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Outside the lines

Writer and illustrator Barbara Slate to speak at WILDCAT COMIC CON

By JARED A. CONTI
Sun-Gazette Correspondent

When asked to do a brief interview of Barbara Slate — the keynote speaker for Pennsylvania College of Technology's third annual Wildcat Comic Con — I called around to my local comic book shops to see if I could pick up her work on DC Comics' "Angel Love," a series she created in 1986 — to no avail.

Instead, I got myself hooked up to the Interwebs and scored the nine-issue maxi-series for a steal, and then sprung for the slightly more obscure "Animal Man No. 24," where the title character of Angel Love appears briefly under some pretty weird circumstances.

Before writing and drawing for both DC and Marvel comics — the titans of comic book publishing — Slate first created "Ms. Liz" in the mid-1970s, a cartoon character who appeared on greeting cards, in *Cosmopolitan* magazine and even in an animated clip on "The Today Show" in 1982.

Ms. Liz had a decidedly feminist perspective, declaring on one 1974 greeting card that "I know I'm not easy to live with, but you're no bargain either," and asking on another, "I'm giving you the best years of my life — do I have to give you a birthday present, too?"

Slate, an Albany, New York, native first came to DC Comics in 1985, a time during which — much as it is today — comics directed toward girls were at a premium. Much of the readership was 95 percent male and DC Comics editors were doing scads of

things to shake it up company-wide: "Watchmen," a "Superman" reboot, "Batman: Year One" and "History of the DC Universe," just to name a few. So what made the powers-that-be jump on a "real life" drama featuring a woman as a main character?

As Slate recalled, "Jenette Kahn was president of DC Comics...the girls were reading 'Archie,' as wholesome as apple pie. I walked into her office at the perfect time. She was looking to do something for girls. She wanted something different."

And different "Angel Love" was. My own personal reading tastes have rarely ventured into the "Archie" series, let alone women's fare. The art and humor of this series, however, lights up with some sort of strange abandon from nursing birds back to health and a reoccurring couple saying their sickeningly sweet "I love you's."

There's an "Archie" feel happening in "Angel Love," yet with an adult flavor that comes and goes on a whim. The first issue has our heroine Angel Love dating someone who uses cocaine. A colleague becomes pregnant and considers abortion.

For eight issues and a special, we get quite a lot in a very short amount of time, but Angel herself comes out on top. She's a young adult, and she deals with these changes — and she deals with them well. In a time when it's needed, we get



ourselves a role model, however briefly. And it's refreshing to read letters pages where both boys and girls pour their hearts out to Angel about problems they face at home, school, in real life. In many instances, they're writing directly to the character of Angel herself.

It makes it such a shame that the series ended after those nine issues. Slate said, "I loved every minute of creating, writing, and drawing comics, but I don't know if it's what I desire to do at this point. I have been teaching how to do graphic novels, and speaking at book fairs and comic cons about my life in comics. Right now I am very busy, but if the phone rang..."

Slate stayed with DC for several years, eventually leaving in 1989. She then joined Marvel Comics, writing and drawing her own comic, "Yuppies From Hell," satirical one-shot takes on the emerging "young urban professional" sector of society — the cover of one offered a look at their "Sex, Lies and Mutual Funds."

"Yuppies," like "Angel Love," was short-lived. But Slate has made a name for herself in comics, a very male-dominated industry, from her humble beginnings at the forefront of the women's movement to "Angel Love" and even those the younger set know and love, like her work on Barbie comics and graphic novel versions of Disney classics like *Beauty and the Beast* while at Marvel.

"I love writing licensed characters. Barbie, Betty, Veronica, Archie, all the great characters from *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Pocahontas*. The great news about these characters is that they come fully defined. I love writing their stories and doing the layout but I don't draw them. When I create my own characters, I write and draw," she said.

Barbara writes and draws her own new book — and so can you.

"You Can Do a Graphic Novel" is written in graphic novel form, with fun drawings. It gives a lot of information in an easy, light way. Lots of creative tips," she said.

Slate will speak at 10 a.m. Saturday at Penn College's Klump Academic Center.



PHOTOS PROVIDED
Above, the title character of Angel Love, the comic book series of the same name created by Barbara Slate; far right, Slate wrote and illustrated with both Marvel and DC Comics. Inset, the cover of "Angel Love."