



Red Light

Superheroes, Saints, and Sluts

edited by Anna Camilleri

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RED LIGHT: SUPERHEROES, SAINTS, AND SLUTS
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Jezebel to Joplin: Female Icons Re-Imagined

An Introduction by Anna Camilleri



Venus of what universe am I?
I live in a glass house
with glass bells
and glass horses;
how rarely do I stand face to face
with my own forces.

- Judy Grahn, *The Queen of Swords*

1. Topologies and Topography

I climbed into a car, intent on travelling west until I could taste salt—the Pacific Ocean, as far away from home as I could get without boarding a plane. I was in my early twenties, and hell-bent on going somewhere. It didn't matter that I didn't know where I was going, had no money, and was depending on the kindness of three well-intentioned but possibly dangerous strangers, who were just as fly-by-night as me. I was on the road. It was mid-September; green fields had receded like the tide. Amber, saffron, and crimson dominated the landscape.

I snapped photos through the front dash, many of them imprinted with my right index finger. Mostly, I looked out the window and jotted word-strings in my notebook: *Taut. Topographic. Tongue. Tongue on taut topography. Graphic to tongue taut top.* I was seduced by the possibilities; every jut of rock, every roll of hill reminded me of bodies I had tasted.

And then, I saw her. Shortly after crossing the Canadian-American border in Sarnia, she sped past in the left lane with hardly a sound. She was lean,

long-legged, large-breasted, and covered in mud. This, my first sighting of the Mudflap Girl, happened in Michigan State, but I soon discovered that she is not bound by province, region, or geography. She is on every highway and freeway in North America, and perhaps around the world, protecting the underbelly of 18-wheel big rigs from dirt, sleet, and salt. My notepad simply says: *Woman on truck. Who is she? Why is she there?*

Since that day, I've encountered the Mudflap Girl — also known as the Silver Goddess of the Highway — through the windows of borrowed or rented vehicles in Jasper, British Columbia; Madison, Wisconsin; Redding, California; and many places in between. She captured my imagination, and I began to wonder: What would her story be, if she could tell it? Would she tell us about the marketer who dreamt her up, and all of the places she's been to? Would she tell us about "her" product line — the baby Ts, fridge magnets, bumper stickers, baseball caps, coffee mugs emblazoned with her image — and how she hasn't seen a dime from any of it? Would she tell us about Barbie, her not-so-distant relation, and what they're really up to when they're not on the open road? Would she tell us that we don't know the first, or the last, of it?

2. *Dislocations and Magnetisms*

Some say that icons are born, but it is public recognition — a devoted following, an audience, a "market" — that creates them. Born of our imaginations, desires, and fears, they are emblematic of our cultural climate on every front—social, political, spiritual, and economic. While some icons come in and out of focus, or fashion, they are here to stay.

The female as represented in western popular culture has been a timeless yet culturally unstable site—from the rise, fall, and re-emergence of the Goddess, to changing notions of the mother and social mores surrounding the slut. This instability, coupled with the tension between desire and repulsion, is precisely what produces the female icon. Construed and contested by men and women alike, the female icon is a site where

our culture attempts to stabilize the female; to make her static, sterile, consumable.

Female icons reflect cultural sublimation of fear of the feminine in all of its manifestations, on a mass scale. Because the icon doesn't exist as "real" — rather, as a beyond-our-grasp screen upon which we project, undesirable aspects of femininity are denied, re-written, controlled, contained, and of course, sold, in palatable morsels. The Mudflap Girl is illustrative of this, but she's not alone. The Woman-in-the-Red-Dress is another female icon, also seemingly without voice and story. She turns up in music videos playing air-guitar, wearing pencil skirts and severely bound hair—she is the powerless dominatrix. Stripped of power, the icon allows us to dislocate aspects of femininity that are potentially frightening and place them in a repository while marking the boundaries of socially sanctioned, biologically determined femininity. When female icons are not only embraced, but engaged and re-imagined beyond those boundaries, there exists the potential to regain what is powerful, and powerfully experienced, about femininity — sexual agency, pleasure, and joy.

This book explores the threads of this fabric—the "underbelly" of female icons, and their significance in the lives and imaginations of women (and a few men). Here, female icons are re-imagined as "dangerous, as volatile matter, as blowing the whistle on the confines on femininity."¹ Greater than one-dimensional representations of "girl power," female icons elucidate the complexity in the lives of women, as well as cast a light — a red light — on the personal and public mythologies that create them.

