



#1

SUPERHEROES!

**CAPES AND CRUSADERS
IN COMICS AND FILMS**

LB TAURIS

ROZ KAVENEY

Superheroes!

‘Like a modern Gulliver, she brings back news of other worlds, of marvellous utopias and dystopias, in order to throw light on the one we live in – or think we live in. Roz Kaveney’s knowledge is awesome, her analysis passionate: this is a work of eloquent advocacy, urging readers to pay more attention to a crucial arena where ideas about men, women, virtue, and power are discussed - and formed.’ – **Marina Warner**

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ROZ KAVENEY

Superheroes!

**Capes and Crusaders in
Comics and Films**

L.B. TAURIS
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This is for John M. Ford and for Jane

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The Freedom of Power

Some First Thoughts on Superhero Comics

Origin Story

Officially, I never read them as a child. They were gaudy trash and a waste of money, and I only got to read them round at the houses of friends. Later on, they were one of the things I bought with money I had earned, often by buying *National Geographic* and *Punch* cheap at jumble sales and selling them for slightly more at second-hand shops. Like most adolescent geeks, I had to find ingenious ways of subsidizing my habits.

Part of the appeal was that American superhero comics were forbidden. In newsagents in the 1950s and 1960s, if they were present at all, it was in the lower rungs of revolving wire racks whose higher rungs held pin-up and fetish magazines. You did not have to have read Frederick Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) to make a connection: beefcake poses and skin-tight clothing and queer intimacy.

Somehow it was less OK to read them than to read British comics, with patriotic heroes like Dan Dare, or the strips in the newspapers – and admittedly my childhood was a golden age for those, what with Jeff Hawke and 4-D Jones in the *Express*, which was my parents' newspaper of choice. The *Eagle* and the other comics in its group had lovely art; at one point, a sick friend was lent an entire back-run of both *Eagle* and *Girl*, and I got to sit and work my way through both. I still feel that Belle of the Ballet was almost as

fine in its way as Dan Dare, and that Lettice Leef was significantly more amusing than her kinsman Harris Tweed.

Like pornography, superhero comics always teased, they always offered more than they could ever deliver, on splash covers where grinning villains played with our heroes and heroines as figures on a giant chessboard, or spun them on a wheel of death. Part of the thrill was always that, no matter how powerful superheroes were, they always managed to find themselves in a jeopardy commensurate with their strength. And yet, to deliver fully on that promise would always have been to make that jeopardy more real than the commercial medium could bear. Comics taught me that disappointed expectation of greatness that is part of the aesthetic experience: things are this good, but somehow, in one's mind, they might be better yet.

Yes, comics were strangely sexy, even when I was young enough not to be entirely clear what sexiness was. They offered fantasy and danger and risk and masks and skin-tight clothing. Wertham was a long way from being wrong about comics; he was just an uptight sexist prig who did not understand how complex and various human sexuality is. As a teenager, I was never quite sure what the Comics Code was, but I knew that every time I picked up a comic, it had passed some sort of censorship. I remember resenting this, inchoately, knowing that one of the reasons why comics so often disappointed me was that someone was leaning into my enjoyment, imposing limits on material whose whole point was that it should have none.

Yet, often, especially when I picked up Marvel comics rather than DC, I found material that blew my head off. Beings that ate worlds, like Galactus, or who simply had names as resonant as the Living Tribunal. They were creatures of dream and nightmare, available once a month for a shilling. Because comics had to avoid the specifically and overtly sexual, they often dealt in other kinds of ecstasy, and linked them with that pervading sexiness that nonetheless got through. This sense of the vast, oceanic and mildly perverse combined with my teenage religiosity to give me a taste for the sublime that has never deserted me.

At a more intimate level there were moments of psychological insight in the comics that I read that have haunted me ever since, no matter how corny they are, as when Mr Fear turned to Daredevil (the man without fear) and said that he had his own version of their story and in that version 'I'm the hero and you're the villain'. That was an important lesson for me to learn when I was 15 years old and a self-centred prig, and I learned it not from religion, nor political economy, nor from great literature, but from superhero comics.

