Episode 904 Story 3 – Negro Romance

Gwen Wright: This case opens a comic book, which may have helped start a new chapter in popular entertainment. The 1940s, the population of Americans under the age of 18 hits a record 45 million, and they’re hungry for entertainment. Young people turn to a recent mass market phenomenon, comic books. Eighty million sell every week; each passing from person to person an average of eight times, reaching more people than movies, magazines, radio or TV. The comics are packed with fantastic fictions: superheroes and villains; purple prose and broken hearts. But how did one comic book try a radically new approach to reaching its audience? Now, Gerald Early, a collector and historian from St. Louis, has stumbled upon a romance comic with some very unusual characters. Last year, Gerald helped us solve a mystery about a Jackie Robinson scorecard. This time, he’s in New York with a question of his own.

Gwen: It’s nice to have you here.

Gerald Early: Thank you so much. Let me take this out for you. I don’t do this for everyone! It’s a comic book from the early 1950’s. As you can see the comic book doesn't have a cover.

Gwen: “Negro Romance.” So, where did you find this?

Gerald: I’ve been a big comic book collector and I bought it in an auction online.

Gwen: What was the description? What drew you to this?
Gerald: I was excited about it because when I was growing up I hardly ever saw black people in a comic book, and to see a whole comic book devoted to black people, I said, “I got to get this!” I mean to me for something in 1950 this is pretty surprising.

Gwen: Well tell me, Gerald, what you’d like for me to find out about this comic book?

Gerald: I’d like for you to find out who wrote and drew this comic book. I really would like to know whether it was black or white artists and writers who put this comic book together.

Gwen: 1950. I think it’ll tell us a lot about that period of time in American life.

Gerald: I think so too.

Gwen: It looks just like the romance comics I read in the 50’s, except the characters in these pages are African American. Elegant language although a bit over the top. “My mind was a cauldron of seething anxieties beneath a tense, masked face.” It’s a classic tale…young girl falls in love, loses her man, changes her ways, and gets her man back. This is a romance comic book but it’s really a morality tale. Telling women how they ought to behave. So it’s published August 1950, Volume 1, No. 2 by Fawcett Publications in Greenwich, Connecticut. Well the title page has the names of the executive editor and the various editors, but no mention of the writer or the artist. Let’s see. I'll try “Negro Romance.” This must be the cover. And here’s our story, “Possessed.” Looks like there were only three issues published. Ours is number two.
There’s not much here of any substance, and a search of the editors doesn’t help either. Let me try Fawcett, the publisher. Fawcett was a major comic book publisher during the golden age of comic books in the 40’s and 50’s. There was a genre for every audience: superheroes, war stories, horror, romance. Nearly 650 titles published; 80 to 100 million copies sold every week. Comics were popular culture. And Fawcett was right in the thick of it. Captain Marvel and other heroes. But there’s no mention of “Negro Romance.”

I’m heading to downtown Manhattan to the Museum of Comic and Cartoon art. Professor William Foster studies how African Americans have been portrayed in comics and popular culture.

Well, I’m eager to show you this copy of Negro romance.

Professor William Foster: This is absolutely amazing. This is rare beyond words.

Gwen: Well, I remember reading comic books in the 1950’s when I was a kid, but I can’t recall any black characters.

William: Well, in comic books there probably were very very few.

Gwen: Much like the era, William notes, comic books were a segregated world. Most publishers were white, and their few representations of African Americans were often unflattering and demeaning.

William: That was fairly typical for the time.
Gwen: Well, that makes our comic book unusual.

William: Absolutely. We have black people who are thin, attractive, well dressed. So you see the typical ideas for African Americans. The hair, the noses are quite thin, talking about going to college. Very much the middle class dream. Theoretically they could be anybody if you changed their color which is maybe the exact idea they were trying to promote.

Gwen: So do you think this could have been done by a black writer or an artist?

William: It’s very difficult to tell because at that point in time, writers and artists were not credited for their work.

Gwen: William explains that comic book publishers worried that their talent would be poached, so they kept their names anonymous. But it’s certainly possible that the author, or artist, was African American.

William: This is all “Negro Comics,” 1947 considered a landmark work. First comic book that we know of created by an African American publisher, writer and artist, Orrin Evans.

Gwen: Evans was a leading black newspaper reporter, who created aspirational black characters such as “Detective Ace Harlem”.

William: He said himself, “I got tired of never seeing people who look like me in comic books.”
Gwen: William points out the characters in Evans’ comics have darker skin tone and more traditionally African American features. Do you think that Evans could have done this one?

William: I don’t believe he would have. Only because I know the most important thing to him was to create his own company. All black owned, all black images, going to a black audience created by black creators.

Gwen: But William says our comic may tell a second story: a debate among African Americans, about the best strategy for winning civil rights.

William: I think that you probably had a number of Negro leaders at the same time who were saying, this is how we will make it into white society. The more we look like the majority, the more our chances of success are. And then there were people on the other side who were saying, “You know what? We have to be who we are if we’re going to make it in America.”

Gwen: Well who at Fawcett might have created this?

William: I’m guessing for Fawcett that they had a number of white liberals that worked for the company and decided and here’s a really unique opportunity to be more inclusive, and these are the kind of black people that white people would be glad to invite to their homes and to their communities and this would be not threatening at all.

