



# OUR QUEEN, OUR MOTHER, OUR MARGARET

by Paula Guran

## HOW ONE ARTIST'S MAGAZINE COVERS SHAPED THE VISION OF A GENRE FOR A GENDER

I THINK I saw my first Margaret Brundage *Weird Tales* cover when I was about eleven or twelve. I had a friend whose aunt had a used bookstore. Upstairs, in what was more an attic than a second story, there were boxes and stacks of dusty magazines. Mostly it was *National Geographic*s, but there were oddities and treasures to be found too.

The cover I saw portrayed a determined-looking strawberry blonde striding along stark naked in the snow with three wolves, a vivid blue sky served as background; the magazine title was white against red. I had no idea what *Weird Tales* was.

For some reason, I never had a chance to open the beat-up old magazine that day or even look at the cover for long, but the image stayed with me forever.

Many years later, I learned it had been the March 1933 issue and the cover story, described as “a powerful werewolf story by Seabury Quinn” was “The Thing in the Fog,” a Jules de Grandin tale. And, although a beautiful young woman turns into a wolf, at no point in the plot does she run around nude with lupines.

I, tender-aged and innocent of the entrancements of publishing, had subconsciously learned two lessons about covers that day.

**Lesson One:** Covers with beautiful women attract eyeballs and sell magazines and books.



**Lesson Two:** A “good cover” does not necessarily portray an exact element of the story.

There was another lesson in that cover, too: despite the titillation of nudity, there was nothing powerless or weak about the woman. She was strong, fearless, and to be admired. She ran among wolves.

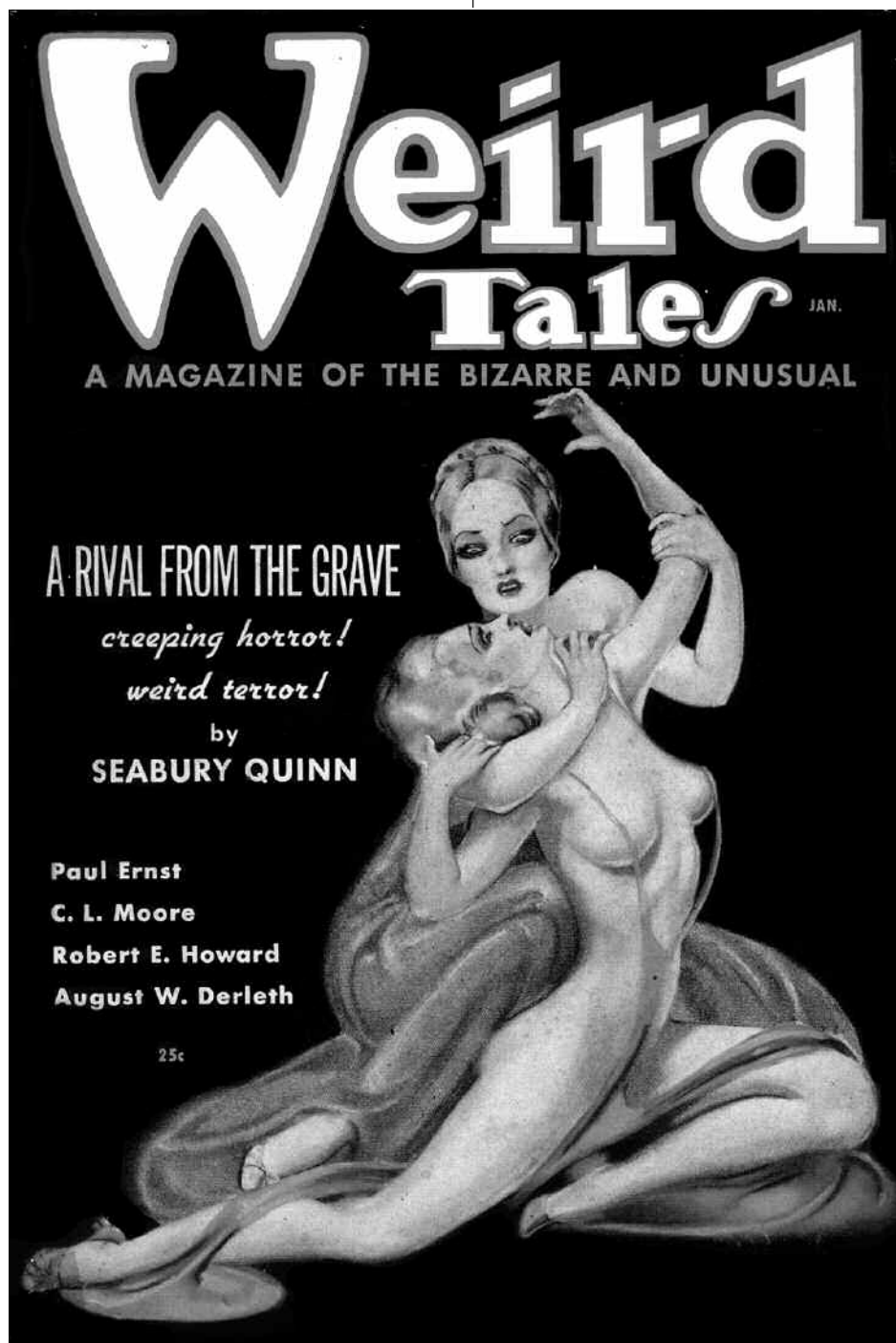
Years later, when I actually read the story, I found that Quinn’s fictional character was, typically for the era, more a victim than a heroine.

