out about them? Are they single? Are they taken? What are they into?’ And inevitably every student raises their hand. Instagram is not comics, nor do we want to conflate the two, but when students say they have never read comics before entering our classes, it’s a great way to get them to see that they have indeed read sequential art that is curated with some effort to tell a story for followers, aka readers. It also helps us to think about this shift toward a more visual culture.

GR: It is part of our desire to create causality. Human beings, as a species, have a natural desire to create causality. For example, my son’s girlfriend buys a new car, they go to fill it up at the gas station, they don’t fill it up with ultra-premium, they pull out and the ‘check engine’ light comes on. My son determines it’s because they did not put ultra-premium in the tank. It’s just as likely that something else went wrong, but we want a causal connection. And comics work based on our ability to take the blank space between panels – or swipes in someone’s Instagram page – or different images of memes and build a narrative. We supply what’s missing. Comics at their best does that with cunning and even savage intention. At their best those gutters are more eloquent than anything anyone has written or drawn. That’s the strength of the medium. You just don’t get gutters watching television, in a play, or even reading prose. Though prose is capable of doing it, it does it – even in the deftest hands – in a clumsier fashion. When we are reading in prose and something jumps, we think ‘what did we miss?’ If the author is particularly adept, we will understand subtly something has happened and we have missed it.

Point of View is important, too. *Whiteout*, which is a freshman effort at a murder mystery absolutely fails as a murder mystery. In the first ten pages I tell you who did it. I do that because I made an error that I would have never made in prose, but I made it because of the medium being visual I wanted to build suspense. So, I traded suspense for point of view. If I had been consistent in my first-

person point of view, you never would have seen the scene you see because the narrator isn't present, she can't report it. I think the medium allows for rules violation in a far more forgivable and naturalistic fashion than prose ever does.

VC and VZ: As a reader of prose, one might get irritated by a jump, but as a reader of comics, one learns to value that 'what did I miss?' This is where the imagination takes its place. Should we talk about Wonder Woman now? Can you give us some of your history with Wonder Woman?

GR: I met Diana the way that everyone in my generation met Diana. It was either Saturday mornings with the *Justice League* or it was Lynda Carter's *Wonder Woman*. Both happened so close together that I have no knowledge of a period of my life where I did not know who Diana was. I can remember being in first or second grade playing in the front yard with some friends, playing superheroes and arguing about who got to be Wonder Woman. She was always present, and since most of my friends were girls, I know that for me I was never hung up on gender.

There is a specific moment in my career where I sat down to write a novel – *Shooting at Midnight* – and it was a first-person narrative and the main character was an Irish Catholic Bronx girl recovering junkie. I had decided to tell this character's story specifically because the novel I had written before had come too easily. It was the third novel I had published. I wrote the draft, sent it to my editor, she sent back a note, and I corrected the edits in a day. I hit that point where I thought: 'now I'm in trouble.' I thought: I need to scare myself. What's about as far from my experience? Which led to writing *Shooting*. When I made that decision, I scared myself because if I was going to write from this woman's point of view, if I were not honest then the book would be a failure. I put some real time and effort to illuminate the blind spots I had as a white middle class guy. I had written female protagonists before, but not in first person.

I've always been a feminist, I've never had a problem with the label or found the word dirty, so that was not the problem. What was an issue to me was trying to be acutely aware of how this woman's gender matters. We experience the world – whether we like it or not – through a gendered filter. That is what society has done to us. Whenever someone tries to argue with me I say here is the simple litmus test: 'is walking down the street at 3am the same for a guy as for a girl?' If the answer isn't 'no,' which it obviously is,

then your argument is wrong. You're just wrong. There was some heavy lifting involved for me in creating this novel. I love doing research and it mattered to me to be honest – if not true, at least honest. I had to know what I was talking about. I think that absolutely is carried forth in my work.

I always get a little nervous talking about this because on the one hand I am told: 'you write women so well.' But that is not something that women are told about men. So why is it some type of magic trick? At the same time, it is a magic trick because society is skewed in my favor. Why should I have to know what the world is like from my wife's point of view? My daughter's point of view? It's my world. I was pretty much born with a pass. I'm Jewish, so I have a negative mark in that column as far as such things go, but aside from that I look white. So I get a little leery about it. It should not be such a remarkable thing. I have had many people treat me as if I am doing something remarkable. At the same time, I acknowledge it does not happen as often as it should.

We have strayed from Diana. I'll bring it back.