Gwen: Any ideas about how I might find out who created “Negro Romance?”
William: I’d have to say, honestly I’m stumped. But you might try a romance comics expert. They were doing a lot of romance comics for general audiences around the same time. They might well you know, know who actually put this together.

Gwen: I’ve come to Baltimore, to Geppi’s Entertainment Museum, a great resource for History Detectives investigations in the past.

Gwen Wright, nice to meet you.

Jacque Nodell: Nice to meet you.

Gwen: Jacque Nodell writes about the history of romance comic books.

Jacque: Oh wow. I haven’t seen this in real life. It’s really exciting to see it.

Gwen: Now were there other romance comics in 1950?

Jacque: Absolutely. I have a few. So romance comics really exploded in 1949. Here are just a few from various companies. But most of the comic books companies got in on, sort of, the love game.

Gwen: Here’s one that has a cover that’s very similar to this one.

Jacque: It is.
Gwen: Except that they’re white people.

Jacque: Yeah. And actually the reason is because “Romantic Story” was also published by Fawcett. And Fawcett was very known for this happy couple on their photo covers.

Gwen: Are the stories inside pretty much the same?

Jacque: Very, very similar. And these romance comics from Fawcett definitely mirror what was going in society in 1950’s. That push towards women leaving the factories after the war and going into domestic roles. And you have to remember that most comic books and romance comic books included were written by men. And “Negro Romance” just fits in right with those.

Gwen: Jacque explains how, following World War II, the economic power of the black community was growing.

Jacque: Comics were big money, big business. Fawcett wanted to get into every corner of the market they could.

Gwen: Do you know who created this?

Jacque: I don’t. These stories, they’re unsigned for the most part. The front page does list the editorial staff which we know were white. But as far as the actual artists, the writer, I don’t know.
Gwen: Jacque says Fawcett got out of the comic business in 1953, and she doesn’t have information about their employees. But historian Shaun Clancy has spent the last 15 years tracking down former members of the comic book industry. As I told you, I have a copy of “Negro Romance.”

Shaun Clancy: I’ve actually never seen the inside of one of these, every copy I’ve ever seen has been encased in plastic.

Gwen: Shaun’s located a private collector with all three issues. How many of these are around today? Do you know?

Shaun: My estimation less than 10 known copies of each. These are a romance line that Fawcett was experimenting with.

Gwen: This wasn’t Fawcett’s first attempt at experimenting with African American characters. Shaun says that in 1942 they added a new character to their best selling “Captain Marvel” comic. A valet, “Steamboat,” but it went horribly wrong. That’s a very derogatory stereotype.

Shaun: Yes, in fact the African American community protested the character and actually went to the Fawcett offices in New York and got the attention of the editor. Will Lieberson was the editor in charge at that time. He listened to their concerns. He himself being Jewish was sensitive to stereotyping and that he would do what he could to eliminate that character.

Gwen: In 1945, the “Steamboat” character was dropped. As times changed, so did Fawcett. In 1950, they introduced “Negro Romance” with very different
African American characters. I’ve been trying to find out exactly who is responsible for creating “Negro Romance.”

Shaun: If you look at the title page here you’ll see the editor is Roy Ald. And Roy Ald is still with us. He’s 90 years old and I’ve spoken to him. He was in charge of the “Romance” line in general at Fawcett’s. And he was looking to expand into the romance market because it was so successful. So he came out with the three issues you see here.

Gwen: What was the definition of success? What was the run of these?

Shaun: At the time of printing there was probably 100,000 copies each. Today’s comic runs would envy that type of print run.

Gwen: Well, who was the writer?

Shaun: Well, Roy Ald! Roy created pen names and basically double dipped and if he could draw he’d probably do three things, he’d triple dip.

Gwen: Do you know who was the artist?

Shaun: Actually he did mention that name.

Gwen: What Shaun tells me next helps close my investigation. This ended up being an interesting and very surprising story. This was an experiment in romance comics.
Gerald: Wow.

Gwen: I have the cover of this issue.


Gwen: The real excitement is in your question.

Gerald: Okay.

Gwen: The writer was an editor at Fawcett. A man named Roy Ald.

Gerald: Was he African American or white?

Gwen: He was white.

Gerald: Okay.

Gwen: He came up with the idea of this and believed there was a market. But what’s really exciting is the artist.

Shaun: His name was Alvin Hollingsworth.

Gwen: And what do you know about him?

Shaun: Alvin Hollingsworth was a young black man. He was still in high school when he was coming by the Fawcett offices. He was a “go for” type person. He
was doing touch ups and paste ups and doing general errands around the office. And he and Roy Ald hit it off very well. And Roy really liked Alvin Hollingsworth. And when he created the “Negro Romance” line, he thought this was the perfect fit for him.

Gerald: My goodness. That is really something! Oh, man. I hadn’t expected that at all. I thought, I honestly thought that probably the artist was white so this is really quite a surprise to learn this.

Gwen: And here is Alvin Hollingsworth at about age 40. He was the first black artist hired by this company. I explain how his comic told a story about society and the economy, changing profoundly after World War II.

Gerald: I’m blown away to learn that. Boy, this is really a genuine artifact of African American life, African American culture, to know that. That’s quite a story.

Gwen: Alvin Hollingsworth stayed in comics until 1955. In the 1960s, his early paintings focused on civil rights issues. He then went on to have a major career as an abstract artist whose work was shown in museums and galleries around the world. Hollingsworth died in 2000.