

A red-skinned superhero with a yellow 'S' on his chest, standing against a blue cityscape background. The superhero is shown from the waist up, with his arms slightly out to the sides. The background is a dark blue cityscape at night, with lights and buildings visible. The overall tone is dramatic and heroic.

A | B R I E F | H I S T O R Y | O F

SUPERHEROES

FROM SUPERMAN TO THE AVENGERS,
THE EVOLUTION OF COMIC BOOK LEGENDS

BRIAN J. ROBB

Brian J. Robb is the *New York Times* and *Sunday Times* best-selling biographer of Leonardo DiCaprio, Johnny Depp, and Brad Pitt. He's also written acclaimed pop culture books on silent cinema, the films of Philip K. Dick, Wes Craven, Laurel and Hardy, and the TV series *Doctor Who* and *Star Trek*. He is co-editor of the popular website Sci-Fi Bulletin and lives in Edinburgh.

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF
SUPERHEROES

Brian J. Robb



*For Jerry and Joe and Stan and Jack
The true superheroes of comic book history*

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PART 1: ORIGINS!

1

COMIC BOOKS TO BLOCKBUSTERS: THE RISE OF THE SUPERHERO

Imagine a young American boy, ten or twelve years old, picking up a new comic book at the local drug store or newsstand, pestering their parents for a dime to buy it. It's April 1938, and the comic the kid has in his hands is something new, something called *Action Comics*. He's never seen it before, and it says '#1', right there on the cover. And, boy, what a cover . . .

Under the sizeable Action Comics logo and the 10¢ price slug, there's a picture the kid just can't believe. There's a guy dressed like a circus strongman (blue bodysuit, red trunks, red cape waving in the wind), and he's lifting a car above his head and smashing it into a rock face. There's a cowering man on the ground beneath the car, and two others, one running away in the background, the other coming straight out of the cover towards the reader, his head gripped in his hands in terror. What is all this about?

The introduction of Superman (the guy in the cape) was a seismic moment in American pop culture. It's unlikely that hypothetical young comic book reader knew that at the time – the guys at DC Comics who'd

published the book certainly didn't. Only Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, a pair of creative Cleveland teenagers who dreamed up Superman, had any idea he might catch on. Years before they'd even been professionally published, original sketches of an action hero who would later become Superman were adorned with scribbled notes patterned after the kind of hype Jerry and Joe saw on American news-stands in the Thirties: 'The smash hit strip of 1936' and 'The strip destined to sweep the nation!' They were modest young men, but these guys had big dreams.

Even more astonishing, not only to Siegel and Shuster, but also to the kids who bought, read, and (more often than not) tossed away *Action Comics* #1 is what those comics would one day be worth. Today, it is estimated that fewer than 100 copies of that first issue remain in existence. *Action Comics* #1 (graded 8/10 on the accepted quality measurement) was the first-ever comic book to sell for \$1 million, in 2010. That same year a second copy (graded 8.5) sold for \$1.5 million. Actor Nicolas Cage (once cast as Superman for an unmade movie) had his copy of *Action Comics* #1 stolen in 2000, only for it to be recovered in 2011, and then sold for \$2.16 million. That's a lot of dimes . . .

That same kid from 1938, a couple of years older, might have been in a movie house to see the first instalment of the 1941 Captain Marvel serial, the first comic book superhero to make it to the movies. He probably also saw *The Phantom* (1943), based on a newspaper strip hero; *Batman* (1943), the dark knight of the comics; and *Captain America* (1944), the

wartime superhero who punched out Hitler. He definitely listened to the Forties Superman radio serial, three times a week after school, and maybe his younger brother or sister saw the *Superman* serial when that character finally made his movie debut in 1948. Little could they have imagined the sights and sounds of twenty-first-century superhero cinema, a period where summer movie blockbusters are dominated by characters first created in the four-colour comics of the Thirties and Forties, and dramatically developed in the Sixties.

The two companies that drove the superhero revolution in pop culture are now huge commercial enterprises whose productions dominate summer movie screens. *The Avengers* (2012), based on a superhero team created in the Sixties for Marvel Comics, is the third-highest-grossing film of all time having taken \$1.5 billion worldwide. DC Entertainment is teaming up its top two superheroes, Superman and Batman, in one highly anticipated movie in 2015. It took until the twenty-first century for digital effects to reach a stage where what had long played on the comic book page could truly be brought to the screen. Now, the biggest audiences for superheroes are in cinemas and on DVD, not reading the comics that first gave birth to them.

From their secret origins in myth and legend, as well as in the adventurers of nineteenth-century pulp fiction heroes, the first comic book superheroes, Superman and Batman, gave rise to an all-conquering genre. Most superheroes fall somewhere on the scale between those two, who are in so many ways natural opposites.

Superman stands in the light, a figure of action who wears no mask; his alter ego Clark Kent is from a rural background. Batman is a creature of the night, a figure of mystery, who hides behind a mask better to instill fear in his criminal prey in the urban jungle of Gotham.