To be fair to DC comics, which I read less frequently, they contained material that affected me as well. If, as a critic, I have been obsessed with shadow doubles, and with the nightmare self that is both threat and parody, it perhaps has something to do with Superman's freakish antagonist/other self Bizarro, or with the hideous Man Bat that Batman fought and conquered, yet whose hideous wings were capable of sky-borne flight where Batman could only ever swing or glide.

There is poetry in this material, both in the ideas and in the drawn images that embody those ideas. I used to own an issue of *Daredevil* in which, for page after page, the blind acrobat lawyer simply traversed rooftops and swung between skyscrapers, in total silence, without speech bubbles, thought bubbles or sound effects. It has stayed in my head as an image of pure athleticism and joy, as blissful as a Mozart rondo. Gene Colan was the artist for this, as for much else that I loved in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Back then, if you liked comics, you liked superheroes, because they were most of what there was. There were still aviators, but I thought that the Blackhawks were big bores. There were mystic adventurers like Dr Strange, but he so clearly lived in the same world as Spider-Man and the Hulk that it was no surprise when he started teaming up with, or advising, Marvel's actual superheroes; his mystic powers were rather close to being superpowers, anyway.

There is a grey area between magic and impossible powers, to put it mildly. The original Green Lantern's ring was magic, and the later ones were given their rings by an intergalactic agency, the

Guardians of the Universe. (The original Green Lantern's magic ring was later explained away as indirectly deriving from the same technology, which involves magic as well as science, conveniently.) In both cases, they acted as a focus for will, and – as we all know – magic is a technology of will, and any technology sufficiently advanced is indistinguishable from magic.

Comics helped teach me to play with paradox, and with the complex and double-natured; they are one of the reasons why I enjoy the postmodern condition without needing to dignify it with elaborate structures of theory. If my work is 'theory anorexic' as has been claimed, comics are partly to blame, or thank.

Powers and Responsibilities

So, superheroes, male and female . . . what is a superhero?

A superhero is a man or woman with powers that are either massive extensions of human strengths and capabilities, or fundamentally different in kind, which she or he uses to fight for truth, justice and the protection of the innocent. A substantial minority of people without powers as such share a commitment to the superhero mission, so they are generally regarded as superheroes in spite of the absence of such powers. Prior to Siegel and Shuster's invention of Superman (1933–8), masked avengers of this kind were the default group and were only gradually largely superseded. The mission is an important defining characteristic, as much so as the powers – many of the opponents of the superhero are as powerful as the hero, or more so, but they either lack moral compass or have specifically chosen evil. Nor is it enough to do no harm; most superheroes are as obsessed with duty as are the central characters of Corneille's dramas.

Superman has powers of both kinds but has them of his nature, not by self-improvement: he has preternatural strength and preternaturally keen senses, but he is also able to fly, heat things with his gaze and bounce bullets off his chest. Daredevil, on the other hand, has keen senses, as a by-product of his blinding by radioactive material, and his developed senses include not merely

the standard remaining four but other senses, such as balance and location, and an extra sense often called radar; he is also, by constant exercise, in superb but merely human physical condition. The Fantastic Four have ahuman abilities – stretching, invisibility, the capacity to become living flame, a stone-like skin coupled with immense strength – acquired by exposure to cosmic rays during an experimental space flight; they are also effectively the four elements.

In most cases, these powers are the result either of anomalous personal situations or of accidents. Superman is the survivor of an exploded planet and his powers derive in part from the difference between Krypton's sun and Earth's. Others have been bitten by spiders, or altered by cosmic or gamma rays, or given powers by beneficent aliens. It is the fate of the superhero to be set apart from the common run of humanity and to experience a degree of estrangement as a result.

