



SUPERGODS

WHAT MASKED VIGILANTES, MIRACULOUS MUTANTS,
AND A SUN GOD FROM SMALLVILLE CAN
TEACH US ABOUT BEING HUMAN

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INTRODUCTION

FOUR MILES ACROSS a placid stretch of water from where I live in Scotland is RNAD Coulport, home of the UK's Trident-missile-armed nuclear submarine force. Here, I've been told, enough firepower is stored in underground bunkers to annihilate the human population of our planet fifty times over. One day, when Earth is ambushed in Hyperspace by fifty Evil Duplicate Earths, this megadestructive capability may, ironically, save us all—but until then, it seems extravagant, somehow emblematic of the accelerated, digital hypersimulation we've all come to inhabit.

At night, the inverted reflection of the submarine dockyards looks like a red, mailed fist, rippling on a flag made of waves. A couple of miles of winding road from here is where my dad was arrested during the anti-nuclear protest marches of the sixties. He was a working-class World War II veteran who'd swapped his bayonet for a Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament badge and became a pacifist "Spy for Peace" in the Committee of 100. Already the world of my childhood was one of proliferating Cold War acronyms and code names.

And the Bomb, always the Bomb, a grim and looming, raincoated lodger, liable to go off at any minute, killing everybody and everything.

His bastard minstrels were gloomy existentialist folkies whining horn-rimmed dirges about the “Hard Rain” and the “All on That Day” while I trembled in the corner, awaiting bony-fingered judgment and the extinction of all terrestrial life. Accompanying imagery was provided by the radical antiwar samizdat zines my dad brought home from political bookstores on High Street. Typically, the passionate pacifist manifestoes within were illustrated with gruesome hand-drawn images of how the world might look after a spirited thermonuclear missile exchange. The creators of these enthusiastically rendered carrion landscapes never overlooked any opportunity to depict shattered, obliterated skeletons contorted against blazing horizons of nuked and blackened urban devastation. If the artist could find space in his composition for a macabre, eight-hundred-foot-tall Grim Reaper astride a flayed horror horse, sowing missiles like grain across the snaggle-toothed, half-melted skyline, *all* the better.

Like visions of Heaven and Hell on a medieval triptych, the postatomic wastelands of my dad’s mags sat side by side with the exotic, triple-sunned vistas that graced the covers of my mum’s beloved science fiction paperbacks. Digest-sized windows onto shiny futurity, they offered android amazons in chrome monokinis chasing marooned spacemen beneath the pearlescent skies of impossible alien worlds. Robots burdened with souls lurched through Day-Glo jungles or strode the moving steel walkways of cities designed by Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, and LSD. The titles evoked Surrealist poetry: *The Day It Rained Forever*, *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, *The Silver Locusts*, *Flowers for Algernon*, “A Rose for Ecclesiastes,” *Barefoot in the Head*.

On television, images of pioneering astronauts vied with bleak scenes from Hiroshima and Vietnam: It was an all-or-nothing choice between the A-Bomb and the Spaceship. I had already picked sides, but the Cold War tension between Apocalypse and Utopia was becoming almost unbearable. And then the superheroes rained down across the Atlantic, in a dazzling prism-light of heraldic jumpsuits, bringing new ways to see and hear and think about everything.

The first comic shop in the UK—The Yankee Book Store—opened in Paisley, home of the pattern, just outside Glasgow in the years after the war. With a keen sense of ironic symmetry, the comics arrived as ballast alongside the US service personnel whose missiles threatened my very

existence. As early R&B and rock ’n’ roll records sailed into Liverpool to inspire the Mersey generation of musicians, so American comics hit in the west of Scotland, courtesy of the military-industrial complex, to inflame the imaginations and change the lives of kids like me.

The superheroes laughed at the Atom Bomb. Superman could walk on the surface of the sun and barely register a tan. The Hulk’s adventures were only just beginning in those fragile hours after a Gamma Bomb test went wrong in the face of his alter ego, Bruce Banner. In the shadow of cosmic destroyers like Anti-Matter Man or Galactus, the all-powerful Bomb seemed provincial in scale. I’d found my way into a separate universe tucked inside our own, a place where dramas spanning decades and galaxies were played out across the second dimension of newsprint pages. Here men, women, and noble monsters dressed in flags and struck from shadows to make the world a better place. My own world felt better already. I was beginning to understand something that gave me power over my fears.

Before it was a Bomb, the Bomb was an Idea.

Superman, however, was a Faster, Stronger, Better Idea.