Red Light encompasses icons stripped of sexuality and sexual agency, in addition to those who are highly sexualized — the Virgin Mary alongside Wonder Woman and Jezebel — each open to broad interpretation, each reflecting cultural dis-ease, and each riddled with troubling and important questions. In the smoke-and-mirrors terrain of female icons, the absences speak volumes. Those who are seldom taken up as icons in mass culture — women of colour, queer women, and women of diverse gender experience — are featured in *Red Light*, and how. Explorations of the "Indian Princess," the "Black Bitch," and the Bollywood seductress not only

redress, but sear the lacquer right off of well-travelled colonial and racist epithets (see Boudreau, Moïse, and Singh). Those who are maligned and pathologized — witches, bitches, cougars, cunts, whores, and so-called crazy women — are celebrated here (see McKinley, Banerji, Bridgforth, and Cullis). The show stoppers — largely unknown despite mass exposure — shimmy into new narratives in which nocturnal emissions spill and refract in a house of mirrors (see Foad, Gottlieb, Hornick, Melusine, and Tihanyi). Icons that are steeped in a benign heteronormativity — domestic and do-gooder public servant “Goddesses” who are “naturally” selfless, demure, and morally upright — are redeemed by their portrayers (see Hahnel, Hammond, Simmers, and Steidle). And personal icons, who have lived solely in the imaginations of their creators (see Augustine, Linton, and Sami), make their stunning debuts.

3. *Articulations and Long-Term Memory*

As a child, I didn’t dream about being Barbie or a cheerleader—not that there would be anything wrong with that beyond its anatomical impossibility, for me or any other average girl. But in my dreams, I wasn’t average. I was Alpha Girl—a girl who could not be lost, because nothing can exist without a beginning, and Alpha Girl was there at the exact moment of articulation.

Besides her impeccable sense of timing, she also had the power to save other children from unthinkable horrors, held the Guinness World Record for the longest shot put, and was fiercely independent. The adventures of Alpha Girl were, of course, rife with conflict: just as she is about to swoop in to topple the neighbourhood Peeping Tom, she remembers that she doesn’t know how to fly, and unceremoniously crashes to the ground. When pert breasts show up on the scene (her body), she squeals with delight, but soon after, notices that her place in the world now seems to be entirely mediated by the bumps that constantly assert their presence. Her delight becomes matched by ambivalence. Later, everyone (except for her equally marginalized friends and lovers) calls her a slut

— not in the appreciative, *You’re so sexy!* way — and she eventually sets her own desires aside for a life in the doldrums that ticks out minutes and seconds like Betty Crocker’s Easy-Bake. And you know what they say about watching a pot.

But Alpha Girl’s problems weren’t about utility. Her powers weren’t faulty or compromised by proximity to copper, or nickel. No, Alpha Girl’s dilemma, ironically, was one of memory. She routinely forgot who she was: a butt-kicking force of nature.

As a subterranean girl who didn’t invest in Pippi Longstocking or even Nancy Drew, Alpha Girl was my very own superhero who embodied the qualities that I wanted and needed: strength, smarts, stubbornness, and a sense of “rightness” about my place on the planet. But even inside of the boundaries of my liminal childhood world where imagination ruled, Alpha Girl was subject to the rigours of social scrutiny that demanded she be a certain kind of girl, a girl that she wasn’t—a one or the other kind of girl. Smart or strong. Moral or slutty. Competent or pretty.

Alpha Girl embodied my very-average-girl conflict: how can I be a butt-kicking force of nature in this world knowing full well that I shouldn’t have to choose between one — smart, moral, competent — or the other — strong, slutty, pretty — and that none of those characteristics have anything to do with sex or gender, except for that which we insist upon?

When I set out across the country, I didn’t know that I had left home in search of Alpha Girl—with her memory intact. I needed to find the Alpha Girl who knew her own strength and rightness and goodness, so that I could know my own. Its no small irony that a lost girl (me) set out in search of another lost girl (Alpha Girl) so that she (me) might find herself, only to discover another seemingly lost girl (the Mudflap Girl). In this landscape of lost girls, Alpha Girl swoops in and sashays with abandon, and yes, she also forgets some fundamental things about herself from time to time. I allow her this endearing quality because she is a superhero, carrying the hope of a very average, mortal girl.

RED LIGHT

Here then, are stories, poems, essays and works of visual art that make icons of lost girls, that gather together some of what has been misconstrued beyond recognition, as well as incendiary superheroes, saints, and sluts that defy any such categorizations. Harbingers one and all.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Anna". The letters are cursive and fluid, with a small dot above the final 'a'.

Anna Camilleri

¹ Brushwood Rose, Camilleri, "Introduction: A Brazen Posture." In *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2002).