Some figures normally classed as superheroes have no such powers in and of themselves, and thus regularly confuse the issue by being an exception to this rule. Batman is an extraordinary human being who has trained many standard human abilities to their limits and beyond, but has no special abilities. He is separate and estranged, however, as the result not of accident but of human malice – as a boy, he witnessed the deaths of his parents during a mugging and swore vengeance on all criminals.

What Batman does share with superheroes proper is this estrangement and the liminal status that is another of the superhero's defining characteristics. Superheroes are uncanny and exist at the threshold between states – it is the threshold that is important rather than the states it lies between, which is why liminality, of the most basic and literal kind, is a useful descriptive term here. There are many ways in which superheroes can be liminal – they can be socially dead, though alive, through the loss of their original family (Superman, Batman, Spider-Man), or exist as figures of the twilight (Batman). Many of them have an animal aspect, whether or not they literally metamorphose, others take on part of the nature of an alchemical elements, while remaining essentially human (the

Human Torch); to exist in two realms at once is also a way of being liminal. They can be the abstract embodiment of a quality – the various versions of the Flash, and Marvel's Quicksilver are both avatars of Speed.

They can, in a few cases, be literally both dead and alive; Superman has died and been reborn, as has Hal Jordan, one of several human Green Lanterns. They may be morally liminal, good and evil at once or at different times, or possess shadow doubles; Superman has been turned to evil by possession and by various sorts of Kryptonite, and he has a parodic surrealistic amoral double in Bizarro. Hal Jordan turned to the dark side – this was later explained away as his possession by Parallax, a powerful evil being – and then died, his spirit becoming the embodiment of the Spectre for a while, before being reborn free of the taint of Parallax.

Almost all superheroes are to some degree vigilantes: they do not work for the authorities, though at times they work alongside them, and they are sometimes accepted as a volunteer auxiliary of the police and other organs of the state. Superman, in particular, is deferential to elected officials to an extent that has sometimes led to his being portrayed negatively as the mere lackey of corrupt officials who exploit his goodwill – in Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), for example.

Some of them, and many of them some of the time, are at odds with the authorities. Batman periodically finds himself in conflict with new district attorneys who wish the police to dispense with the alliance. In the conclusion of Brian Michael Bendis' run on *Daredevil*, Matt Murdock has been imprisoned as the result of a long campaign by an FBI agent. In Alan Moore's *Watchmen*, (1986–7) masked vigilantism has been suppressed by law, and most of them have complied. In the Marvel *Civil War* storyline (2006–7), the superhero community is divided by an Act obliging them to register and reveal their identities, with internment as the punishment for non-compliance. (This is very clearly intended as a comment on the decline of civil liberties in Bush's America – Sue Storm, one of the moral centres of the Marvel Universe, says at one point that she thinks the USA went mad after 9/11.) Another of those moral

centres, Captain America, is assassinated in the aftermath of *Civil War*, and this may be that rare thing in comics, a real and permanent death.

Most especially, the X-Men, as mutants, experience bigotry; as such, they have regularly operated as Marvel's stand-ins for ethnic and sexual minorities. To pick but one of many examples, in one storyline of Brian Michael Bendis' *Alias* (2002–4) – which has no connection with the television show of the same name – the misidentification of a lesbian teenager as mutant helps pinpoint the small-town bigotry from which she feels forced to flee.

In the Marvelverse, mutants are potential victims of hate crimes and of state-sponsored pogroms, and of the sort of bureaucratic prying that is often a prelude to the latter. The mutant community is shown as deeply politically divided between those who want to make an accommodation with standard-model humanity and those who either regard themselves as superior or regard genocide of so-called 'flat-scans' as the only way of saving mutant lives. Periodically, in side-bar alternate universes like the worlds of event¹ storylines like the *Age of Apocalypse* (1995) or the *House of M* (2005), we have been shown the boot on the other foot. As the character of the mutant supremacist Magneto evolved over years of continuity, we discover that he spent his childhood in a concentration camp, and that if you look into the abyss too long, the abyss will look into you.

