

CARTOONIST BARBARA SLATE

# Feminist ink

## Pioneer cartoonist Barbara Slate to speak at Simon's Rock

By John Seaven »  
Special to The Eagle

When the Berkshire Festival of Women Writers presents a talk and art show from cartoonist Barbara Slate, the celebration isn't just that Slate is a woman writer, but rather a pioneer and revolutionary in an industry traditionally dominated by men, producing work primarily for the enjoyment of other males.

Slate got her professional start in the 1970s with a line of high-profile feminist greeting cards called Ms. Liz. After Ms. Liz went out of business, Slate interviewed with DC Comics president Jenette Kahn in the early '80s, receiving the go-ahead to create a comic that was far ahead of its time — "Angel Love."

Slate's childhood was filled with a love of comics, particularly Archie and especially romance comics, so getting the opportunity to create a comic book for DC was a dream come true.

"At camp, crawling into my cot and reading love comics at 11 or 12 was just heaven," she said.

"Angel Love" was an unusual creature in the world of mainstream comics in the 1980s — commissioned by a woman, conceived, written and drawn by a woman, with a woman editor, aimed to a female audience. It pulled in from the romance comics that Slate loved as a kid, but was also progressive, predating an entire movement in women's indie comics in the 21st century. It even helped set the tone for a culture that eventually welcomed such entertainment as Lena Dunham's "Girls."

It was edgy for the time, and very topical.

"You write what you know about and I knew about a girl coming to the city and trying to make it as an artist, that was what my character was based on," Slate said. "At the time, AIDs was happening and my first panel was Angel working at a restaurant as a roller skating waitress and the bartender was not there. There was a new bartender, who Angel had a crush on, but the old bartender who said he was on vacation had AIDs.

"I never got to work on that story because, as I said, it was taken off the stands. But Angel goes out with a guy who's a drug addict, and all these things that were life. Her sister got sexually abused. It was just stuff that was happening. I got fan letters from girls that were sexually abused. It really caused a lot of controversy."

"Angel Love" lasted eight issues with a double-sized special to conclude the storyline, after controversy about its mature subject matter. Quite apart from other mainstream comics at the



COURTESY OF BARBARA SLATE

'Self Portrait' penned by cartoonist Barbara Slate, who will be speaking about her career as part of the Berkshire Festival of Women Writers festival.

### IF YOU GO

**What:** Pioneering Woman Artist Barbara Slate presents "My Life in Comics," original pages, synopses and rough sketches demonstrating the process of illustrating a comic book or graphic novel.

**When:** Tuesday, March 31 through Thursday, April 16

**Where:** Hillman-Jackson Gallery at the Daniel Arts Center, at Bard College at Simon's Rock, Great Barrington

**Gallery hours:** 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. weekdays; 2 to 8 p.m. weekends

**What:** Artist's Talk: "My Life in Comics and Tips for Creativity" followed by a Q & A and reception with Barbara Slate

**When:** 5 p.m. Tuesday

**Where:** Hillman-Jackson Gallery at the Daniel Arts Center

**For more information:** www.simons-rock.edu

time, "Angel Love" did not bear the mark of the Comics Code Authority, an rating from the 1950s guaranteeing a level of wholesomeness. This proved difficult to sell on newsstands.

In the aftermath, Slate had trouble finding work in comics, but Marvel Comics editor Tom DeFalco encouraged her to make pitches and Slate worked at convincing him to start a girl's line



COURTESY OF BARBARA SLATE

Slate began her career in the 1970s with a line of high-profile feminist greeting cards called Ms. Liz.

at Marvel.

