



Book-Review:
Superhero Comics

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Gavaler, Chris. *Superhero Comics*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. ISBN 978-1-4742-2635-6.

Chris Gavaler's *Superhero Comics* is a chronological volume that traces the history and development of superhero comics since the 1930s but also their pre-comics roots since the late 1800s. Following its straightforward title, the book covers in detail all major parts of the history of superhero comics: influences, controversies leading to censorship and the implementation of the Comics Code, the de-militarization of superheroes, and the emergence of minority superheroes. The book ends in a section in which Gavaler has gathered tools for the critical visual analysis of comic books. As Gavaler reminds us in the first paragraph of his introduction, a "superhero comic is a superhero story told in a graphic narrative. Superhero is the content; comics the form" (1). In order to understand superhero comics, it must be kept in mind that not only are there several other genres of comics but several other types of superhero narratives as well. *Superhero Comics* is built around these two understandings. Gavaler provides a comprehensive, engaging account of the evolution of the superhero bolstered by a fine concluding section on the visual analysis of comics. *Superhero Comics* is a great book for a teacher of comics studies or popular culture. As described in the *Bloomsbury Comics Studies Series* editor's preface, the book is meant to "satisfy the needs of novices and experts alike" (n.p.).

Colonial Supermen

Superhero Comics outlines the history of its subject in a detailed way. Offering insights into the early influences of superheroes, such as the Scarlet Pimpernel and Spring-Heeled Jack, the book makes it clear that, although the creation of Superman in 1938 is often cited as the birth of the superhero, that series was preceded by decades of other

supermen. Gavalier starts from the very beginning in a chapter titled “The Mythic Superhero” where he offers support for the popular claim that superhero comics are contemporary versions of ancient mythology and folk tales. The chapter uses Joseph Campbell’s work on monomyth and Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928) to conclude that superhero comics are micro-epics that depict individual transformation while featuring extraordinary powers and events that fall within the framework of “minimal counterintuitive”, a concept coined by Pascal Boyer (1994). Minimal counterintuitive (MCI) refers to a balance between the humanness of the characters and the extraordinary powers they possess. According to the idea of MCI, people easily remember stories and characters that contain a few, though not too many, fantastic elements – a fact which might help explain the global popularity of superheroes.

After laying the groundwork by describing the universality of superhero comics as well as the superhero character, Gavalier focuses on a more specific dimension in superheroes’ history: imperialism. In the following chapters, Gavalier traces the development of superheroes through their imperialist origins and early influences from 19th-century British literature to American pulp heroes. Following in the footsteps of Spring-Heeled Jack and John Carter, who receive their extraordinary powers in an encounter with the Other, characters such as Superman and Wonder Woman received their fantastical powers from a mystical site: Superman has Krypton, Wonder Woman has a mythical island in colonial waters. The foreign and even intimidating powers are, however, used for the benefit of the colonizing power against suspicious threats coming from the outside.

From Fascism to the Atomic Age

In the following three chapters, “The Wellborn Superhero”, “The Vigilante Superhero”, and “The Fascist Superhero”, Gavalier moves from colonialism to the British and American eugenics movements in the early 1900s. Even though much has been written on superheroes and fascism, and for example Batman has been described as a feudal lord who protects his realm and his fellow aristocrats from threats coming from the underclass, these chapters about masked vigilantes’ roots in eugenics and Thomas Dixon’s Ku Klux Klan novels are fascinating. As Gavalier notes, the original idea of privileged dual-identity heroes who are wellborn aristocrats by day but who fight crime by night is largely lost in contemporary iterations of the superhero type. Both Superman and Captain America originally bore the characteristics of a Nietzschean superman (both are perfect specimens who defend their own people against outside threats), but later their origin stories have been altered, as have their attitudes towards vigilantism and violence. The historical section ends with a chapter on superheroes in the Atomic Age, where Gavalier describes how nuclear threats and the Red Scare influenced superhero comics during the Cold War era. Especially during the Cuban missile crisis, radioactive rays simultaneously opened new possibilities to gain incredible powers and posed an enormous threat for the characters.

Cultural Impacts

After going through the historical eras of superhero comics, Gavalier analyzes their social and cultural impacts. This is the part where some more depth and broadness

might have been desired. A somewhat list-like quality pertains to both chapters, “The Black Superhero” and “The Gendered Superhero”. In the former, tens of black superheroes are mentioned and their outfits described, but the analysis stays surface-level. It is unfortunate that the reason cited by Gavale for the scarcity of successful black superheroes remains valid today: black and other non-white superheroes make less money because white consumers do not read (i.e. pay for) their stories. I also find it problematic that the title and content of this chapter concerns only *black* superheroes instead of a wider specter of non-white heroes. There is no mention, for example, of the multiple Asian superheroes and villains in the Marvel universe. Similarly, the chapter on gendered superheroes concentrates mainly on listing historical pioneer characters instead of a deeper analysis of gender representations in superhero comics. Furthermore, while “The Black Superhero” mentions several non-white comics artists, Gavaler never mentions female artists, writers, or non-cis-gendered comics creators in “The Gendered Superhero”.

Unlike other previous histories of comics, Gavaler dedicates the last third of his volume to a concise beginner’s guide on how to study comics. This section offers a set of tools for someone interested in the analysis of superhero comics. Following in the footsteps of Scott McCloud, Gavaler describes different panel sizes and layouts, angles, framing, as well as levels of abstraction – all with visual examples. After providing the reader with the necessary tools, the chapter ends in a visual analysis of Frank Miller and Bill Sienkiewicz’s *Elektra: Assassin* (1987). The analysis is thorough and follows the themes introduced in the chapter, and the combination of the tools set and a model analysis will surely help guide teachers of introductory courses on comics studies.

Conclusion

With the first parts of the book focusing on the history of superhero comics as well as cultural and social impact, Gavaler’s volume provides a good starting point for anyone interested in superheroes. Combined with a conveniently presented set of tools for visually analyzing comics, and a list of suggested reading from each era of superhero comics, Gavaler’s book will be useful for university classroom usage. Despite a few shortcomings, *Superhero Comics* is an interesting read for anyone who wants to understand how superhero comics have developed into what they are today.

Biography: Laura Antola is a media studies PhD student at the University of Turku, Finland. Her research is focused on transnational adaptations of American superhero comics and films. In her doctoral thesis, she analyzes the different roles played by editors, translators, and fan communities in how Marvel’s superheroes have been adapted for the Finnish audience.