



Reflections on the death of Superman

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On November 20, Superman, the fictional character who represented 'Truth, Justice and the American Way' for more than 50 years, suffered a violent death at the hands of a character known as Doomsday. If you bought an issue and stuck it in a plastic bag with a cardstock backing, it might be worth something in 20 years.

It would be very easy to ignore the significance of this event. Traditional literary theory, particularly radical theory, tends to dismiss 'popular' or 'formula' literature as promoting bourgeois values.

This attitude came mostly from the Frankfurt School, which in attempting to explain the rise of fascism turned to the ideological power of mass culture under capitalism, expanding the economic metaphor of producer and consumer to include ideology.

In general, there is more than a kernel of truth in this theory, but in the case of comics it overlooks the substantial influence of readers who, through fan organisations or other contact, can influence authors. Thus, in many cases, popular literature is more likely to be influenced by radical political opinion.

It is also notable that comics, along with most genre fiction, underwent a substantial change in the mid-'80s, a change that is going on. Authors Allen Moore and Rick Veitch destroyed the noble superhero myth in their respective 'graphic novels', *Watchmen* and *Brat Pack*. Existential mythology with modern applications surfaced in Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*, while cyberpunk ethics are promoted in Lewis Shiner's *The Hacker Files*, and the *Crisis* series ran several stories taking up feminism, sexuality, Third World politics, police racism and alienation.

Even some of the more traditional comics and characters have changed direction in recent times. Always more liberal, Green Arrow has become a political radical, and his support for the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua caused him to lose an arm to Superman. Northstar, from *Alpha Flight*, came out in 1992, becoming the first mainstream gay superhero.

The difference between these comics and the Superman series is fairly evident. Superman fought only the unproblematic villain, who had chosen rather than been driven to a life of crime, and who lived in a vastly simplified society. Rather than condemning alternative opinions, the Superman series ignored them.

Poor sales and complaints of boring plots eventually led to Superman's demise. In part, the Man of Steel was also a victim of Frank Miller's 'alternative future' comic *The Dark Knight Returns*, in which an aged and embittered Batman, facing certain death at the hands of Superman, says, 'I've become a political liability. And you, you're a joke.'

Superman had to die because his simplistic, right-wing values were boring, and he had to go in a violent, trite and meaningless fashion to prevent him becoming a martyr. He died as he lived: a false icon, a myth.

In response to rumours that the DC company plans to disinter Superman at some future date, some comic fans have already begun a campaign to keep him dead and buried. Try as DC might to revive him, comic readers are not interested in Superman any more. His moral high ground was long ago exposed as a lie. His homogeneous USA, in which there was only one version of 'Truth, Justice and the American Way' has been overthrown irretrievably.

Lev Lafayette

An incorporated association in the State of Victoria, A0094301K RPG Review Inc., PO Box 15, Carlton South, 3053
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