"For about six or seven months, I would pitch ideas to him, one after another after another," she said. "Finally, I said, 'Look, if there's not going to be

a girl's line, I get it, you don't have to keep taking me out to lunch or listening to my pitches, I get it.' He said, 'No, actually, I was thinking about you doing

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## Slate

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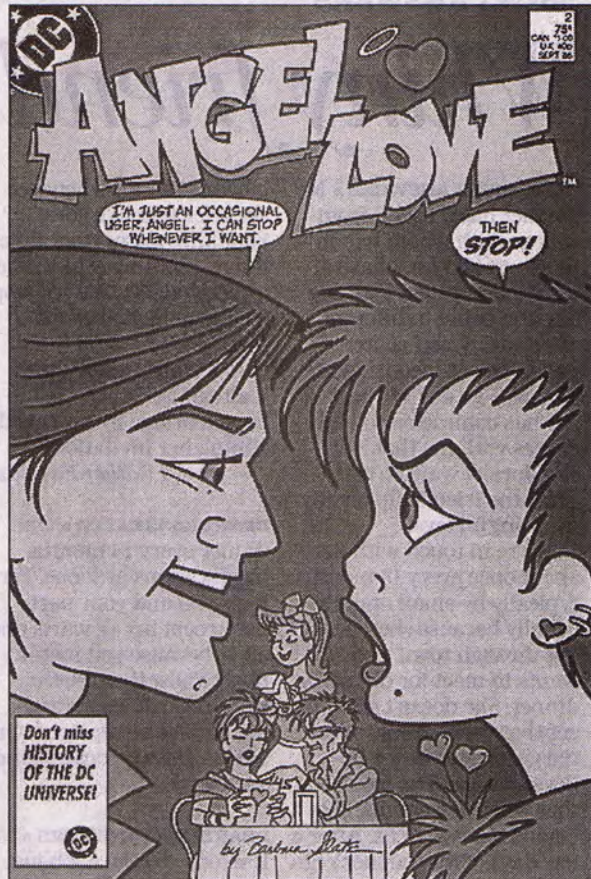
"Yuppies From Hell" graphic novels for Marvel and then scripted a number of titles for the girls line, including "Sweet Sixteen," which Slate describes as "Archie and Veronica and Betty set in ancient Rome," and several licensed comics, including "Beauty and the Beast" and, most significantly, "Barbie."

"We were all passionate about Barbie," Slate said. "There was a group of women writers and artists who were passionate about having this great character. We reduced her boob size. The artist made them smaller. My friends were really mad at me, because how can you do Barbie after Ms. Liz and Angel Love? But we really made Barbie into a feminist. She could do anything and live anywhere."

Under Slate, Barbie became a jet-setting adventurer of multiple skills. Slate ended up doing 65 issues of Barbie before the Marvel girl's line was closed down by the company's new owner. Slate moved onto one of her childhood favorites, Archie Comics, which she scripted until recently. When Slate sat down to configure the characters with feminism in mind, she decided to focus on Betty and Veronica's own bond beyond whatever attraction they each had for Archie.

"It was mostly about their friendship instead of loving Archie," she said. "I didn't mind that they loved Archie. They were best friends for 80 years and both loved the same guy. Not very realistic."

Slate approached it with a sharp humor that was meant for outrageous com-



COURTESY OF DC COMICS

'Angel Love,' created by Slate, lasted eight issues.

edy effect that mirrored the real self-doubt that girls often feel and must overcome.

"To me it was important for girls to see these girls as real people," Slate said. "Also, I humiliated them. There was a lot of public humiliation — anything that was public humiliation and seeing how they could get over it, because girls are so hard on themselves. Those kinds of lessons, I put a lot into my stories."

It was during this stretch that Slate adopted a child and moved to Hudson, N.Y., where her attention turned to autobiography, which saw fruition in her 2012 graphic novel "Getting Married And Other Mistakes," and a current work-in-progress based on her years in

the comic book industry. She also teaches cartooning and graphic novel creation to kids, guiding a whole new generation of comics creators, most notably girls. Her boy-girl ratio in classes is often 50-50, and that just reflects what she sees in the wider world of comics nowadays, and understanding her own part in the change.

"Going to a convention and looking at the kids, it's half girls and half boys," Slate said. "Back when we were going to San Diego, there were lines around the block for signatures for the superhero guys, and we were doing Barbie, and if we got six little girls lining up, we were 'yay!' But now it's really half and half — it's very exciting."