

A History of Zines

By Jenna Knorr

The first question that you might be asking yourself is, “What is a zine, exactly?” Zines, from the word *magazine*, refers to small self-published magazines... and that’s really as specific as the definition can get. There is no single theme or style that unifies zines, no content standard, no expected page length: nothing. While zines historically have been created out of passion and not for profit, even that is changing as poets, writers, and artists alike adopt the zine format to sell their works¹. But before all of that, before the commodification of the style, the zine was (and remains) an essential tool used by marginalized groups to circulate messages and information. Enter feminism, a social movement that has revolutionized the zine landscape.

The spread of feminist zines as we know them now is specifically tied to third-wave feminism which appeared in the United States in the 1990s. The Riot Grrrl punk movement saw female-centered spaces emerging wherein girls were playing in punk bands, discussing feminist politics, and distributing home-produced magazines about anything and everything related to feminism – style, music, poetry, protests, whatever². Readers were liable to find all sorts of design elements in these publications, from typewriter fonts to glittery stickers to lipstick kiss-prints. In fact, it was design elements such as these that inspired the design for this issue of the YA *Hotline*.

One historically significant zine that was circulating in the 90s was *Jigsaw*, which included a document called “The Jigsaw Manifesto” by Tobi Vail, the zine’s editor². This manifesto outlined a gender revolution that would see spaces filled with tough girls who live life on their own terms and cast off the patriarchal expectations of how girls are supposed to dress, act, self-identify, interact with society, and even interact with other girls (specifically citing the media’s bad habit of depicting catfights as the norm).

This notion of gender revolution, of feminism, is still at the crux of zine culture today. In a world dominated by cookie cutter characters and stories of young/white/straight people, representations of people of colour, queer and transgender individuals, people with disabilities, people who wear religious garments, and bodies of all shapes and sizes are largely absent from the media. Zines allow individuals to write and share stories about their unique lived experiences. Many people have never encountered characters that are explicitly relatable, so by publishing the many facets of the human experience in zines, individuals are more likely to read about and see images of people and think, “Hey! They’re just like me!”

Zines also have the advantage of appealing to a wide variety of economic needs. At its core, a zine is simply some printer paper, cut-outs from magazines and books, tape or glue, and a pen to scrawl in poems, stories, and news. Costs start to surface when photocopies are made, but even those prices can be reduced or eliminated altogether through community partnerships and public libraries that offer photocopying services on the cheap or for free. Unlike the formal publication route, zines reduce barriers for people, especially marginalized groups and teens, and allow them to share their stories with those who need diverse stories most. ☐



References

- 1 Bartel, J. (2004). From A to zine: Building a winning zine collection in your library [eBook]. Chicago: American Library Association.
- 2 Piepmeier, A. (2009). Girl zines: Making media, doing feminism [eBook]. New York, NY: New York University Press.

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