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Do The Gods Wear Capes?: Spirituality, Fantasy, And Superheroes (New Directions In Religion And Literature)



Synopsis

Brash, bold, and sometimes brutal, superheroes might seem to epitomize modern pop-culture at its most melodramatic and mindless. But according to Ben Saunders, the appeal of the superhero is fundamentally metaphysical - even spiritual - in nature. In chapter-length analyses of the early comic book adventures of Superman, Wonder Woman, Spider-Man, and Iron-Man, Saunders explores a number of complex philosophical and theological issues, including: the problem of evil; the will-to-power; the tension between intimacy and vulnerability; and the challenge of love, in the face of mortality. He concludes that comic book fantasies of the superhuman ironically reveal more than we might care to admit about our human limitations, even as they expose the falsehood of the characteristically modern opposition between religion and science. Clearly and passionately written, this insightful and at times exhilarating book should delight all readers who believe in the redemptive capacity of the imagination, regardless of whether they consider themselves comic book fans.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Sonntag's review notwithstanding, Saunders' book is not a ripoff of Knowles' book. The methodologies of the two books are very different. Saunders engages in long, careful readings of particular characters, and engages the material on a different level than Knowles. His approach is not "speculative" but exploratory; in other words, he isn't try to draw speculative historical connections. Instead, he's trying to READ the comics carefully, through the lens of contemporary theology as well as contemporary literary and cultural theory. In the process he does some startling

and VERY interesting work. So, don't judge this illuminating and useful book by Sonntag's comments. He appears not to have read Saunders carefully. DO THE GODS WEAR CAPES? is an important addition to the critical conversation about superheroes and one of the few rock-solid, well-constructed scholarly books on the genre. It's also quite well written: Saunders has an accessible, trenchant style that lifts his work well beyond that of many treatises on the genre. If you're intrigued by scholarly discussions of comics, superheroes, popular culture, and/or spirituality, you'll find the book very rewarding. I consider it a must-have for those wanting to do in-depth critical work on superheroes. In the future I'll definitely be using it in my writing and teaching.

I expected an inaccessible scholarly read, but what I received was a book I couldn't put down, enlightening, entertaining, and challenging. I'm not an academic. This book was written for us all, scholars and just Plain Janes like me. I have loved the comic book heroes since I was a child. I admired and envied their superhuman ways of being in the world, yet at the same time so wonderfully flawed emotionally. That was part of their appeal for me. That made them much more real and identifiable, beings I could relate to. Growing up in an emotionally unhealthy home (who didn't?) they helped me escape from reality and dream and imagine. It was harmless and saved me from feeling sorry for myself because I had a way to escape as well, just as they did. I also was taught in some ways by these same superheroes in ways the originators may or may not have imagined they would influence their readership, yet Saunders recognizes this and articulates it beautifully numerous times and in just one example as follows: "To take the ethical choice is therefore to commit to a lifelong project; it is not a once-and-for-all decision to 'do the right thing' so much as an endless process of self-examination and self-correction." It's those kind of sentences that took me to another level of understanding and truly let this 60-year-old woman off the hook and can stop feeling guilty for loving the superheroes, still loving them. I was constantly surprised by Saunders' insights and every time he expanded a new understanding for me, I felt that wonderful insight rise to the surface, and say yes, yes, that's right. That's exactly right. Thank you, Professor Saunders, for writing this most enjoyable and erudite book about a subject I've loved most of my life, but which is derided as trite way too often. Janice Friend

The antithesis of shallow fanboy pandering, Saunders' DO THE GODS WEAR CAPES? is a thoughtful, well-reasoned, ultimately satisfying exploration of a surprisingly neglected theme suffusing many superhero comics - spirituality. Applying a chapter-by-chapter analysis of the oft-overlooked moral & ethical aspects of four iconic characters - Superman, Wonder Woman,

Spider Man, and Iron Man - Saunders uncovers surprising links between these well-known superhumans and such all-too-ordinary concerns as the terror of vulnerability, the burden of guilt, and the difficulty of love. Potential readers who might be wary of GODS academic tone and at times complex philosophical/theological ruminations are encouraged to leave their doubts at the door - this is an elegantly-described, deeply felt, fascinating journey. One that references everything from the notion that 1973's AMAZING SPIDER-MAN #121 (wherein Peter Parker accidentally killed girlfriend Gwen Stacey while trying to save her) marked the end of "the joyful...so-called Silver Age (of comics) to the more uncertain, pessimistic and cynical Bronze Age," to the theory that a sequence in the first IRON MAN film (wherein Gwyneth Paltrow manually replaces Robert Downey Jr.'s chest-based power unit) can also be read as a near-hardcore sex scene! Obviously the result of a life-long fan who both respects and understands the medium, DO THE GODS WEAR CAPES? is an important work that belongs on the bookshelf - digital or actual - of any serious comic book aficionado.

Ben Saunders is a professor at the University of Oregon and curated the greatest exhibit of comic book art ever (as all who saw it would attest) at the University museum. His brilliance, intellect, and respect for the comic book art form make me feel like my chosen profession of writing and drawing comics was a halfway decent career choice. It's a thrill to have such deep thought and study captured by Professor Saunders in this book, and I'm honored to have been asked to illustrate the cover. Though my dear friends Steve Rude and Mike Baron are the creators of Nexus (responding to a previous review), I'd like to think that any similarity to the design of my character on the cover is completely original and inspired by "those who came before" only on a subconscious level. Though I would argue that it needs way more pictures, I highly recommend this book.

This book achieves a solid balance between being accessible enough for the everyday superhero fan and intellectually rigorous enough to be a scholarly book that can be read by professors and students. While Saunders focuses on comic books, the superheroes he chooses to explore have the advantage of being featured in famous films and television shows, making the book understandable to fans of the characters who know them primarily from other mediums.

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