

Not-so-

HEROES



THE MYTHIC SUPERMAN OF YESTERYEAR WAS INVULNERABLE AND HEROIC. TODAY, THE MAN OF STEEL IS ANGST-RIDDEN AND SELF-ABSORBED. IN THE AUGUST 2000 COMIC BOOK *ADVENTURES OF SUPERMAN*, OUR HERO MUSES OVER HIS FEELINGS AND BRUISED EGO.

Think Woody Allen in a cape. Or better yet, check out the Weinbergs, dysfunctional teenagers who battle with “self-esteem issues” and an occasional bad guy in the recent comic book series, *Relative Heroes*. Their “powers are their problems.”

Whether it's the dark, craggy Batman or the morose Superman—who doesn't so much fly as lumber over his fictional metropolis, holding back tears—superheroes aren't quite so super anymore. Can you feel their pain? “It's not easy for these guys,” says Bill Jemas, Marvel Comics president of publishing and new media. “It's hard to fight crime and have a day job.”

Yes, they still have special powers and battle criminal elements. But who can fly straight with such emotional baggage? This fall, Spiderman sees a psychologist. And a psychologist will soon arrive in Gotham City, perhaps to better understand Batman's nemesis, the Joker.

As comics become more like soap operas, moral ambiguity is increasingly pronounced, says former DC Comics editor Stuart Moore. It's often hard to tell the good guys from the bad guys. The X-Men, who debuted in the 1960s, once fought monsters and mutants. Now, their mission isn't so clear. In the new X-Men series this November—part of a much-ballyhooed Ultimate Marvel line geared to attract a new generation of readers—Jemas says the X-Men are “like Janet Reno: involved in high-profile, no-win situations.”

Industry legend Stan Lee, creator of Spiderman and the Incredible Hulk, makes a similar point. “The stories have gotten a little darker and grimmer, not as light-hearted as they used to be,” he tells *TAE*. “There is overlapping of bad guys and good guys.”

Who stole Superman? It's hard to find a single villain. It would be simplistic to blame political correctness or typecast the industry as yet another victim of the culture wars. Yes, *Batman* writer Devin Grayson rails against conservatives Jesse Helms and Pat Buchanan. But she also says “the evil forces we live with today are ourselves.” Not exactly a conservative sentiment, but it doesn't reek of obsession with “social injustice” or naivete about human nature.

True, some comic books have pushed for gun control, and the tobacco industry is evil incarnate in recent editions

of *Superman*. But more than politics is at play. Since Superman and Batman burst onto the scene in the late 1930s, superheroes and comic books have been constantly reinvented, says comic writer Gerard Jones, author of *The Comic Book Heroes: The First History of Modern Comic Books*.

After seeing sales decline in the '50s, the industry rebounded in the early 1960s with a new breed of superheroes created by Stan Lee. Lee wanted more human superheroes, not “characters who didn't need to worry about making a living and dandruff.” His Spiderman first captured the imagination of millions of Americans as an angst-ridden high school student who obtained special powers when he put on his costume. “We had to accept the fact that someone could stick to walls and spin webs and worry about grades in school.”

Worries, yes; moral ambiguity, no. Self-absorption was literally deadly: Spiderman was so busy showcasing his new powers he didn't notice a burglar who later killed his uncle. He learned his lesson.

In the late 1960s, as everything was “questioned,” says author Jones, superheroes' lives became even less black and white. Still, more than politics was at play. The most pronounced changes took place not at the highpoint of left-liberalism in the 1970s, but a decade later, at the height of the Reagan era. The Punisher, who started out as a villain in Spiderman, became a border-line hero (and border-line psycho) a decade later in 1987. Asked one writer, “Was the Punisher a menace or martyr?”

The same question could be asked of Batman. In 1986, Frank Miller created a rather unseemly Batman, fat and cranky, in *Dark Knight Returns*. The series sold big. And as Batman went, so did the other superheroes—until even industry insiders worried their trademark heroes had plunged too far into the dark side. Superman started behaving like a super-vigilante. In a breach of an unwritten code, he killed some bad guys in cold blood, says editor Moore. “People at DC thought, ‘This is not Superman. He should not be doing that.’ They didn't want Superman to be a killer.”

