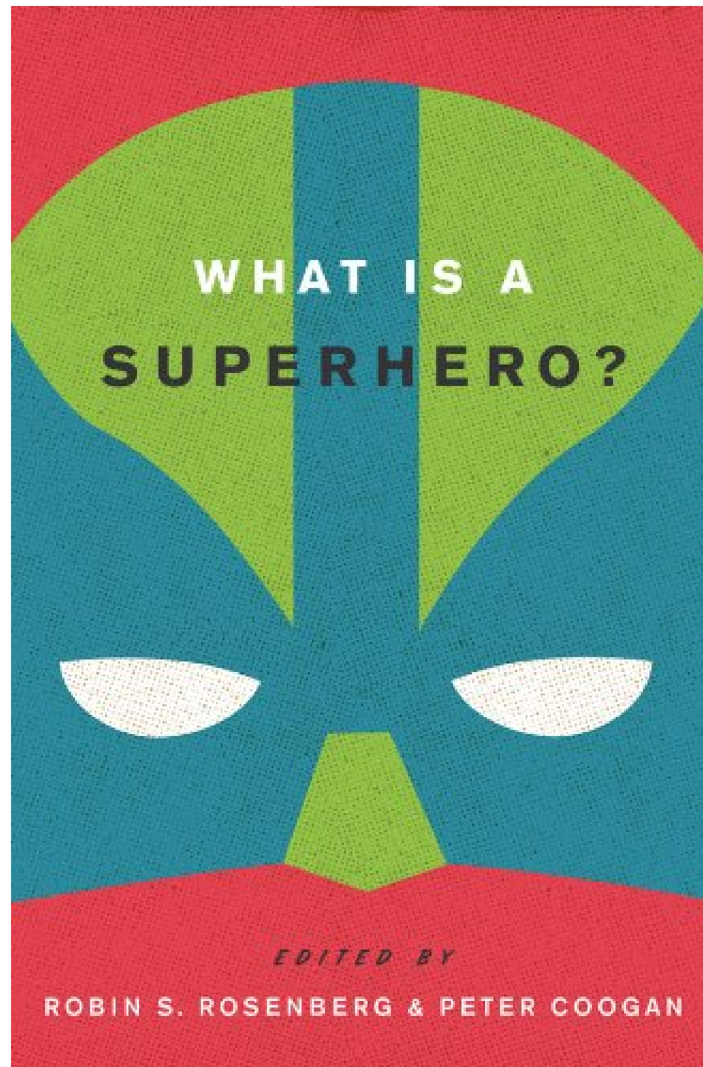
# What Is a Superhero?



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## Synopsis

It's easy to name a superhero--Superman, Batman, Thor, Spiderman, the Green Lantern, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Rorschach, Wolverine--but it's not so easy to define what a superhero is. Buffy has superpowers, but she doesn't have a costume. Batman has a costume, but doesn't have superpowers. What is the role of power and superpower? And what are supervillains and why do we need them?In What is a Superhero?, psychologist Robin Rosenberg and comics scholar Peter Coogan explore this question from a variety of viewpoints, bringing together contributions from nineteen comic book experts--including both scholars in such fields as cultural studies, art, and psychology as well as leading comic book writers and editors. What emerges is a kaleidoscopic portrait of this most popular of pop-culture figures. Writer Jeph Loeb, for instance, sees the desire to make the world a better place as the driving force of the superhero. Jennifer K. Stuller argues that the female superhero inspires women to stand up, be strong, support others, and most important, to believe in themselves. More darkly, A. David Lewis sees the indestructible superhero as the ultimate embodiment of the American "denial of death," while writer Danny Fingeroth sees superheroes as embodying the best aspects of humankind, acting with a nobility of purpose that inspires us. Interestingly, Fingeroth also expands the definition of superhero so that it would include characters like John McClane of the Die Hard movies: "Once they dodge ridiculous quantities of machine gun bullets they're superheroes, cape or no cape."From summer blockbusters to best-selling graphic novels, the superhero is an integral part of our culture. What is a Superhero? not only illuminates this pop-culture figure, but also sheds much light on the fantasies and beliefs of the American people.

## Sort review

About the AuthorDaniel Clowes (b. 1961, Chicago, Illinois) is an American cartoonist. He is a multi-Harvey, Eisner, and Ignatz Award Winner, and his papers have been acquired by the University of Chicago library. His most recent book, Patience, has been translated into nineteen languages, and his books and comics have won numerous awards, including a PEN America Literary Award and over a dozen Harvey and Eisner Awards. As a screenwriter, he has been nominated for an Academy Award and written the films Ghost World (with Terry Zwigoff), Art School Confidential, and Wilson. A retrospective of his work, Modern Cartoonist, debuted in 2012, appearing at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, the Oakland Museum, and the Wexner Center. His illustrations have been featured on a wide-ranging array of posters, album covers, and magazines, including many covers for The New Yorker. He lives in Oakland, California, with his wife and son.

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### Look inside the book

What Is a Superhero?What Is a Superhero?Edited By Robin S. Rosenberg and Peter CooganOxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,and education by publishing worldwide.Oxford New YorkAuckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong KarachiKuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City NairobiNew Delhi Shanghai Taipei TorontoWith offices inArgentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France GreeceGuatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal SingaporeSouth Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine VietnamOxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press in theUK and certain other countries.Published in the United States of America byOxford University Press 198Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016© Robin Rosenberg and Peter Coogan 2013"Superheroes Are Made" © Tom DeFalco"Nobility of Purpose" © Danny Fingeroth"Making the World a Better Place" © Jeph Loeb"Superheroes and Supervillains: An Interdependent Relationship"© Ivory Madison"Extraordinary" © Joe QuesadaAll rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted by law, by license, or under terms agreed with the appropriate reproduction rights organization. Inquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the address above.You must not circulate this work in any other formand you must impose this same condition on any acquirer.1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2Printed in the United States of Americaon acid-free paperTo Neil, Justin, and David—for whom I am eternally grateful.My cup overflows.—R. S. R.To Karla, Lila, and Lucinda, all my La's.—P. C.ContentsForeword by Michael UslanAcknowledgmentsIntroductionRobin Rosenberg and Peter CooganSection I: Super and Hero: Powers and MissionSECTION INTRODUCTIONONEThe Hero Defines the Genre, the Genre Defines the HeroPeter CooganTWOWe Could Be HeroesWill BrookerTHREEWhat Is a Female Superhero?Jennifer StullerFOURStraddling a Boundary: The Superhero and the Incorporation of DifferenceClare PitkethlyFIVESave the DayA. David LewisSection II: Context, Culture, and the Problem of DefinitionSECTION INTRODUCTIONSIXSuperheroes and the Modern(ist) AgeAlex BoneySEVENHeroes of the SupercultureRichard ReynoldsEIGHTSuperheroes by DesignJohn JenningsNINEThe Experience of the Superhero: A Phenomenological DefinitionDana AndersonTENWhat Is a Superhero? No One Knows—That's What Makes 'em GreatGeoff KlockSection III: Superheroes Need SupervillainsSECTION INTRODUCTIONELEVENWhy Supervillains?Paul LevitzTWELVESuperheroes Need SupervillainsFrank VeranoTHIRTEENSuperheroes Need Superior VillainsStanford W. CarpenterFOURTEENThe Subjective Politics of the SupervillainChris DeisFIFTEENSupervillains Who Need Superheroes (Are the Luckiest Villains in the World)Andrew SmithSIXTEENSorting Out Villainy: A Typology of Villains and Their Effects on SuperheroesRobin S. RosenbergSection IV: From the Experts:

Comic Book Writers Define the SuperheroSECTION INTRODUCTIONSEVENTEENMore Than Normal, But BelievableStan LeeEIGHTEENMaking the World a Better PlaceJeph LoebNINETEENPower and Responsibility … and Other Reflections on SuperheroesDanny FingerothTWENTYSuperheroes and PowerDennis O'NeilTWENTY ONEThe Importance of Context: Robin Hood Is Out and Buffy Is InKurt BusiekTWENTY TWOSuperheroes Are MadeTom DeFalcoTWENTY THREEExtraordinaryJoe QuesadaTWENTY FOURThe SuperprotagonistFred Van LenteTWENTY FIVESuperheroes and Supervillains: An Interdependent RelationshipIvory MadisonIndexForewordMichael Uslan is just about the ideal person to introduce a collection of essays on the definition of the superhero. He is both scholar and creator. He taught the first accredited college course on comics, at Indiana University, and wrote the first textbook on comics. His passion for Batman comics led him to envision a dark version of Batman for the big screen. Uslan became the originator and Executive Producer of all the Batman movies from Tim Burton's 1989 Batman through 2012's The Dark Knight Rises. As if that weren't enough, he also writes comic books, including Batman, and has recently authored his memoir, The Boy Who Loved Batman. In 2012, Uslan received the world's first ever Doctorate in Comic Books.Heroes and villains have been essential parts of folklore and mythology since the beginnings of oral traditions and storytelling. Across the millennia, the heroes have come in many forms and sizes, varying from culture to culture around the world. The villains emerged as sometimes evil and sometimes spiteful and jealous gods, monsters, ogres, wizards, warlocks, witches, kings, knaves, and even as the dark side of the heroes themselves. So, when and how does a hero earn the right to be called or designated as a "superhero"?Does being a superhero require one or more superpowers? Conversely, is that the same requirement for a supervillain? Thus, does the strength of Hercules or Samson qualify them for membership in some ancient version of a Justice League? Do the powers of Medusa or Circe or Macbeth's three witches entitle them to become part of some legendary Secret Society of Supervillains? On the surface, the answers to the questions we pose seem obvious and simple. When Superman made his debut in June 1938* in the pages of Action Comics #1 as comicbookdom's first superhero, the requirements of this new class of heroes seemed set in stone: a benevolent Hercules equipped with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men; a colorful costume evoking a circus strongman, the man on the flying trapeze, the human cannonball, or a tumbling acrobat; and perhaps also a secret identity as earlier utilized by the Scarlet Pimpernel and Zorro. Yes, it all appeared so very, very simple … until the world's second superhero made his debut in May 1939.The Batman mysteriously appeared in Detective Comics #27 and rewrote the rules Superman had set down just 11 months before. He looked like a superhero. He had the colorful costume and cape. He had a secret identity. But he had no superpowers. Batman's greatest so-called superpower was possibly his humanity. If the Batman was, indeed, a superhero as much as Superman, what now would be the qualifying criteria? As the fledgling comic book industry grew and dozens, then hundreds, of these caped crusaders and mystery men made their four-color appearances, the true answer became clearer and

clearer.When young Bruce Wayne watched in abject horror as his parents were gunned down before his eyes, he made a vow … a vow. At that frozen moment in time, he made a sacrifice … a sacrifice. He sacrificed his childhood on a blood-soaked concrete altar in order to dedicate the rest of his life to getting the evil one who did this … getting all the evil ones … even if it meant having to go through Hell in order to do so. It was a commitment he was willing to make and see through to the end … a commitment. In order to accomplish this mission, he had to train relentlessly to become the best a human being could become physically and mentally … to become the best. In doing so, he became an urban warrior … an urban legend … a superhero.Thus, today we have our own real-life superheroes who fill the bill laid down by Superman and Batman. The firefighters, police, and EMTs who rushed to the World Trade Center during and after its attack are superheroes. The man who jumped onto the subway tracks in New York to rescue a person in distress is more than a fast-thinking Good Samaritan flush with adrenalin; he's a superhero. The doctors or nurses rushing to Haiti in the aftermath of a terrible earthquake are superheroes, and the people they help and save and comfort will swear this to you. The soldier heading off to a distant land is our modern-day, dragon-slaying Beowulf. All these individuals would qualify as members in what in olden days might have been called King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table and in contemporary times might be referred to as the Avengers.Is there any other definition for “superhero”? My own mother and father sacrificed so much to raise my brother and me, and they taught us life's most important lessons in the process, often by example. They are my superheroes. Who are yours?I've had the pleasure of appearing with Robin Rosenberg and Peter Coogan on celebrated panels at some of the world's biggest comic book conventions, where we have enthusiastically discussed and debated, in front of what are by now thousands of comic book fans, everything from the psychology of supervillains to the essence of superheroes. Their research, writings, and presentations represent some of the most scholarly work being done or ever having been done in the field. Initially afraid that Robin and Pete would be attempting to teach a graduate-level academic seminar at a Comic Con to a room filled with girls dressed as Harley Quinn, boys dressed as the Joker, and an occasional very large, bearded man dressed as Princess Leia, I was relieved and amazed to experience the entertaining and enlightening approach they bring to a subject that attracts such great interest across fans of both genders, all ages, and all cultures.When the writers and artists of comic books, beginning in the Golden Age of the late 1930s through World War II and the 1940s, created all these characters and stories, they were trying to make a living in hard times. They were not thinking that what they were in the process of doing was creating a legitimate American art form or America's (and eventually the world's) newest mythology. But in addition to the sheer entertainment and escapist fare they provided us with, their greatest gift was the ideal of the modern-day superhero. And yes, it's true: the ancient gods of Egypt, of Greece and Rome, of the Norse, all still exist—only today they wear spandex and capes.What is a “superhero”? The secrets lie within the pages that follow. Your quest to find the answers begins now…Michael UslanSomewhere inside Mt. Olympus,Odin's Palace in Asgard,the JLA's Hall of