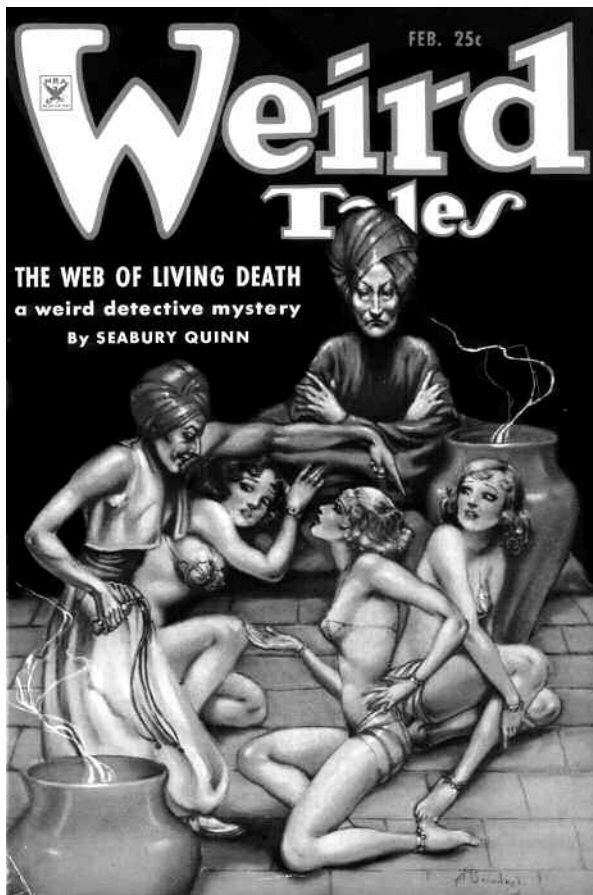
**Lesson Three:** Art can be subversive.

*“Margaret Brundage’s lovely female nudes for Weird Tales contrast strongly with the frequent images of blood and skulls and twisted flesh that adorn modern horror books.”*  
—Steven Hampton & Tony Lee

WHAT IF MY youthful virgin eyes had glimpsed one of Margaret Brundage’s spicier covers with a more submissive female?

Brundage has been accused of “lurid excess” in her art, but closer examination of her covers for *Weird Tales* seems to disprove this. Despite L. Sprague de Camp’s assertion that “Mrs. Brundage earned the title ‘Queen of the Pulps’ with her pictures of naked heroines being tortured, raped, and disemboweled...” (from *Lovecraft: a Biography*) and other similar if less drastic opinions, Brundage never portrayed a woman being raped or mutilated. Scantily clad or nude females were shown in submissive postures, menaced by obvious phallic symbols like knives or swords, and in peril aplenty, but the *WT* covers are remarkably devoid of real violence.