I had written *Whiteout* and that led to me doing some work on Batman. I came into DC Comics at the absolute right moment. They had a changing of the guard, a big event planned, and there I was. I was young, didn't need to sleep, and I had a lot of passion. So, DC started throwing a bunch of work at me. Then, I was at San Diego Comic Con around 2001. Jenette Kahn was still Publisher of DC Comics. I was doing a signing at the DC booth. She and I had not met. She came over, and introduced herself. I knew who she was because of her role at DC and because she was part of my childhood, she was responsible for *Dynamite*, the magazine of my youth.

I remember this very distinctly, she said to me 'I understand you are interested in writing a certain character.' She did not even say a certain woman. I didn't know why we were speaking in code, but I immediately knew she was talking about Diana. I said, 'I would love to.' She said 'Really? Can I ask why?' I told her 'I think she is one of the most unique characters in the canon. I think that she has been horribly maltreated for the most part. I think to write her properly you have to turn in to what she represents, and you can't turn away from the politics.' She said: 'that's really interesting. You should meet Gloria. We should go to lunch next time you are in New York.' I remember thinking 'she means Gloria Steinem!' So

I said 'I would love that!' Between that conversation and my first writing of the character things kept coming up that delayed my run. I was slated to do my first run in 2001/2 but it kept getting pushed back. When I finally did it, in 2003, Jenette Kahn had already left the company. That first run was really a very fraught run for a number of reasons.

Before that run I did *Hiketeia* (2002). It was a stand-alone, long form story that did not fit anywhere into the canon, but it was my first-time attempt at figuring out Diana's voice, to try to write her in terms of her political office in the world. One of the things I tend to end up doing in my superhero books is taking these fantastic concepts and put their feet on the ground.

VC and VZ: Right! You showed Diana in the UN in your run.

GR: I didn't put her in the UN, I just actually showed her there. When I came onto the book, everyone had been saying that's what she did, that she was an ambassador, but you never saw it on the page. I asked, what does it mean to be the Ambassador to Themiscrya? Let's see what that means. I had a friend in the State Department. I spent some time with him, asking him questions and talking about what it means to be the Ambassador to the UN, then spent more time trying to balance that with the needs of the superhero story, which by definition requires some punching.

VC and VZ: What was it like writing Wonder Woman at two very different periods of time? While only 10 years apart, the world has changed quite a bit. How has that affected the stories you want to tell? Did you focus on different aspects of the character as warrior or love leader?

GR: I don't think there is a run which has as open an acknowledgement of her trying to promote her mission even since Pérez, never mind Marston. One of the lovely dichotomies of the comic is that she is a warrior priest. She is capable of violence and understands it.

Kelly Sue Deconnick is doing a story for DC's Black Label, which is entirely a reaction to the portrayal of the Amazons in the movie.² She said: 'I really didn't like the way they were portrayed.' I said: 'I had the argument you are having with yourself.' What were the real Amazons like? Well, we don't know. There is very little historical record for the real Amazons. There is Herodotus, who was telling vampire stories for the Greeks because there was nothing scarier than liberated women who were capable of self-realization and actualization. To spice it up we will add the bit where they capture men and have sex with them

against their will – there is your ravishment fantasy. Then we will make it scary and add in that they are cutting off their breasts, which is impossible. They could not have done that. It did not happen. They would have all died. Never mind from the hemorrhage, the infections would have killed them. I also notice there a lot of women who participate in Olympic archery, and none of those women seem to be missing a left or right breast.

We have Herodotus and a lot of what we get in pop culture comes from that bullshit. It was vampire fiction. I said this in the ‘Rebirth’ issues of *Wonder Woman*. In issue 8, Barbara Minerva says to another archeologist ‘they were vampire myths.’ They were erotic fantasy that was scary to the Greeks, meaning those free Greek males who were not slaves, to be really specific. The DC Universe Amazons, the Amazons of Themyscira, are supposed to be a Utopian society. That is radically different from anything we have in the real world or in history, maybe a period in Moorish Spain when there were Christians and Jews and Muslims all living together and exchanging ideas and respecting one anothers’ beliefs, that might come close, but that’s about it.

The Amazons of Themyscira are technologically advanced; they are an ethical, pluralistic, moral society, and they need to be, for the purposes of Diana’s mythology in the DC Universe, they have to remain that way. They have to come from a martial culture that they honor but that does not make them bellicose. That is crucial to me.