Justice,or maybe just the local fire and police station2013AcknowledgmentsThis book would not have been possible without the many comic book, film, and television writers, artists, actors, directors, and other folks who have contributed their own interpretation of what it means to be a superhero. Many thanks to all the “creators” of superheroes. We are extremely grateful in particular to the comic book writers who contributed to this volume (in reverse alphabetical order, since alphabetical order is the most common way to do it and is inherently unfair to folks whose names begin with letters toward the end of the alphabet): Fred van Lente, Joe Quesada, Dennis O’Neil, Ivory Madison, Jeph Loeb, Paul Levitz, Stan Lee, Danny Fingeroth, Tom DeFalco, and Kurt Busiek. We are grateful to Michael Uslan for writing a foreword, and for collaborating with us on Batman panels at San Diego Comic Con.Thanks also go to the comic book scholars who contributed to this volume for their insightful musings on what makes a superhero, and for their patience. Of course this book also wouldn’t have been possible without superhero fans: those of us curious about superheroes—their lives and stories—and who ponder questions such as, just what is a superhero?We are grateful to Oxford University Press for their support. Specifically, thanks to Abby Gross, Purdy, Suzanne Walker, Justyna Zajac, Joan Bossert, and Tracy O’Hara. Thanks also to Catharine Carlin Alexander and Angelique Rondeau for their support in the initial phases of this book (and to Angelique for the penultimate phase as well).On the personal side, we thank our families for their support and love: Justin, David, Neil, Rebecca, Stephen, Steven, Bunny, and Ed; Karla, Lila, and Lulu.IntroductionWhat is a superhero? We—Robin Rosenberg and Peter Coogan—are asking and answering that question with this book. But is a whole book of essays really needed to answer that question? Everyone knows what a superhero is, right? Yet everyone seems to have a different answer. In fact, this book’s origin arose from that fact. Robin was meeting with her editors at Oxford University Press regarding another superhero book she was working on, Our Superheroes, Ourselves (which, like the book you’re reading now, is part of Oxford’s Superhero Series, of which Robin is editor). One of the Oxford folks, who was new to the superhero world, asked, “What exactly is a superhero?” Everyone else at the meeting—superhero fans all—had a slightly different answer. Robin then realized that asking—and answering—that very question should be part of the Superhero series.As for Pete, the definition of the superhero has been his hobbyhorse for most of the past two decades. His dissertation, The Secret Origin of the Superhero: The Emergence of the Superhero in America from Daniel Boone to Batman, features 54 pages of obsessive examination of all the extant definitions, plus another 18 proposing—and shooting down—candidates for the title of “First Superhero” (and the title goes to … Superman!). But in the years he spent writing his dissertation, he routinely discussed the topic at conferences, comic book conventions, and cocktail parties with faculty, fans, and friends until he settled the issue for himself (see his “dictionary definition” of the superhero in the first essay of this volume). And he made his conclusions available to the world via his book Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre (MonkeyBrain Books, 2006). So that should have settled things—but astonishingly, shockingly, other people still have their own opinions.In fact, the question of what a superhero is

has become central to our culture's understanding of itself and our future. The superhero genre has moved into the position held by the Western genre for most of the 20th century, when it served as a useful metaphorical way of discussing immigration, Americanization, urbanization, American identity, changing conceptions of race and gender, individualism, capitalism, modernism, and so many other central cultural concerns. In the Cold War, the Western became crucial to America's image of itself. Think of the Cold War as a Western—two diametrically opposed cultures in a twilight struggle that could end in an apocalypse. In Westerns, Indians (using the language of Westerns) often threaten the wholesale destruction of the settlers, and the stories often end in an apocalyptic, fiery extirpation of Indian towns and an expulsion of Indians from the settled territory. During the Cold War, especially at its height in the 1950s, Westerns dominated television and were consistently popular at the movies. This popularity can be traced to many factors, but at some level the genre's metaphors worked well to express social tensions. According to Thomas Schatz, genres are privileged story forms in which social tensions are brought to life in narratives and ritualistically resolved. Popular genres are those that can best animate and resolve social tensions through their metaphors.1In fact, like Westerns, superhero stories depict an "epic moment" when civilization is threatened but the forces of savagery—whether represented as Indians or outlaws in Westerns or villains in superhero stories —are defeated. Whereas the violence in Westerns was in the service of containment (trying to keep the "Reds" on the reservation, as with the Truman Doctrine and the West's attempt to limit communist expansion), the violence in superhero stories arises as a last resort (as with the Powell Doctrine after the Cold War), engaged in by the superhero because of the implacable threat posed by the supervillain, which ordinary authorities are unable to combat effectively.Emblematic of this cultural shift in storied metaphor from Western to superhero is the choice of adjective to describe some modern presidents. If Ronald Reagan was the first modern "cowboy" president of the United States (and George W. Bush the second one), Barack Obama is its first "superhero" president. He was frequently portrayed as a superhero in editorial cartoons and websites, and at the 63rd Annual Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation Dinner in 2008, a charity roast organized by the Catholic Archdiocese of New York for the benefit of needy children, Obama played off the image of himself as a savior, saying, "Contrary to the rumors you have heard, I was not born in a manger. I was actually born on Krypton and sent here by my father, Jor-El, to save the planet Earth."The current popularity of superhero movies seems to demonstrate the hold the genre has on the public, and these movies take up current real-world issues. Iron Man, in his first movie, directly takes on fanatical terrorists in Afghanistan. In The Dark Knight, the Joker explicitly uses terror and nihilistic aggression to forward his ends, and Batman employs both warrantless surveillance and extraordinary rendition to battle him. In Spider-Man 2, when Doctor Octopus moves to finish off the Amazing Arachnid on an elevated train in New York, the passengers step forward to defend the unconscious and unmasked Spider-Man in a scene reminiscent of the real-life heroic actions of United 93 passengers who stood up to the hijackers.And the superhero is a figure that touches centrally on the likely future

of humans. Baseball player Alexander Rodriguez explained his steroid use as a response to the pressure he felt to perform at a superhuman level (because of the chemical enhancements employed by other players).2 A-Rod's fear of losing to "superhumans" recurs in superhero comics. For instance, Lex Luthor hates Superman because he sees the Kryptonian as marking an end to human potential and achievements, the end of human dreams: "All of us—everyone—deserves a chance at greatness. All that takes is the belief that it exists. But his existence threatens not just that belief, but our existence. I believe there's something inherently dangerous when something real becomes mythic. I believe when that happens we lose the part of ourselves that yearns to be great. Because when faced with a myth? We can't win."3This same concern surfaces in the graphic novels Kingdom Come, Watchmen, and Miracleman, in the X-Men, and in countless other superhero comics, as well as in films like Gattaca. Widespread steroid use means that players who don't use can't compete. Barry Bonds became a myth when he broke Hank Aaron's home run record—and it appears that no merely human player, unaided by superpowers, may be able to break Bond's record, driving home Luthor's point. That mythic future of superbeings among mere humans is becoming a reality through the GRIN technologies (genetics, robotics, information, and nanotechnology) that promise to transform us—or perhaps just those of us who can afford them—into superhumans. Those who can't transform might be left behind. Superheroes and their stories allow us to explore these possible futures; exploring what the superhero is aids our understanding of our recent past, contemporary political and social situation, and future. That's why the question "What is a superhero?" matters.So how is this question to be answered, and whose answers count? We approached this problem from a shared history of bringing scholars and comics professionals together to discuss comics and superheroes. Peter co-founded and co-chairs the Comics Arts Conference (CAC), an academic conference held during the San Diego Comic-Con International. The CAC operates to bring scholars and comics professionals together in dialogue with the public via the medium of the academic conference at a comic book convention in order to break down the walls between the academy and the industry and to share the insights of both with the public; it's an effort at public intellectualism. The professionals bring their real-world, concrete experience of struggling with the demands of crafting a story, editorial directives, sales, and appealing to audiences. Scholars can step back from the daily grind and pecuniary concerns of publishing to look at the big picture and investigate superheroes across a range of contexts through their scholarly training and methodological tools. Bringing scholars and professionals together brings theory and practice together and shines a dual light that illuminates the topic from multiple perspectives. Peter and Robin met through a CAC panel that Robin organized in 2009, "Is the Joker a Psychopath? You Decide!" that perfectly illustrated the value of bringing scholars and professionals together, and she and Peter were joined by psychology professor Travis Langley, Joker creator Jerry Robinson, Adam West of TV's Batman, famed "Joker-fish" writer Steve Englehart, and Batman film producer Michael Uslan. Robin and Travis Langley explained the psychology of psychopathy, and the superhero professionals on the panel discussed how the

depiction of the Joker across media enacted the traits associated with psychopaths. Either side of this equation on its own would have left out what the other offered. Like this Joker panel, What Is a Superhero? brings scholars and professionals into dialogue through the discussion of this central question.Essentially, creators encode their ideas of what constitutes a superhero through their depictions of the characters, and scholars decode what constitutes a superhero through their academic analyses of rendered depictions. We wanted to represent both ends of that equation to get at how the definition of the superhero is engaged when creators create and how it is understood and explained—how meaning is made and made usable. Space constraints forced us to invite only a fraction of the people whose views we wanted to hear. On the creator side, for this volume we restricted ourselves to comic book writers and editors, as it is a story's words that carry the bulk of the message and morals. We made sure to invite creators who represent various generations of comic book stories from the Golden Age to today, who have introduced major characters or revisions of characters, and who worked on superhero movies and television shows.For scholars, we wanted a spread of disciplines. Too often in the past, comics studies has been biased toward scholars of literature for reasons grounded in the political economy of academia and the fact that literary scholars are inherently comfortable working with narrative texts. The scholars we recruited as contributors come from a range of disciplines—philosophy, literary history and criticism, cultural studies, religious studies, art and visual aesthetics, psychology, and women's studies—and employ a wide mix of theoretical lenses, including phenomenology, genre criticism, literary analysis, feminist theory, deconstruction, communications theory, media theory, and popular culture theory. Academic disciplines construct different ways of understanding reality and establishing truth and employ different theories and methodologies—lenses that shape the way objects of inquiry are interpreted. Each discipline tends to have its own way, or ways, of seeing that determine what counts as evidence, what sorts of objects are looked at, and how the interpretation is presented.It is our hope that by bringing together creators from across comics history and media and scholars from across the university, we have cooked up a tasty stew of answers, ultimately leaving it in your hands to decide what a superhero is.What is the superhero? We can't answer that question in the Introduction, but we have arranged the book around certain foci that should provide for comparative reading. First, in every essay there is a direct statement of the author's answer to the title question. As you read, look for the phrase "a superhero is." Our intention is that you might pull these answers out and compare them—which ones lean toward the general or universal answer? Which toward culturally and historically specific answers? Which answers delineate specific conditions or criteria or limit who gets admitted to the superhero clubhouse, and which answers are more expansive and inclusive?Is there an answer to the question, "What is a superhero?" Maybe; maybe not. But here are 25 attempts to provide one by people who have built careers making and studying the superhero. Enjoy.NOTES1. Thomas Schatz. (1981). Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System. New York: McGraw Hill, pp. 29–31.2. Peter Gammons, "Rodriguez: 'Sorry and deeply regretful.'" February 9, 2009,3. Brian