Her reputation for portraying flagellation and bondage is also enhanced by legend. A whip—actually, an always inaccurately drawn cat-o'-nine tails—appears on only five of her sixty-six covers:

September 1933: One woman prepares to strike another (hands bound by an odd metal contraption above head) with a cat. (A highly controversial cover that sold out and probably could have sold more.)

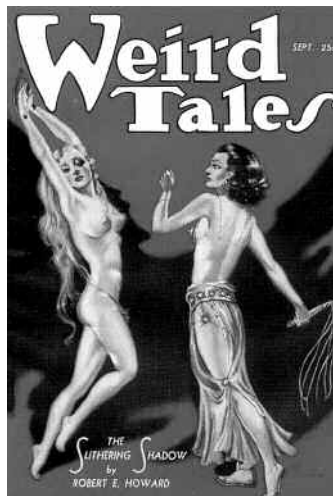
April 1934: Turbaned black male in loincloth prepares to strike cowering brunette.

February 1935: A little guy in a blue turban and yellow harem pants holds a limp cat-o'-four tails. Of the three women portrayed, two appear to be apprehensive; one seems to be chatting amicably with Mr. Turban.

March 1936: An infamous cover of a woman chained wrist and ankle—the single cover featuring manacles—menaced by a crimson-clad masked figure with yet another cat . . .

October 1937: . . . but then there's also a red-headed woman shown flashing a cat above a bunch of helpless males.

*"[Brundage's] covers might not have reflected the contents but surely sold a lot of copies."—Robert Weinberg*

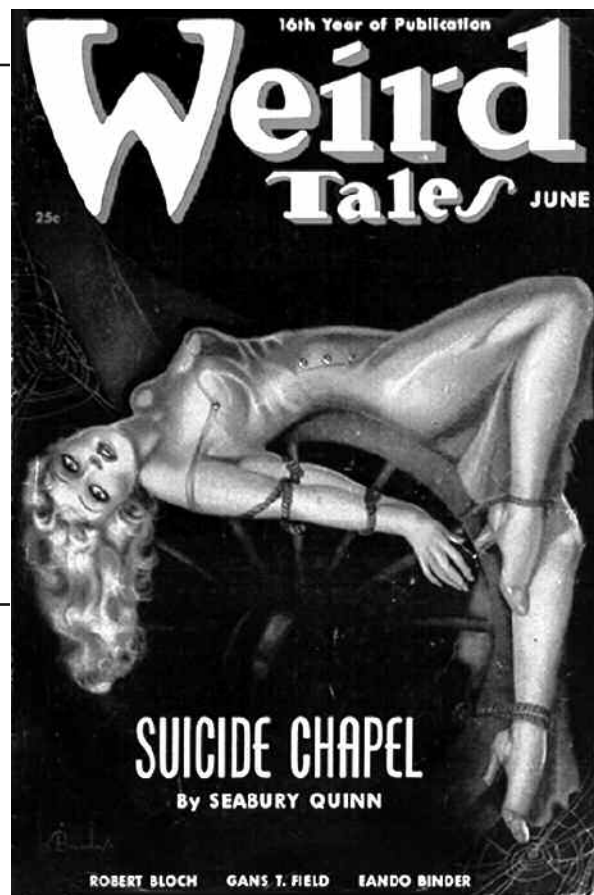
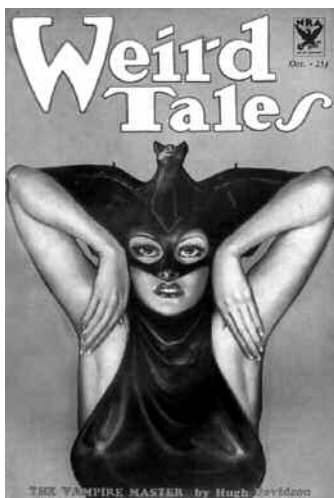


Bondage? Along with the aforementioned semi-handcuffed lady and the manacled victim, there's also a blonde (modesty preserved only by the shadow of a bat) who appears to be rather sloppily tied to something-or-other with a dragon painted on it on the January 1937 cover. July 1936 sports a singular combination of semi-bondage (blonde rather lackadaisically held by arm and ankle by two bored brunettes to a table/altar) and tepid threat (third equally apathetic brunette stands over blonde with oddly-shaped knife). Otherwise, the only woman shown in true bondage is a blonde fetchingly (if somewhat ineffectively, considering her position) tied atop a wooden wheel.

