



LET THE WEAK SAY "I AM STRONG"

*Spider-Man, Superman &
the Incredible Hulk*

*Batgirl's **body** is strong. All the parts of her are strong. She says that good food makes strong **bodies**.*

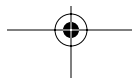
***Everyone** would like to be as strong as Wonder Woman. All people would like to be that strong.*

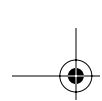


THE SUPER DICTIONARY



Hear the phrase "comic book reader," and many people immediately picture a gangly, pimply loser. Outside of prepubescent boys, the majority demographic audience for comic books is, let's face it, postpubescent boys. And the older we get, the more fiercely committed we must become to the fantasy universe mapped out in sequential art in order to keep the title "fanboy." Sadly, however, the more fiercely committed we become to comic book fantasy, the less comfortable we feel in the reality we actually inhabit. The comic book (and later the film) *American Splendor* touches on this sense of surreality for those of us who filter our lives through comic books—we become to our own minds caricatures of our-





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selves, and our engagement of the world is paneled off into isolated encounters. Author Richard Reynolds highlights the dilemma: “The comic book . . . continues to be . . . held by many to be an irredeemably corrupt and corrupting form of discourse, or else suitable only for children and the semi-literate.”

“Comic book stories presented physical strength and appearance as the measure of an individual’s worth, while the ads offered children the supposed means for achieving it.”

BRADFORD W. WRIGHT

Fanboys in particular are forced to deny our fascination with superheroes, to accept as true our classification by the general public as geeky weirdos, or to live in the uncomfortable tension somewhere in between: *He seems so normal otherwise . . .*

You’ve surely come across a picture of the stereotypical fanboy. The TV show *The Simpsons* has a recurring example: an overweight, smug pseudo-intellectual resembling not at all the heroes he promotes. He celebrates superhuman strength, but in his real, everyday life he is weak, contributing nothing positive to his community.

That’s OK, though, because comic books cater to the weak. When I was very young, growing up in Iowa, I responded to an ad in a comic book promising me muscles that would ripple every time I combed my hair or drank a bottle of soda, a physique that would make my arch-enemies think twice before kicking sand in my face when I went to the Iowa beaches. I was weak, but for the cost of postage (plus, say, \$6 shipping and handling) I could be strong.

When the package arrived I ripped it open to find a sixteen-page booklet. Fifteen pages had pictures of a ridiculously burly guy doing basic exercises in a variety of household settings—situps using the sofa as a brace for his legs, pushups from the seat of a chair, that sort of thing. The sixteenth page invited me to send away for more materials that





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would turn me into a hulking behemoth and keep my face free of all that Iowa sand I was apparently so afraid of. I did a few situps before realizing I had been hoodwinked out of my money. So I went back and read the comic book.

THE SECRET LIFE OF THE SUPERPOWERED

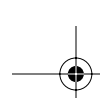
Fortunately for my fragile psyche, the comic book offered more than cheap marketing tactics to fulfill my fantasies of strength and self-defense. In fact, superheroes often serve as stand-ins for the shut-outs among their audience. Though our heroes live out their daily lives meek and mild-mannered, their nights are filled with heroic action and stunning feats.

Consider a typical day for a junior-high-aged hero. In the tradition of matching initials (from Lois Lane to Bruce Banner), let's call him Fritz Fryling. Fritz wakes up, tucks his wings into an oversized shirt and walks to school—even though he could fly. As he reaches his gym locker, he hears behind him the first of many taunts from the class bully: "There's Owl-boy. I hope you don't lose those Coke-bottle glasses of yours during dodge ball. Hoot hoot!" Then our mutant friend feels the sharp sting of a wet towel snapped against his legs.

He knows he could spin his head all the way around to face his attacker; he knows that he could easily fly out of reach of the towel; he even knows that his razor-sharp, retractable talons could quickly shred a bully whom no one would miss for long. He knows that he's smarter and nicer to girls than the bully; he even knows that in reality he's stronger and more dangerous than the bully. But he stays silent, and he keeps his secret.

That's just gym class. We, the readers, know what our hero's classmates, teachers and family don't know, and we sympathize with his plight. And in a way, we share in his suffering because we are all too familiar with the pain of alienation, of victimization. We know that bullies





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call the shots in junior high and that one moment of satisfaction in returning violence against a popular, powerful nemesis would open the door to all kinds of trouble.

We know this whether we are the bullied or the bully. There are social forces at work in our lives, whatever season we find ourselves in. We are part of a pecking order because fallen human beings operate consciously and unconsciously in power dynamics. When we are weak, we wish we were strong. When we are strong, we fight to retain our strength.