Azzarello and Lee Bermejo. (2005). Lex Luthor: Man of Steel. New York: DC Comics, Chapter 3.What Is a Superhero?SECTION ISuper and Hero: Powers and MissionWhat defines a superhero? The word itself gives us a couple of clues. The super part indicates powers or abilities that are significantly greater than those of the average person (though they need not be "beyond those of mortal men" or women). The hero part indicates that the gifted individual acts heroically—not just on a handful of occasions, but repeatedly. The superhero consistently tries to do the right thing. He or she has a mission. The essays in this section explore the role of those powers and missions and how they help to define superheroes and create the genre itself.ONEThe Hero Defines the Genre, the Genre Defines the HeroPeter CooganPeter Coogan is director of the Institute for Comics Studies, co-founder and co-chair of the Comics Arts Conference, and an instructor at Washington University in St. Louis, MO. He holds a Ph.D. in American Studies and authored Superhero: The Secret Origin of the Superhero, a monograph on the development, history, and functioning of the superhero genre. He is a nationally known commentator on comics and superheroes, has a semi-regular pundit gig on the Major Spoilers Podcast, and is co-editor of this volume.The superhero is the protagonist of the superhero genre. The first superhero—the founding character in the superhero genre—was Superman, whose debut in Action Comics #1 (cover date June 1938) established the major conventions of the superhero genre. What made Superman different from the heroes of the science fiction, fantasy, pulp, Western, war, and jungle adventure genres? It was the specific conventions—mission, powers, and identity—that coalesced in Superman's heroic portrayal, and which were then imitated and repeated by other comic book creators. Imitation and repetition are important—without them, a genre doesn't exist. Every genre has a central dynamic: Westerns are about civilization triumphing over savagery, detective stories detail the solution of a mystery, and superhero stories concern the responsible use of extraordinary power in the service of justice. The definition of the superhero, as the protagonist of the superhero genre, written dictionary style, isSu•per•he•ro (soo'per hîr'o) n., pl. -roes. A heroic character with a universal, selfless, prosocial mission; who possesses superpowers—extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical and/or mental skills (including mystical abilities); who has a superhero identity embodied in a code name and iconic costume, which typically express his biography or character, powers, and origin (transformation from ordinary person to superhero); and is generically distinct, i.e. can be distinguished from characters of related genres (fantasy, science fiction, detective, etc.) by a preponderance of generic conventions. Often superheroes have dual identities, the ordinary one of which is usually a closely guarded secret.—superheroic, adj. Also super hero, super-hero.1This dictionary definition is concise and specific to the superhero genre.*The superhero's mission is to fight evil and protect the innocent; this fight is universal, prosocial, and selfless. The superhero's mission must fit in with the existing, professed mores of society, and it must not be intended to benefit or further the superhero. The mission fulfills the hero part of superhero. We see the concept of the superhero's mission operating when the news media in our world designate people as "local super-heroes," ordinary citizens who

selflessly act to better their community. It's the selflessness and the prosocial nature of their acts that cause such people to be labeled as superheroes, a metaphor that is rooted in the superhero genre. When George W. Bush and Ronald Reagan were called "cowboys," both the speakers and the audiences recognized the metaphorical application of the term cowboy. No one would mean to imply, nor would anyone infer, that either of these presidents was a ranch hand who drove cattle. Cowboy here is a metaphor rooted in the Western genre, not in the actual lives of 19th century employees of cattle barons. The metaphoric use of superhero is similarly rooted in the superhero genre and in the protagonists' selfless, prosocial mission.The mission convention is essential to the superhero genre because someone who does not act selflessly to aid others in times of need is not heroic and therefore not a hero. But the prosocial mission is not unique to the genre. Superman's mission is to be a "champion of the oppressed … sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need"—that is, to "benefit mankind."[2] This mission is not essentially different from that of the pulp adventurer Doc Savage, whose "purpose was to go here and there, from one end of the world to another, looking for excitement and adventure, striving to help those who needed help, punishing those who deserved it."[3] Nor does Superman's mission differ materially from the missions of the dime novel or pulp and radio heroes of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.The superhero's mission does, however, distinguish him or her from certain other hero types. Many Western and science fiction heroes do not have the universal mission of the superhero or pulp vigilante because they are not seeking to "do good" for the sake of doing good.* Instead, many of these heroes reluctantly get drawn into defending a community. In contrast, superheroes actively seek to protect their communities by preventing harm to all individuals and to right wrongs committed by criminals and other villains.Powers—or superpowers, to emphasize the exaggeration inherent in the superhero genre—are often put forward as the central, defining element of the superhero; they put the super in superhero. They are all those abilities and qualities that raise a person's performance above that of ordinary people. Often these are thought of as supernatural abilities—abilities that defy the laws of physics in some way—which is why people often claim that Batman does not have superpowers. But superpowers need not violate the laws of physics. Wildcat and the Golden Age Atom are merely highly trained athletes, but their physical abilities allow them to interact with the godlike Spectre or Dr. Fate as part of the superhero community.* Nor do superpowers need to be inherent in the body of the superhero. Although Tony Stark's genius may have enabled him to create his advanced armor for Iron Man, his genius is not a superpower; rather, it is the armor that provides Iron Man's superpowers. The same is true of Hal Jordan's willpower: It makes him an excellent wielder of the power of the Green Lantern ring, but it is the ring and not the willpower that gives him his superpowers. Superpowers can come from extraordinary abilities, like the X-Men's mutant abilities (extra-ordinary in the literal sense); advanced technology, like Iron Man's armor; or highly developed physical or mental skills, like Batman's martial arts prowess or his supreme tactical abilities. Superpowers can also include mystical abilities that result from years of study and training, like Dr. Strange's mastery of the

mystic arts.†Superpowers distinguish Superman from his pulp and science fiction predecessors and contemporaries. Each of Superman's powers amplifies the abilities of the science fiction supermen who came before him. Hugo Danner, the protagonist of Philip Wylie's novel of social commentary, Gladiator (1930), was bulletproof, super-strong, and super-fast.‡ In the first issue of Action Comics, published in 1938, Superman displays super-strength, super-speed, super-leaping, and invulnerability at only slightly greater levels than Danner. Over time, though, Superman's powers went far beyond merely exaggerating the strength, speed, and toughness of ordinary human beings as science fiction supermen's powers had done; he gained the powers of flight, heat and x-ray vision, super-cooling breath, faster-than-light speed, and even time travel. Superman also differed from science fiction supermen in that he used his extraordinary powers within contemporary society in pursuit of his selfless prosocial mission. Prior to Superman, these sorts of powers were typically employed in narratives set far in the past or future or on other planets, not in a realistic version of modern, urban America.The identity convention is the clearest marker of the superhero genre. The identity is composed of two elements: the code name (e.g., "Superman" and "Spider-Man"), with the secret identity being a customary counterpart to the code name (e.g., "Clark Kent" and "Peter Parker"), and the costume. The code name conveys some aspect of the character, typically his or her mission or powers or the character's origin or personality. "Superman" indicates someone who is a superior person, the peak of physical, mental, and moral evolution. "Captain America" indicates someone whose patriotic mission is paramount. "Spider-Man" indicates spider powers. "Batman" refers to the bat that flew through Bruce Wayne's window and symbolizes the fear he inspires that turns him into a mythic figure of terror for the criminal underground of Gotham. "The Hulk" conveys, as Stan Lee learned from a thesaurus, "a gargantuan creature, a being of awesome strength coupled with a dull and sluggish thinking process."4 Superman's code name is particularly important, as it is likely the source of superhero as a designation for the characters that sprung from his popularity.Like the code name, the costume also conveys a sense of the superhero's mission, powers, origin, or personality. For instance, Superman's costume is made from blankets that accompanied him from Krypton in the rocket ship, and the S chevron on his chest is his El family crest; the costume represents his Kryptonian heritage and the source of his powers. Captain America's costume is a stylized American flag. Spider-Man's spider chevron announces his powers, and Batman's bat chevron records the bat that inspired his identity.Similar to his code name, Superman's costume formed the template for superhero costumes—form-fitting tights with shorts worn over them, a cape, a chevron, a belt, and boots; these are the basic components of a costume. Batman added the cowl and mask, and Captain America (among others) ditched the cape. But Superman's costume remains the base from which other superhero's outfits are built.Further, the costume announces the superhero and places him or her within the superhero community. In Nightwing #102, Dick Grayson, who had recently quit being Robin, visits Superman in Metropolis to get some guidance from the Man of Steel about what to do with his life. During the trip, Grayson and Superman separately face down members

of a political hit squad. The assassin facing Superman knows exactly what the Man of Steel is there to do—stop him. But when Dick Grayson, wearing jeans and a windbreaker with a bandana over his face, drops down on the ledge where the assassin is perched, the villain wonders who he is and why he's there. Grayson thinks, "Without the mask and colors I had to explain myself."5 The costume explains why the hero is fighting crime; without the costume, Dick Grayson has no immediately understandable purpose on that ledge—there's no community or context to which he belongs.The costume continues to announce the superhero genre to this day. Put a kid in a bathing suit with goggles and flippers, and he's ready for the beach. Tie part of a towel around his neck so the rest flows down his back, and suddenly he's Beach Boy! The cape alone—in this case, a towel doing double-duty—stands for the idea of the superhero. Superheroes are often referred to as "capes" or "masks" by the fictional cops and criminals who populate superhero stories. In fact, the superhero can be suggested without depicting the costume directly. A man using both hands to open his shirt to reveal his chest, bare or clothed, is so suggestive of superheroes—specifically Superman—that DC Comics has trademarked the pose and threatened legal action to protect it.*These three elements—mission, powers, and identity—establish the core of the genre. But specific superheroes can exist who do not fully demonstrate all three of these elements. This apparent indeterminacy originates in the nature of genre. No one example within a genre displays every convention of its genre, but all examples from a genre share common elements that form a "complicated network of similarities overlapping and crisscrossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail" that can be best thought of as "family resemblances."6 These family resemblances are all the conventions that mark a character as belonging to the superhero genre, and which I designate as generic distinction.† Examples of superheroes without all three core elements of mission, powers, and identity abound. The Hulk is a super-hero without a mission: At times he seems absolutely antisocial, and his adventures do not typically arise from his attempts to fight crime or improve the world. Batman was originally designed as a superhero without superpowers.7 Wildcat and the Atom are highly trained athletic fighters and lack even Batman's advanced technology (which Batman lacked in his early appearances). The Fantastic Four debuted without costumes (although they did have code names). But whichever primary convention is weak in these heroes, they fully possess the other two, and their stories are full of the other conventions of the superhero genre—costumed supervillains, science fiction technology, superhero teams, headquarters, supporting casts, and all the other accoutrements of superherodom. The preponderance of conventions, or generic distinction, determines the identification of a character as a superhero (as the protagonist of the superhero genre) if one or more elements of the core triad are weak or missing.This sort of superhero—the one with mission, powers, and identity—is the genre superhero and is distinct from heroes of other genres who are sometimes called super-heroes. Such characters—Buffy the Vampire Slayer, The Shadow, Beowulf, Luke Skywalker—all do good while using their superior physical or mental skills; they are heroes who are super, or super heroes.‡ Generic distinction—the preponderance or totality of generic

