



Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal

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In many ways, twentieth-century America was the land of superheroes and science fiction. From Superman and Batman to the Fantastic Four and the X-Men, these pop-culture juggernauts, with their "powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men," thrilled readers and audiences—and simultaneously embodied a host of our dreams and fears about modern life and the onrushing future.

But that's just scratching the surface, says Jeffrey Kripal. In *Mutants and Mystics*, Kripal offers a brilliantly insightful account of how comic book heroes have helped their creators and fans alike explore and express a wealth of paranormal experiences ignored by mainstream science. Delving deeply into the work of major figures in the field—from Jack Kirby's cosmic superhero sagas and Philip K. Dick's futuristic head-trips to Alan Moore's sex magic and Whitley Strieber's communion with visitors—Kripal shows how creators turned to science fiction to convey the reality of the inexplicable and the paranormal they experienced in their lives. Expanded consciousness found its language in the metaphors of sci-fi—incredible powers, unprecedented mutations, time-loops and vast intergalactic intelligences—and the deeper influences of mythology and religion that these in turn drew from; the wildly creative work that followed caught the imaginations of millions. Moving deftly from Cold War science and Fredric Wertham's anticomics crusade to gnostic revelation and alien abduction, Kripal spins out a hidden history of American culture, rich with mythical themes and shot through with an awareness that there are other realities far beyond our everyday understanding.

A bravura performance, beautifully illustrated in full color throughout and brimming over with incredible personal stories, *Mutants and Mystics* is that rarest of things: a book that is guaranteed to broaden—and maybe even blow—your mind.

Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal Details

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From Reader Review *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal* for online ebook

Jeremy says

Wonderful as an exploration of fantastic tropes in sci-fi, comic books, and paranormal literature and their roots in mysticism and gnostic spiritualities, but the author seems too credulous for my tastes. I love Grant Morrison and Alan Moore as much as the next comic book nerd, and wild ideas in weird sci-fi always spark my imagination, but uncritical treatment of Uri Geller and flawed remote viewing research projects caused my eyes, as if by some telekinesis, to roll uncontrollably. Skepticism is not the same as materialism is not the same as closed-mindedness.

As Aristotle supposedly said (but probably didn't), "It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it." *Mutants and Mystics* is full of thoughts I had fun entertaining. I recommend it if you're fascinated by woo as a kind of contemporary creative mythology, like me, though I would encourage any reader who finds her/himself swayed by the more fantastic claims in *Mutants and Mystics* to do some critical research before joining the neighborhood UFO cult. An open mind is a great thing, but let's keep our wits about us.

All that said, I would love to buy Jeffrey Kripal a beer and pick his brain as long as he'd let me. This guy can obviously geek out about *the weird shit*, and that makes for primo bar conversation in my book.

Bill Bridges says

This book was written just for me. I swear Jeffrey Kripal telepathically scanned my mind and knew all the buttons to push to make me devour this book. For someone like me who has spent years reading and writing sci-fi and weird horror in pop culture mediums – comics and games -- it's a welcome relief to see an academic take it all seriously. Well, not so serious as to make it boring and stuffy. Kripal admits that it was his remembering his love of comics as a kid that called him to take a fresh look at what comics have been telling us all these years, in light of his religious studies scholarship. That and a synchronistic X in a parking lot upon exiting an X-Men movie.

The book explores the intersection of pop culture – specifically comics and the sci-fi pulps – and the paranormal, and finds things are stranger and more uncanny than most readers, let alone sci-fi fans, are aware of. Kripal reveals the many hidden themes that all-too-often synchronistically crop up in comics and the lives of those who author them. He proposes that we are living in a Super-Story, an over-riding narrative behind the many sub-narratives we tell ourselves in pop culture. Well, we *think* we're telling these stories, but we ourselves *are being written*. By what and by whom? That remains mysterious and rather Gnostic, but once we come to Realization we can move to Authorization and becomes "authors of the impossible" writing the stories of our own lives.

This is a good companion book to Grant Morrison's *Supergods*. It covers some of the same territory, but now from a broader perspective than the experiences of just one artist (Grant Morrison); we also discover the weird and prescient lives and art of other key comic-book and pulp prophets as Alan Moore, Jack Kirby, Barry Windsor-Smith, and Ray Palmer, among others.

Next on my reading list is Kripal's previous book, *Authors of the Impossible*. I'd previously read portions of his book, *The Serpent's Gift*, and I plan to get back to that one soon, too. There's a cornucopia of rich ideas and connections in Kripal's work and I look forward to exploring them all.

