



Superheroes!: Capes, Cowls, and the Creation of Comic Book Culture

Laurence Maslon

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Superman, Batman, Spider-Man, Iron Man, Wonder Woman, the Avengers, the X-Men, Watchmen, and more: the companion volume to the PBS documentary series of the same name that tells the story of the superhero in American popular culture.

Together again for the first time, here come the greatest comic book superheroes ever assembled between two covers: down from the heavens--Superman and the Mighty Thor--or swinging over rooftops--the Batman and Spider-Man; star-spangled, like Captain America and Wonder Woman, or clad in darkness, like the Shadow and Spawn; facing down super-villains on their own, like the Flash and the Punisher or gathered together in a team of champions, like the Avengers and the X-Men!

Based on the three-part PBS documentary series "Superheroes," this companion volume chronicles the never-ending battle of the comic book industry, its greatest creators, and its greatest creations. Covering the effect of superheroes on American culture--in print, on film and television, and in digital media--and the effect of American culture on its superheroes, "Superheroes: Capes, Cowls, and the Creation of Comic Book Culture" "appeals to readers of all ages, from the casual observer of the phenomenon to the most exacting fan of the genre.

Drawing from more than 50 new interviews conducted expressly for "Superheroes!"--creators from Stan Lee to Grant Morrison, commentators from Michael Chabon to Jules Feiffer, actors from Adam West to Lynda Carter, and filmmakers such as Zach Snyder--this is an up-to-the-minute narrative history of the superhero, from the comic strip adventurers of the Great Depression, up to the blockbuster CGI movie superstars of the 21st Century. Featuring more than 500 full-color comic book panels, covers, sketches, photographs of both essential and rare artwork, "Superheroes" is the definitive story of this powerful presence in pop culture.

"From the Hardcover edition."

Superheroes!: Capes, Cowls, and the Creation of Comic Book Culture Details

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From Reader Review Superheroes!: Capes, Cowls, and the Creation of Comic Book Culture for online ebook

Michael says

I could not have enjoyed this big, beautiful book anymore than I did. Spanning the last almost 100 years, the author covers the history of comic books and superheroes while providing incredible examples of comic book art from the 1920s until the present day. I learned everything I need to know about Marvel, DC, the Comic Codes (I just read *The Ten Cent Plague* as well) and a whole bunch more. Being somewhat new to superhero comic books, there was a lot I didn't understand about how they work, and especially about how character and universe continuity is maintained over nearly 80 years of different writers, illustrators, and fans. This was fascinating stuff!

???? ???? #BookDiet2019 says

This was a rather lucky purchase last month. I was rummaging through shelves in the bookstore when I found this displayed in the entrance. With its glimmering silver cover and embossed superhero pictures that spell **SUPERHEROES!** with a bold intent, I knew I have to buy it. Once I unwrapped it, I scanned the pages and was just stunned. I researched more about this online and found out that it was a companion book for a PBS Documentary called *Superheroes!: A Never-Ending Battle*. It was divided into three segments, all an hour-long tribute to the origins, industry and legacy of superheroes in American culture and consciousness.

While downloading the documentary, I started reading the book every night for the next two weeks. I was in page 35 when I started watching the first part of the documentary entitled "*Truth, Justice and the American Way*", and it was uncanny how Michael Kantor's episode went hand-in-hand with author Laurence Maslon's accounts. They traced the beginnings of comic books in the Depression Era and the emergence of two Jewish kids named Siegel and Shuster who came up with the Superman idea. Pulp inspiration converged with the creation of Batman, and Wonder Woman symbolized the growing need of gender equality of those times. The narrative in the book was gratifying while the screenplay itself was mesmerizing. Once I finished the first part of the documentary, I went ahead and finished the second chapter before going on with the next episode that features the same content.

"*Great Power, Great Responsibility*" introduced me to Stan Lee and the Marvel Universe, providing in-depth insights on Spider-Man, the X-Men and the Civil War storyline with Captain America and Iron Man (as well as the wonderful revolutionary art style of the Nick Fury issues). With Marvel humanizing their heroes and giving them actual real-world problems, DC was challenged to change their tone and approach and came up with Green Arrow-Green Lantern tandem who travel across America and expose its ills and injustices. The television shows were also discussed, from Adam West's campy Batman show and the Superman movies starring Christopher Reeve to the Spider-Man's groundbreaking debut in the cinemas and the X-Men's anti-bigotry message. The comic book-movie industry was further explored in the last part "*A Hero Can be Anyone.*"

In *A Hero*, further examinations of real-world crises such as the 9-11 tragedy became a canvas for heroes to represent new ideals and struggles. Nolan's *The Dark Knight* franchise as the War on Terror allegory, and Marvel's *Civil War* as a pseudo-political discussion between the old and new generations of Americans in conflict with each other because of global terrorism. The book and the documentary imparted a very strong

message concerning superheroes and their legacies. The world will always need superheroes and superheroes will evolve depending on how culture will help them progress. Marvel married not only Peter Parker and Mary Jane before but also two gay superheroes in their new universe. DC killed Superman and brought him back again because the country needed his unblemished symbol alongside Captain America. Even other countries recognize how superheroes stand for the oppressed and how they serve as front runners for doing the right things.