conventions—roots these characters firmly in other genres (respectively, horror, pulp vigilante, epic, and science fiction), which means that while (as Meatloaf put it) "two out of three ain't bad," it's not enough.8 There is a distinction between these heroes who are super and superheroes. In fact, this distinction is widely and intuitively, if not formally, understood. Writers who include Zorro, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Jack Bauer, or John McClane (Bruce Willis's character from the Die Hard series) still distinguish between these heroes who are super and genre superheroes. The distinction is indicated through phrases like "the super-powered, costumed, comic book variety," "a costumed superhero," or "the comic book crowd"9 because the difference between genre superheroes like Superman, Batman, Captain America, and Spider-Man and heroes who are super is well understood, if sometimes difficult to articulate. This difficulty is rooted in the slipperiness of genre generally and the indistinct boundaries between genres due to the sharing of conventions across genres, and it arises primarily when someone attempts to define the superhero. If Zorro 3 and Iron Man 3 were to come out the same weekend and a friend said, "Let's go see a superhero movie," your friend would mean Iron Man. But ask that friend to define "superhero," and in comes Zorro. The distinction between Iron Man as a superhero and Zorro as a costumed vigilante is understood, but the act of articulating the definition causes this distinction to dissolve.The reason for the general indeterminacy of the definition of the superhero lies in the way the genre is understood. The superhero genre is a genre of its own, but most people don't recognize it in the way they do science fiction, or Westerns, or fantasy. These other genres, like all genres, have their own definitional difficulties, but the difficulties with the superhero genre are particularly knotty because the superhero genre shares its primary conventions of mission, powers, and identity, as well as secondary conventions such as supervillains, advanced technology, urban settings, and helpful authority figures, with many other genres, particularly adventure genres. Adventure genres—which include superhero, war, Western, and fantasy—feature a "central fantasy" of the hero "overcoming obstacles and dangers and accomplishing some important and moral mission."10 Luke Skywalker puts himself in harm's way to defeat Darth Vader and the Empire, as does Flash Gordon in his struggle against Ming the Merciless, as does James Bond when he takes down Goldfinger or Dr. No. These heroes clearly have selfless, prosocial missions, so distinguishing between them and superheroes is understandably difficult. The superhero mission's universality is one thing that differentiates it from the missions of these other heroes. Luke Skywalker doesn't go out on patrol to stop muggers on Tatooine. Flash Gordon largely limits his activities to Mongo. James Bond serves M16; he doesn't diffuse hostage crises or respond to burglar alarms.Powers are common to heroic characters in many adventure genres, whether genuinely supernatural powers of mythological heroes such as the strength of Hercules, the heightened human powers of legendary heroes such as the endurance of Roland, or the abilities of heroes from genres more rooted in a realistic depiction of the laws of physics, such as the ability of 24's Jack Bauer to withstand torture or the fighting abilities of Die Hard's John McClane. Jack Bauer's and John McClane's abilities certainly seem beyond those of ordinary people, even if they are not at the

level of Hercules' strength, Beowulf's grip, or Luke Skywalker's Jedi mind tricks. Although the powers of Superman, Green Lantern, Dr. Strange, and the Spectre do seem to be exaggerated or expand beyond the limits of those of most other genre heroes, these superheroes' powers are different in degree rather than in kind relative to the powers of heroes of other genres. Moreover, many "street-level" superheroes like Batman, Daredevil, or Wildcat operate at power levels far below those of science fiction heroes such as Neo of the Matrix trilogy or fantasy heroes like Harry Potter, so superpowers are not distinct to the superhero genre.Both the code name and costume portions of the identity convention are shared with other genres, but much less frequently than mission and powers. Pulp vigilantes like The Shadow, the Spider, the Phantom Detective, the Crimson Clown, the Green Hornet, and the Black Bat employ code names in the same way superheroes do. But outside the pulp vigilante genre, code names are rarer and operate in different ways. Although Buffy is known as "the Slayer," the Slayer is not a public identity in the way the identities of the Fantastic Four or Spider-Man are. Residents of Sunnydale are not aware of the Slayer the way the residents of Marvel's New York are of Mr. Fantastic and the Invisible Woman. The Fantastic Four's code names operate similarly to stage names like Madonna, Lady Gaga, or Ke$ha—these are public names that everyone recognizes. Just as some fans know the names Madonna Ciccone, Stefani Germanotta, or Kesha Sebert, some residents of Marvel's New York know the names Reed Richards and Susan Storm. "The Slayer" does not keep Buffy's family and friends safe from harm the way "Spider-Man" does Peter Parker's Aunt May. Nor does "the Slayer" entail a different personality, as the Superman identity does for Clark Kent. In the television series Dark Angel, the protagonist Max Guevera is never called "Dark Angel" in a story; the name is completely external to the world of the story and is known only to viewers. So the parallels between the superhero genre's use of the code name convention and similar uses in other genres are much more limited.The costume, while not absolutely unique to the superhero genre, is identified much more with the superhero genre than with other genres. Genre superheroes are often referred to as costumed superheroes or long-underwear heroes (as well as "capes" and "masks"). The producers of Smallville wanted to hold off on identifying the show with the larger Superman mythos and the superhero genre, so they employed the motto "no flights, no tights" when thinking about the show (highlighting two main identifying features of Superman—and hence superhero—stories).11 More importantly, a superhero's costume tends to be a visual embodiment of the character's mission, powers, origin, or personality in a way that pulp vigilante costumes are not, and it also tends to be much more iconic in terms of how the costume expresses the connection with the mission, powers, origin, or personality. Zorro is often put forward as a costume wearer, but his all-black outfit, cape, mask, and broad-brimmed hat do not iconically suggest "fox," which is what zorro means in Spanish. The Shadow's black cloak enables him to hide in the shadows, but it does not suggest the idea of a shadow in the way that Iron Man's armor suggests a man made of iron. Even the costume of the Black Bat, a pulp vigilante who wears an all-black body suit with a scalloped cape that suggests bat wings, is not as iconic as Batman's pointy-eared cowl and bat chevron. The

chevron—the chest shield or logo that has been central to the superhero genre since the debut of Superman in 1938—is a convention of the costume that is almost unique to the superhero genre, and it is probably the clearest marker of the genre.The superhero genre shares many of its other conventions—the supervillain, the helpful authority figure, the sanctum sanctorum, the team, the sidekick, and even the dual identity—with other genres but usually has emphases that are specific to it in the way these conventions are deployed or have come to be firmly identified with the superhero genre. The damsel in distress, who is often the hero's love interest, is common to adventure genres in general. But the two-person love triangle—best embodied by the Superman–Lois Clark relationship in which the woman is attracted to the superhero who spurns her advances, while she similarly spurns the advances of the secret-identity alter ego who pursues her—is firmly identified with the superhero genre.The superhero genre has changed over time because, like all genres, it responds to changes in the culture. But the core conventions of mission, powers, and identity have remained stable. These primary conventions are an economical way to indicate firmly that a heroic character is a superhero. So what is a superhero? A superhero is the protagonist of the superhero genre. Other heroic figures—whether real or fictional—are called superheroes because they are super (they have powers) and/or heroes (with selfless, prosocial missions). But these uses of superhero can be considered metaphoric references to the superhero genre. All answers to the question "What is a superhero?" are ultimately rooted in the superhero genre.NOTES1. Peter Coogan, Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre (MonkeyBrain Books, 2006), p. 30. I have added "universal" to the description of the mission to clarify an aspect of the super-hero mission that distinguishes it from those of other genres.2. Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, Action Comics #1, June 1938, p. 1.3. Kenneth Robeson [Lester Dent], Man of Bronze. New York: Banta, 1933/1964, p. 4. Doc Savage is Clark Savage, Jr., a pulp adventurer whose adventures were published by Street and Smith from 1933 to 1949 and has appeared in numerous paperback and comic book revivals, as well as a campy 1975 feature film, Doc Savage: The Man of Bronze, starring Ron Ely.4. Stan Lee, Origins of Marvel Comics. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974, p. 75.5. Scott Beatty, Chuck Dixon, and Scott McDaniel, "Bombs Away!" Nightwing 102 (March 2005), p. 8.6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, cited in Brian Henderson, "Romantic Comedy Today: Semi-Tough or Impossible?" Film Genre Reader. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin, TX: U. of Texas P., 1986, p. 314.7. Bob Kane and Tom Andrae, Batman and Me. Forrestville, CA: Eclipse Books, 1989, p. 99.8. Jim Steinman, "Two Out of Three Ain't Bad," on Meatloaf, Bat Out of Hell, Epic Records, 1977.9. Joe Quesada, "the super-powered, costumed, comic book variety"; Jennifer Stuller, "a costumed superhero"; and Kurt Busiek, "the comic book crowd."10. John Cawelti, Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture. Chicago: U niversity of Chicago Press, 1976, p. 40.11. Christine Mersch, "Alfred Gough." Writers Digest, February 11, 2008.TWOWe Could Be HeroesWill BrookerWill Brooker is Professor in Film and Cultural Studies at Kingston University, London. His Ph.D. thesis focused on a cultural history of Batman and involved a three-year study of the Dark Knight across all media from 1939 to 1999. The research was published as Batman

Unmasked and earned him the title Dr. Batman in the media. He has since published widely on popular culture and its audiences.Superheroes are about wish fulfillment. They're about imagining a better world and creating an alternate version of yourself—bigger, brighter, bolder than the real thing—to patrol and protect it. That's the way it's always been, right from the start. That's how it was for Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, misfit young men from immigrant families who dreamed up a Superman in the 1930s; that's how it was for Bob Kahn, a little later, sketching a Bat-Man who could soar above the roofs of his run-down Bronx neighborhood. Kahn even changed his own name, hiding his Jewish roots in a new brand—Bob Kane—and a carefully crafted logo; when he put his signature to Bat-Man, he also confirmed a new identity for himself, and he made sure it rhymed with Bruce Wayne.The best heroes are those with hidden hurt and secret wounds—the ones who channel some of their creators' outsider status and reflect back some of their readers' insecurity. Superman is arguably the least interesting of the bunch. He's annoyingly untraumatized for someone who witnessed the destruction of his home planet and grew up as an alien on Earth, and his stuttering, stumbling alter-ego persona Clark Kent is just a front. Most of his pals in the first wave of superhero comics were similarly confident heroes, in the mold of cinema's handsome matinee idols—sure, they had a token weakness, like Superman's Kryptonite or the Green Lantern's vulnerability to wood,* and they suffered the odd romantic quarrel with their girlfriends, but at heart they were square-jawed, barrel-chested, all-American, stand-up guys. Even Wonder Woman, an Ebook Library from the peacefully feminist Paradise Island with presumably no stake in World War II, integrated herself happily into "Man's World," dated a U.S. Army officer, and fought the Nazis. Batman's sidekick, Robin, was meant to provide a way in for the young reader, but again, he was pretty perky for an orphan.Marvel Comics did something new in the 1960s by introducing a superhero with a genuinely geeky private life. Teen boys could see themselves for the first time in Peter Parker, the bullied bookworm, whose life was much closer to theirs than Clark Kent's metropolitan whirl or Robin's high-wire history as a circus acrobat. When Parker transformed into Spider-Man, his becoming a man was as significant as his getting the abilities of a spider, and Spidey's confident wise-cracking was as important as the web-slinging and wall-crawling. Sam Raimi's Spider-Man film of 2002 had the right idea, depicting Parker's transition through sequences of sticky web fluid and embarrassing homemade costumes—becoming a man can be a messy business.Superhero mythology is about escape, about creating an alternative identity and becoming someone different, someone better. Arguably, superheroes are at their finest when they're the alter-ego creations of geeks and loners, not handsome hunks. In Grant Morrison's Doom Patrol comic of the early 1990s, it's clear that the author understood that: it's a story of misfits and rejects, including puny Wally Sage, who sketched a muscle-bound hero called Flex Mentallo and brought his imaginary friend to life. Together, Wally and Flex look like the "before" and "after" pictures in the Charles Atlas ads: the boy who got sand kicked in his face, and the superman he wants to become. "There is a better world," runs a caption in Doom Patrol, quoting Morrissey, a singer who fully understands the lost and the lonely; "Well … there must

