

Of Monsters and Men

Graphic novelist MARJORIE LIU talks to ZARA ZHUANG about creating comic book universes, fighting for representation, and finding her voice in the male-dominated arena

COMIC BOOKS WEREN'T a prominent feature of Marjorie Liu's childhood in Seattle, but being treated differently due to her biracial heritage was.

Though she considered herself "very Chinese on the inside" from growing up among her Chinese cousins and spending weekends in her grandparents' laundromat — "the Chinese-American stereotype" — she was rejected membership in her high school's Asian-American club for not looking Asian enough.

"That really stung," the Boston-based author says when she dropped in for the Singapore Writers Festival last November. "I began to retreat and became defiant."

That episode serendipitously led her into the world of comic books. Having grown up enthralled by the *X-Men* cartoon series of the 1990s, Liu popped into her university town's comic bookshop for a peek, picked up issues of *X-Men*, *Wonder Woman*, *Batman* and *Deadpool*, and never looked back. "I became obsessed," Liu says. "Part of what drew me to these stories, particularly *X-Men*, was the theme of otherness

and what it means to be fully human and for others to see you as such."

Liu is now a celebrated writer and graphic novelist. *Monstress*, her epic fantasy set in a matriarchal Asia, was nominated in 2016 for Eisner Award for Best New Series. She has written the *Dirk & Steele* paranormal romance novels and the *Hunter Kiss* urban fantasy series, and worked on Marvel titles such as *X-23*, *NYX*, *Astonishing X-Men*, *Dark Wolverine* and *Black Widow*.

"We're always searching for the heroic and for inspiration," she says of the enduring allure of fantasy worlds and comic books. "There are [superhero] characters that are larger than life and have powers, but there's something human and relatable about them. And within that connection is the endless possibility for ourselves."

WHAT DID YOU DISCOVER ABOUT YOURSELF THROUGH WRITING YOUR NOVELS AND COMICS?

In all my romance novels there is this "monster" — a shape-shifter, gargoyle, merman, vampire, psychic, you name it — someone who feels like an outsider, who's looking for a home, community, friendship and love. When I started, I would have said I wrote paranormal romance novels such as *Beauty and the Beast*, but in hindsight I was writing about race and my version of the mixed-race experience, of people feeling as if they are on the outside looking in and trying to figure out where their place is.

WHAT WAS MOST CHALLENGING ABOUT GOING FROM WRITING FOR MARVEL UNIVERSE CHARACTERS TO CREATING YOUR OWN UNIVERSE?

At Marvel, the characters are established — you're playing in someone else's sandbox. But when I started working on *Monstress*, I realised how little I knew about writing comics. To create worlds, characters and conflict from scratch is difficult; I was effectively writing a novel in a comic book format. It's a 3D process, so in every panel I think about character, conflict and moral, as well as which moments are most important and where on a page they create the most impact.

WERE YOU LIMITED BY THE COMIC BOOK MEDIUM?

Not at all — you learn to be more



creative when you have a certain amount of space to work with, because you have to think about what's essential for the story. It's a distillation process — everything has to count — and the end-product is more powerful.

WHY DID YOU DESIGN THE WORLD IN MONSTRESS TO BE DOMINATED BY WOMEN?

As a child, I loved reading fantasy and science fiction. I accepted as normal most characters in these stories were white men, and the few female ones might be plucky princesses or warriors, but ultimately they were a means for the hero to be inspired. I didn't realise everything I loved was rather reductive until I went to university. The blockbusters coming out now still adhere to this formula. I caught *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* on TV last night; the characters were nearly all men and maybe two women with speaking roles. I thought, "Wow, the Star Wars universe has almost no women! What happened to them? Were they killed off?" (laughs). With *Monstress* I wanted to reverse all that, so I wrote a book in which nearly all characters are women of colour.

IS IT ENOUGH JUST TO HAVE DIVERSE CHARACTERS? HOW IMPORTANT IS IT THAT THOSE CHARACTERS ARE DEVELOPED BY A DIVERSE POOL OF AUTHORS AND ARTISTS?

I can't overstate how important it is. For how many years have we had to read stories about ourselves written by white people? That's what I read growing up. The argument I hear most often is, "We're all human anyway, so I just think about the humanity and not the race." But race is part of a person's character, background and culture. There are these subtleties and essential details



that, unless you grew up with them or feel and live with them every day, you may not relate to.

DO YOU FEEL WOMEN WRITERS AND ARTISTS HAVE TO PERFORM BETTER THAN MEN JUST TO BE ON PAR?

When I was working on the Marvel comics series, I did feel a lot of pressure — I knew if I messed up, there's a good chance the next woman might not be given a similar opportunity. It cracks me up because folks will say, "We just want to hire the best person for the job, we don't want to think about gender or race." It's the same thing with superheroines (in films). We had a talking raccoon (Rocket, in *Guardians of the Galaxy*) before we got *Wonder Woman*, and it's sad that the misogyny of Hollywood and publishing can't look at women as equal human beings.

HOW CAN WOMEN WRITERS AND ARTISTS BREAK OUT OF THAT CYCLE?

You just have to keep working at the top of your game. It's the same hustle women have had to go through for all eternity: You keep knocking on doors and eventually, hopefully, break through. ■