



# INTRODUCTION

## *We Could Be Heroes*

*When people **ask** how to be brave, Supergirl tells them. When people make questions about being brave, Supergirl tells them.*

*Robin wondered what Batman would **expect** from him. He wondered what Batman looked forward to. He was afraid that Batman **expected** too much.*

*Flash would **rather** be good than bad. He would more gladly be good than bad.*



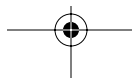
### THE SUPER DICTIONARY



**S**top me if you've heard this one: A man walks into a phone booth . . .

If the first image to pop into your head is Clark Kent, and if that image is immediately followed by a mental picture of Superman, you're in good company. Superman is a fixture in Western pop culture, so instantly recognizable that people think of a man in tights and a cape instead of the Nietzschean theory that originally gave the term *superman* cultural relevance.

That's a significant comment on contemporary culture: we are more shaped by an entertainment icon than by the major philosopher of the





## COMIC BOOK CHARACTER

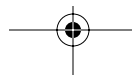
nineteenth century. But Superman, and other superheroes like him, have come to represent what is noble and worth pursuing. Our ethics are reflected in (and perhaps shaped by) who they are; our understanding of salvation and deliverance is shaped by (and perhaps reflected in) their exploits.

Superheroes have cemented their place in the American cultural landscape. A person could wear Spider-Man underwear while riding a Batman rollercoaster, then go home to sit in front of the TV in his Superman (or Wonder Woman) robe watching an *X-Men* DVD, munching on Incredible Hulk cereal. Superheroes have become so culturally viable that even heroes unfamiliar to the mainstream culture such as Daredevil or the Huntress have gotten their own film or television treatments. But where do these heroes come from, and what gives them staying power?

### **AN ADMITTEDLY SHORT AND SUPERFICIAL HISTORY OF THE UNIVERSAL NEED FOR HEROES**

It may seem odd on the surface of things to think that comic books can be linked to Greek myths, but it's not so unusual if you think about it. When I was very young, my parents didn't keep a lot of comic books around the house, but they did have a vast library, and they were interested in having kids who read. Greek myths were easily filtered to a preschooler's reading level and were compelling enough to hold a squirrely little child's attention.

So I read about Hercules and his twelve adventures, including his battle with the unbeatable Hydra and his encounter with the even more impressive Atlas, who held up the heavens. I read about the Minotaur, the flight of Icarus, the Medusa and the golden fleece. In reading these stories I entered into the storytelling heritage of the Greeks, which taught lessons about the rise and fall of nations and the fragility of the human condition while captivating my imagination with characters of breathtaking power and creativity. My early childhood heroes went way back.





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Lest you think I grew up in goatskin pants, raised by pagan parents, I also read stories from the Bible, principally from the Old Testament and the Gospels. I got a kick out of my namesake David, who stood up to a giant and won. Daniel and his friends wowed me as they fought lions and fires and came out unscathed. Even Moses impressed me with his remarkable abilities and his heroic battle against the pharaoh.

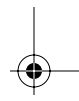
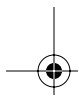
By the time I stumbled onto the comic book stand at my local library, I had already been schooled in the classic “hero myths.” Not that I believe the Bible is just a bunch of myths, but you have to admit that for a grade-school kid there were some common denominators of interest between Hercules and Samson, Atlas and Goliath. Screenwriter Brian Godawa recognizes the thread that connects the superheroes to these characters from antiquity: “In . . . comic book-based stories there is a projection of super powers onto individuals in much the same way that the gods were projections of pagan hope.”

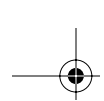
Essentially, every culture in every era has had its mythic heroes—people of extraordinary ability reaching spectacular goals against overwhelming odds. From Abraham’s rescue of Lot, to the Maccabees’ defense of Jerusalem, to Beowulf’s defeat of Grendel, to Saint Patrick’s driving out the snakes of Ireland, to Muhammad’s siege of Mecca; from William Tell to Robin Hood to Joan of Arc to Catherine the Great to Montezuma to Pancho Villa, people have gravitated to the telling and retelling of stories about people more powerful and more beneficent than they, battling forces more powerful and more malicious than they.

Eventually I turned from religious history and mythology to superheroes and supervillains, and I was quickly an enthusiastic convert. But enough about me, what about *them*?

**AN ADMITTEDLY SHORT AND SUPERFICIAL OVERVIEW OF SUPERHEROES**

In 1938 the undefined, fledgling comic book industry found its rhythm in





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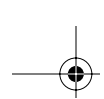
*Action Comics #1*, where DC Comics introduced a man called Superman. Faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound (of course he couldn't fly; don't be ridiculous), Superman ushered in the era of superheroes. He was followed in short order by others, including *Detective Comics'* Batman, a more sinister and somewhat more plausible hero. Whereas Superman fell to Earth, Batman rose from a family tragedy to fight back against the crime that plagued his city. Whereas Superman had amazing powers, Batman had only his wits, his excellent physique and an immense bank account.

