

Introduction

"LEAPING OVER SKYSCRAPERS, RUNNING FASTER THAN AN EXPRESS TRAIN, SPRINGING GREAT DISTANCES AND HEIGHTS, LIFTING AND SMASHING TREMENDOUS WEIGHTS, POSSESSING AN IMPENETRABLE SKIN--THESE ARE THE AMAZING ATTRIBUTES WHICH SUPERMAN, SAVIOR OF THE HELPLESS AND OPPRESSED, AVAILS HIMSELF OF AS HE BATTLES THE FORCES OF EVIL AND INJUSTICE."

--SUPERMAN, *ACTION COMICS*, 1939

Superhuman strength. Virtual invulnerability. Motivated to defend the world from evildoers. A secret identity. And a penchant for looking good in long underwear. These are the traits that define the quintessential superhero: those characters whose impossible feats graced the pages of comic books during comics' Golden and Silver Ages. They are Batman, Captain America, Captain Marvel, Spider-Man, Superman, Wonder Woman, and dozens of others—with names like Ant-Man, Daredevil, Hawkman, the Human Torch, the Spectre, the Spirit, and Sub-Mariner—whose death-defying acts and altruistic motives have come to characterize heroism for generations of fans.

Though these characters repeatedly saved planet Earth from the well-laid plans of supervillains, larger-than-life aliens, and Nazi infiltrators, by the mid-twentieth century, heroes had evolved from the All-American



boy fantasy to multidimensional characters that clearly reflected the dreams and fears of modern society. By the end of the twentieth century, the real world had become a darker place, necessitating a new kind of hero. Popular heroes of yesteryear were reinvented to meet the demands of a new age. The popular culture witnessed the rise of the anti-hero, a fresh breed of brazen, gritty adventurer that includes the likes of Elektra, the Punisher, and Wolverine. Heroes that aren't typically defined as *super*—Buffy, Hellboy, Sandman, and Spawn—became associated with the word because they possessed superhuman qualities and identified with their audience in unique ways.

At this time, too, the superhero's presence in mass media became stronger than ever, with the Batman and Superman live-action film franchises of the 1980s preparing audiences for the entrée of superhero films like *Spider-Man 1* and *2* and two X-Men adventures, which consistently made worldwide top-grossing films lists. Mega-merchandising machines like the Ninja Turtles and the Powerpuff Girls enjoyed previously unheard-of success, helping to round out a burgeoning market filled with independents like the spunky neo-feminist Action Girl, anime favorite Sailor Moon, and even Cutey Bunny, the world's first African-American rabbit superheroine. Characters continued to show up on consumer products as varied as hair barrettes and lunchboxes, and they began to make new inroads into the videogame, trading-card, and book markets. One well-known hero even starred in his own "got milk?" ad campaign.

But who exactly are these mask-wearing, cape-donning men and women? What are their strengths and weaknesses? Secret identities? Who are their arch-enemies? When and where did the characters first appear and how have they changed through the years? *The Superhero Book*—the ultimate A–Z compendium of everyone's favorite superheroes and their mythology, sidekicks, villains, love interests, superpowers, vulnerabilities, and modus operandi—attempts to answer these questions and more as it explores many of pop culture's favorite icons. Within its pages lie almost 300 entries on superheroes mainstream and counter-culture, famous and forgotten, best and worst—including classics like Green Lantern and Plastic Man, cult favorites like the Rocketeer and Madman, and timeless entities like the X-Men. You'll be reminded why you love them (who wouldn't want to fly like Superman for just one day?), why they were chosen to save the world ("We shall call you Captain America, son! Because like you—America shall gain the strength and will to safeguard our shores"), what they do for their day jobs (world traveler Oliver Queen ... Hollywood star and America's sweetheart Linda Turner ... bil-

lionaire playboy Bruce Wayne ... college student and freelance photographer Peter Parker), and their very human *faux pas* (as the Flash, he could outrun the wind, but as alter ego Barry Allen he was hard-pressed to show up for a date on time!).

Because this encyclopedia is as much a reference on modern mythology as it is a chronicling of the superhero genre in America, the book discusses the cultural phenomenon of each character and its various incarnations in the popular culture. “In the Media” entries supplement many of the more commercial heroes’ write-ups. Themed topics for discussion include African-American heroes, alternative futures, anime and manga, atomic heroes, camp and comedy heroes, civilian heroes, feminism, funny animal heroes, multiculturalism, one-hit wonders, side-kicks and protégés, superheroes with disabilities, superheroines, supernatural heroes, superpatriots, team-ups and crossovers, and World War II and the superhero in America. Each significant era of the superhero is explored—the Golden Age (1938–1954), the Silver Age (1956–1969), the Bronze Age (1970–1979), and the Modern Age (1980–present)—providing the reader with a perspective of the hero over the twentieth century and beyond. And creators, comic-book companies, and merchandising efforts all take their rightful place in the history of hero-making.

