Where are the women cartoonists?

WHY ARE THERE so few women political cartoonists? Branch Chairennie Quinton described setting up the meeting. She was getting annoyed that the Guardian had used Kate Evan’s work once and every other cartoonist she could see appeared to be male.

She’d approached Jackie Fleming who said no, you don’t want me, you want Blue Lou and Nicola Streeten – they have been working on this.

So our speakers were Dr Nicola Streeten, co-editor of The Inking Woman: 250 Years of Women Cartoon and Comic Artists in Britain, and Blue Lou. Blue Lou has drawn cartoonists for the Morning Star, the Guardian and New Statesman, and now works for Tribune.

Nicola recalled being in the audience back at the 2009 London Comic Con where the panel was all men, and asking “Where are the women?”

She is author of Billy, Me & You, a memoir in graphic novel format, recounting bereavement and recovery. She co-founded Laydeez do Comics – it’s a space for cartoonists and comic artists (women and men) whose work “focuses on the drama of the everyday”.

It’s hard for commissioning editors to find documentary evidence of the work of women cartoonists, let alone contact them. In 2014, for example, Nicola’s own work was in “Comics Unmasked, Art & Anarchy in the UK”; the British Library’s exhibition on comics – but it didn’t make it into the catalogue.

Why the invisibility of women cartoonists? There are narrow definitions of what a cartoon or comic is. Comics are supposed to be “sequential”, telling a story. Cartoons are supposed to tell their story in just one frame. Then there’s the argument about whether you’re a “political cartoonist” or not. Award-winning Leeds-based cartoonist Jackie Fleming “doesn’t count”, as she doesn’t cover party politics, but the politics of the everyday. Jackie’s best-known cartoon dealt with women’s self-defence when serial rapist Peter Sutcliffe, the “Yorkshire Ripper” was at large. “Surely that’s political,” Nicola says.

In feminist history archives Nicola found that women’s magazines all had cartoons. Every copy of the influential feminist magazine Spare Rib (1972-1993) had cartoons and comics. We should “start documenting” women cartoonists, says Nicola.

Blue Lou opened by noting how “Saudi Arabia had a recognised political cartoonist before this country did.” Blue does “short-form single-panel” cartoons, “a hybrid between journalism and art”. She has to contend with a “very small gallery system” controlled mostly by men acting as gatekeepers to editors.

As a lone parent, Blue has encountered difficulties networking. She recalled being “up for one of the best-paid jobs with a national newspaper” and being taken for an evening drink with other candidates, including a twentysomething man based in London. Blue had to leave early to return to Bristol and parenting. Guess who got the cartooning gig? Narrow definitions of what’s a political cartoonist don’t help the career progression of women. The Political Cartoon Society’s President Dr Tim Benson, for example, writes on the organisation’s website, “The Morning Star has female cartoonists, but… with a tiny circulation of 10,000, it cannot be considered a national newspaper.” This is despite the Morning Star being a well-known career progression route into the bigger nationals – one of its cartoonists went on to work for the Telegraph. It’s almost as if the definition of a political cartoonist has been tweaked to exclude women.

Blue described the political cartoon gallery scene as mostly a closed circle, a weirdly male-dominatated world of “editors and journalists and MPs”. Women cartoonists are increasingly finding work online, where there are fewer gatekeepers. Blue “could never have done this without the internet”.

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#useitpayforit & revenge on those who don’t

THE NUJ’s #useitpayforit campaign has taken a life of its own. It aims to raise awareness of the issue of publishers using images for free with amateur photographers and videographers who, by giving their work away for nothing, “are undermining professional photographers and the worth of good photographs and videos” as it says at http://useitpayforit.info

Every few days, it seems, someone reports on Twitter that a newspaper has asked to use their photo or video – usually generously offering “a credit” – and that when they said “no” the paper sometimes went ahead anyway. Some argue that if they “embed” an image online – hoicking it off the Twitter server, for example, not copying it onto their own machine – copyright is not invoked. Freelance journalist GemmaFra-ser10 got just this treatment from the Independent and Women’s Health, both wanting to “follow up” a piece she did for Time a Break magazine on her daughter’s health. Both wanted photos. When she mentioned cash, they went ahead and embedded social media images. What neither had realised was that she could change the image captions to include the #useitpayforit hashtag – which she did, leaving their websites displaying her carefully-crafted complaint about their unlicensed use of her images. She was rewarded with a writeup in Private Eye.

More online...

There are more complete versions of many of these articles online. Also go to www.londonfreelance.org/ ft to read:
• Updated advice on catching up on your National Insurance contributions;
• Publishers pay out for online use 17 years after the claim was laid, and advice on tax on US payments;
• Branch member Tim Dawson reflects on his two years as President of the NUJ;
• The annual report from the Equalities Officers (and other London Freelance Branch officers).

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MANY JOURNALISTS write books, and many are lent by libraries, and you can get payments compensating you for this from the new permanent web address of www.bl.uk/ plr – but the system has fallen behind the times and does not cover lending of ebooks. Of course these are an increasingly popular way of distributing texts and there’s nothing wrong with libraries lending time-limited and copy-protected ebooks so long as the law does catch up.

The Society of Authors has written to Matt Hancock, Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, reminding him that the government promised to fix this by July 2018 – and we call on you to add your voice: write to the Minister of enquiries@culture.gov.uk and copy us in at plr@londonfreelance.org if you please.

We have made a template letter available at www.londonfreelance.org/ft/1805plr.html – do adapt it to make your own case.