be."Perhaps the most poignant example of the way a misfit can transform himself through a mask is Rorschach, from Alan Moore's epic graphic novel Watchmen. Rorschach first appears as a stone-cold, hard-boiled urban vigilante dressed in a private eye trench coat. His face is obscured by shifting patterns of black and white, symbolizing his binary worldview: "Never compromise. Even in the face of Armageddon." One of the story's major twists is the revelation that Rorschach is Walter Kovacs, a bigoted loner who wears platform shoes, lives in a tiny room, never washes his stinking trench coat, and slurps beans straight from the can. But along with the squalor, the sadness, and the madness of Kovacs's existence, we're shown how he turned out that way—a childhood of beatings, bullying, and abuse—and we understand why he needed a new identity: to escape his own real life. His mask isn't just a mask. The mask is his face, a face he can bear to look at in the mirror. How many teenagers, male and female, have felt ugly and unlovable and wished they could cover their face with a clean, anonymous blank? Rorschach's transformation is far more important than just putting on a cloak and thinking of a cool name. It's the only way he can live with himself. Becoming a superhero—or an anti-hero, in his case—is a new start, a new history. That's one reason that an origin story, the tale of how a character gained his or her identity and chose his or her costume, is invariably of a "secret origin": The stories bury the old, battered, weaker self and give the character a new life as someone braver and bolder.Batman, of course, is the prime example of the self-made superhero. His appeal lies primarily in the fact that he's a human being. He's trained to the point of mental and physical perfection, but his powers are all based in human ingenuity and determination. Any reader could become Batman. Sure, you'd have to suffer a childhood trauma, inherit a fortune, hone your body, study forensics, and craft your own gadgets, but if you really put your mind to it, you could become Batman—or that's what generations of fans have told themselves.* Christian Bale's recent casting in The Dark Knight Trilogy (2005–2012) only confirms the theory: Bale, according to director Christopher Nolan, bulked up, built muscle, learned martial arts, and climbed to the pinnacles of skyscrapers to inhabit the role.Christopher Nolan's Batman films are distinctive because of their realism; they ditch the camp and the gothic fantasy of earlier incarnations and reimagine the gadgets and costumes in plausibly militaristic terms—Batarangs become throwing knives, the Batsuit becomes spray-painted Kevlar armor, and the Batmobile becomes a tank. Similarly, Watchmen's big idea was to depict superheroes realistically, imagining how they'd work in a world very much like our own; thus, a vigilante like Rorschach is revealed as an unhygienic conspiracy nut. But of course, our real world is severely lacking in costumed heroes. Though we've read about their adventures for over 70 years in the comics, nobody has ever made a living out of dressing up and fighting crime. It would be unreasonable to expect a godlike patriot like Superman or the science fiction powers of Green Lantern, but we've never even had more plausible hard-ass masked vigilantes like Rorschach or self-made city guardians like Batman. Maybe that's because the concept of a masked protector just outside the boundaries of the law doesn't comfortably cross over. When real-life vigilantes do hit the headlines, they're not cool and stylish, but dangerous, pathetic nutjobs with a gun and a grudge. When guys dress up

in superhero costumes to protest a cause or raise awareness, they invariably look saggy and paunchy rather than sleek and dynamic.*So, is ours a world without superheroes? Not entirely. Our versions do dress up, they just don't fight crime. In our own alternate universe, the closest we get to larger-than-life costumed characters are entertainers rather than vigilantes—ordinary people who transform themselves into bigger, brighter versions of themselves, and in doing so offer the same promise of escape and empowerment to their followers.Media icons with secret identities have been around at least as long as the comic book heroes. In the 1900s, Florence Lawrence, the first-ever movie star, was branded "The Biograph Girl" as if she were a real-life superheroine, and just as characters like Batman have passed on their cape, cowl, and code name to others, Florence shared her new name with another girl, Mary Pickford. In the 1930s and 1940s, when Superman and his co-stars made their first appearances in comics, Archibald Leach and Marion Morrison were ditching their slightly wimpy names and recreating themselves as the debonair Cary Grant and the solidly masculine John Wayne; a little later, a model-actress called Norma Jeane Mortenson followed suit. Her chosen identity, Marilyn Monroe, even sounds like a superhero name—or a superhero's secret alter ego, along the lines of Peter Parker and Reed Richards—and perhaps more tellingly, the double "M," which she felt was a lucky omen, looks like a superhero logo, a lightning bolt or zigzag.†In the 1950s, when Elvis took on the brand "The King,"‡ British singers with everyday names dreamed up flashier, manlier, comic book alternatives for themselves as the basis of their bolder stage personas. Just as Walter Kovacs branded himself "Rorschach" and covered his face with a black-and-white blot to close the door on his old life, so Terry Nelhams-Wright took on the name "Adam Faith"—with its Biblical connotations of belief and the creation of a brand new man—as part of his transformation into a TV star and teen idol. And as Bruce Wayne was inspired by a bat crashing through his window and adopted its name as a dark totem, so a British singer called Harry Webb took on "Cliff," for its towering evocations of rock music, and "Richard," as a tribute to his idol, Little Richard. Of course, Cliff Richard's group, the Shadows, was a guitar band rather than a crime-fighting team, but the importance of the origin story—the concept of choosing a new name, of baptism and rebirth—is as central to celebrity as it is to superhero culture.*It was in late-1960s New York that the costumed heroes of comic books truly collided with their real-world counterparts. Warhol made himself into a distinctive brand, created a science fiction silver Factory, and surrounded himself with a clique of superstars. His followers, with alter egos like Ultra Violet, Billy Name, Ondine, Candy Darling, and the Velvet Underground, could have walked right out of Marvel comics. But the connections between costumed heroes and celebrities went further. Warhol and his contemporaries borrowed from superhero comics, enlarging panels to canvas size for gallery exhibition, and the comics borrowed back, marketing themselves as "authentic Pop Art." Warhol's crowd was even invited to the launch of the 1960s Batman TV show, and Warhol and German singer Nico dressed up as Robin and Batman for a 1967 Esquire shoot. Back in the UK, the Beatles disguised themselves as Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band (it even sounds like a superhero group), and in 1975, Paul McCartney made explicit

reference to Marvel Comics villains in the song "Magneto and Titanium Man."†By the mid-1970s, of course, David Bowie's star had risen. Bowie had followed his own superhero-style origin story: Growing up in post-war London suburbia and possessed by the belief that he could be someone —or something—out of the ordinary, he ditched the dull name "Jones," re-christened himself after a type of knife (what could be more cutting edge?), and launched himself as a science fiction icon. In fact, a single persona wasn't enough for Bowie; he went through a host of incarnations. By 1975 he'd already killed off one larger-than-life character, Ziggy Stardust, and was moving through new masks, costumes, and names like a superhero on speed. The very idea of killing off his alien alter ego is a grand, pop-operatic statement suitable for a comic book cover—"Ziggy is DEAD! Call me … ALADDIN SANE!"The 1970s rock band KISS was even more explicit in its debt to costumed heroes, and the debt was repaid when they and their on-stage alter egos—the Demon, the Starchild, the Space Ace, and the Catman—appeared in their own Marvel comic book in 1977. The back-and-forth relationship between comic books and popular culture continued when, three years later, Marvel created a new heroine to cash in on the disco craze. The new superhero, Dazzler, was planned as a cross-platform phenomenon, a comic book character who would also release records. In turn, the disco music style influenced long-running characters like Batman's sidekick, Robin: When the Boy Wonder grew up and, in a second re-birth, chose the new name Nightwing, he ditched the old-fashioned red and green costume for a midnight blue catsuit with a Dazzler-style disco collar (only a decade or so after they'd fallen out of fashion).The interplay between music and comic books continued into the 1980s and 1990s. When a superhero character was "reborn" (i.e., rebooted for a new generation of readers), his new macho attitude was often signaled by a leather jacket, inspired by the previous decade's pop music pin-ups. For instance, the new teenage Superman of 1993* (slogan: "Don't ever call me SUPERBOY!") wore leathers over his costume and looked like a missing member from the 1980s boy-band Bros or George Michael at the start of his solo career.British comic book writers were a little more knowing about the trend: creator Grant Morrison gave his home-grown superhero Zenith a pop career and showed him fuming at his pretty rivals Bros and A-ha, scorning Acid House music, and then selling out to the "baggy" Manchester fashions of the 1990s. Further examples from the decade emphasize the playful borrowings between pop music and superhero comics. Alan Moore's occult detective John Constantine was explicitly based on another rock star, Gordon Sumner, known to the world as Sting. John Smith's The New Statesmen depicted superheroes as gorgeous celebrities, prefiguring our current tendency to turn golden couples into brand names; Brangelina, TomKat, and Posh and Becks could be alternate versions of the comic book characters Bulleteer, Kitty Pryde, and Hawk and Dove.Meanwhile, in the music industry, the origin stories continued, as ordinary boys and girls dreaming of stardom took on outlandish costumed identities. More than ever, young hopefuls transforming themselves into potential pop stars went through a process of superhero-style baptism like Bowie's, deliberately elevating themselves above the ordinary into something glittering, transcendent, and larger than life.Take Paul Hewson, for instance, who