Characters were underdeveloped during this Golden Age of comic books. Print issues were self-contained; kids bought comics to see who needed justice and who needed deliverance, not necessarily to see what their hero was thinking. As the Second World War came to dominate news reports and U.S. families fretted over the fate of their soldiers and their relatives overseas, jingoism overtook comic books. *Captain America Comics #1*, which debuted in 1940 (long before America entered the war), featured a cover picture of Captain America punching Adolf Hitler on the jaw. The character quickly generated sales of millions of books.

After the war some comic book heroes survived and others did not; due to the absence of a running storyline, the fate of particular heroes wasn't terribly important. Instead, as the 1950s unfolded and the industry came under criticism for glamorizing violence and hooliganism among juvenile readers, comic book companies began to focus on brand enhancement. Superman got a superdog, a supercousin and a retrospective on his childhood. Batman got Batwoman and Batgirl. In the process, comics got, well, a little silly.

Until the 1960s, when upstart Marvel Comics launched a flurry of new titles. While flagship DC Comics in 1965 sent Batman prancing around on national TV, Marvel was introducing characters like Spider-Man (1962), a teenage boy exposed to radiation and given enhanced strength and agility; the Incredible Hulk (also 1962), a scientist exposed to radia-





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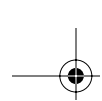
tion and mutated into a raging beast; the Fantastic Four (1961), a group of friends who went into space and gained bizarre powers after being exposed to radia . . . say, are you noticing a pattern? By capitalizing on the uncertainty surrounding nuclear power, Marvel established a new kind of plausibility among comic book superheroes. And to emphasize the blurring of fantasy and reality, Marvel's heroes were placed not in imagined locations like DC's Gotham City or Metropolis but in New York—the capital of the world and the center of the comic book industry.

Perhaps the most significant development in comic books when Marvel entered the scene, however, was that Marvel capitalized on its serial format. Readers started rooting for Peter Parker as he mustered up the courage to ask a girl on a date, even as they booed Spider-Man's enemy, who had a nebulous connection to Parker's daily life. All the while, Parker tried to earn a paycheck by selling photographs of himself as Spider-Man to a newspaper editor who hated Spider-Man's guts. Never mind *Days of Our Lives*; whereas readers could just as easily live without a particular issue of a self-contained comic book, serial comic books were appointment reading. Byron Stump recalls the difference:

A DC comic, there's a beginning, there's a middle, there's an end. It's complete. . . . A Marvel's going to start in the middle, end in the middle. It'll just be a piece.

The Marvel universe exploded, with wave upon wave of new characters with fascinating origins and complicated life situations. Serialized readers were invested enough in the characters that they wrote in regularly, expanding on character development and providing plausible correctives to errors in the continuity. Marvel editors would indulge such participation by awarding "No Prizes" to people who fixed flawed stories and, as Matthew Pustz observes, "telling the company's readers how smart and hip they were." Comic book readers were becoming a family, and they started to grow up in the 1970s.



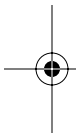


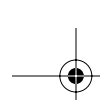
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Gwen Stacy, the first love of Peter Parker's life and a popular character in the Spider-Man franchise, lost her life in 1973 as a victim by association: Norman Osborne, the mentally unstable father of Peter's best friend, Harry, was the CEO of a laboratory and Spider-Man's arch-nemesis Green Goblin; he discovered that Peter Parker was Spider-Man and used Gwen as bait to draw him out. Gwen died while Peter/Spider-Man and his readers/fans watched helplessly. Comics came closer to real life than ever.

The death of Gwen Stacy was set against a backdrop where Peter Parker's other friends were struggling with other problems plaguing the social conscience of 1970s America. With the support of the U.S. government, Marvel Comics set aside its obligations to the Comics Code Authority in 1971 to show Harry Osborne, another main character in Spider-Man's storyline, struggling with drug use. DC Comics turned heads in 1970-1972 by addressing social justice in its *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* books; establishment icon Green Lantern was forced by populist anti-hero Green Arrow to face the inequities between rich and poor and systemic racial injustices. Comics in general embraced a mainstream, liberal worldview of tolerance and progressive libertarian ideals.

In 1978 Will Eisner advanced the medium of comic books (or its more sophisticated label "sequential art") with his "graphic novel" *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories*. The graphic novel differed from conventional comics in its length, its binding (graphic novels had spines, as opposed to staple-bound comic books, and thus could sit comfortably on a bookshelf) and in many cases its mature and sophisticated content. Comic books now had a template for serious, adult treatment of substantial topics, as well as a format that left behind both serial and situational storytelling. The industry expanded to accommodate Eisner's vision, and by 1989 a Pulitzer Prize had found its way to Art Spiegelman for *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, a comic book treatment of so grave a subject as the Holocaust.