What are the core ingredients that made up the American comic book superhero as first established by Superman in *Action Comics* #1 in 1938? Most superhero figures have

an unusual start in life, often requiring them to leave their homes to avoid a terrible fate. Superman's life-saving escape from Krypton as a baby is the urtext for this superhero trope. Similarly, a vague history in youth helps – growing up on a nondescript Kansas farm – as it allows future writers to fill in the blanks or reinvent the specifics. Parents are often removed, as with Superman and Batman, as it makes the hero more vulnerable. Becoming an orphan seems to be important to making many superheroes self-reliant from an early age.

The key attribute of many, if not most, superheroes is some kind of super-power. Superman can travel at great speed, has super strength and can fly. Some superheroes simply rely on perfecting their unique human skills or attributes, as in the case of Batman, Iron Man, or Green Arrow. Other regularly seen attributes include a fatal weakness or a defect to be overcome, including Superman's aversion to Kryptonite, Daredevil's blindness, or the Hulk's inability to control his wrath-driven transformations.

Superheroes sport almost magical weaponry, including Thor's hammer and Green Lantern's power ring.

Superheroes exhibit a strong moral code and a selfless dedication to the public good: they're usually out to do the right thing regardless of any possible rewards and often at the expense of their own personal lives. The motivation for this crime-fighting life is often deeply personal: the death of Spider-Man's Uncle Ben at the hands of a mugger, or the killing of Bruce Wayne's parents. For Superman his humanitarian service is core to his being, while for someone like Wonder Woman it is a formal calling, a selfless role to be fulfilled willingly. Such figures often adopt a secret identity, both to conceal their unusual powers and abilities, but also to allow them to operate in the world as a near-normal figure, so Superman's alter ego is *Daily Planet* reporter Clark Kent, while Batman is the philanthropist millionaire Bruce Wayne. Both these key figures,

and many others have troubled romantic lives, usually as a result of their complex secret lives. Many adopt specific costumes with distinctive insignia or themes, such as Superman's shield-encased S-symbol, Batman's identification as a bat-like figure, or Spider-Man's web symbolism woven across his outfit.

The stories featuring these superheroes often include a supporting cast of assistants, recurring characters who are the hero's friends, co-workers, or potential romantic partners. There's also a rogues' gallery of villains (super-or otherwise) who function as the heroes' antagonists, including such classic foes as Lex

Luthor (opposite Superman), the Joker (Batman), and the Green Goblin (Spider-Man). Often the superhero's mirror image, the super-villain may also adopt an outlandish costume, use a variety of super-weapons, and enact a myriad of evil plans. They are always defeated, but they always return to wreak havoc once again . . .

For superheroes, being independently wealthy (like Bruce Wayne, the X-Men's Professor Xavier, or Green Arrow's Oliver Queen) can come in handy, as it then affords the hero a secret base or hidden headquarters (such as Batman's Batcave), and a way to pay for all the vehicles, weapons and supplies a hero might need.

Many of these characteristics were established by the first comic book superheroes – Superman, Batman, Captain Marvel and the Flash – while their successors, rivals, and equals would often be born out of a need by their creators to react against these original superhero models. As comic book superheroes matured, through the propaganda of the war years of the Forties, into the censorious Fifties, where they were under attack, and through the counterculture of the Sixties that gave birth to many new superheroes, they developed and diversified in all sorts of imaginative and fascinating ways. After a period of relative stagnation and decline in the Seventies, the superhero was reinvented in the Eighties and Nineties, as darker, more serious figures, often revived in creator-owned independently published comic books and graphic novels. After several false starts, the twenty-first century saw the domination of the movies by superhero franchises,

including Batman, Superman, The X-Men and Spider-Man.

The concept of the superhero is a uniquely American creation, born of troubled economic times, and forever changing to better fit with new audiences and new challenges. This is the story of the rise of the American superhero, from mass appeal in lowly Depression-era comic books to their blockbuster success in the twenty-first century's most popular movie franchises.

A note on comic book cover dates . . . Most comic books were on sale at news-stands up to two months before the date stated on the cover. Published cover dates are used throughout, and only when relevant is the actual month of publication highlighted. Comic book history is generally divided up into several widely recognized 'ages': the Golden Age is from 1938 to the mid-Fifties; the Silver Age from the mid-Fifties to 1970; the Bronze Age from 1970 to the mid-Eighties; and the Modern Age from the mid-Eighties to the twenty-first century. These divisions have been used in the text.

2

SECRET ORIGINS: THE PRE-HISTORY OF THE SUPERHERO

The classic American comic book superhero didn't emerge fully formed. Ancient myths and legends are littered with 'supermen', gifted by the gods with extraordinary powers. Folkloric heroes grew from figures like Robin Hood, while literature gave birth to masked avengers like the Scarlet Pimpernel. 'Penny Dreadfuls', dime novels, radio dramas, and movie serials all featured masked crime fighters, such as the Green Hornet and the Phantom. These mythological influences and myriad pulp magazine heroes would feed into the birth of the modern superhero, culminating in the creation of Superman in 1938.

The superhero template made popular through American comic books during the Depression originated in antiquity, in stories ancient cultures retold across centuries, forming the basis for today's myths and legends. Many told of a pantheon of gods and goddesses who boasted of superhuman prowess. Not all supernatural heroes were gods, far removed from everyday humanity. In some tales, humans might encounter gods and be endowed with superhuman powers. Others might be descended