As for hands-on violence both November and December issues from 1934 show a woman actually being attacked, in both cases by another woman. Two women fight on the January 1936 cover. Sixty-six covers: men and monsters may menace, they may even hold or grasp, but there are only three instances of a woman actually being assaulted, and all three involve other women.

And, like my wolf-woman and the whip-wielding redhead, Brundage's cover girls were occasionally anything but distressed damsels. There were, for instance a bat-hatted vampire vamp, a panther lady, magically empowered women, females saving a male or two, and a even a couple of gals who seem relatively content with some brawny hunk.

Females do not appear at all on three covers: April, May, and August 1935.



Considering the fiction of the era—often devoid of women altogether, almost always portraying the female as a brainless victim or a heartless villainess; racist, sexist, and often flat-out bad—Brundage’s *Weird Tales* covers were less likely to corrupt than its words. They surely were attractive to the male of the species, but they must have appealed to women as well. There’s no proof of how many women read *Weird Tales* in any era, but based on what data he could find, Eric Leif Davin (in *Partners in Wonder: Women and the Birth of Science Fiction, 1926-1965*) has estimated that more than 26% of *WT* readers were female.

**Lesson Four:** When you sell the fantastic, you are selling fantasy. Fantasy is interpreted (or misinterpreted) by the beholder.

*“Brundage’s exotic nudes were a constant source of controversy among Weird Tales readers in the 1930s. . . . When readers complained about nudity on the cover, [editor] Farnsworth Wright had Brundage do a cover without nudes. Complaints flowed into the magazine office, and within a month, the nudes were back.”*—Robert Weinberg

Not that women weren’t misused and even abused on sf/f/h book and magazine covers over the years. Not that there isn’t a history of silliness, stupidity, and even rank misogyny concerning women on covers (and, for that matter, elsewhere in the field). Not that Brundage was even a consummate artist. But somehow her art “worked” because—edgy, sexy, and provocative as it was—she never stepped

over certain self-imposed and possibly subconscious boundaries.

She allowed herself to be pushed a bit—editor Farnsworth Wright would select the cover to be executed, usually the most salacious, from several rough sketches. Brundage later said, “Weird Tales asked me to make larger and larger breasts—larger than I would have liked to—well, one cover, one of the authors wrote in and said that things were getting a little bit out of line. And even for an old expert like him, the size of the breastwork was getting a little too large.”

But “Brundage girls,” curvaceous as they were, never seemed intentionally seductive. Even the villainesses were more alluring than enticing. Sensual, but not wanton.

Our Ladies of the Weird displayed expressions of terror, shock, and surprise, but not pain. No drop of blood, no wounds, no bruises, never a hint of gore, or even a broken fingernail appeared in the art.

Where other artists might portray damsels in supine listless distress, eyes closed, awaiting fates worse than death, Brundage’s women usually writhed, struggled, resisted evil with rolling eyes, and (attractively displayed) lithe limbs. A couple appear

to be unconscious but, by and large, “Brundage beauties” were afraid, but not totally daunted. Terrified, but never completely powerless.

Time and memory have muddled the differences between Brundage’s art and other pulp covers. Brundage’s are relatively circumspect. Compared to the “Spicies” of the era (*Spicy Adventure*, *Spicy Detective*, *Spicy Mystery*, etc.) the *Weird Tales* covers were mild. As *Smithsonian Magazine* put it: “...the Spicies blurred the line between mainstream fun and sadistic voyeurism. When New York City mayor Fiorello La Guardia passed a newsstand in April 1942 and spotted a *Spicy Mystery* cover that featured a woman in a torn dress tied up in a meat locker and menaced by a butcher, he was incensed... Thereafter, Spicies could be sold in New York only with their covers torn off.”

