

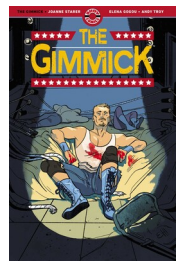
10. "Comedy with a Conscience" -- Interview with Joanne Starer

Joanne Starer has been an editor, writer, and owner-operator of a women's wrestling promotion out of Pennsylvania in 2002. Starer has served on the board of the Editorial Freelancer's Association and holds a Master's in Media Studies as well as a certificate in Digital Film Editing. She has worked with DC Comics, Marvel Comics, Image Comics, Walter Foster Publications, and Harris Publications, among others. At Marvel, she was part of the team that launched the now-legendary Marvel Knights line, which helped revitalize the brand. Her comics work includes *Fire and Ice* (DC Comics) and (Boom Studios).

In wrestling, Starer created *The Gimmick*, a miniseries with artist Elena Gogou, colorist Andy Troy, and letterer Rob Steen (about Shane Bryant, a wrestler who also happens to have super-strength) and *Total Suplex of the Heart* with Ornella Greco (art).

What is your story with wrestling?

If you really want to go back to the BEGINNING, I grew up watching WWF on TV with my dad. It was kind of a Saturday morning ritual. And as New Yorkers, whenever wrestling came through at Madison Square Garden, we'd go to live shows. Back then (we're talking about the 80s...I'm old), it was pretty weird for a little girl to watch wrestling and read comic books. So as I got older, there weren't a TON of other women with the same interests—and there were definitely very few opportunities for women to work in those businesses. At some point in college, a counselor told me that being a writer wasn't a real career (I'm sure a lot of people have this kind of story), and I should focus on something more specific like journalism. In my little geek brain, I turned that into "Write for wrestling news sites."



Well, in the process of writing about and researching wrestling, I found a post on a message board looking for a valet/manager for a local independent promotion. It seemed like something that would make a good story, so I responded. But as you see in *Total Suplex of the Heart*, the ringside thrill took over. I gave up the writing and went full-on into performing. It was very exciting for a while, until I realized how toxic it was.

So the next step for me was to try to build a women's promotion where athleticism was the main focus—not T&A. But this was the very early 2000s. There were no WWE Divas, no Shimmer—serious women's wrestling just wasn't a thing.

And I had a boyfriend who was kind of sabotaging the whole thing (more about that in **Total Suplex**). So the promotion didn't last very long at all.

I did spend the next 6 or 7 years still AROUND wrestling, in a pretty serious relationship with another wrestler on the West Coast. So I feel pretty blessed to have seen so many workers and promotions come into their own, and really experience history first-hand.

Wrestling has been called the “most popular form of American theater.” Wrestling is storytelling, in many ways, within and across the individual matches. How might wrestling, as a storytelling art, have impacted your own work as a storyteller?

I think it's no coincidence that wrestling and comics were my greatest loves. They both essentially deal with stories of good vs evil. And, hey, men in tights, right? But the interesting thing about wrestling is, you have someone who goes out on stage as the good guy, but behind the scenes, he can be pretty damn awful. That's quite the opposite of a classic comic book superhero, whose secret identity is going to be a mild-mannered reporter or something. So it certainly has made me think about the reality and complexity of people. A lot of that comes out in my series **The Gimmick**, which is about a wrestler who seems like a good guy but maybe makes a mess of his life.

Tell me about your genres and media in this game and other work you've done — how you developed your strengths in these genres (and what, if any, connection your strengths in genres may have with wrestling).

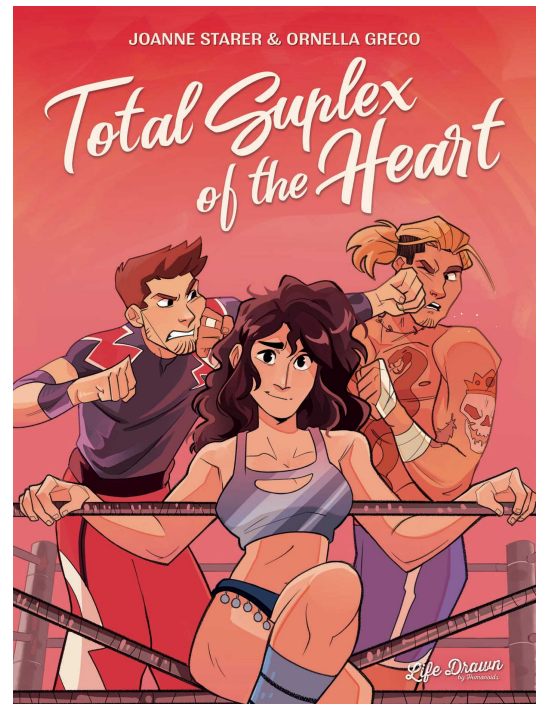
I like to say that my brand is “comedy with a conscience.” I always want people to laugh, always. No matter how serious the topic I'm writing about, or how hard the world is, you have to laugh to survive. I think that comes from having family that was in the concentration camps. You can't get through something like that, you can't move forward and have a life and a family, if you don't find ways to laugh. So for instance, with **Sirens in the City**, that's a book about bodily autonomy. It's about a teenage girl who wants to get rid of her pregnancy. And it's wrapped up in a story about supernatural creatures in 1980s New York. NONE of that sounds funny. But it has plenty of comedy because I don't want it to be a bummer!

Fire & Ice: Welcome to Smallville, that's a book about two female superheroes in their 30s trying to figure out what to do with their lives now that they're older and haven't really made it to the big time. Now that definitely comes from wrestling experience. I've seen what it's like for people who “age out” without ever making it. They dedicate their entire adult lives to this one thing, and then it doesn't happen, and they have to reevaluate. And it's much more devastating for women, because hell, the entertainment world has no place for old women. So when I was developing **Welcome to Smallville**, all that came into play.

Tell us about what came next, after this project. What will be next for you?

Well, I've got the exciting new sequel to **Welcome to Smallville—Fire & Ice: When Hell Freezes Over**. That's a 6-issue miniseries coming to stores April 9. Fire and Ice accidentally swap bodies and then have to track down a mystical artifact in hell to fix it.

And then there's the **Harley Quinn Fartacular: Silent Butt Deadly!** A 40-page April Fool's special, in stores March 26. Poison Ivy lets out a little toot and is terribly embarrassed, so Harley sets out to make a grand gesture. And maybe it involves stealing James Joyce's love letters.



In-text illustrations from a Medium post by Starer. For more information, visit <https://www.joannestarer.com/>.