



Superwoman of British cinema

Jane Goldman isn't just Mrs Jonathan Ross, mother of three, she is now our most prolific screenwriter

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The former newspaper gossip columnist is still angry about Sachsgate (Dave M Benett)

Let's start with a cheap shot about art imitating life. The forthcoming *X-Men: First Class* blockbuster sees James McAvoy playing an intense young Charles Xavier — Patrick Stewart's role in the earlier films — hauling the superhero franchise back to Auschwitz, the cold war and the Cuban missile crisis. At its heart, the story is about two of his most complex relationships: with his friend Erik and his ward, Raven Darkholme, who clearly wants to be so much more to him.

Charles meets Raven, a shapeshifter, as she raids his kitchen. She looks startling — blue skin, yellow eyes, red hair — and he takes her under his wing. Over time, however, she starts to outgrow him. Her powers develop and her attitudes change. At the end of the movie, he looks close to death, and she has to make a choice. What she decides will shape their worlds for ever.

The script was co-written by Jane Goldman, once best known as Mrs Jonathan Ross. She met Ross in 1986, when she was a flame-haired 16-year-old making her way as a writer. They married two years later. He became a household name while she raised their three children and tapped out nonfiction books from home. Over time, however, her powers developed. She wrote a screenplay with the Lock, Stock producer turned director Matthew Vaughn — 2007's romantic fantasy *Stardust* — then another, then yet another until, according to a list from the now defunct UK Film Council, last year saw her as effectively Britain's most prolific screenwriter, in the crucial terms, at least, of movies actually being made in 2010. Now she has written a huge summer film, as well as Daniel Radcliffe's latest, *The Woman in Black*. Ross, meanwhile, is the face of the French movie channel CinéMoi and the presenter of Channel 4's 100 Greatest Toys.

It is a cheap shot. For a start, the X-Men plot wasn't entirely hers to invent: the arc and the characters were created by Bryan Singer, director of the first two movies. Raven has looked like Raven since the late 1970s. Ross has a new chat show on ITV this autumn, and Goldman is unlikely to turn on him to win the love of a magnetic supermutant. And journalists making this sort of clunky overlap should be wary: Goldman knows their tricks. Her first job was as a gossip columnist for the *Daily Star*, where her enthusiasm for hot metal was rapidly doused by a particularly nasty cold shower.

"I left very quickly under very awkward circumstances," she says when we meet at the Dorchester hotel. "They sent me to cover a music festival in Sanremo and, while I was away, stole my holiday photos out of my desk and published them..."

She laughs at the sheer audacity of her employers. "But, really, what was I doing working for them? I think I got my instant karma — I don't think I'm still paying my cosmic debt." She looks over and grins. "Not that I believe in those things."

Which answers one key question: how much of the sci-fi comic world she's moved in since she was a teenage girl, loving its alternative reality as much as she once loved journalism, does she take seriously? "It seems odd to ask, why are you into comics?" She shrugs. "It's like saying, why are you into books or films? It's a way of telling a story."

Her enthusiasm has done her no harm. *Stardust*, her first, breakthrough screenplay, was based on a novel by the comic-book writer Neil Gaiman, while 2010's *Kick-Ass* — a sharp romp about a hapless kid who tries to be a real-life superhero despite lacking any powers — started life as a graphic novel by Mark Millar. "Okay, women who were into comics used to be in a minority, but I think that's changing," she argues. "Sure, it's still somewhere for outsiders. When I first went to Comic-Con, in San Diego, it was a relief to walk past the hotel pool and see lots of chubby white people having trouble with hair dye running in their faces. These are my people... I feel that I belong. But, since Neil Gaiman, Alan Moore and Frank Miller started writing different stories, it's more about characters than biff-bang-pow."

Certainly, Goldman's X-Men script is a refreshing reboot of the genre's Lycra-and-muscle motif. The genetic mutations that create superheroes are first spotted by a Nazi doctor who tortures them out of young Jewish children; then, like Nazi science in the real world, he filters out into the cold war as he flees to South America, pops up in the States and defects to the Soviet Union. The first half of *First Class* is *le Carré* meets Fleming, with a hint of Austin Powers — secret assignments, villainous super-yachts and Vegas girls in stockings and corsets — before Cuba ups the ante.

"I hope we've hit a balance with the history — although, clearly, it's an alternate universe," she grins. "The producer said to treat the crisis as if this was *Star Wars* and these were warring planets. You don't want endless exposition, with people pointing at maps, but we've got the basic beats. Obviously, it's not entirely historically accurate — there were no mutant superheroes in the real crisis, as far as I know — so I hope nobody will have issues with how we depict the superpower standoff."