**Lesson Five:** Subtleties count. Just because you portray nude women in your art or put a sexy girl on the cover does not mean you are a sexist pig or deviant pervert.

*“Brundage was excellent at composition and if she had flaws—of draftsmanship or detail—they were irrelevant. For her flaws were her virtues. She usually gave backgrounds short shrift or ignored them completely; her figures often appeared to be floating in space, standing on nothing—even the chains to which the*

*fair captive was often manacled [sic] rarely were riveted to a wall. That’s because Brundage was impatient with nonessentials . . . Brundage . . . was a trash artist. But she was a top trash artist of her time, and she may have been a kind of genius. Her work had zip, zest, pizzazz; it had luster and lust; it zoomed straight past the intellect and homed in on the viscera.”*

—Ray Russell

But “naughty bits” disappeared from the cover of *Weird Tales* long before La Guardia’s *Spicy* outrage. August 1938’s cover of a “wolf-girl” is scantily but opaquely clad. Thereafter, whether Brundage was the artist or not, bosoms occasionally heaved, but skin became rare—so, in fact, did women. Not coincidentally, *Weird Tales* was sold to another pulp publisher, William Delaney, in 1938. *Weird Tales*’ November 1938 issue was the first issue published by “Weird Tales, Inc., New York.” The *Weird Tales* offices moved to New York. Wright, who had suffered from Parkinson’s disease since 1921, moved to New York with the magazine. Dorothy McIlwraith, the editor of Delaney’s *Short Stories* magazine became Wright’s assistant. McIlwraith took over in May 1940 when Wright left *Weird Tales*. He died in June of the same year.

## THE LIFE & TIMES OF MARGARET BRUNDAGE

Of Swedish and Irish descent, she was born Margaret Hedda Johnson on December 9, 1900, in Chicago, Illinois. Her father died when she was eight years old. She was raised by her mother and grandmother.

She graduated from McKinley High School in 1919. Walt Disney was a class-

mate but, as she later said: “I finished; he didn’t. He lied about his age to get into the Army in World War I.”\*

She attended the Chicago Academy of Fine Art. “I was there, I think, about 1921-1922-1923 or so, along there somewhere. I was considered one of their better students. I don’t think I ever got their certificate of graduation, because I could never letter. Never! My lettering is the world’s worst.”\* After leaving school, she worked as a freelance fashion illustrator for newspapers.

Margaret Johnson married Myron “Slim” Brundage (1903-1990) in 1927. He had spent time as a hobo and was attracted to radical politics and alcohol. In

the 1920s he supposedly spent thirty days in jail for illegally procuring liquor for undercover Prohibition agents. An aspiring writer, he received little publication. He is most often noted as the founder of the College of Complexes in 1932, which presented speakers and audience debate/discussion. (He later established the Beatnik Party during the 1960 elections. Leon M. Despres called him: “Chicago’s last guerrilla fighter for free speech.”)

The Brundages had one son, Kerlynn Byrd Brundage, born in either 1927 or 1929. The marriage was turbulent and Slim’s financial contribution to the family evidently matched his nickname. (They divorced in 1939.)

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*“Although Finlay, Brundage, and new artist Hannes Bok continued to provide some attractive covers, the style was toned down from their previous excesses . . .”*

—Michael Ashley

The lessons I didn’t realize I was learning lay dormant for many years. One day someone asked me to edit a weird semi-psychotronic magazine called *Horror Garage*. We were very serious about good dark fiction. We weren’t so serious about anything else. (Clue: My editorial column’s title and the ’zine’s subtitle was “sex. death. rock’n’roll.”) Each cover was to feature a Garage Grrl. No problem. I’d learned my lessons.