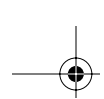
I'd like to pretend, for example, that I was always the victim of such bullying and never the perpetrator, but I can't. I certainly could have been: when I was a child, I was hardly ever in the in-crowd. I was a band geek who collected comic books, for heaven's sake. As such, I was manipulated into helping pretty girls cheat on their finals, I was called a nerd and a loser to my face, and I was pointed out for public ridicule and threatened with a beating on more than one occasion.

"Superheroes are first and foremost about role-playing—becoming the character."
SCOTT McCLOUD

And yet, I managed to find a way of asserting myself within the caste I found myself in. My friends and I invented ways of ostracizing people that would cause maximum pain—the most unimaginative being "the group" membership cards we passed out to those people we considered part of our A-list. (Imagine the humiliation of being rejected for membership in a group of nerds.) At my worst, I made a girl cry all the way home from school, and I beat up a boy for being too new to our town. I didn't have much social power to defend, but I defended what little I did have with ferocity.

But back to our hero. Fritz trudges his way through a day filled with occasional humiliations and the constant awareness that at any moment he could overturn the power dynamics in place. That night he hits the streets, with wings spread wide open and talons extended. He is no longer Owl-boy; now he is Night Vision, ready to use his power without





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restraint against whatever forces of evil threaten the peace.

And so are we. Just as our hero has escaped his everyday world to live free as his expanded self, so his readers leave behind the frustrations of paying bills and finishing homework and avoiding trouble and enduring rejection to play hero.

THE FANTASY OF STRENGTH

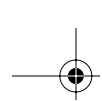
So what is it about superheroes that makes them endure the tedium of normal life? And why do we, as readers, allow it? If we had the powers of our heroes, would we stand for the petty meanness of the average people who bully us? If we knew our friends had such powers, would we allow them to do nothing for us or for themselves? There's an unspoken rule among superheroes that powers are to be used only in critical situations. We're not often told why, but the origin of one superhero gives us a look at what could happen without such self-restraint.

Spider-Man wasn't always Spider-Man. For most of his childhood he was mild-mannered Peter Parker, an orphaned genius being raised by his elderly aunt and uncle. He was a bookish, withdrawn kid, regularly used and abused by his classmates. He was Owl-boy without the wings.

Then one day on a field trip to a laboratory, Peter was bitten by a spider exposed to radiation. Over time Peter discovered that he had appropriated the physical characteristics of a spider—the ability to stick to walls and ceilings; greatly enhanced strength, speed and agility; and (we're told much later in the 2002 film) the capacity to spin his own webbing. He had always been smarter than anyone in his class; now he was stronger, faster, more talented and quickly more confident as well.

So Peter did what you might expect the butt of everyone's jokes to do: he started showing off. He picked fights with schoolmates and got quick revenge on the people who had abused him for so long, and he started making lots of money by exploiting his newfound talents as an unbeatable mystery wrestler. He alienated everyone he encountered—his employer, his





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classmates, eventually even the press—with his brash, defiant attitude. And when he could have stopped a burglary without even exerting himself, he didn't bother. All the average, immature high-school students got their comeuppance from Peter, but no bad guys met justice through Spider-Man.

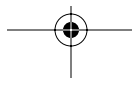
Peter learned a painful lesson though. His uncle, who had raised him since his parents' death, lost his life at the hands of the very burglar Peter had let escape. Peter quickly realized that by his inaction he was complicit in his uncle's death. And by the end of his first adventure, as he meditated on his uncle's advice—"With great power comes great responsibility"—he grew up a bit and discovered the proper channel for his abilities.

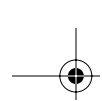
Peter Parker added an adolescent humanness to superheroes that until his debut in the comic *Amazing Fantasy* had played a minor role, and he resonated with his readers. We learned that to fantasize about having special powers was all well and good, but there was a corresponding ethic to having such powers, and our fantasies would not play out as we might like if we intended to remain the hero of our own stories. We can hope that someday we will be stronger than we are, better equipped to handle the hardships we inevitably face, but we must also hope that we will use that strength with wisdom and humility.

For Peter, that humility meant returning day after day to school and eventually to work, enduring humiliation as well as he could, and seeking the appropriate balance of power and responsibility that his uncle had pointed him toward. He used his powers only against those whose passions could not be controlled by the ordinary safeguards of law, common decency and moral impulse. He alternately used and hid his powers so that he and the people around him could live as normal and happy a life as possible. Such was his gift, and such was the greatest use of his strength.