In the early '90s, these “angry heroes” burned themselves out, according to Jones, and the pendulum swung in the other direction. The heroes became a little bit more heroic. But these are still not your father's superheroes. As an alien who tracks

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Does RELIGION HINDER Heroism?



ROBERT ROYAL • “WHAT IS MORE HARMFUL THAN ANY VICE? ACTIVE PITY FOR ALL THE FAILURES AND ALL THE WEAK: CHRISTIANITY.” THUS SPAKE FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, THE WEST’S MOST INFLUENTIAL MODERN PHILOSOPHER, IN HIS 1888 BOOK *THE ANTI-CHRIST*.

The refrain has echoed throughout the century since. Media mogul Ted Turner, no philosopher, put the now common notion into a more modern idiom: “Christianity is a religion for losers.”

Some of Nietzsche’s admirers have tried to rescue the often self-contradictory thinker from his own incoherence and exaggerations by pointing out that his Superman—the extraordinary creature he hoped would appear to save civilization—still retains a certain *noblesse oblige* towards the weak. In this view, Nietzsche was only condemning a mistaken indulgence of mediocrity; he admired, for example, strong Old Testament figures. Yet mercy and compassion are inextricably connected to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—and, for that matter, to Allah the All Merciful and the Compassionate Buddha.

No. Nietzsche posed a clear question, and it deserves a clear answer: Are the religions that place high value on humility and compassion—which is virtually all of them—the enemies of excellence and heroism?

The Nazis, drawing on and sometimes distorting Nietzsche, believed so. In his table talk, Hitler argued that it was “decisive for our people whether they have the Judeo-Christian faith and its flabby morality of sympathy, or a strong, heroic faith in god in nature, in god in one’s own people, in god in one’s own fate, in one’s own blood.... One is either a Christian or a German. One can’t be both.”

Yet religious people within Germany gave evidence that this alleged opposition of humility and compassion to heroism and virtue was quite crudely misconceived. We are familiar with the brave resistance, for example, of the two great Protestant pastors Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Niemöller. If Christian humility and compassion are just timidity and love of mediocrity, then these two death-defying men must have been very poor Christians indeed. And there were thousands of others whose stories still need to become better known because, precisely out of their right understanding of humility and compassion, they boldly opposed false notions of self-esteem and valor, often to the point of death.

One of the most remarkable and stunningly heroic was the German Jesuit Rupert Mayer. Father Mayer was a living refutation of the Nazi claim that the “negative” Christianity of the churches, Catholic and Protestant, with its piety, sense of sin, and self-denial, was incompatible with the strong virtues the Nazis admired. Mayer was early attracted to the religious life in his native Bavaria and was deeply trained in the traditional Christian virtues. He showed what these meant in practice. In World War I, as a chaplain to the German army, he distinguished himself by his fearless movements on battlefronts where he administered the sacraments to the dying and used his body to shield wounded men.

Mayer was mangled so badly during one clash he lost his left leg. Hans Carossa, an eyewitness, was moved to poetry by Mayer’s courage and serenity as he lay bleeding: “The man lying there in his own blood maintained, even in the most wretched condition, the air of uncommon superiority over himself.... When people like us died, something not quite settled, not quite finished always remained. But this man floated like a sonata by Bach, conjured out of the darkness in clearly drawn lines and in a state of complete release.” Mayer was the first priest to receive Germany’s Iron Cross, first class, as well as other medals for valor.

That poise, self-possession, and courage were not merely the result of necessity on the battlefield; they also appeared in his everyday life. As National Socialism began its rise to power in Germany, Mayer, out of commitment to the very humility and compassion the Nazis despised, confronted the brutal movement head on. As a matter of pastoral concern, he made a point of attending political meetings that might affect believers in Germany. He did so not as a political activist but as a legendary, battle-tested priest who felt a responsibility to be a pastor over all dimensions of the life of his flock. When 21 young people of the Catholic Association of Saint Joseph were massacred by marauding Nazi bands, for example, he took to the pulpit counseling a firm response, animated not by revenge—which was the Nazis’ spirit—but by Christian love. One of his constant themes: If they feel our love, they will believe what we say.

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