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Are comics predictive, or do they simply follow the society they're produced in?

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Are comics predictive, or do they simply follow the society they're produced in?

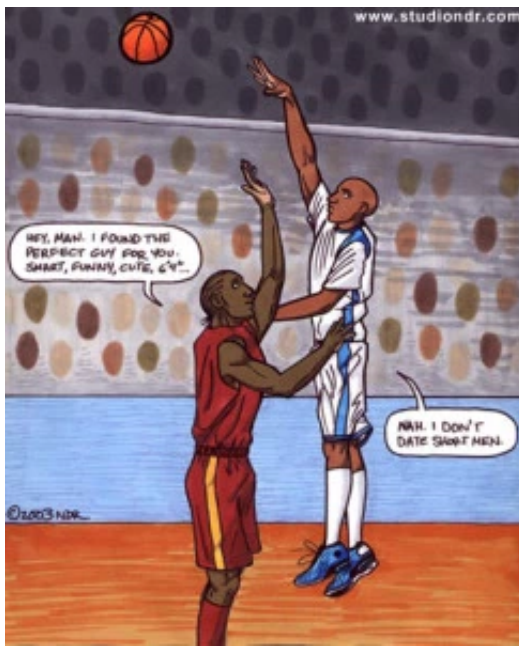
In early August 2013, Alyssa Rosenberg posted [an article](http://thinkprogress.org/alyssa/2013/08/08/2433121/legendary-superhero-creators-the-comics-follow-society-they-dont-lead-suggest-women-look-elsewhere/) (<http://thinkprogress.org/alyssa/2013/08/08/2433121/legendary-superhero-creators-the-comics-follow-society-they-dont-lead-suggest-women-look-elsewhere/>) about a panel discussion she attended, which was a press tour to promote a new documentary about the history of comics in the U.S. One of the panelists was Gerry Conway, who made the claim that “comics follow society. They don’t lead society.” This was in the context of a discussion about the nature of superhero comics and representations of male and female characters.

Rosenberg’s article explores the disappointment she feels with the restrictive, underdeveloped representation of women in superhero comics. I think we can also ask similar questions about representations of race and sexual orientation in comics as well. Can comics ever lead society rather than just follow?

I disagree with Conway. I think that if we say that comics follow society (and that they necessarily don’t lead society), we seriously underestimate the creativity and the imagination of comics artists and writers who so often give us a glimpse into the near future or distant future that they want to see or, in some cases, don’t want to come to pass.

In April this year, Jason Collins, a player in the National Basketball Association, [came out as a gay man](http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/magazine/news/20130429/jason-collins-gay-nba-player/) (<http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/magazine/news/20130429/jason-collins-gay-nba-player/>). This was a major announcement in the world of sports as well as for those of us who identify as LGBTQ. As more and more athletes come out, it makes the world a better and safer place, especially for young athletes who find themselves in that position.

Back to Conway’s claim about comics. Interestingly, a decade before Jason Collins came out, Dylan Edwards (NDR) published this single-panel cartoon on the [Outsports website](http://www.outsports.com/) (<http://www.outsports.com/>).



(<https://pencilpanelpage.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/basketball.jpeg>)
basketball

This was part of his the series called 'The Outfield,' many of which are available at [Dylan's site](http://www.studiondr.com/comics/the-outfield/) (<http://www.studiondr.com/comics/the-outfield/>).


This comic is notable because of the dialogue. These two athletes are on opposing teams, yet they are having a conversation on the court about romance. We can read the dialogue in a couple of ways. Because it was drawn by Edwards, and because it was published on a website devoted to sports and LGBTQ issues, it is easy to understand this as an earnest, sincere chat between friends. (In a different context, we could perhaps read this as a mild form of trash talk, where Mr. Red Team is trying to distract Mr. White Team and interfere with the shot.) There is also enough ambiguity in Mr. Red Team's turn that he may be gay himself or he may not be gay and might just be looking out for Mr. White Team. In other words, this cartoon could reflect two friends, simply and plainly. Or, it could reflect two friends in a revolutionary way, depending on how we look at it.

What does a 2003 cartoon have to do with a 2013 comment by Gerry Conway? For me, it indicates that comics do not only follow society, that they can in fact predict or lead. Admittedly, this panel was created by an artist whose work largely revolves around sexual minorities as well as transgender characters. Perhaps artists who self-identify as LGBTQ are more inclined to have vision about LGBTQ issues and events. But this cannot always be the case. For a long time, people who do not identify as LGBTQ have been forward thinking and have created comics accordingly.

Naturally there are many other comics that could be cited for leading, for making predictions about society. What comics have you read that, in hindsight, were remarkable for the vision of their creators?


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About Frank Bramlett

Until June 2014, I am a visiting lecturer in the English Department at Stockholm University, where I offer seminars in Sociolinguistics; Language and Gender; and Language and Comics; among others. For Fall 2014, I will return to the English Department at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

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