SUPERHEROES!: Capes, Cowls, and the Creation of Comic Book Culture was indeed a tantalizing historical account and a must-read literature for any comic book aficionado or casual reader interested to be a part of its legendary reach.

RECOMMENDED: 9/10

* I highly suggest watching the documentary alongside it for further appreciation of the reading material.

Daniel Kukwa says

A solid, coffee-table history book that tries to pack in as much as possible...and nearly succeeds. It can't do justice to everything, and there are other books about there (especially cover Marvel & DC) that go into much further depth, but this is as good of a one-stop-shop as you're likely to find on the subject of comic books.

Snow says

This is a history of comics, and their effects on america as they have grown, changed and influenced millions over the decades. Along the way we meet all the superheros who have formed the psyche of America.

Jonathan says

Super Heroes is the complete guide to the history of comic book super heroes. From their origins as mythical figures, through WWII and the civil rights movement, and into the modern gritty era. The book is a companion piece to a PBS documentary series which aired a few years ago. The audiobook edition of the book includes interview quotes with some of the people interviewed. Both wide in scope and history, Maslon & Kantor give readers an expansive view of how super heroes have become entangled into popular culture.

The most fascinating parts of this book include the non-canon origins of some of the characters. Some characters were easy to understand. For example, Captain America was developed as a hero to reflect the U.S. spirit during the war. His intent was always as literal as the star spangled costume. This blatant type of hero was an exception. Maslon goes into the deeper context of some of the most well-known characters. The dichotomy of Superman and Batman; early feminist rhetoric of Wonder Woman's author; the Fantastic Four was written as the first super-powered family. The book tracks the history from the 1930s to the present day, including discussion of Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and Todd McFarlane's *Spawn*.

The book ponders some of the most thoughtful essays on the topic of super heroes including the politics of secret identities, character sexuality, and gender roles. It all ends at what is called super heroes' "third

generation” which includes Alex Ross and Darwyn Cooke. Their retro-inspired artwork borrows from the golden age of comics, which have since been altered as the concepts of a reboot and a retcon were introduced.

“Superheroes!” concludes on the recent success of comic book movies, merchandise and fan conventions. Coming full circle, Maslon discusses the larger acceptance into the culture with the mention of President Obama’s interest in Spider-man and Batman, which prompted Obama’s cameo in the comics.

This is a wonderful read for it’s cultural anthropology and focus on contemporary culture. If you’re into super heroes, this one book will give you the historic context to enjoy the genre even more.

Denise Spicer says

This book covers comic book history, sociology, and in pop culture. The book includes almost 300 pages of colorful illustrations.

Bill Sleeman says

Superheroes! Capes, Cowls, and the Creation of Comic Book Culture by Laurence Maslon is well researched, well presented and nearly comprehensive, at least as much as it can with a community of followers (myself included) who grew up with and who can still appreciate the masked men and women of the multiverse. Based on the documentary of the same name by Michael Kantor (lots of fun that as well, check your PBS listings for when it will be re-aired) “Superheroes!” is a solid history of the mainstream superhero comics industry. I particularly appreciated that author Maslon is upfront at the outset that everyone who knows this topic will find one of his or her favorite characters missing (I did: Ka-Zar). It is inevitable in a topic this vast.

In spite of Maslon’s caveat at the beginning that some characters were missed there are some glaring holes in his text that have to be mentioned. Most obviously – and least understandable – is the total lack of discussion of Manga. This far reaching artistic and storytelling style continues to influence the industry (take a look at “Teen Titans GO!”) and its absence from this work is unfortunate. Also lacking is a discussion of the various war/army comics such as the Blackhawks or Sgt. Rock (although Nick Fury does get a mention in his SHIELD incarnation) which were essentially superhero comics in slightly different guise. Finally, in terms of shortcomings, Maslon overlooks The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Now, of ‘course, the Turtles are exactly what they set out to spoof (“Merchandising, merchandising, where the real money from the movie is made...” as explained by Yogurt in Spaceballs) but there was a time when the TMNT’s commentary on the excesses of Marvel and DC storytelling was the most interesting thing in the superhero world.