grew up in an ordinary Dublin suburb, joined a rock band, and decided to take on a new identity. He could have gone for a version of the more modest stage personae of previous generations (like Cliff Richard and Adam Faith), but instead he adopted a stranger brand, “Bono Vox,” and led a supergroup called U2. As with Rorschach and indeed Batman and Bowie, “Bono” seems to have taken over from the real person; rather than just a stage name, the persona has become the main identity. It’s Bono, not Paul Hewson, who holds high-level discussions with politicians and popes. Like Rorschach and Batman, Bono wears a mask—the wraparound shades constantly shielding his eyes—but he also needs the symbolic mask of his chosen name, and the larger-than-life persona it implies, even off stage. Tellingly, Bono also calls his closest bandmate “Edge,” rather than David Evans; the alter ego, for both men, has become (to quote their own lyrics) even better than the real thing.*Equally telling is the way Bono, like Bowie, has consistently invented new personae over the years. Already an iconic character, Bono disguised himself further onstage as “The Boy in the Box,” “The Fly,” “Mirror Ball Man,” and “MacPhisto,” each a new construction of props, costume, voice, and gesture. The ability to ditch a former identity and adopt a new one—to start afresh, with a new face and name—is one of the powers that real-life celebrities share with superheroes, and the liberating joy of rebirth, of recreation, of relaunching yourself under a new brand (whether “Rorschach,” “Batman,” “Bono,” or “Bowie”), can clearly be addictive.†The pop heroine of a new generation is of course Stefani Germanotta, better known as Lady Gaga; like sidekicks Kid Flash and Robin, she grew up learning from role models—drawing from rock stars Bowie, Madonna, and Queen’s Freddie Mercury‡11—before changing her name, adopting a costume (or ten), and starting her own career. She even has an origin story: when her producer texted “Lady Gaga” to her phone, she declared, “That’s it. Don’t ever call me Stefani again.”Lady Gaga is the closest thing we’ve got right now to a comic book superheroine, a living embodiment of the American dream that both Bruce Wayne and Clark Kent have embodied since the 1930s: The idea that anyone—especially someone from an immigrant background, like Superman himself—can dream big, work hard, and make it, even if “making it” means the construction of a whole new identity.It may seem like a raw deal, a pale copy of superhero comics. Gaga doesn’t patrol the city fighting crime, after all, any more than Bowie donned his Ziggy Stardust guise to protect the innocent and make the streets safer. (As a pop star turned political campaigner and philanthropist, Bono is, arguably, a rare exception.) There might be something super about giving yourself a new name and baptizing yourself as a star, but there’s nothing obviously heroic in the process.Not obviously, perhaps. But what our real-world costumed characters offer is the power of carnivalesque reinvention, which they hold out, as role models, to their followers. Lady Gaga modeled herself on the self-made stars of a previous generation, and just as Bowie, Madonna, and Freddie Mercury have inspired countless young people to find their own inner strength, to dress up and bravely parade even in the most conservative small towns and suburbs, so Gaga shows today’s teenagers that it’s just fine to be different—that being different, in fact, is a way of being special. It’s a power.The TV show Glee picked up on this idea in a recent storyline. Its main characters are all, in one way or another,

misfits, social rejects, and outsiders—a pregnant teenager, a young gay man, a student in a wheelchair, a football player who loves musical theater—brought together by their passion for song and dance. In a 2010 episode, they all dressed in either Gaga drag or KISS makeup and formed a united front—gay, straight, male, and female—against homophobic bullies who picked on one of their group for being different. Blocking a school corridor in their flamboyant masks, outfits, and makeup and facing down the burly football jocks, Glee's misfits didn't look like losers; they looked like superstars. They looked like superheroes.In comic books and pop celebrity, the origin story—the story of how Walter became Rorschach, of how Stefani became Gaga—is about gaining new confidence, ditching your old identity, and becoming someone new. Like superheroes, pop stars show us that a wimp, a persecuted loner, a nobody, can become a somebody. The science nerd can become a wise-cracking wall-crawler. The suburban dreamer, whether from London or Dublin, can dream out loud and conquer the world under a new name. This isn't just a conventional makeover, a sell-out to dominant ideals. The misfits don't become mainstream; they make their own style of strangeness big and bold. They dare the world to deal with them on their own terms, and they invite others to join them.And if they can do it, we can, too. It doesn't have to happen on a global scale; we can do it on our own terms, ditching our old, weaker, shyer selves and becoming someone else, someone bigger, better, brighter, bolder … and someone who belongs. Gloriously decorated, disguised in their face paint and ornate dresses, Glee's marginalized misfits weren't just new versions of their old selves; they were part of a team. They were part of something larger, pulling together to support each other, to defend the bullied and embrace the outsider, in the name of Gaga.What Is a Superhero?What Is a Superhero?What Is a Superhero?Edited By Robin S. Rosenberg and Peter CooganWhat Is a Superhero?Edited By Robin S. Rosenberg and Peter CooganOxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,and education by publishing worldwide.Oxford New YorkAuckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong KarachiKuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City NairobiNew Delhi Shanghai Taipei TorontoWith offices inArgentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France GreeceGuatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal SingaporeSouth Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine VietnamOxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press in theUK and certain other countries.Published in the United States of America byOxford University Press 198Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016© Robin Rosenberg and Peter Coogan 2013"Superheroes Are Made" © Tom DeFalco"Nobility of Purpose" © Danny Fingeroth"Making the World a Better Place" © Jeph Loeb"Superheroes and Supervillains: An Interdependent Relationship"© Ivory Madison"Extraordinary" © Joe QuesadaAll rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted by law, by license, or under terms agreed with the appropriate reproduction rights organization. Inquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the address above.You must not

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screen. Uslan became the originator and Executive Producer of all the Batman movies from Tim Burton's 1989 Batman through 2012's The Dark Knight Rises. As if that weren't enough, he also writes comic books, including Batman, and has recently authored his memoir, The Boy Who Loved Batman. In 2012, Uslan received the world's first ever Doctorate in Comic Books.Heroes and villains have been essential parts of folklore and mythology since the beginnings of oral traditions and storytelling. Across the millennia, the heroes have come in many forms and sizes, varying from culture to culture around the world. The villains emerged as sometimes evil and sometimes spiteful and jealous gods, monsters, ogres, wizards, warlocks, witches, kings, knaves, and even as the dark side of the heroes themselves. So, when and how does a hero earn the right to be called or designated as a "superhero"?Does being a superhero require one or more superpowers? Conversely, is that the same requirement for a supervillain? Thus, does the strength of Hercules or Samson qualify them for membership in some ancient version of a Justice League? Do the powers of Medusa or Circe or Macbeth's three witches entitle them to become part of some legendary Secret Society of Supervillains? On the surface, the answers to the questions we pose seem obvious and simple. When Superman made his debut in June 1938* in the pages of Action Comics #1 as comicbookdom's first superhero, the requirements of this new class of heroes seemed set in stone: a benevolent Hercules equipped with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men; a colorful costume evoking a circus strongman, the man on the flying trapeze, the human cannonball, or a tumbling acrobat; and perhaps also a secret identity as earlier utilized by the Scarlet Pimpernel and Zorro. Yes, it all appeared so very, very simple … until the world's second superhero made his debut in May 1939.The Batman mysteriously appeared in Detective Comics #27 and rewrote the rules Superman had set down just 11 months before. He looked like a superhero. He had the colorful costume and cape. He had a secret identity. But he had no superpowers. Batman's greatest so-called superpower was possibly his humanity. If the Batman was, indeed, a superhero as much as Superman, what now would be the qualifying criteria? As the fledgling comic book industry grew and dozens, then hundreds, of these caped crusaders and mystery men made their four-color appearances, the true answer became clearer and clearer.When young Bruce Wayne watched in abject horror as his parents were gunned down before his eyes, he made a vow … a vow. At that frozen moment in time, he made a sacrifice … a sacrifice. He sacrificed his childhood on a blood-soaked concrete altar in order to dedicate the rest of his life to getting the evil one who did this … getting all the evil ones … even if it meant having to go through Hell in order to do so. It was a commitment he was willing to make and see through to the end … a commitment. In order to accomplish this mission, he had to train relentlessly to become the best a human being could become physically and mentally … to become the best. In doing so, he became an urban warrior … an urban legend … a superhero.Thus, today we have our own real-life superheroes who fill the bill laid down by Superman and Batman. The firefighters, police, and EMTs who rushed to the World Trade Center during and after its attack are superheroes. The man who jumped onto the subway tracks in New York to rescue a person in distress is more than a fast-thinking Good

Samaritan flush with adrenalin; he's a superhero. The doctors or nurses rushing to Haiti in the aftermath of a terrible earthquake are superheroes, and the people they help and save and comfort will swear this to you. The soldier heading off to a distant land is our modern-day, dragon-slaying Beowulf. All these individuals would qualify as members in what in olden days might have been called King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table and in contemporary times might be referred to as the Avengers.Is there any other definition for "superhero"? My own mother and father sacrificed so much to raise my brother and me, and they taught us life's most important lessons in the process, often by example. They are my superheroes. Who are yours? I've had the pleasure of appearing with Robin Rosenberg and Peter Coogan on celebrated panels at some of the world's biggest comic book conventions, where we have enthusiastically discussed and debated, in front of what are by now thousands of comic book fans, everything from the psychology of supervillains to the essence of superheroes. Their research, writings, and presentations represent some of the most scholarly work being done or ever having been done in the field. Initially afraid that Robin and Pete would be attempting to teach a graduate-level academic seminar at a Comic Con to a room filled with girls dressed as Harley Quinn, boys dressed as the Joker, and an occasional very large, bearded man dressed as Princess Leia, I was relieved and amazed to experience the entertaining and enlightening approach they bring to a subject that attracts such great interest across fans of both genders, all ages, and all cultures.When the writers and artists of comic books, beginning in the Golden Age of the late 1930s through World War II and the 1940s, created all these characters and stories, they were trying to make a living in hard times. They were not thinking that what they were in the process of doing was creating a legitimate American art form or America's (and eventually the world's) newest mythology. But in addition to the sheer entertainment and escapist fare they provided us with, their greatest gift was the ideal of the modern-day superhero. And yes, it's true: the ancient gods of Egypt, of Greece and Rome, of the Norse, all still exist—only today they wear spandex and capes.What is a "superhero"? The secrets lie within the pages that follow. Your quest to find the answers begins now…Michael UslanSomewhere inside Mt. Olympus,Odin's Palace in Asgard,the JLA's Hall of Justice,or maybe just the local fire and police station2013ForewordMichael Uslan is just about the ideal person to introduce a collection of essays on the definition of the superhero. He is both scholar and creator. He taught the first accredited college course on comics, at Indiana University, and wrote the first textbook on comics. His passion for Batman comics led him to envision a dark version of Batman for the big screen. Uslan became the originator and Executive Producer of all the Batman movies from Tim Burton's 1989 Batman through 2012's The Dark Knight Rises. As if that weren't enough, he also writes comic books, including Batman, and has recently authored his memoir, The Boy Who Loved Batman. In 2012, Uslan received the world's first ever Doctorate in Comic Books.Michael Uslan is just about the ideal person to introduce a collection of essays on the definition of the superhero. He is both scholar and creator. He taught the first accredited college course on comics, at Indiana University, and wrote the first textbook on comics. His passion for Batman

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the subway tracks in New York to rescue a person in distress is more than a fast-thinking Good Samaritan flush with adrenalin; he's a superhero. The doctors or nurses rushing to Haiti in the aftermath of a terrible earthquake are superheroes, and the people they help and save and comfort will swear this to you. The soldier heading off to a distant land is our modern-day, dragon-slaying Beowulf. All these individuals would qualify as members in what in olden days might have been called King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table and in contemporary times might be referred to as the Avengers.Is there any other definition for “superhero”? My own mother and father sacrificed so much to raise my brother and me, and they taught us life's most important lessons in the process, often by example. They are my superheroes. Who are yours? I've had the pleasure of appearing with Robin Rosenberg and Peter Coogan on celebrated panels at some of the world's biggest comic book conventions, where we have enthusiastically discussed and debated, in front of what are by now thousands of comic book fans, everything from the psychology of supervillains to the essence of superheroes. Their research, writings, and presentations represent some of the most scholarly work being done or ever having been done in the field. Initially afraid that Robin and Pete would be attempting to teach a graduate-level academic seminar at a Comic Con to a room filled with girls dressed as Harley Quinn, boys dressed as the Joker, and an occasional very large, bearded man dressed as Princess Leia, I was relieved and amazed to experience the entertaining and enlightening approach they bring to a subject that attracts such great interest across fans of both genders, all ages, and all cultures.When the writers and artists of comic books, beginning in the Golden Age of the late 1930s through World War II and the 1940s, created all these characters and stories, they were trying to make a living in hard times. They were not thinking that what they were in the process of doing was creating a legitimate American art form or America's (and eventually the world's) newest mythology. But in addition to the sheer entertainment and escapist fare they provided us with, their greatest gift was the ideal of the modern-day superhero. And yes, it's true: the ancient gods of Egypt, of Greece and Rome, of the Norse, all still exist—only today they wear spandex and capes.What is a “superhero”? The secrets lie within the pages that follow. Your quest to find the answers begins now…Michael UslanSomewhere inside Mt. Olympus,Odin's Palace in Asgard,the JLA's Hall of Justice,or maybe just the local fire and police station2013AcknowledgmentsThis book would not have been possible without the many comic book, film, and television writers, artists, actors, directors, and other folks who have contributed their own interpretation of what it means to be a superhero. Many thanks to all the “creators” of superheroes. We are extremely grateful in particular to the comic book writers who contributed to this volume (in reverse alphabetical order, since alphabetical order is the most common way to do it and is inherently unfair to folks whose names begin with letters toward the end of the alphabet): Fred van Lente, Joe Quesada, Dennis O'Neil, Ivory Madison, Jeph Loeb, Paul Levitz, Stan Lee, Danny Fingeroth, Tom DeFalco, and Kurt Busiek. We are grateful to Michael Uslan for writing a foreword, and for collaborating with us on Batman panels at San Diego Comic Con.Thanks also go to the comic book scholars who contributed to this volume for their