There are also mutants who, as a result of social exclusion or because of poor morals, abuse their power to live outside the law: Gwen in the television show *Angel* is a good example of a criminal mutant and an odd outcropping of X-Men style mutants into the Whedonverse. Between the underworld of crime and the underworld of the hideously mutated or transformed living in sewers, the bright glossy world of comics has always had a dark side – one might almost say, a *noir* side.

Latterly, both in Joss Whedon's run of *Astonishing X-Men* (2004–7) and in the third film *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006), mutants have

¹ I have used the term 'event' generally throughout this book. For a full discussion of events, see Chapter 5.

to cope with the possibility of genetic therapy that would simply turn them back into ordinary humans. The analogy here is not merely with blue-sky theorizing about gene-therapy for sexual identity, but with the political project of gay absorption into the suburban mainstream preached by, for example, Andrew Sullivan. In the parallel Marvel continuity that has followed from the *House of M* storyline, most mutants have been turned back into normal humans by magic, and are still victims of persecution by other humans, now as ex-mutants.

In the *Civil War* and *Decimation* (2005) storylines (see Chapter 5), the small rump of mutants still extant are effectively being held as prisoners on what might as well be called reservations. Approached by the factions in the row about registration, they for the most part refuse to take sides. Approached by her former lover, Tony Stark, for support, Emma Frost, who survived the destruction of the mutant nation Genosha, simply asks him where he was, where were the Avengers, when millions died, ‘when our babies were burning’. Mutancy in the Marvel Universe is a free-floating signifier, but a very powerful one, emotionally and polemically; the same is true of a number of other concepts, notably that of the superhero itself.

In many cases, this ambivalent relationship with the authorities is closely linked to areas of moral ambiguity. Particularly during the period when the Comics Code held sway, it is part of the mission statement of many superheroes that they do not kill, no matter what the provocation. Like many arbitrary artistic choices, this is an endless generator of story and the occasions when this rule is breached are always events – the execution of Maxwell Lord by Wonder Woman (to stop him using a hypnotically controlled Superman as his assassin) leads to an estrangement between her on the one hand and Batman and Superman on the other, which helps precipitate the *Infinite Crisis*, DC Comics’ major 2005–6 rebranding exercise (for an extended discussion of this and its 1985 predecessor, see Chapter 5). However, as we shall see, long-established rules and characters are only broken or re-imagined with impunity some of the time, and mistakes are often made.

Because of this anomalous relationship with society, many superheroes have secret identities. Superman is the reporter Clark Kent, Batman the industrialist and socialite Bruce Wayne, Spider-Man the photographer Peter Parker. Sometimes the secret identity is merely a useful expedient, and sometimes it functions as the expression of a divided personality, most notably in the case of Bruce Banner, who turns into the Hulk under emotional stress, but rather more subtly in the case of Batman (where there often seems a profound disconnect between the playboy tycoon Wayne and the dour vigilante). The idea that the angst-ridden world of superheroes is straightforwardly a form of escapism is a misconception; the process of self-identification that is part of enjoying comics involves a far more complicated dialogue between one's own problems and those of the characters one enjoys. Part of the point of Matt Murdock for me, once Frank Miller took the character over in the early 1980s, was the heavy dose of Catholic guilt.

Many superheroes are either orphaned or otherwise estranged from their families of blood; many of them acquire families of the heart in groups of co-workers or support systems, or work together as groups. Batman has an entire family of assistants and associates – the various Robins being merely the most obvious – as well as Alfred, who is both Bruce Wayne's butler and Batman's technician and battlefield medic. Those of us isolated by temperament or sexuality in our teens need a literature that consoles with the possibility of finding friends of the heart, and comics provide it, but not in any simple wish-fulfilment form; the relationships between team-mates or mentor and pupil are almost always shown as works in progress, as prickly soap operas in which things can go wrong.