David James says

I'll admit that I generally loiter in the rationalist world and don't put much faith in the supernatural. But having delved back into the *X-Men* and the novels of Philip K. Dick in recent years, I opted to read this overly-long and decidedly unfocused book looking for insights that never seemed to happen.

Kripal is rooting around in the pop culture world looking for ties to the realms beyond, and he's proven that if you filter your way through enough dross, you'll find the connections you were looking for. What he hasn't proven is his thesis, which in itself is not all that clear. Like a beginning jazz musician, he hits on all sorts of riffs here, once in a while hitting a good one, but usually just going on about nothing for far too long. The song he's riffing on lacks melody.

The result is a mess of a book that is completely uncritical of paranormal claims, highly critical of scientific skepticism (is he involved in some sort of interdepartmental conflict down there at Rice University?), and not particularly informative about science fiction, superhero comics, or the paranormal (which he accepts as real but never offers anything more than anecdotal evidence for; we find ourselves once again at the old game of requiring faith to believe, which invariably means believing without thinking...not a good life plan, but believers don't have much else to work with).

The book is not without its periodic merits (the above mentioned decent riffs that emerge every so often), but the most compelling case it makes is one the author probably didn't intend: he needs to spend less time reading too deeply into his old comic books, and more time out of doors.

Kassandra says

I couldn't get past page 50 of this awful book. Yes, comics often illustrate, even beautifully, a wide range of human experience that some label "paranormal" (but which I think is simply experience on a 6th sense level, completely natural and normal, not at all "supernatural" and which simply can't yet be explained by science). However, to have had a gnostic experience does not qualify one to be smarmy, smug, self-righteous, or to hold out a New Age-y type belief that this proves that humanity as a whole is "evolving" to some better space or time (or that humanity is really a colony that came from aliens who dropped on this planet). Come on, the New Age movement started in the 70s, and I think most educated humans can see that since then, we've gone a long way toward destroying our planet, wrecking our economies on a global scale, extirpating many other species, and generally intensifying the gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots". I don't see humanity evolving in any positive way. So I can't swallow a book written in a hopeful, faith-based style that sprinkles fairy dust. If you want to learn more about mythology and man's attempt to explain his sense of spiritual self or "Divinity", read some Joseph Campbell. Don't waste your time on this crap. And don't even get me started on the Whitley Striebers of this world, out to make gobs of money through b.s. claims of alien abduction. If you're gullible, a fanboy/fangirl, or you really do think we were put here to colonize the planet by aliens, by all means, read away. However, if you're just looking for some interesting reading about the

myriad ways humans have always used to try to explain what can't yet be rationally explained (and perhaps never will be, since each of us has our own individual response to what comes to us from a 6th sense perspective), like I said, read some Campbell or go back to the classics of Greek mythology.

Bill FromPA says

Throughout this book, Kripal describes several paranormal experiences of his own and various writers and artists, which often feature a sense of being outside of time. In reading this book, I sometimes had the sensation of having left the 21st century and stepped into the drugstores and newsstands of my youth where for a few dollars you could walk out with an armful of superhero comic books, magazines about UFOs and the paranormal, and maybe an SF / fantasy paperback or two as well. But this is no nostalgia trip: for Kripal these elements of pop culture are, to steal part of a Frank Edwards title, *Serious Business*.

While I'm all for serious treatments of popular culture, at times Kripal takes things a little too seriously for me. He seems to imply that these mass entertainments contain messages of personal and cultural transformation – he continually relates the messages in SF and comics to esoteric religious traditions like Gnosticism and theosophy. He tries to fit these various messages into a framework he calls a “super-story” (he's as fond of that suffix as any comic book writer), which looks at superpowers, both (supposedly) real and fictional as obtained from or projected into various sources. These sources are Orientation (finding power or transcendence in a distant place, particularly the East), Alienation (travelers from or to outer space), Radiation (not just radioactivity, but any powerful energy release), Mutation (biological evolution), Realization (the discovery that one is part of a written story), and Authorization (the taking of the power of writing one's story into one's own hands).

Despite having *Science Fiction* in the title, the book really covers very little SF – mainly Ray Palmer's “Shaver mystery” series in magazines during the 40s and Philip K. Dick's *VALIS* trilogy. In fact, I have the suspicion that Kripal has read considerably less SF than even I have: in his chapter on Mutation he doesn't even mention Sturgeon's *More Than Human*. Kripal deals much more extensively with comic book superheroes, which he sees, if I read him correctly, as prototypes of spiritual and / or physical transformation, figures embodying superpowers that have been cultivated by practitioners of occult disciplines over the past two centuries.