The first issue’s cover was a natural: acid green with Julie Strain in vintage 1950s Betty Page black lingerie and hairstyle winking in front of a giant skull. Great! The second issue’s Garage Grrl was fully dressed, holding a black cat, and probably chosen because the publisher would have liked to date her. Not so great. As someone correctly noted at the time, “*Horror Garage’s* cover should be like *Maxim* on acid.” The third issue was, well, just that. The model was Jaime Bergman, a *Playboy* magazine Playmate of the Month (January 1999, its 45th Anniversary issue). Bergman, a well-paid model who chose her career, was wearing a ridiculous white fur bikini and had a blue cap on backwards. Her tongue, although not literally “in cheek,” pointed in that general direction. The back-

ground was a yellow-and-black leopard pattern.

It was not high art. It was not even trash art of genius, but it was “garage”. It was also a parody of hot chicks on men’s magazines and something of a tribute to the jungle goddesses, tiger girls, and panther ladies of the pulps B-movies.

I don’t know if this story is true, but legend has it that within minutes of the issue being distributed at a convention, it was being denounced on a panel by a woman who accused *Horror Garage* of exploiting women. She had no idea the editor, me, was female or a feminist. She evidently never opened the magazine. She saw a girl in a bikini on a cover and condemned.

We weren’t exploiting anyone. We were attracting attention with an attractive woman and, if you were smart enough to catch the joke, having some fun with the whole idea of sexy women on covers.

Later on, after I was no longer associated with *Horror Garage*, the publisher went with a cover idea I had refused—a woman with a blood-drenched face.

Neither the alleged panelist nor the publisher understood Lesson #5.

*“Illustrator Margaret Brundage not only created the signature style for Weird Tales magazine, she also brought a refined sensibility to its niche in the pulp market.”—F.B. Taraba*

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Brundage first approached *Weird Tales*, published in Chicago, with samples of her work circa early 1932. One drawing was of an oriental dancer. Like *Weird Tales*, *Oriental Stories* was published by J.C. Henneberger’s Rural Publications and edited by Farnsworth Wright. Impressed with her exotic dancing girl Wright first bought Brundage art—published on 1932’s spring and summer issues—for *Oriental Stories*.

Brundage’s first cover *Weird Tales* covers were for the September and October 1932 issues (Volume 20, Issues 4 and 5). J. Allen St John covers appeared on the November and December issues that year and again in January, February, April, and May of 1933. Beginning with

the June 1933 issue, Brundage created covers for 39 consecutive issues. St. John’s work reappeared on the October and December 1936 issues. The November 1936 cover was a Brundage creation. Brundage covers for 1937 included January, March, May, June, August, September, October, and November. For 1938: January, March, May, June, August, September, and October; July/August and November/December 1940; March/April and September/October 1942; July 1942, May 1943, May 1944, and, finally, January 1945. The last cover was reprinted on the November 1953 issue.

She signed her work “M. Brundage.” In October 1934, Wright revealed the “M.”

stood for “Margaret.” Complaints about the eroticism of her work increased when readers discovered she was a woman.

In the midst of the Great Depression, Brundage was paid \$90 per cover. Those fortunate enough to land jobs in the Works Progress Administration at the time made an average of \$41.57 a month. A loaf of bread cost 8 cents in 1931. The finest lobster dinner at Chicago’s Congress Hotel in 1937 cost \$2.75.

Unlike most cover artists, she worked in pastels, not oils. She usually drew the work twice the size of the cover, but occasionally as large as three times >>>

More years pass. I become the editor of a line of fantasy novels (Juno) that featured strong, brave, intelligent women. It eventually morphed into an urban fantasy imprint (Pocket Juno)—still with strong, brave, intelligent female protagonists.

Women are on most of the covers. A couple of the earliest small press covers suggest lack of clothing (a bare back, a silhouetted profile). These fantasy women are often sexy but none of them are nude. Sometimes they may be showing slightly more skin or wearing higher heels than their activities or personalities might call for, but nary a nipple nor even an areola is in sight. Shapely buttocks may be encased in tight clothing, but nothing as revealing as the diaphanous wisps Brundage sometimes pasted on her ladies' derrieres. Such things are no longer shown on fantasy covers.

These covers are neither lurid or lewd... and neither were Margaret Brundage's.