WILLING WEAKNESS

Unlike Peter Parker, Superman was born Superman. He was christened Kal-El on another world but raised on Earth as mild-mannered Clark





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Kent, a lovable nerd in a world too big for him. But why would someone who could do anything and be anyone choose to remain Clark Kent? Is there something inherently virtuous in being weak? Does Superman practice deceit as a part of everyday life?

You could blame his adoptive parents. They hid his unearthly origin from their friends and neighbors, and brought up Superman from infancy as their own. They advised him to keep his abilities secret, and when he left home he continued to do so. They raised him to live a dual life.

To be asked by those in authority over you to not be who you are seems patently unfair, but the whole thing seems particularly absurd in the case of Superman. His parents couldn't stop him from being Superman unless he let them. He condescended from birth to adopt the life-style handed him by his parents.

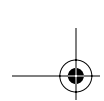
Superman embraced his identity as Clark Kent. In fact, Clark Kent's weakness became as much an asset to Superman as heat vision or the power of flight—it kept for him some sense of normalcy that would otherwise be unachievable, given his particular gifts. It also meant that people regularly underestimated him, allowing him to work some angles of a problem with significantly less resistance than he would have experienced in cape and costume.

Superman does, however, have more than one weakness of his own. He can be affected by the supernatural, for example, which means that he can be coerced into situations beyond his capacity to escape or overpower. But supernatural events are by their definition outside of what is normal to our experience. Over the course of a normal day there are only a couple of weaknesses that stick with him.

EYE HAS NOT SEEN

The first of Superman's weaknesses is not so much a weakness as it is a limitation: though he can see through virtually anything, he cannot see through lead. You and I survive our daily lives happily enough without





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X-ray vision, but then again, we don't have to see through anything to get our work done—unless you count seeing through scheming and posturing by the people in our lives.

But Superman lives his life in part by seeing through things. In hostage situations he can know where all the criminals and victims are hidden—unless they are shielded with lead. As a reporter Clark Kent can investigate a suspicious corporation without ever making it past the reception desk—as long as the building is not lined with lead. He can see things he's not supposed to see (like birthday presents) and know things he's not supposed to know (like the contents of a safety deposit box) as long as no lead blocks his view.

Now let's be frank: this isn't much of a weakness or limitation. Superman can do virtually anything else, so he can easily find his way around the lead issue; he can even rip the lead apart if he's desperate enough to get it out of his way. A more interesting weakness would be if he couldn't see through air or glass.

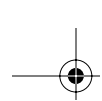
But Superman has occasionally suffered for his inability to see through lead, most notably in the first *Superman* motion picture, in which his rival Lex Luthor uses a lead-lined box to hide the more dangerous of Superman's weaknesses.

THE THING TO AVOID

Superman's other weakness is also not so much a weakness as it is a vulnerability: though he is impervious to virtually all earthly elements in any form or combination, his physical or mental state is compromised whenever he comes into contact with kryptonite, the piecemeal remains of the planet of his birth.

Kryptonite comes in forms conveniently distinguished by color. When exposed to green kryptonite, for example, Superman is quickly sapped of his powers, his strength and ultimately his life force. Too much green kryptonite for too long, and Superman dies.





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Red kryptonite isn't necessarily fatal; its effects are entirely unpredictable. Red kryptonite has been known to change Superman's shape or his constitution; sometimes it simply renders him powerless. Sometimes, though, as happened in an early episode of the TV show *Smallville*, he becomes violent, self-absorbed, immoral—all the things you would not want an unstoppable force to be. Under the influence of red kryptonite Superman has hurt people he cares about, caused rampant destruction to places important to him and generally undone much of the good he'd done previously. Too much red kryptonite for too long, and the soul of Superman dies.

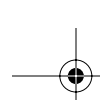
Fortunately for him and for those who inhabit his universe, Superman recognizes and accepts his limitations and vulnerabilities. He can't see through lead—so what? That doesn't make him less of a person. He has to depend on other people when he gets sick from exposure to green kryptonite—so what? We all need other people from time to time. He can't let himself fall under the influence of red kryptonite—so what? We all have issues that overwhelm our sensibilities, and if we're lucky we find the strength and support to steer clear of their influence.

Superman is lucky. He knows and accepts what he can and cannot do, and he accepts the help of people in his times of need. His weaknesses, though they are profound, do not define him and will not overcome him. The Hulk, on the other hand, frequently wallows in his weakness and gives uncontrolled expression to the rage his weaknesses incite.