Kripal prefers to focus on those comic book creators whose work conveys a specific message of a mystical or philosophical nature or who have personally had mystic or paranormal experiences, which are sometimes only loosely connected to their productions. For example, in the section covering Batman, Bill Finger only gets a passing mention, while many pages are devoted to a Batman writer I had never heard of, Alvin Schwartz (who primarily scripted the syndicated newspaper comics) because he later wrote and lectured on visionary experiences he had concerning his work in comics.

Kripal seems highly credulous in regard to the paranormal, accepting most of the statements of figures like Uri Geller and Andrija Puharich who make some, to me, literally unbelievable claims. While he can occasionally offer a debunking type explanation, for example of Geller's televised watch repair trick, he doesn't seem to have read much in the skeptical literature. To be fair, the objective truth of these claims seems not to be all that important to Kripal, who treats much of the material, in a phrase he claims to take from Charles Fort, as “truth-fiction”, perhaps having reality in the minds of the perceivers, but the importance of which lies in embodying in symbolic form some psychological or spiritual truth.

Despite all my criticisms and qualifications, I really enjoyed reading this book – mainly because I enjoy reading about comic books, particularly when an author has a take on the subject that I haven't encountered before. The non-comic book material was less interesting for me; while I enjoyed the section on Ray Palmer / Richard Shaver, the later chapters concentrating on the mystical experiences of Philip K. Dick and Whitney Strieber were of less interest – they went over material I had read before and failed to add much new to my knowledge or belief in these men's experiences.

Etienne says

As a literary review and history of the dynamics of mutual influence between science-fiction trends and popular narratives pertaining to the supernatural, this book is a work of unparalleled erudition.

As a thesis on metaphysics and the malleable nature of reality, I'm afraid it did not succeed in convincing me. It is very likely I am not its intended audience; I am wary of the way that narrative conventions are sometimes essentialized. When we insist that our stories express a fundamental human nature, we necessarily must draw lines as to what that nature is, thereby running the risk of denying others our human dignity. I have seen nothing in "Mutants & Mystics" which might legitimate a narrow view of humanity, but I worry that the structure of its argument has been used to perpetuate iniquitous norms and roles.

Amanda says

I don't know where to begin with this fascinating book. First, this is the quintessential non-ebook. The design elements, color plates, and the thick, creamy pages, sewn into a rich cloth-bound book makes this a pleasure to hold in the hand. If you read this on an ereader, I weep for you. As far as the topic goes, it jacked straight into the part of my brain that loves fortean phenomena, occult knowledge, and pop culture. If those topics appeal to you...if you were ever a member of Barbelith...if you read comics or have any interest in comparative religion, mysticism, or the paranormal, you should give this book a try.

Richard says

Absolutely brilliant. Mind blowing.

Nicholas says

I picked up Authors of the Impossible a few months before reading this, and found Kripal's narrative and thought line in it to be compelling and touched on many things I have heard and read about the new myths and lores of the modern world. I liked it so much, I ended up suggesting a friend read this before I even had the chance to read it myself. I enjoyed this book almost as much as I enjoyed Authors, and felt it was lucid argument, not for the existence of the phenomenon, but for the existence of our involvement in it, which is an important distinction. Authors is a more personal account, following the experience of particular writers, whereas Mutants and Mystics zooms further out, while still focused on the experience of individual writers

and creators. *Mutants* discusses the larger cultural impact of the ideas discussed in *Authors*, examining the interplay between those creating the art and narratives of the paranormal and mystical, and the actual subjective experiences themselves in the wider culture. Once again, there are no arguments that will convert the believer or debunker, and the data and evidence is left for others to debate over. Kripal is more interested in how the subjective becomes real, and the real effects subjective experience.

The book is easy to read if you have some experience in philosophy, so it may be a bit difficult to navigate without a foundation level. In addition, some of his examples feel a little blown up and out of perspective. Otherwise, it is a thought provoking and fun view of a strange and compelling world.

Mark Oppenlander says

Dr. Jeffrey J. Kripal teaches philosophy and comparative religions at Rice University. He is also an avid fan of superhero comics, science fiction and stories of the paranormal. In this book he combines his sensibilities as a researcher with his interest in tales of the strange, alien and metaphysical to come up with one of the weirdest books I have ever read.

Kripal's premise is quite simple: Those who write science fiction, comic books and other tales of speculative fiction are often modern-day prophets writing from personal experiences. These stories of the supernatural, paranormal and metaphysical that we so avidly consume are grounded in some heretofore unexplained reality. Kripal does not try to "prove" that experiences of alien abduction, mutant powers or otherworldly happenings are true. Rather he simply presents the evidence: Many famous comic book artists and writers (e.g. Jack Kirby) have had unexplained metaphysical experiences that they later translated into material for their artistic work. The same is true for many renowned science fiction authors (e.g. Philip K. Dick). Kripal's research sources are unimpeachable; these writers and dreamers all believed that they had experienced things that transcended science and human experience.