The long association of superheroes with each other in crossover groups like DC's Justice League of America (JLA) and Marvel's Avengers means that they and their broader support groups are caught up in each other's destinies. In Alan Davis' alternate world miniseries *The Nail* (1997–8), the non-involvement of Superman in the affairs of the world – he has been brought up by Amish parents instead of the Kents – means that his colleagues in the JLA are less effective and that some of Superman's closest associates, notably

Jimmy Olsen, have turned to evil. The playfulness of comics is often distinctly dark in its thought experiments with its own material.

Many superheroes are paradoxical beings: his blindness means that Matt Murdock can hide in plain sight, as it were, because he is the one person no one will ever suspect of being Daredevil. Most secret identities are of this kind – Bruce Wayne is frivolous and money-grubbing, as is Tony Stark, so that no one suspects them of being Batman or Iron Man. Both Superman and Spider-Man are news journalists, which gives them a perfect excuse for being near where the action is. The one natural thing that can harm Superman is a rock from his lost home. In his identity as the lawyer Matt Murdock, Daredevil sometimes defends men he handed over to the law in the first place, and latterly he has been accused of malpractice on this basis.

Iconographically, almost all superheroes are good-looking and muscular, and wear costumes that emphasize the fact. There are obvious exceptions – Ben Grimm of the Fantastic Four is not any the less a superhero for looking like a pile of orange rocks – but the same is true in the world of celebrity, for which the world of superheroes is, as Jennifer Stoy has pointed out, a fairly obvious metaphor. Both celebrities and superheroes are wish-fulfilment people, living complicated and glamorous lives that we envy in spite of the perpetual hard work and potential tragedy that goes with the glitz. ‘When you’ve got it, flaunt it’, says Max Bialystock in *The Producers* (1968) and that they certainly do, often given a particular assist by artists like Alex Ross and Alan Davis, both of whom sometimes draw characters so sinuous, sinewy and stylish that it hurts to look at them.

Of course, superheroes have supervillains to struggle against, though the lines are often drawn in an arbitrary way and there are a significant number of characters who have crossed the line in both directions. Hal Jordan, DC’s best-known bearer of the Green Lantern uniform and ring, went to the dark side, and returned. Marvel has an entire team, the Thunderbolts, who were originally villains working a scam with new identities and variously sought redemption because they liked being good better. They were often

On the Artists – Briefly

If, in much of what follows, I talk far more about writers and editors than I do about the artists who give comics so much of their appeal, it is not, let us be clear, because I do not hugely admire the best of those artists. It is because they have been written about more, and because many of the writers in whom I am interested have been extraordinarily lucky in finding artists who were prepared to be servants of their vision. Sometimes I am writing about artists who were also writers, or managed to find writers to write what they wanted to draw – Alex Ross, for example, is the auteur of *Marvels* (1994) and *Kingdom Come* (1996) quite as much as the wonderful writer Kurt Busiek and the more ordinary Mark Waid. Let me here, though, record the names of artists like Bolland and Adams and Sienkewicz and Gibbons and Davis and Buscema and Romita and Colan and Vess and McKean and all of the others. Someone should write a book that properly celebrates the work of all these men, but that book is not this one, partly because it would cost so much to produce.

led by the current Baron Zemo, a figure more morally ambiguous than many of his team, since he may have laid aside his family's Nazi ideology, but he still regards himself as a man meant to rule. Post *Civil War*, as written by Warren Ellis, they are effectively a different group with different objectives, in spite of some continuity of personnel.

Some supervillains are career criminals; some are mad scientists using crime as an alternative to corporate or government funding; some are the rulers of rogue states; some are aliens or are time-travellers whose agenda are so caught up in paradoxes as to be almost incomprehensible. The Avengers' regular opponent, Kang, is at war with various other time-travellers and self-appointed or metaphysical guardians of chronological reality; he is also has problems with his younger and older selves, and with his clones. There are reasons why some supervillains decide that being good is an easier way to make a living.