It’s not that I needed Superman to be “real,” I just needed him to be more real than the Idea of the Bomb that ravaged my dreams. I needn’t have worried; Superman is so indefatigable a product of the human imagination, such a perfectly designed emblem of our highest, kindest, wisest, toughest selves, that my Idea of the Bomb had no defense against him. In Superman and his fellow superheroes, modern human beings had brought into being ideas that were invulnerable to all harm, immune to deconstruction, built to outsmart diabolical masterminds, made to confront pure Evil and, somehow, against the odds, to always win.

I entered the US comics field as a professional writer in the mideighties at a time of radical innovation and technical advance, when the acknowledged landmarks of superhero fiction like *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* were being published and the possibilities seemed limitless, along with the opportunities for creative freedom. I joined a generation of writers and artists, mostly from a UK working-class background, who saw in the moribund hero universes the potential to create expressive,

adult, challenging work that could recharge the dry husk of the superhero concept with a new relevance and vitality. As a result, stories got smarter, artwork became more sophisticated, and the superhero began a new lease on life in books that were philosophical, postmodern, and wildly ambitious. The last twenty years have seen startling, innovative work from dozens of distinctive and flamboyant talents in the field. The low production costs (pen and ink can conjure scenes that would cost millions of dollars of computer time to re-create onscreen) and rapid publication frequency mean that in comic books, almost anything goes. No idea is too bizarre, no twist too fanciful, no storytelling technique too experimental. I've been aware of comic books' range, and of the big ideas and emotions they can communicate, for a long time now, so it's with amazement and a little pride that I've watched the ongoing, bloodless surrender of mainstream culture to relentless colonization from the geek hinterlands. Names that once were arcane outsider shibboleths now front global marketing campaigns.

Batman, Spider-Man, X-Men, Green Lantern, Iron Man. Why have superheroes become so popular? Why now?

On one level, it's simple: Someone, somewhere figured out that, like chimpanzees, superheroes make everything more entertaining. Boring tea party? Add a few chimps and it's unforgettable comedy mayhem. Conventional murder mystery? Add superheroes and a startling and provocative new genre springs to life. Urban crime thriller? Seen it all before . . . until Batman gets involved. Superheroes can spice up any dish.

But there's even more going on beneath the surface of our appetite for the antics of outlandishly dressed characters who will never let us down. Look away from the page or the screen and you'd be forgiven for thinking they've arrived into mass consciousness, as they tend to arrive everywhere else, in response to a desperate SOS from a world in crisis.

We've come to accept that most of our politicians will be exposed, in the end, as sex-mad liars or imbeciles, just as we've come to expect gorgeous supermodels to be bulimic, neurotic wretches. We've seen through the illusions that once sustained our fantasies and know from bitter experience that beloved comedians will stand unmasked, sooner or later, as alcoholic perverts or suicidal depressives. We tell our children they're trapped like rats on a doomed, bankrupt, gangster-haunted planet with

dwindling resources, with nothing to look forward to but rising sea levels and imminent mass extinctions, then raise a disapproving eyebrow when, in response, they dress in black, cut themselves with razors, starve themselves, gorge themselves, or kill one another.

Traumatized by war footage and disaster clips, spied upon by ubiquitous surveillance cams, threatened by exotic villains who plot from their caverns and subterranean lairs, preyed upon by dark and monumental Gods of Fear, we are being sucked inexorably into Comic Book Reality, with only moments to save the world, as usual. Towering, cadaverous Death-Angels, like the ones on the covers of Dad's antinuke rags, seem to overshadow the gleaming spires of our collective imagination.

Could it be that a culture starved of optimistic images of its own future has turned to the primary source in search of utopian role models? Could the superhero in his cape and skintight suit be the best current representation of something we all might become, if we allow ourselves to feel worthy of a tomorrow where our best qualities are strong enough to overcome the destructive impulses that seek to undo the human project?

We live in the stories we tell ourselves. In a secular, scientific rational culture lacking in any convincing spiritual leadership, superhero stories speak loudly and boldly to our greatest fears, deepest longings, and highest aspirations. They're not afraid to be hopeful, not embarrassed to be optimistic, and utterly fearless in the dark. They're about as far from social realism as you can get, but the best superhero stories deal directly with mythic elements of human experience that we can all relate to, in ways that are imaginative, profound, funny, and provocative. They exist to solve problems of all kinds and can always be counted on to find a way to save the day. At their best, they help us to confront and resolve even the deepest existential crises. We should listen to what they have to tell us.

Supergods is your definitive guide to the world of the superheroes—what they are, where they came from, and how they can help us change the way we think about ourselves, our environment, and the multiverse of possibilities that surrounds us. Get ready to take off your disguise, prepare to whisper your magic word of transformation, and summon the lightning. It's time to save the world.