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another 18 proposing—and shooting down—candidates for the title of “First Superhero” (and the title goes to … Superman!). But in the years he spent writing his dissertation, he routinely discussed the topic at conferences, comic book conventions, and cocktail parties with faculty, fans, and friends until he settled the issue for himself (see his “dictionary definition” of the superhero in the first essay of this volume). And he made his conclusions available to the world via his book Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre (MonkeyBrain Books, 2006). So that should have settled things—but astonishingly, shockingly, other people still have their own opinions.In fact, the question of what a superhero is has become central to our culture’s understanding of itself and our future. The superhero genre has moved into the position held by the Western genre for most of the 20th century, when it served as a useful metaphorical way of discussing immigration, Americanization, urbanization, American identity, changing conceptions of race and gender, individualism, capitalism, modernism, and so many other central cultural concerns. In the Cold War, the Western became crucial to America’s image of itself. Think of the Cold War as a Western—two diametrically opposed cultures in a twilight struggle that could end in an apocalypse. In Westerns, Indians (using the language of Westerns) often threaten the wholesale destruction of the settlers, and the stories often end in an apocalyptic, fiery extirpation of Indian towns and an expulsion of Indians from the settled territory. During the Cold War, especially at its height in the 1950s, Westerns dominated television and were consistently popular at the movies. This popularity can be traced to many factors, but at some level the genre’s metaphors worked well to express social tensions. According to Thomas Schatz, genres are privileged story forms in which social tensions are brought to life in narratives and ritualistically resolved. Popular genres are those that can best animate and resolve social tensions through their metaphors.1In fact, like Westerns, superhero stories depict an “epic moment” when civilization is threatened but the forces of savagery—whether represented as Indians or outlaws in Westerns or villains in superhero stories—are defeated. Whereas the violence in Westerns was in the service of containment (trying to keep the “Reds” on the reservation, as with the Truman Doctrine and the West’s attempt to limit communist expansion), the violence in superhero stories arises as a last resort (as with the Powell Doctrine after the Cold War), engaged in by the superhero because of the implacable threat posed by the supervillain, which ordinary authorities are unable to combat effectively.Emblematic of this cultural shift in storied metaphor from Western to superhero is the choice of adjective to describe some modern presidents. If Ronald Reagan was the first modern “cowboy” president of the United States (and George W. Bush the second one), Barack Obama is its first “superhero” president. He was frequently portrayed as a superhero in editorial cartoons and websites, and at the 63rd Annual Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation Dinner in 2008, a charity roast organized by the Catholic Archdiocese of New York for the benefit of needy children, Obama played off the image of himself as a savior, saying, “Contrary to the rumors you have heard, I was not born in a manger. I was actually born on Krypton and sent here by my father, Jor-El, to save the planet Earth.”The current popularity of superhero movies seems to demonstrate the hold the genre has

on the public, and these movies take up current real-world issues. Iron Man, in his first movie, directly takes on fanatical terrorists in Afghanistan. In The Dark Knight, the Joker explicitly uses terror and nihilistic aggression to forward his ends, and Batman employs both warrantless surveillance and extraordinary rendition to battle him. In Spider-Man 2, when Doctor Octopus moves to finish off the Amazing Arachnid on an elevated train in New York, the passengers step forward to defend the unconscious and unmasked Spider-Man in a scene reminiscent of the real-life heroic actions of United 93 passengers who stood up to the hijackers.And the superhero is a figure that touches centrally on the likely future of humans. Baseball player Alexander Rodriguez explained his steroid use as a response to the pressure he felt to perform at a superhuman level (because of the chemical enhancements employed by other players).2 A-Rod's fear of losing to "superhumans" recurs in superhero comics. For instance, Lex Luthor hates Superman because he sees the Kryptonian as marking an end to human potential and achievements, the end of human dreams: "All of us—everyone—deserves a chance at greatness. All that takes is the belief that it exists. But his existence threatens not just that belief, but our existence. I believe there's something inherently dangerous when something real becomes mythic. I believe when that happens we lose the part of ourselves that yearns to be great. Because when faced with a myth? We can't win."3This same concern surfaces in the graphic novels Kingdom Come, Watchmen, and Miracleman, in the X-Men, and in countless other superhero comics, as well as in films like Gattaca. Widespread steroid use means that players who don't use can't compete. Barry Bonds became a myth when he broke Hank Aaron's home run record—and it appears that no merely human player, unaided by superpowers, may be able to break Bond's record, driving home Luthor's point. That mythic future of superbeings among mere humans is becoming a reality through the GRIN technologies (genetics, robotics, information, and nanotechnology) that promise to transform us—or perhaps just those of us who can afford them—into superhumans. Those who can't transform might be left behind. Superheroes and their stories allow us to explore these possible futures; exploring what the superhero is aids our understanding of our recent past, contemporary political and social situation, and future. That's why the question "What is a superhero?" matters.So how is this question to be answered, and whose answers count? We approached this problem from a shared history of bringing scholars and comics professionals together to discuss comics and superheroes. Peter co-founded and co-chairs the Comics Arts Conference (CAC), an academic conference held during the San Diego Comic-Con International. The CAC operates to bring scholars and comics professionals together in dialogue with the public via the medium of the academic conference at a comic book convention in order to break down the walls between the academy and the industry and to share the insights of both with the public; it's an effort at public intellectualism. The professionals bring their real-world, concrete experience of struggling with the demands of crafting a story, editorial directives, sales, and appealing to audiences. Scholars can step back from the daily grind and pecuniary concerns of publishing to look at the big picture and investigate superheroes across a range of contexts through their scholarly training and methodological tools. Bringing scholars and

professionals together brings theory and practice together and shines a dual light that illuminates the topic from multiple perspectives. Peter and Robin met through a CAC panel that Robin organized in 2009, “Is the Joker a Psychopath? You Decide!” that perfectly illustrated the value of bringing scholars and professionals together, and she and Peter were joined by psychology professor Travis Langley, Joker creator Jerry Robinson, Adam West of TV’s Batman, famed “Joker-fish” writer Steve Englehart, and Batman film producer Michael Uslan. Robin and Travis Langley explained the psychology of psychopathy, and the superhero professionals on the panel discussed how the depiction of the Joker across media enacted the traits associated with psychopaths. Either side of this equation on its own would have left out what the other offered. Like this Joker panel, What Is a Superhero? brings scholars and professionals into dialogue through the discussion of this central question.Essentially, creators encode their ideas of what constitutes a superhero through their depictions of the characters, and scholars decode what constitutes a superhero through their academic analyses of rendered depictions. We wanted to represent both ends of that equation to get at how the definition of the superhero is engaged when creators create and how it is understood and explained—how meaning is made and made usable. Space constraints forced us to invite only a fraction of the people whose views we wanted to hear. On the creator side, for this volume we restricted ourselves to comic book writers and editors, as it is a story’s words that carry the bulk of the message and morals. We made sure to invite creators who represent various generations of comic book stories from the Golden Age to today, who have introduced major characters or revisions of characters, and who worked on superhero movies and television shows.For scholars, we wanted a spread of disciplines. Too often in the past, comics studies has been biased toward scholars of literature for reasons grounded in the political economy of academia and the fact that literary scholars are inherently comfortable working with narrative texts. The scholars we recruited as contributors come from a range of disciplines—philosophy, literary history and criticism, cultural studies, religious studies, art and visual aesthetics, psychology, and women’s studies—and employ a wide mix of theoretical lenses, including phenomenology, genre criticism, literary analysis, feminist theory, deconstruction, communications theory, media theory, and popular culture theory. Academic disciplines construct different ways of understanding reality and establishing truth and employ different theories and methodologies—lenses that shape the way objects of inquiry are interpreted. Each discipline tends to have its own way, or ways, of seeing that determine what counts as evidence, what sorts of objects are looked at, and how the interpretation is presented.It is our hope that by bringing together creators from across comics history and media and scholars from across the university, we have cooked up a tasty stew of answers, ultimately leaving it in your hands to decide what a superhero is.What is the superhero? We can’t answer that question in the Introduction, but we have arranged the book around certain foci that should provide for comparative reading. First, in every essay there is a direct statement of the author’s answer to the title question. As you read, look for the phrase “a superhero is.” Our intention is that you might pull these answers out and compare them—which

ones lean toward the general or universal answer? Which toward culturally and historically specific answers? Which answers delineate specific conditions or criteria or limit who gets admitted to the superhero clubhouse, and which answers are more expansive and inclusive?Is there an answer to the question, “What is a superhero?” Maybe; maybe not. But here are 25 attempts to provide one by people who have built careers making and studying the superhero. Enjoy.NOTES1. Thomas Schatz. (1981). Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System. New York: McGraw Hill, pp. 29–31.2. Peter Gammons, “Rodriguez: ‘Sorry and deeply regretful.’” February 9, 2009,3. Brian Azzarello and Lee Bermejo. (2005). Lex Luthor: Man of Steel. New York: DC Comics, Chapter 3.IntroductionWhat is a superhero? We—Robin Rosenberg and Peter Coogan—are asking and answering that question with this book. But is a whole book of essays really needed to answer that question? Everyone knows what a superhero is, right? Yet everyone seems to have a different answer. In fact, this book’s origin arose from that fact. Robin was meeting with her editors at Oxford University Press regarding another superhero book she was working on, Our Superheroes, Ourselves (which, like the book you’re reading now, is part of Oxford’s Superhero Series, of which Robin is editor). One of the Oxford folks, who was new to the superhero world, asked, “What exactly is a superhero?” Everyone else at the meeting —superhero fans all—had a slightly different answer. Robin then realized that asking—and answering—that very question should be part of the Superhero series.As for Pete, the definition of the superhero has been his hobbyhorse for most of the past two decades. His dissertation, The Secret Origin of the Superhero: The Emergence of the Superhero in America from Daniel Boone to Batman, features 54 pages of obsessive examination of all the extant definitions, plus another 18 proposing—and shooting down—candidates for the title of “First Superhero” (and the title goes to … Superman!). But in the years he spent writing his dissertation, he routinely discussed the topic at conferences, comic book conventions, and cocktail parties with faculty, fans, and friends until he settled the issue for himself (see his “dictionary definition” of the superhero in the first essay of this volume). And he made his conclusions available to the world via his book Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre (MonkeyBrain Books, 2006). So that should have settled things—but astonishingly, shockingly, other people still have their own opinions.In fact, the question of what a superhero is has become central to our culture’s understanding of itself and our future. The superhero genre has moved into the position held by the Western genre for most of the 20th century, when it served as a useful metaphorical way of discussing immigration, Americanization, urbanization, American identity, changing conceptions of race and gender, individualism, capitalism, modernism, and so many other central cultural concerns. In the Cold War, the Western became crucial to America’s image of itself. Think of the Cold War as a Western—two diametrically opposed cultures in a twilight struggle that could end in an apocalypse. In Westerns, Indians (using the language of Westerns) often threaten the wholesale destruction of the settlers, and the stories often end in an apocalyptic, fiery extirpation of Indian towns and an expulsion of Indians from the settled territory. During the Cold War, especially at its height in the 1950s, Westerns dominated television and were consistently