You also can’t write in the DC Universe without putting Diana in the context of the Trinity. Nothing articulates the differences in the characters more clearly than their approaches to violence and the trauma of it. Batman is a product of violence, the trauma creates him, to such an extent that he will never kill. Superman’s use of violence is entirely predicated on the force directed at him. You have to direct an awful lot of force at him where he can even be put into a situation to take a life. He does not ever want to do that.

But Diana comes out of a culture that understands that violence by its very nature cannot be controlled and that when you go to the sword all bets are off. Batman’s whole experience has been about controlling violence. Diana understands that once it gets to that point anything can happen. Again, coming out of this mythological martial society, she believes in monsters – they’re not creatures of myth, they exist, they are creatures she has faced, and

sometimes you have to kill a monster. And sometimes monsters look like you and me. It is never her first choice, but it is always on the table. I think for that reason she is dedicated to avoiding it at all costs.

VC and VZ: In terms of the movie, that is why there has to be some truly fascist or demonic evil force that would mobilize aggression. There always has to be something that is going to destroy civilization that would mobilize aggression.

GR: One of the things that I love about the character is the 'stranger in a strange land' aspect. She willingly leaves paradise to come here and is constantly having to learn. She is constantly being tested. The things that work for her on Themyscira do not work here. Her shock that there were laws against same-sex marriage must have made a really traumatic night for her. She must have been like 'I have made a horrible mistake. These people are really backwards.' These things she has taken for granted all her life have really been challenged.

I think this is one of the reasons why Wonder Woman runs have been so radically inconsistent in quality. There have been these periods of editorial mandates, or queasy creators, where the political nature of the character has not only been shied away from, but outright rejected. The people responsible for telling her stories literally run away from it.

She suffers when you do that.

VC and VZ: We all suffer! The whole idea of people running away from her is really interesting.

GR: At her worst, she becomes like Red Sonja. She becomes this vicious warrior. I have a real problem every time I see her depicted with a sword. The sword is not her primary weapon. Her weapon is a whip, even if we call it a lasso. And the purpose of that whip is to bind and subdue. You can't subdue easily with a sword. That's not what it was made for. It was made to end lives. And sure, you can kill someone with a whip or lasso, but it takes a helluva lot more effort!

VC and VZ: When you think of her when writing, do you go back to Marston? Truth telling as we know from the political turmoil today is a weapon unto itself. And after all Wonder Woman has the lasso of truth, while the lasso was not imagined this way by Marston, he was the inventor of the lie detector! He understood the power of truth.

GR: I go back to Marston. I go back to Pérez a lot. I think the genius of Marston isn't so much in the stories as it is in the

creation of the character. When we say Marston, ultimately it is a collective. We tend to be influenced by the moment we met them. Almost every fan's favorite era of a book is the era in which they found the character. So I am always going to look back at Pérez. What Pérez did, and even where, he failed was reinvigorating and vital. He took a Diana who had, in many ways, become fallow and stagnant – who as a character had allowed the world to pass her by – and re-articulated her core and brought it in line with the present. He took the Greek mythology and threaded it through her origin, and he gave the Amazons an origin, as well, and in so doing further helped define – or redefine – Diana.

When Nicola Scott and I did the Wonder Woman year one, we worked off of Pérez. We wanted to say some of the things that he likely hadn't been allowed to say overtly, and some of the things that perhaps had never occurred to him about both Diana and Themyscira. We spent hours and hours talking about how we were going to depict Themyscira in the first issue. It mattered to us. I have never on any book spent as much time discussing everything from the architecture, to the landscape and everything else in the background. Nicola and I had discussions about how we had to see not only different ethnicities but also different body types. We had to see Amazons in pants and Amazons in skirts. We had to, in the course of twenty pages, depict this vision of their utopia: a utopia that is a working one, a functional one. And that is the other trick: how do you make that society live and breathe?

Some writers will approach it and say, well Themyscira is actually flawed, that it's not really paradise. There's dirty dealing going on in the background, they don't really get along, etcetera. But I think if it's going to be Paradise then it has to be Paradise. You can't un-paradise it. It was one of the reasons why, when I was approached to write the character again for 'Rebirth,' I was adamant that when she leaves Themyscira, she couldn't go back. That is one of the most vital things to the character's story and it has been consistently ignored, erased, overlooked. I am surprised that the movie seems to have reached the conclusion at the same time. I was working independently while the movie was still in production.

VC and VZ: Why is that so critical to your vision? Can you explain further why she cannot go back?