*"[Margart Brundage's] covers of damsels in distress put her exotic females in situations as evocative as they were weird."* – Robert Lesser

For various reasons, the women on book covers do not always perfectly match descriptions or actions from the books themselves, but effort is made to con-

vey essential "truth" about the contents. These are women who stand or move with power and often stare the beholder directly in the eye. Yes, sometimes they are headless or faceless, but that's due to those "various reasons" already mentioned.

Even though she occasionally portrayed empowered women, Margaret Brundage did not always get her choice of what scenes she illustrated for *Weird Tales*. But the choices often reflected the story more than our modern day minds might want to recognize.

I like to think of Jirel of Joiry (according to Marion Zimmer Bradley: "the first woman to take up her sword against sorcery") in C.L. Moore's "Black God's Kiss" as the author first portrays her in the story:

She was tall as most men, and as savage of the wildest of them...The face above her mail might not have been fair in a woman's head-dress, but in the steel setting of her armor it had a biting, sword-edged beauty as keen as the flash if blades. the red hair was short upon her high defiant head, and the yellow blaze of her eyes held fury as a crucible holds fire.

Jirel later escapes and takes a strange journey to find the "black god." Moore has her attired in a doe-skin shirt, a mail tunic, and greaves worn on bare legs. She has a dagger in her belt and carries a sword.



>>> the cover size. Pastels smudge easily and she had a special box for taking the art to the *WT* office. (Conveying the delicate pastels may have been seen as a problem when the office moved to New York. Turnaround time in shipping sketches from Chicago to New York may also have hampered using her art.)

Both the magazine's business manager, William Sprenger, and Wright realized the move to New York and lack of commissions would be a financial hardship for her. According to Brundage, Spreng-

er kept in touch with her for about five years after the move and expressed concern about her situation.

Brundage never recovered financially after she lost her regular work with *Weird Tales*. She sold her art at Chicago art fairs. Her later years have been described as being lived in relative poverty. There are reports that she attended some science fiction conventions where "fans" stole some of her original artwork.

According to *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, edited by John Clute and Peter Nicholls, Brundage "was, as far is known, the first woman artist to work in the sf/fantasy field, and the first of either sex whose covers featured nudes."

Her son died in 1972. Margaret Brundage died April 9, 1976. On October 14, 2008, the original cover art for "The Altar of Melek," the first Brundage *Weird Tales* cover, sold at auction for \$50,787.50. ©

How could such a woman be portrayed as the barely dressed nymphet in the lap of a one-eyed-idol, lips puckered against its ebony mouth? (*Weird Tales*, October 1934) Surprisingly, Brundage is not as far from accurately picturing the pivotal scene that inspires the story's title. Take away the fashionable hair, the plucked eyebrows, the suggestion of make-up (all "sins" of current and past cover artists); add chain mail rather than clingy blue fabric and the picture tells the story at that point quite well.

Brundage and the artists of today's "strong-but-sexy" women on covers may not always be exactly portraying the heroine, but they are selling the story.

*"I would submit about three different pencil sketches. And they would make the selection of the one I was to do in color. Once in a while I would suggest a little color in my sketches, but most of the time...well, they were very rough. And yes, they chose the scene."* – Margaret Brundage, interviewed by R. Alain Everts

I have no statistics, but common consensus leads one to believe that urban fantasy with female protagonists sells to more woman than men. In this day of Internet community and freely available opinion, you'll hear grousing about the sameness of the covers and the portrayal of the "tramp stamp" (a tattoo, generally in the small of the back). Back in the day I was an ordinary reader, I much preferred a character on the cover who looked like the one described in the book by the author, most readers probably do. That doesn't happen as often as we'd like.

But those complaints aside, the book-reading public, male and female alike, still appears to like looking at women. What has changed, at least in sf/f fiction, is that women are no longer written as perennial victims and often take the leading role—making a female even more appropriate to put on the covers. ©

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**Paula Guran** is the editor of the Pocket-Juno line of fantasy novels as well as *Weird Tales*'s new nonfiction editor.

\*Direct quotes from Margaret Brundage are taken from "Woman of Weird Tales: An Interview with Margaret Brundage" conducted by R. Alain Everts. *Lovecraft's Weird Mysteries #4*, Vol. 1 No. 4, 2001.



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