Maslon does offer a bone of sorts to those characters that do not really fit the overall narrative with short features throughout the text devoted to *Heroes and Villains We Love*. In fact one of these offered a review of one of the most puzzling of characters from my own giant box of comics – Hawk and Dove! I mean really, even as a kid I knew that Dove was virtually useless as a hero, his brother Hal could and would at least

punch someone, Dove just quivered in angst – not exactly the power a reader wants in his or her fantasy hero. It is interesting and perhaps telling (and not mentioned by Maslon) that Dove has seen a re-emergence as a female character with greater powers and stronger sense of moral expediency.

Superheroes! Capes, Cowls, and the Creation of Comic Book Culture might have been more comprehensive but who would really read a five thousand page work devoted to superheroes? Even a superfan would be daunted by such an undertaking but you would probably need that many pages to really do the topic justice. Lacking that sort of space and acknowledging the book's relationship to the documentary, this work is an entertaining and valuable addition to the genre.

Steven Wilson says

An ambitious work, valuable for its illustrations alone. It covers the history of comics from the pulps of the early 20th Century through the Avengers film of 2012. Its coverage of the youth and coming of age of the industry, up through Dr. Wertham and the creation of the Comics Code Authority, is strong. Then the text starts to taper off in both energy and in quality. I was fascinated by the frank discussion of the backgrounds of the Golden Age creators, and the factors that cause the children of Italian and Jewish immigrants to gravitate to the field. I was disappointed, however, to note that the authors were sometimes writing about comics they hadn't read or fully researched. In their discussion of the industry post-1970, their objectivity fails, as they pretty much follow the sales figures in choosing what books, characters or creators to talk about. I'm a little unclear how you write an overview of an industry and call a solid-but-never-spectacular talent like Gerry Conway "a giant," and yet you never mention, even once, creators like Matt Wagner or Steve Englehart, and you give John Byrne the barest nod. Even Chris Claremont, without whom X-Men would be a book that died in the Seventies, is a little short-changed here, in favor of slavish devotion to the likes of Grant Morrison, a man who, by his own admission, hates comic books.

Melissa says

I got this book both in hardcover and on audiobook after watching the 3-part documentary series of the same name on Netflix. As someone who didn't really know where to start when she waded into comic books a few years ago and who has slowly picked up pieces of context over time, this book was a wonderful and invaluable overview of the history of the medium. It covered everything: from the initial development and influences of the medium to the effects of societal and technological movements on the creation and regulation of characters, from the Marvel vs. DC jockeying in various media to the ongoing disputes over creators' rights and the creation of Image Comics, leading all the way up to the recent corporate acquisitions of the major market players and the emerging cinematic juggernaut status of the medium. All of this definitely gave me a more comprehensive understanding of the history of comics as well as a greater appreciation for the characters and creators that it encompasses, as well as providing a nice jumping off point to research more of what intrigued me here. All I can say now is that, since I listened to the audiobook, I definitely need to go back to the print book to see all the art I've missed!

David Thompson says

By no means am I a comic book junkie, however, I am hopefully like most Americans in that I appreciate the idea of a super hero. Whether in a comic book, on a television screen, movie screen, or action figure, there is no question that some form of super hero has touched most people in their childhood. Laurence Maslon's "Superheroes!: Capes, Cowls, and the Creation of COrmic Book Culture" is a great once-over-the-world for anyone to do a deep dive into the comic environment.

Broken into three parts across seven chronological and thematic chapters this book is thorough enough to satisfy any quest for super hero knowledge the average reader may be looking for. It certainly scratched my itch.

The first part covers 1938 to 1954, a great period, but marked heavily by the rise of the Superman character. Next is the "Great Power, Great Responsibility" phase from 1955 to 1987. Finally, "A Hero Can Be Anyone" covers the 1988 to 2013 window. I personally enjoyed this final part as it closed the gap between the written / drawn page and the big screen.

The book is a solid, comprehensive non-fiction approach to an interesting topic. His writing style serves as a great forcing function to continue turning the page. The plethora of super hero vignettes also make for a well-balanced book.

I recommend it for any super hero fan, whether on the comic page or on the big screen.

Jeff says

I was extremely excited when I learned that the PBS documentary "Superheroes: A Never Ending Battle" had this companion book and even more pleased when my local library had a copy. Little did I know what was in store for me.