Why do all this? The bottom line is, we need our heroes. Psychologist Carl Jung (*Man and His Symbols*, 1964) and myth-maker Joseph Campbell (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 1949) both explored society’s need for heroes, though many prefer the edited version. Upon gazing at Batman and Robin approaching Gotham City in their Batcopter in *Batman: The Movie* (1966), Ordinary Joe said it best when he declared, “It gives a fella a good feeling to know they’re up there doing their job.” In a world not quite right, heroes provide a solution. Though scholars have long noted that superheroes fulfill our longing to honor the heroes of legend and myth, it really goes beyond that. They satisfy our “inner hero.” Superheroes embody “the ancient longing of mankind for a mighty protector, a helper, guide or guardian angel who offers miraculous deliverance to mortals,” observed Reinhold Reitberger and Wolfgang Fuchs in their *Comics: Anatomy of a Mass Medium* (1972). Frank Miller, artist extraordinaire of Daredevil, put it a bit differently when he said, “It’s very comforting to know that there’s a god-like figure going around making things right. That’s a lot of what superheroes are about.”

That’s not all the outspoken Miller has had to say. Regarding the prospects for the superhero genre’s health into the new millennium,

Miller told the *Village Voice* in 2002, “The president talks incessantly about evil. I don’t think melodrama is dead.” Indeed, in the era of action-movie heroes winning governorships and military missions against opponents with designations like “Dr. Germ,” comics have struck a chord again—even if nowadays they deal with gray skepticism about government motives as often as they deal in black-and-white portrayals of heroic firepower. Comics have emerged from an industrywide sales slump since September 11, 2001. Even though they were generating notice in prestigious quarters before then—with a Pulitzer Prize for Michael Chabon’s novel about the comic-book medium’s pioneers, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000), for example—the current cultural currency of blockbuster superhero films and widely covered events like Miller’s *Dark Knight Strikes Again* series show that the costumed variety of comic book still has a lot to tell America about the state of its soul.

Noted cartoonist Jules Feiffer once said that if superheroes joined the more numerous supervillains, they would fill the skies like locusts. This truism prompts a note about selecting the superheroes, particularly those created in the first half of the twentieth century: Out of the tens of thousands of comic books that make up the Golden and Silver Ages, hundreds of them contain costumed heroes. Even following the strictest criteria of a superhero or superheroine—he or she wears a costume/mask and has special powers and/or a secret identity—a complete listing of every hero would be prohibitive. Therefore, the table of contents reflects the most diverse listing of American superheroes (or those from other countries that have had a U.S. presence) possible—those that are among the best loved, historically significant, or most representative of a type of hero.

Generally speaking, most heroes follow what Robert C. Harvey in his *Art of the Comic Book* (1996) calls “the superhero formula” as established by Superman in his *Action Comics* debut in 1938. He or she has an altruistic mission, possesses superpowers or advanced mental or physical skills, wears an iconic costume, and functions within a dual identity, the “civilian” one of which is concealed. Following these criteria, *The Superhero Book* naturally eliminates entries for one-off or obscure characters, as well as those that would more precisely be defined as cowboys, magicians, detectives, spacemen, or jungle men, though some thematic entries do touch on these character types. In addition, the characters of Japanese manga and anime don’t follow the rigid conventions of the early American superheroes, though readers may be surprised to find more similarities than are typically acknowledged.



The ground gets muddier for the later heroes, those of the Bronze and Modern Ages, since they break away from the “strict criteria” that can easily be applied to the earlier heroes. Here, some artistic license has been applied to their selection. Many of these later protagonists possess qualities customarily considered nonheroic, or “anti-heroic,” their motivations for superheroic acts being not always selfless or clear. To further broaden the definition, they may not always wear a costume, possess superpowers, or function in the real world with a civilian identity, yet the popular culture considers them heroes primarily because there is a strong heroic identity associated with the character. Rather than argue whether certain borderline characters fit the mold, the book chooses to include them and lets the reader draw his or her own conclusions.

These qualifiers aside, the goal of *The Superhero Book* is straightforward: to pay homage to the heroes who have, in whatever minor or major way, influenced our lives.

—Gina Misiroglu, Los Angeles, 2004