HIDEOUS STRENGTH

Unlike any of his predecessors in the comic book universe, the Hulk explores the pitfalls of strength. He came to be as the result of a heroic act by a physically weak and ethically challenged scientist who was developing a weapon of mass destruction for the U.S. government. To save the life of a young drifter, Bruce Banner enters the weapons testing range and is exposed to gamma radiation. Now, since Bruce isn't killed by the





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bomb, we might simply conclude that it is a failure and he is a bad scientist. But the effect of the radiation on Bruce keeps us reading.

We soon discover that Bruce, when faced with stressful circum-

“The Hulk is the manifestation of the part of yourself that you’re trying to deny. . . . He’s the big unknown that is hiding in the deepest level of brain structure.”

ANG LEE

stances, morphs into a primal, raging beast who gives near-full vent to his emotions. So what do the people around him start doing? You guessed it—they consistently expose Bruce to stressful circumstances.

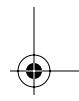
Creator Stan Lee characterizes the Hulk as a sort of Jekyll-Hyde character, but unlike Mr. Hyde, the Hulk is always sympathetic—always the protagonist.

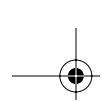
Predating revolutionary movements of the 1960s such as the Black Panthers and the Weathermen, the Hulk served as guilty pleasure, occasionally sticking it to the government that persecuted him and generally wallowing in righteous self-pity.

As a rampaging, paranoid beast, the Hulk doesn’t fit the description “team player,” but he has been attached to teams nonetheless. The Avengers and, later, the Defenders had to step lightly around the Hulk and channel his rage toward their own goals, but for a short time the Hulk experienced the security and insecurities that coexist in a team setting.

Still, for the most part the Hulk has been a loner. In a universe given to exaggeration, the Hulk serves as an exaggerated example of the isolation that accompanies power and difference. In this respect he is different only in degree from our Fritz Fryling/Night Vision, from Peter Parker, from Superman, even from each of us.

The Hulk is the favorite character of Brian, a friend of mine. Brian runs a successful business that as a side effect leaves him without direct human contact for hours at a time. Unmarried, he’s watched friends and family members get married and have children—something he wishes





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for himself. He works, eats and sleeps alone while others work, eat and sleep together. Sometimes it drives him, well, a little crazy.

Yet Brian has an enviable life when judged on its own merits. He controls the direction of his business; he enjoys a reputation as a gifted, ethical businessperson and as a generous, compassionate person; he has a diverse network of friends who are intensely (and, I admit, intrusively) devoted to his best interests. He is, at least in theory, free to go anywhere and do anything at virtually any time. Brian and the Hulk have this in common: they are, depending on your mood, free or cursed to roam the earth.

STRENGTH IN WEAKNESS

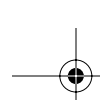
Superman has something, then, that the Hulk does not. Superman has accepted what he is *not* as part of embracing what he *is*. Granted, it's good to be Superman; he isn't hunted like the Hulk or misunderstood like Spider-Man. He does recognize, however, that his weaknesses play their part in shaping who he is and what he does. Matters that require seeing through lead and handling kryptonite will have to be delegated to someone else, but outside of those examples virtually anything looks like a job for Superman.

We're all in many ways like these heroes. Despite our best efforts some people will be intimidated enough by our strengths that they will try to manipulate our weaknesses. We live in a politicized world, and even the best of us are motivated enough by personal gain to be threatened or opportunistic in how we relate to others. I've been jealous of my friends' successes, and I've manipulated the mistakes made by professional colleagues to my own advantage, and—trust me—I'm not alone. We've all been on either side of Spider-Man's webbing.



Like the Hulk, we will continually face the temptation of interpreting our differences as weaknesses and wallowing in what we cannot be or do, even lashing out at convenient scapegoats. The American propensity to





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sue corporations for emotional damage over such things as making their food too fatty is a good example of pent-up frustration expressing itself blindly. Each of us is one gamma-ray bomb away from being the Hulk.

But like Superman, when we come to terms with our limits and embrace our identity we are freed to experience the surprising strength that can flow through our weakness. The apostle Paul understood this for himself and for his hearers. “Not many of you were wise,” he writes matter-of-factly in 1 Corinthians 1:26. Yet the Corinthians lack of wisdom made it all the more remarkable that, as Paul goes on to suggest, they held the secrets to life and joy and peace. In fact, their foolishness—our foolishness—would “shame the wise” and bring glory to God. “Therefore,” he would later declare, “I will *boast* all the more gladly of my *weaknesses*, . . . for whenever I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:9-10, emphasis added).

Many have wished that they were like Spider-Man or Superman or the Hulk or even the apostle Paul. But few have wished to be like them in their weakness. Perhaps that’s why so few have been so strong.