GR: Because I believe we need stories of heroism. Diana has to be heroic, and fundamental to that is the idea of self-

sacrifice, and it has to be a motivating one. You cannot give Superman Krypton back. If you give him Krypton back then he doesn't have to be Superman anymore. If Bruce Wayne's parents come back then he doesn't have to be Batman anymore. He doesn't have to continue doing it. We have to see what these characters are willing to give up for us.

I can't think of anything more potent than turning to this eighteen-year-old, twenty-year-old woman who has grown up in Paradise, has the promise of immortality that will never end, and she says: but I am called to do this, and I will go. And then to look her mother in the eye knowing that, if she leaves, she's never going to see her again.

Honestly, the biggest change we made to Diana's origin was that she enters the competition with Hippolyta's knowledge and, if not blessing, at least without objection. Diana wasn't wearing a mask this time. It often felt like a really hard sell to me. You would need an awful lot of Amazons to not have someone recognize her. They would have to be like 'isn't that Diana?' There are like 3000 of them. Never mind if that's not Diana, where is she?

This is me patting Nicola and me on both of our backs! But I think it becomes more compelling honestly if Hippolyta knows that the minute Diana enters the competition she is going to win. She is going to lose her daughter here. She knows she will. So, each of them are making a sacrifice. To me, thematically, that is crucial. We always talk about Diana's superpower, and invariably the conversation always comes back to love: her ability to love. Most people tend to get a little cringey at that, but it is an act of love on each of their behalves to allow the other the ability and opportunity to thrive.

As to how my perceptions changed...?

Well, my son is going off to college this Fall. When I was writing Diana the first time I did not have a daughter. The concept of my son ever going to College was alien. It was probably unconscious in a sense. Looking back at it I can say today that one of the things clearly influencing the writing of Diana is that I am a parent, and I am much more in tune to what that means – in a way that I could not have been when I did the original arc.

VC and VZ: There is a way in which that sacrifice, even though it is an anguish to the mother to let her daughter go – and you know this as a parent – there is a way in which that is the very thing she was raised for. Even if it was an explicit

vision, it was that she was going to raise a child who was capable of that kind of action, this kind of deed.

GR: It is the goal of every parent to have a child who would surpass them – and then there is the pain that comes with it. It's going to break Hippolyta's heart, but she must be so proud.

VC and VZ: During our Symposium, we tried to focus on Wonder Woman, her significance and her history, but also her heirs. The heirs to Wonder Woman are the daughters – and sons – within comics, and outside comics with her readers. Do you have any reflections on that? I think we are awakening to her powers these days now more than in earlier years.

GR: It's true and it's connected to where we are in this moment. During my initial run on *Wonder Woman* one of the things we had as part of our story was Diana publishing this book of essays. We had discussions at DC on whether we could write these essays and they broke out in hives. It was too political. I was saying things like, well, she's a vegetarian, for two very logical reasons. First, she can talk to animals. It's really hard to have a steak when you've had a conversation with its mother. The second is the environmental cost. She would be aware of that. They got nervous at vegetarian.

Then I said she is going to be pro-choice, she is going to be anti-capital punishment. Not that she doesn't believe that there are crimes where death is the penalty, but because she does not believe it will be imparted fairly or with no margin for error. We went around and around on that. You can see in the run that we were trying to sidle up to some of these things, but it was pushed gently back by editorial. The politics are always at play. But we planted the seeds, as it were!

Now jump to 2018 and we are in social convulsions right now. But all these conversations are extant. None of them are behind-closed-doors conversations now. I would also venture to say that the vast majority of people are closer to Diana's point of view on these things than not. Maybe it is finally her time. Maybe not just who she is, but everything she represents and advocates we can talk about now with an honesty that we couldn't back in 2003, 2004.

One of the things that makes the character so challenging is her politics. Batman's politics don't really have to evolve. Superman's politics don't really have to evolve. The moment of inception for these characters requires very little in modification. All you have to do is add a couple

zeros in front of the Wayne family fortune and if you murder his parents in front of 8-year-old Bruce tomorrow you are still going to get Batman. If Kal-El crashes to earth in a fictionalized, idealized middle America that believes in truth, hard work, dignity, respect, and helping others because by helping others you help yourself, and because it's the right damn thing to do, you are going to get Superman. As long as John and Martha find him you are still going to get Superman. That doesn't change.

But Diana arriving in the United States in 1941 as an emblem of progressive thought and feminism is incredibly different than her arriving in 1961, in 1981 or in 2001. You'd think these conversations would have ended by now, but there are still people arguing about whether feminism is a dirty word or even what it means to *be* feminist. Today we have Post-Third Wave Feminism. That puts her moment of creation, what, four waves back? She must evolve. She can't stay static. I think the character suffers when we try to divorce her from that.