Many superheroes have nemesis figures who are tragic, partly because they are the superhero's dark self. Superman has Lex Luthor, the millionaire and scientific genius whose quest for some way of damaging the being whose strength and integrity perpetually shames him regularly reduces him to ignominy. The television series *Smallville* (2001 onwards) places the origins of this feud in Luthor's young manhood and Superman's adolescence. This is not original, but rather a return to what was continuity before the *Crisis on Infinite Earths* reboot of the DC Universe in 1985 and the consequent reinvention of Superman continuity by John Byrne, and plays teasingly with the possibility that in this version of continuity things will work out differently. At one point, for example, Luthor has a vision of a world in which he becomes a completely ethical human being, and rejects it, without yet embracing evil, because it is a world in which he has no power and cannot escape the normal tragedies of the human condition. For a while, in main DC continuity, Luthor is President of the USA and abuses his office to attack Superman, risking the lives of everyone on Earth to do so; he ends up a deranged fugitive. In the aftermath of *Infinite Crisis*, however, he manages to blame his crimes on a genetically identical corpse (actually the son of his virtuous cognate in an alternate world). Such figures always find a way of coming back, but never really change, whereas Jean Grey and Elektra are at least chastened by tragic death and resurrection.

Very few, if any, of these arch-adversary figures are ever female – the relationship between the Batman and Catwoman has always been flirtatious as much as combative (and latterly she has largely rejected burglary for good works). His other significant female opponents are Poison Ivy – whose hatred for him is less personal than a question of his being a) male and b) not a plant – and Harley Quinn, whose feud with the Batman is mostly about attracting the attention of her main love object, the Joker, or Poison Ivy, with whom she has a relationship that is sometimes represented as being almost as romantic as the one she has with the Joker.

Generally speaking, the relationship between superhero and principal adversary is rarely seen as having a homoerotic component

— even now that the Comics Code no longer operates — and is more a matter of the motiveless malignity of an Iago towards an Othello: ‘he hath a daily beauty in his life/ that makes me ugly’. One obvious exception to this is the relationship of Superman and Luthor in *Smallville*, where, because the show is as much a part of teen genre as superhero material, adolescent ambivalence is certainly a factor, along with their rivalry over various young women (see my extended discussion of homoeroticism in teen media in the first chapter of *Teen Dreams* (2006)).

Another such relationship is some portrayals of that between Batman and the Joker, explicitly in Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* (see below in Chapter 4), implicitly in his murderous attitude to Batman’s young sidekicks, male and female. The Joker murders the second Robin, Jason Todd, and leaves Batgirl, Barbara Gordon, in a wheelchair for the rest of her life; in Alan Davis’ *The Nail* he tortures both of them to death. Interestingly, the intensely perverse implications of this are comparatively rarely followed through even in ‘slash’ fan fiction, which has no particular problems about making use of the quasi-pederastic implications it is possible to impute to Batman’s relationships with his male wards and assistants.

The other antagonist relationship that is sometimes given quasi-erotic implications is that between Charles Xavier (Professor X of *The X-Men*) and Magneto. It is a canonical given in continuity that the two mutant leaders used to work together and were friends; in the Ultimate² continuity, it is even canonical that Xavier neglected

² In the 2000s, Marvel created various titles in what we must call the Ultimate continuity, some of which, but not all, differ radically from the main line of Marvel continuity. All set their origin stories at the time of publication. This affects *Ultimate Spider-Man* comparatively little, save that Aunt May is a contemporary active woman in her late fifties rather than the standard near-crone. The *Ultimate X-Men* storylines tend to be grittier and use parallels with contemporary terrorism. *The Ultimates*, the equivalent of *The Avengers*, is very gritty indeed, with several of the team being near-psychopaths and the Hulk a monster who eats at least some of his victims. Earlier they created the M2 continuity that

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