

“I’m covering the story! Wait here for me”

The Two-Career Couple in the Pages of The Flash

CHARLES W. HENEGBRY

The 2014 premiere of *The Flash* on the CW network reinvented Barry Allen and Iris West as a youthful will-they-won't-they pair. The television series' first episode establishes Barry as a charmingly nerdy police scientist who becomes super-speedy after exposure to radiation from an exploding particle accelerator. Iris is his childhood crush and adoptive sister, a young reporter still finding her voice, who writes as an unpaid blogger. Both of them are obviously talented, but both display the shy under-confidence typical of millennials recently graduated from college. The question hanging over their incipient romance is whether Barry can escape the stickiest tar pit of a “friend zone” ever imagined by a television writing team.

By contrast, the Barry Allen and Iris West that first appeared in the pages of DC's *Showcase* (issues #4, #8, #13 and #14, published 1956–58) dressed and acted like people in their early thirties. They had been dating for some time, and were both well-established in their respective professions. The question that hung over this couple was whether her career would doom their love. He was a police scientist of no particular prominence, whereas she was a leading reporter for Picture News.¹ Bad enough that her job put her on a first-name basis with Barry's boss, the police captain (*Showcase* #8A, May-June 1957), but Iris seemingly couldn't help but express her superior status by constantly running Barry down. He may be super-speedy, but according to her he's always running late.

The scenario's evident interest in the dynamics of a two-career couple

conflicts with prevailing notions of mid-fifties America. Iris will strike today's reader as sharing more in common with Katherine Hepburn's world-renowned lady journalist from the 1940 movie *Woman of the Year* than with iconic '50s figures like June Cleaver or Marilyn Monroe.² But while the feminist movement may have been at a low ebb in 1956–58, half a decade before Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, there was in fact a lot of concern in mid-fifties America about the social impact of career women, on the logic that women with “masculine” ambitions made men correspondingly less ambitious and more effeminate. As we will see, the Silver Age Flash gave expression to this *zeitgeist* with a twist: while Barry, in his meek acceptance of Iris's dominion, embodied the effeminized midcentury male, in his other identity as the Flash he presented a paradoxical solution to that problem: the secret hero.

Prior scholarship has focused on the Barry Allen Flash as a resonator for the nuclear jitters of the Cold War. In particular, Richard Wright examines the series through the lens of Alan Nadel's *Containment Culture*, noting how the Flash's speed grants him a near-total freedom from constraint—even as he constrains the illegal activities of others, he does so by working outside the law (57). In this sense, Wright argues, Flash embodies the Cold-War ideology of American exceptionalism, as exemplified by the title page of “Around the World in 80 Minutes!” (*Showcase* #13A, March-April 1958): the costumed figure of the Flash zooms around the globe in response to SOS calls from Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Russia, and elsewhere. But Wright's analysis ignores what makes the Flash different from other superheroes of his era: his almost comical preoccupation with satisfying his girlfriend. Racing around the world on that title page, the hero's thoughts bend toward home: “How can I answer all these calls for help from all parts of the world—and still keep my date with Iris in Center City?” Barry's phrasing implies that his greatest challenge will not be in saving others, but in placating Iris—as if the worldwide threat of Communism were nothing in comparison to the man-crushing scorn of a woman kept waiting.

Of course, keying the hero's sensibility so closely to the gender politics of the mid-fifties had the unintended consequence of giving the character an expiration date. As this essay will explore in its later pages, from 1966–71 writers on *The Flash* struggled to bring Barry's relationship with Iris into line with contemporary norms without thereby destroying the couple's dynamism. During this period Iris's personality changed rapidly, sometimes from issue to issue, as different writers tried new approaches to making their marriage an impetus, rather than an impediment, to story and drama. But if the results were uneven, they provide insight into the mores of a period of rapid social change.