VC and VZ: How does it feel writing a novel where you have free reign more or less versus writing under the eye of an editorial board that has such power and politics?

GR: There is something beneficial in having constraints. I haven't written an original novel for three years. I find writing novels much more difficult. They are isolating, and reductive. If you don't have a good relationship with your editor, you are entirely alone in them. When you are working in comics, speaking as a guy who can't draw, I want the creative give and take. I want the collaboration. I want an editor who is going to engage me. I want a collaborator who is going to come to me. We can talk and make it better.

It can certainly be frustrating if you are working at a Marvel or a DC where editorial with a capital E, meaning the Publishers' agenda, always has precedence. I don't own Diana. She's not mine. They give me the privilege of writing her, and they compensate me well for it, and as a result they own the product of my effort. Two things are understood when I take the job. First, I will not break the thing they have given me. I will not do damage. Ideally, I will increase value. Second, that they have final say. If I have a problem with either of those things then I don't take the job.

When I came back for 'Rebirth' one of the things that I made clear to DC (and I had not left DC in a good place in 2009), I told them: 'I will do it. These are my conditions.' One of my conditions was that I have cover approval. I was asked why and I said, 'frankly, you have a bad history with covers

lately.’ In particular, they had a few covers that were tone deaf, tasteless, and offensive beyond belief. So, then I’m told that Frank Cho is doing alternate covers for the run. Cho has made his career drawing beautiful women in pinup poses. He does ‘cheesecake art.’ Okay, fine, but I get approval. They said ‘fine.’ We had all sorts of trouble with the guy at DC who is in charge of covers, just getting him to forward roughs of what was being worked on to my editor and me. I wasn’t seeing them until they had already been inked. You have to understand, once the ink is down it is very hard to make any changes.

There was a particular cover early in the run where Cho drew Diana from a particular angle where you could see up her skirt and her spine doing a ninety-degree bend. The traditional tits-and-ass pose. An anatomically impossible pose, spines don’t work like that. There were other issues with that cover as well. So I reached out and told DC, first, I should not be able to see up her skirt. And this wasn’t about being prudish – if Diana is is leaping down from a building and you are below her you are going to see what she is wearing underneath. That’s a choice she’s making, or, at least, a choice in the storytelling. On this cover, though, there was no reason for this angle other than to peep at her panties, which made it non-consensual and an act of voyeurism. The cover was literally framing itself as overt objectification.

Second, as said, the pose was impossible. It is a sexist pose. And related, number three, breasts don’t work like that, and even if they did, clothing doesn’t cling that way to people, let alone to their breasts.

Those were the changes I wanted.

The response was Frank Cho doing interviews about how Greg Rucka was a Nazi, a member of Al-Qaeda and I was denying him his freedom of speech. I got death threats, which is one thing, but there were people going after my daughter online.

I bring this up for one reason. Freedom of speech has *nothing* to do with it. He took the job. You do what the publisher says at the end of the day. If you don’t want to do what the publisher says at the end of the day: quit. You don’t get to point at somebody and say they’re denying me freedom of expression. No, they are not. You are not doing what you were hired to do. Frank left the book, then got himself fired from DC, and Jenny Frisson came aboard to do the alternates, and honestly, they were infinitely better, anyway.

VC and VZ: That is an incredible story. It shows how change creates panic, especially on matters of gender. Wow. Do you have any final words on Diana?

GR: I always get asked who is my favorite. 9 times out of 10 it's going to be Diana. The other 1 is a 50/50 between Kate Kane and Renee Montoya. I just think she is so important and so much can still be done. She is not even close to the end of her run.

VC and VZ: This has been such a privilege. Thank you so much for your contribution to our dialogue on Wonder Woman.

Notes

1. A fumetti is a form of sequential art that uses photos rather than illustrations, but still retains the traditional grammar of comics including word balloons and thought bubbles.
2. In 2018, DC Comics announced their 'Black Label' line, which will feature stand-alone stories by star creators. Kelly Sue DeConnick and Phil Jimenez will tell the stories of the Amazons before the arrival of Steve Trevor in *Wonder Woman Historia: The Amazons*. Graeme McMillan, 'DC Unveils All-Star "Black Label" Imprint,' *Hollywood Reporter*. Accessed 28 May 2017. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/dc-black-label-imprint-unveiled-1092933>.