Oddly, the backdrop works. The acting talent feels like a superpower arsenal as well — McAvoy, the Oscar nominee Jennifer Lawrence, Michael Fassbender, Rose Byrne, Nicholas Hoult, January Jones and poor old Kevin Bacon as the evil Dr Schmidt/Shaw. You care far more for X-Men's villainous Magneto if you see him played by Fassbender, experimented on at the death camps and attacked as a freak by both cold-war combatants. He becomes a civil-rights campaigner — freak power, if you like — when seen in

the context of the 1960s.



It's all turned out pretty peachy for Goldman and her hubby Jonathan Ross (Ian West/PA)

For Goldman, there's a certain Lion King circle of life to this. Her Kick-Ass/Stardust partnership with Vaughn, who directs X-Men: First Class, began when he turned down X-Men 3. He'd done three months' "prep", realised he didn't have enough time to do the movie he wanted and knew he was in a lose/lose

situation. If it succeeded, everyone would say it was the X-Men franchise on top form; if it failed, he would get the blame. He tapped up Gaiman for the rights to Stardust, turned out a draft both of them hated, then Gaiman suggested that he talk to Goldman. Vaughn met her as a courtesy, loved what she said, saw her first 20 pages and they have worked together ever since. She seems slightly surprised.

"I'd just called home to see if they had any avocados, and Jon had said he'd call right back, so, when the phone went, I answered in a comedy voice," she says, groaning at the memory. "It was Matthew calling from LA, and I was standing in the M&S underwear department feeling very unprofessional. I thought, this is clearly not going to happen. I've messed it up already." She pauses. "Getting avocados from M&S. That's so middle-class. Could you put I was getting a pie from Lidl? Or foie gras from Fortnum's?"

Vaughn remembers it slightly differently. "When Neil suggested Jane, I wasn't 100% sure," he recalls. "We're the same age, and I remembered her from when I was 16, thinking, you dirty bugger, Jonathan Ross. She's young and fit, why is she with him? I thought there must be an angle — Neil needs Jonathan to plug a book. But she turned out to be exactly what I wanted."

In fact, Goldman has never traded on being Mrs Ross. She barely mentions his name in interviews, charmingly talking about getting married at 18 without naming her husband, to journalists who must at least have googled her. It's only when I press her, asking about the controversy when 11-year-old Chloe Moretz in Kick-Ass used the c-word, about being the main breadwinner, about the media storm when Ross and Russell Brand mocked Andrew Sachs on Radio 2 that she considers carefully, and then finally opens up.

"It's tough to see someone you care about treated in a way you think is unfair — so that was unpleasant," she nods cautiously. "I felt bad about the imagined Kick-Ass controversy because certain quarters saw that as a way to extend his story. There were two [audience] complaints at the time — another one was about Russell making fun of Jonathan's speech impediment. I was slightly horrified, apart from my emotive stuff, at how it was not reported accurately."

She suddenly stops, thinks, says: "Oh, man, I probably shouldn't be talking about this... No, I don't mind mentioning it, because I found it extraordinary." Then she makes a fascinating claim. "Andrew [Sachs] gave consent. They apologised to him immediately and said it shouldn't go out, but he said, 'It's fine, tone down some of the swearing, but put it out.' And somehow that became his family in torment..."

Also... oh, man, I shouldn't... actually, no, I will say this, because I feel strongly about it. I thought the accusations of invasion of privacy were utterly hypocritical. The girl in question was never mentioned by name on the radio show, but she was named, photographed and her past raked over by the papers, so for them to take the moral high ground seemed extraordinary to me."

She pauses, lets it go, smiles. "It's actually been a really nice couple of years," she almost laughs. "Jon's writing comics, which has been his dream since he was a kid. Russell is a Hollywood star, my work's going well... It all turned out nice in the end."

How does it feel, I wonder, having sat at a red-top gossip desk, then faced down red-top gossip desks when they stake out your home and family? She considers this: "People who work on tabs have to dehumanise the people they write about, otherwise they can't live with themselves. They have to think everyone is publicity-hungry and an attention whore, and not worthy of your respect as a fellow human being, or how do you do your job?" She laughs. "Also, it makes me worried when I read my description. I remember those rules when writing about women. If they're okay-looking, they're 'stunning', but if they have a face like a boot, you just give their hair colour — being called a blonde sounds as though they may be vaguely attractive. So, if I read myself described as 'redhead Jane Goldman', I'm like, what? So I didn't even get 'pretty'?"

And a big laugh rolls out of her as she sits in the Dorchester, promoting her blockbuster movie with two more on the way, the fuss behind her and the future looking fantastic in more ways than one. Maybe Goldman is a shapeshifter, maybe she towers over her mentor as she bestrides the Atlantic — these things are open to debate. One thing isn't in doubt, however. She's definitely a superhero.

X-Men: First Class opens on Wednesday