This beautifully illustrated book takes the reader on a journey of superheroes from their earliest days in pulp format, right through 2012/2103. Along the way we are introduced to the giants of the industry, who laid the ground work for generations to come and experience the ups and downs of a world where comic book heroes are cheered as patriots during WWII and quickly get demoted to the dregs of society in the 1950s; resurgence in the 1960s, mirroring fears of the nuclear age and racial tension; the rise of anti-heroes in the 70s and 80s; and the revitalization of the industry from the 90s to today. The men and women who championed the superhero genre are true American artists of the highest degree and I was so happy to learn more about the industry that has meant so much for me over several decades.

Fans of comic books, pop culture, and American history will enjoy the wealth of information collected and presented here. I highly recommend it to anyone who is remotely interested in this American art form and would love to add this book to my personal collection in the near future.

Melora says

Starting with the caveat that I only really read the first half, the book is an excellent history of superheroes in comic books. I picked this up to give myself some background before reading Michael Chabon's book, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, and once the history reached the 60's I figured I'd gotten what I needed. Down the road, though, I may read the second half, as the book is well done, detailing how comics adapted to changes into society, appealed to various markets, etc., and is lavishly illustrated with comic book covers, illustrations, and photos of artists at work.

Jacob Smithson says

Really good information on the super heroes we know and love! Loved it!

Kelsey Hendrixson says

Whether you're a mega comic book fan or a casual marvel/DC movie watcher you will LOVE this book! It takes beloved superheroes from conception to 2015. Exploring the creators, inspiration behind the crime fighters, and how they influenced/were influenced by American Culture. I was obsessed from start to finish and now feel better educated on a world I love

Logan Trusner says

In *Superheroes! Capes, Cowls, and the Creation of Comic Book Culture*, the author Laurence Maslon talks how the culture was formed and throughout the book, it goes through the well-known superheroes by their release dates. Then describes the story behind how the superheroes were made into the pages of their books. But what drew the kids in bookstores and later comic book stores to the characters like Superman or Spider-Man? Many kids grabbed these books to escape to a place that they knew the hero would always win. Maybe some grabbed them from the interesting stories that left you hanging till the next issue. They could have also grabbed a comic for the related characters in the story and how they could do the things that the readers often wished that they could do. Comics spurred kids to stand for their beliefs and what they enjoy.

Comics provided many kids with a window into the adventures of their favorite hero. So that the kids ignore the bored and bland world in which they lived in. The adventures were very enjoyable to kids during the Great Depression because the kid could feel the excitement of Superman pounding the crap out of some aliens and saving the day. This is important because it keeps the kids happy in a time of sadness. Also later on for those kids who were going through and divorce or other family matters, they could laugh at Spider-Man's jokes as he would beat up villains like the Green Goblin. This was a major relief for those kids because they were able to put their worries aside and enjoy Spider-Man's jokes and adventures. Lastly, kids could see Batman scaring a group of thugs before knocking them out. The kids felt like Batman was like the world in reverse because if their family was going through money issues the world seemed to be the looming dark figure that was always against them. But rather Batman was a friend to count on.

As the readers of comics in the early ages grew older they realized that they would prefer a hero that they

could relate to. One of which was Spider-Man because though he would save the day he would still have to go home and help Aunt May pay the bills or have trouble getting the girl he liked. This lets the reader feel like they weren't alone in their struggles cause if Spider-Man could struggle with girls and succeed every once in awhile. They could try and succeed too. Also, Superman had seemed problems with girls in that he could save the city of Metropolis as Superman but not get Lois Lane as Clark Kent. This just gave readers hope that they could go through their struggle like their heroes try to every issue. But also readers could relate to heroes like Captain America when he returned from World War 2. The reason is that Cap was an outcast in the 60's society because of his values. The lonely and seemingly shy people could relate to him. But the reader would be easily encouraged to stand up and try to meet new people.

Within the adventure, suspense and action panels of the comic book usually lead a deeper message of being able to stand for their beliefs and encouraging the reader to bravely face their fears. A character that basically represents that is Green Lantern. Who is a character was given a power ring after facing his great fear and overcoming it. This encourages readers to be like him and not let fear stop them when in a difficult situation. Another hero is Spider-Man because in one knowable issue he had to lift multiple tons steel in order to escape a lab and save his Aunt May. This inspires readers to keep going even when you think you can because when you reach the finish it will be sweet. Lastly, Superman still faced Doomsday though he knew the odds were stacked against him. Readers were encouraged to do what's right though you may not be the best for it still do it.

So to conclude comics inspired many kids and later adults to stand firm in their beliefs and interest. Comics provided readers with a character that seemed so fantastic that you were lost in the story. But also so real that you would cry when one of the past. Lastly, this proved that comics have made a good dent in American culture and how we stand for what we believe and like no matter what the cost.