Kripal breaks down seven major themes that he sees running through these stories of the fantastic, dating back to the late 19th century. Those themes include Divination/Demonization, Orientation, Alienation, Radiation, Mutation, Realization and Authorization. Each of his chapters deals with one of these so-called *mythemes* in further detail. The seven mythemes represent both the somewhat normal progression of a superhero story, but also some of the stages through which a human mind or spirit goes when considering the metaphysical or occult realm.

So what does all this prove? Well, nothing really. Kripal seems to think it is enough just to ask a lot of questions and draw a lot of inferences and half-baked conclusions and leave it at that. The book alternates between fascinating and frustrating, with Kripal clearly saying "there is something beyond the physical world that we don't fully understand," while all the time laughing at his own presumption from an aloof position of academic remove. It's like spending 300+ pages watching Mulder and Scully argue - if they happened to be two personalities housed within one person!

In the end I think that Kripal does believe in something beyond the material world. But whether that "something" is ancient aliens, chakra energies or the mutating capabilities of the human genome itself is unclear. What *is* perhaps useful about this book is the way in which he catalogues some of the major trends in popular fiction and comic book entertainments and describes how those relate to our own quests for fulfillment. Whatever we each believe, it becomes obvious that superhero tales are really stories of our spiritual yearnings as human beings.

M Christopher says

I've delayed posting a review of this book because I have such an ambiguous response to it. By the time I got around to reading it, I'd forgotten how it came to be on my list (it was on my shelf because my daughter gave it to me as a Father's Day present). As I began reading, I started thinking, "This reminds me of the bull**** sessions we used to have late at night at Rice University." Then I flipped to the author's bio on the cover and was reminded that Mr. Kripal is, in fact, the current chair of the department of religion at Rice and that I'd first read of the book in the alumni magazine.

"Mutants and Mystics" is indeed at one level some very high class university bull****. Kripal basically admits this in his introduction and mocks his own research and conclusions from time to time in his text, which is both endearing and distracting. His thesis could certainly lead to mockery by others so he defuses the situation with some proactive self-deprecation. His point of view throughout the book (self-mockery aside) is that the creators of superhero comics and science fiction are our era's prophets. Knowingly or unknowingly, he posits, they have tapped into some very strange truths about the universe which deserve our attention.

Despite Kripal's demurrals, it's clear he takes his subject quite seriously. Nor am I willing to dismiss it offhand. As William Shakespeare wrote, "there are more things in heaven and earth than dreamt of in (the average man's) philosophy." And while I am a skeptic regarding UFO's, ancient aliens, etc., I am a believer in the existence of a personal God who is the creator of all -- a stance which many in our culture find just as absurd. So, who am I to deny Mr. Kripal's convictions?

All in all, I found this a fascinating, if occasionally frustrating, read. Kripal presents a wealth of information about seminal figures in s/f, fantasy, and comic book writing. Because he is so familiar with his subjects, he occasionally under-writes context and over-writes details, leaving it hard to remember "who's who." But if you love comics, science fiction and paranormal speculation, you will likely enjoy "Mutants & Mystics."

Dogson says

Best nonfiction books about the origins of Superhero comics being a sublimation of intense mystic experiences of a few writers, who decided to spin tall tales instead of getting up on a soapbox about the spiritual world, siddhis, and superpowers and being subsequently dragged off by the Men In White Coats. Keep in mind, this was the 1950s, early 60's, Kundalini awakenings and Yoga studios were not on every block at this point. So these guys just embedded the archetypes and mythologies into a new subculture, called Superhero Comics. Incredibly inspiring, especially if you're involved in energy work or meditation of any kind.

Williwaw says

I just got a library copy of this book, and it is (so far) full of surprises. First, the book itself is quite beautiful. Much care has gone into every aspect of its manufacture and design. Second, I was delighted to discover that it includes many full-page, color reproductions of comic book covers and pulp magazine covers. I go crazy

for that sort of thing! Third, this is really about how modern day mysticism and paranormal experiences have inspired the works of some very prominent popular writers, including Alan Moore, Barry Windsor-Smith, Philip K. Dick, and Grant Morrison.