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While the medium of comic books was expanding beyond superheroes, superheroes were expanding into other media: four Superman movies (the first debuting in 1978) and later a series of Batman movies (beginning in 1989); several Spider-Man, Superman and Batman cartoons beginning in the late 1960s; *Wonder Woman* (1976-1979) and *The Incredible Hulk* (1978-1983) television shows in prime time—these and other vehicles increased the mainstream visibility of superhero characters. Though their widespread acceptance didn't necessarily translate into increased comic book sales, they did inaugurate a new era of fascination with fantasy heroes.

This trend crystallized in different ways: satire, in the form of television shows like *The Greatest American Hero* (1981-1983) and later *The Tick* (2001-2002); and more serious treatments such as M. Night Shyamalan's 1998 film *Unbreakable*, which explores how a person comes to himself in discovering his unique gifts, and cult television favorite *Smallville*, a direct revisiting of the Superman origin stories that debuted in 2001 and shows the complexities of growing up different—very different.

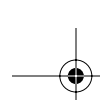
*"The proliferation of comic books being adapted into movies signals a contemporary hunger for hero worship, the desire for redemption through the salvific acts of deity."*  
BRIAN GODAWA

So comic books and superheroes are entertainment phenomena. But what gives them such potency?

**RUNNING ON FAITH FASTER THAN A SPEEDING BULLET**

In my own case, comic books rubbed up regularly against core issues of life. My first resource for learning to communicate and for defining the elements that made up my reality was *The Super Dictionary*, a limited-vocabulary resource that used DC Comics characters to give context to





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the words I was using. I read it cover to cover many times. (Each chapter of this book draws on some of its definitions.) When I was later confirmed in the Catholic church, my aunt gave me a large sum of money in cash, which I put in my pocket as I hopped on my bicycle, rode several miles to my favorite comic book store, and emptied said pockets in exchange for front- and back-issues of *The Avengers*, *Batman*, *Daredevil* and *The X-Men*. My scandalized mother made me write my aunt a letter confessing how I had spent her generous gift. I wrote the letter without shame; what else could be worth so much money?

Comic books were, for nonathletic juvenile boys like me, baseball cards and the Mona Lisa and blue-chip stocks all rolled into one. We washed our hands before and after handling them; we carefully inserted them into clear, plastic bags for their protection; we scrupulously read buyers' guides to determine the net worth of our collection; and we stored them in safe places so our unwashed little siblings could not deface them.

Many of those comic books I have lost track of; they're likely circulating through the comic resale underground. But the stories stay in my head, and the connection between those stories and my confirmation remains acute.

I remember the righteous indignation I felt when the X-Men showed me that some people are belittled and discriminated against for no other reason than that they are different. I remember the horror I felt as Captain America listened to a Holocaust survivor recall her time in a Nazi concentration camp. I remember the perplexity that overwhelmed me as Henry Pym, a founding member of the superhero group the Avengers, deteriorated from heroic genius to broken down emotional wreck, betraying his teammates and beating his wife mercilessly. How could such a hero fall so far? And if my hero could fall, what might happen to me?

Somewhere along the way comic book characters moved from being





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two-dimensional—good guys and bad guys fighting in brightly colored tights—to being human. And while that conversion was unsettling to my adolescent mind, my adult mind reflects on it every once in a while. I take lessons from them now that were only vague considerations then. You might say that I followed a comic book catechism.

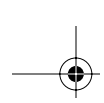
**A COMIC BOOK CATECHISM**

In this book I hope to give some order to that catechism, to mine the characters who have led the genre for what they suggest about what is true and right in the world, and what happens when the values they put before us rub up against the values embraced in American culture and the Christian tradition. While I won't be laying out a systematic program for becoming super—as though each of us is only a series of steps from a perfect life—I will be painting a portrait of how each of us, regardless of our peculiar abilities or flaws or circumstances, grows into our understanding and practice of virtue. I'll be looking at a number of issues that comic book heroes address in explicit and subtle ways, and drawing lines from them to the reality we face.

Why are we sometimes so strong and yet often so weak? What makes the difference between righteous anger and blind rage? Why do superheroes (and we) wear masks? What's so super about being good looking, young or even simply alive? Why are we so quick to marginalize people? Which higher power ought we to submit ourselves to, and which ought we to rebel against—the government? our peers and ourselves? our Creator? Who will save us from this body of death? And how then shall we live?

These are core questions we each must face in the world we inhabit. They've been answered in comic books, and they're being answered in our lived experience. Sometimes those answers correspond, and sometimes they don't. But as testing a car in extreme weather conditions flushes out its strengths and limitations, so by testing what appears to





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be virtuous or axiomatic in the extreme caricatures of comic book superheroes, we can discover what is truly true, good, right and noble. And once we've fixed our mind on these things, we can get on with living a heroic life.