Update: I just finished the book. All my brain circuitry is fried. This book is a whirlwind tour of what is commonly thought of as the underbelly of pop-culture: science fiction, comic books, alien abduction narratives, and other outlandish stories that "really happened" to somebody. To appreciate this book, you need to believe, with Hamlet, that:

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

If you lack Hamlet's open-mindedness, and you think science fiction and comics are "just for kids," then don't bother with "Mutants and Mystics." You'll never know what you missed; but that's okay, because what you don't know won't hurt you (as many are fond of saying).

This was really my cup of tea, however, because I have recently become somewhat obsessed with science fiction, comic books, and pulp magazines. I'm also a big Philip K. Dick fan, and I'm interested in mysticism.

For me, Kripal's book is a gift. Not only does it provide insight into some books that I have already read and loved (Dick's "Valis," for example), but it has introduced me to a potential list of texts that I'm not familiar with but are now on my radar or even on my "to read" list. For example: Whitley Strieber's "Communion," and the books of John Keel (author of "The Mothman Prophecies").

There's no adequate way to sum up "Mutants and Mystics." It is a rich, enchanting, and bewildering brew. I'm tempted to re-read it soon.

But if I had to sum Kripal's book up in as few words as possible, I'd say this: "We have met the aliens, and they are us." (Bad grammar intended.)

Whitley says

Jeff Kripal has written the introduction to my upcoming book Solving the Communion Enigma. I got to know him after he sent me the section of Mutants and Mystics that is about me. The book takes the whole issue of what things like alien abductions actually are to a new level. I wrote a blurb for the book:

"Mutants and Mystics chronicles the emergence of a complex and startlingly dangerous energy in our world. Because we don't know what it is, we identify it as paranormal. But perhaps what it should really be called is "abnormally powerful," for, as Jeff Kripal reveals with satisfying skill in this book, it has come to define the very essence of the popular imagination. Instead of fairies and sylphs and gorgons, our rationalist world is defied by a folklore of superheroes, supervillains, and dangerous strangers, and, as I know all too well, can be shattered by them in some very real ways. Mutants and Mystics is the first book that shines the light of reason and insight into this swarming forest. As a wanderer here, I found the light that poured from these pages as blessed as it is breathtaking."

It's a terrific book.

Ryan Scicluna says

Suggested Further Reading:

Supergods - Grant Morrison
Our Gods Wear Spandex - Christopher Knowles
The 7 Spiritual Laws of Superheroes
A History of God
Etidorhpa - John Uri Lloyd
From India to the Planet Mars - Theodore Flournoy
Roads of Excess, Places of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism - Jeffrey J. Kripal
The Cosmic Serpent: DNA and the Origins of Knowledge - Jeremy Narby
Book of Lie: The Disinformation Guide to Magick and the Occult - Richard Metzger
Our Sentence is up: Seeing Garnt Morrison's "The Invisibles" - Patrick Meaney
Hollow Earth - David Standish
The Rosicrucians: The History, Mythology, and Rituals of an Esoteric Order - Christopher McIntosh
The Coming Race - Edward Bulwer-Lytton
A Magical Universe: The Best of Magical Blend - Jerry Snider and Michael Peter Langevin
A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of America Metaphysical Religion - Chaterine Albanese
The Secret Doctrine - H. P. Blavatsky
Atlantis and the Cycles of Time: Prophecies, Traditions, and Occult Revelations - Joscelyn Godwin
The Lost Land of Lemuria: Fabulus Geographies, Catastrophic Histories - Sumathi Ramaswamy
Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death - Frederic W. H. Myers
Charles Fort: The Man Who Invented The Supernatural - Jim Steinmeyer
Passport to the Cosmos: Human Transformation and Alien Encounters - John E. Mack
The Secret History of Dreaming - Robert Moss
Histories of the Hidden God - Jeffrey J. Kripal
Mothman: Behind the Red Eyes - Jeff Wamsley
The Many Lives of Batman: Critical Approches to a Superhero and His Media - Robert A. Pearson and William Uricchio
The Rough Guides to Superheroes -
The Unauthorized X-Men: SF and Comic Writers on Mutants, Prejudice and Adamantium - Len Wein and Leah Wilson
Turn Off your Mind: The Mystic Sixties and The Dark Side of The Age of Aquarius - Gary Lachman
Alter Ego - Jeffrey J. Kripal
Outside The Gates of Science - Damien Broderick
Yoga Powers - Knut A. Jacobsen
Occult America: The Secret History of How Mysticism Shaped Our Nation - Mitch Horowitz
How to Contact Space People - Ted Owens
A Gathering of Selves: The Spiritual Journey of The Legendary Writer of Superman and Batman - Alvin Schwartz
The Dream Connection - Philip K. Dick
Communion - Philip K. Dick