popular at the movies. This popularity can be traced to many factors, but at some level the genre's metaphors worked well to express social tensions. According to Thomas Schatz, genres are privileged story forms in which social tensions are brought to life in narratives and ritualistically resolved. Popular genres are those that can best animate and resolve social tensions through their metaphors.1In fact, like Westerns, superhero stories depict an "epic moment" when civilization is threatened but the forces of savagery—whether represented as Indians or outlaws in Westerns or villains in superhero stories—are defeated. Whereas the violence in Westerns was in the service of containment (trying to keep the "Reds" on the reservation, as with the Truman Doctrine and the West's attempt to limit communist expansion), the violence in superhero stories arises as a last resort (as with the Powell Doctrine after the Cold War), engaged in by the superhero because of the implacable threat posed by the supervillain, which ordinary authorities are unable to combat effectively.Emblematic of this cultural shift in storied metaphor from Western to superhero is the choice of adjective to describe some modern presidents. If Ronald Reagan was the first modern "cowboy" president of the United States (and George W. Bush the second one), Barack Obama is its first "superhero" president. He was frequently portrayed as a superhero in editorial cartoons and websites, and at the 63rd Annual Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation Dinner in 2008, a charity roast organized by the Catholic Archdiocese of New York for the benefit of needy children, Obama played off the image of himself as a savior, saying, "Contrary to the rumors you have heard, I was not born in a manger. I was actually born on Krypton and sent here by my father, Jor-El, to save the planet Earth."The current popularity of superhero movies seems to demonstrate the hold the genre has on the public, and these movies take up current real-world issues. Iron Man, in his first movie, directly takes on fanatical terrorists in Afghanistan. In The Dark Knight, the Joker explicitly uses terror and nihilistic aggression to forward his ends, and Batman employs both warrantless surveillance and extraordinary rendition to battle him. In Spider-Man 2, when Doctor Octopus moves to finish off the Amazing Arachnid on an elevated train in New York, the passengers step forward to defend the unconscious and unmasked Spider-Man in a scene reminiscent of the real-life heroic actions of United 93 passengers who stood up to the hijackers.And the superhero is a figure that touches centrally on the likely future of humans. Baseball player Alexander Rodriguez explained his steroid use as a response to the pressure he felt to perform at a superhuman level (because of the chemical enhancements employed by other players).2 A-Rod's fear of losing to "superhumans" recurs in superhero comics. For instance, Lex Luthor hates Superman because he sees the Kryptonian as marking an end to human potential and achievements, the end of human dreams: "All of us—everyone—deserves a chance at greatness. All that takes is the belief that it exists. But his existence threatens not just that belief, but our existence. I believe there's something inherently dangerous when something real becomes mythic. I believe when that happens we lose the part of ourselves that yearns to be great. Because when faced with a myth? We can't win."3This same concern surfaces in the graphic novels Kingdom Come, Watchmen, and Miracleman, in the X-Men, and in countless other superhero comics, as well as

in films like Gattaca. Widespread steroid use means that players who don't use can't compete. Barry Bonds became a myth when he broke Hank Aaron's home run record—and it appears that no merely human player, unaided by superpowers, may be able to break Bond's record, driving home Luthor's point. That mythic future of superbeings among mere humans is becoming a reality through the GRIN technologies (genetics, robotics, information, and nanotechnology) that promise to transform us—or perhaps just those of us who can afford them—into superhumans. Those who can't transform might be left behind. Superheroes and their stories allow us to explore these possible futures; exploring what the superhero is aids our understanding of our recent past, contemporary political and social situation, and future. That's why the question "What is a superhero?" matters.So how is this question to be answered, and whose answers count? We approached this problem from a shared history of bringing scholars and comics professionals together to discuss comics and superheroes. Peter co-founded and co-chairs the Comics Arts Conference (CAC), an academic conference held during the San Diego Comic-Con International. The CAC operates to bring scholars and comics professionals together in dialogue with the public via the medium of the academic conference at a comic book convention in order to break down the walls between the academy and the industry and to share the insights of both with the public; it's an effort at public intellectualism. The professionals bring their real-world, concrete experience of struggling with the demands of crafting a story, editorial directives, sales, and appealing to audiences. Scholars can step back from the daily grind and pecuniary concerns of publishing to look at the big picture and investigate superheroes across a range of contexts through their scholarly training and methodological tools. Bringing scholars and professionals together brings theory and practice together and shines a dual light that illuminates the topic from multiple perspectives. Peter and Robin met through a CAC panel that Robin organized in 2009, "Is the Joker a Psychopath? You Decide!" that perfectly illustrated the value of bringing scholars and professionals together, and she and Peter were joined by psychology professor Travis Langley, Joker creator Jerry Robinson, Adam West of TV's Batman, famed "Joker-fish" writer Steve Englehart, and Batman film producer Michael Uslan. Robin and Travis Langley explained the psychology of psychopathy, and the superhero professionals on the panel discussed how the depiction of the Joker across media enacted the traits associated with psychopaths. Either side of this equation on its own would have left out what the other offered. Like this Joker panel, What Is a Superhero? brings scholars and professionals into dialogue through the discussion of this central question.Essentially, creators encode their ideas of what constitutes a superhero through their depictions of the characters, and scholars decode what constitutes a superhero through their academic analyses of rendered depictions. We wanted to represent both ends of that equation to get at how the definition of the superhero is engaged when creators create and how it is understood and explained—how meaning is made and made usable. Space constraints forced us to invite only a fraction of the people whose views we wanted to hear. On the creator side, for this volume we restricted ourselves to comic book writers and editors, as it is a story's words that carry the bulk of the message and morals. We

made sure to invite creators who represent various generations of comic book stories from the Golden Age to today, who have introduced major characters or revisions of characters, and who worked on superhero movies and television shows.For scholars, we wanted a spread of disciplines. Too often in the past, comics studies has been biased toward scholars of literature for reasons grounded in the political economy of academia and the fact that literary scholars are inherently comfortable working with narrative texts. The scholars we recruited as contributors come from a range of disciplines—philosophy, literary history and criticism, cultural studies, religious studies, art and visual aesthetics, psychology, and women's studies—and employ a wide mix of theoretical lenses, including phenomenology, genre criticism, literary analysis, feminist theory, deconstruction, communications theory, media theory, and popular culture theory. Academic disciplines construct different ways of understanding reality and establishing truth and employ different theories and methodologies—lenses that shape the way objects of inquiry are interpreted. Each discipline tends to have its own way, or ways, of seeing that determine what counts as evidence, what sorts of objects are looked at, and how the interpretation is presented.It is our hope that by bringing together creators from across comics history and media and scholars from across the university, we have cooked up a tasty stew of answers, ultimately leaving it in your hands to decide what a superhero is.What is the superhero? We can't answer that question in the Introduction, but we have arranged the book around certain foci that should provide for comparative reading. First, in every essay there is a direct statement of the author's answer to the title question. As you read, look for the phrase "a superhero is." Our intention is that you might pull these answers out and compare them—which ones lean toward the general or universal answer? Which toward culturally and historically specific answers? Which answers delineate specific conditions or criteria or limit who gets admitted to the superhero clubhouse, and which answers are more expansive and inclusive?Is there an answer to the question, "What is a superhero?" Maybe; maybe not. But here are 25 attempts to provide one by people who have built careers making and studying the superhero. Enjoy.NOTES1. Thomas Schatz. (1981). Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System. New York: McGraw Hill, pp. 29–31.2. Peter Gammons, "Rodriguez: 'Sorry and deeply regretful.'" February 9, 2009, 3. Brian Azzarello and Lee Bermejo. (2005). Lex Luthor: Man of Steel. New York: DC Comics, Chapter 3.What Is a Superhero?What Is a Superhero?SECTION ISuper and Hero: Powers and MissionWhat defines a superhero? The word itself gives us a couple of clues. The super part indicates powers or abilities that are significantly greater than those of the average person (though they need not be "beyond those of mortal men" or women). The hero part indicates that the gifted individual acts heroically—not just on a handful of occasions, but repeatedly. The superhero consistently tries to do the right thing. He or she has a mission. The essays in this section explore the role of those powers and missions and how they help to define superheroes and create the genre itself.SECTION ISuper and Hero: Powers and MissionWhat defines a superhero? The word itself gives us a couple of clues. The super part indicates powers or abilities that are significantly greater than those of the average

person (though they need not be "beyond those of mortal men" or women). The hero part indicates that the gifted individual acts heroically—not just on a handful of occasions, but repeatedly. The superhero consistently tries to do the right thing. He or she has a mission. The essays in this section explore the role of those powers and missions and how they help to define superheroes and create the genre itself.ONEThe Hero Defines the Genre, the Genre Defines the HeroPeter CooganPeter Coogan is director of the Institute for Comics Studies, co-founder and co-chair of the Comics Arts Conference, and an instructor at Washington University in St. Louis, MO. He holds a Ph.D. in American Studies and authored Superhero: The Secret Origin of the Superhero, a monograph on the development, history, and functioning of the superhero genre. He is a nationally known commentator on comics and superheroes, has a semi-regular pundit gig on the Major Spoilers Podcast, and is co-editor of this volume.The superhero is the protagonist of the superhero genre. The first superhero—the founding character in the superhero genre—was Superman, whose debut in Action Comics #1 (cover date June 1938) established the major conventions of the superhero genre. What made Superman different from the heroes of the science fiction, fantasy, pulp, Western, war, and jungle adventure genres? It was the specific conventions—mission, powers, and identity—that coalesced in Superman's heroic portrayal, and which were then imitated and repeated by other comic book creators. Imitation and repetition are important—without them, a genre doesn't exist. Every genre has a central dynamic: Westerns are about civilization triumphing over savagery, detective stories detail the solution of a mystery, and superhero stories concern the responsible use of extraordinary power in the service of justice. The definition of the superhero, as the protagonist of the superhero genre, written dictionary style, isSu•per•he•ro (soo'per hîr'o) n., pl. -roes. A heroic character with a universal, selfless, prosocial mission; who possesses superpowers—extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical and/or mental skills (including mystical abilities); who has a superhero identity embodied in a code name and iconic costume, which typically express his biography or character, powers, and origin (transformation from ordinary person to superhero); and is generically distinct, i.e. can be distinguished from characters of related genres (fantasy, science fiction, detective, etc.) by a preponderance of generic conventions. Often superheroes have dual identities, the ordinary one of which is usually a closely guarded secret.—superheroic, adj. Also super hero, super-hero.1This dictionary definition is concise and specific to the superhero genre.*The superhero's mission is to fight evil and protect the innocent; this fight is universal, prosocial, and selfless. The superhero's mission must fit in with the existing, professed mores of society, and it must not be intended to benefit or further the superhero. The mission fulfills the hero part of superhero. We see the concept of the superhero's mission operating when the news media in our world designate people as "local super-heroes," ordinary citizens who selflessly act to better their community. It's the selflessness and the prosocial nature of their acts that cause such people to be labeled as superheroes, a metaphor that is rooted in the superhero genre. When George W. Bush and Ronald Reagan were called "cowboys," both the speakers and the audiences recognized the metaphorical

application of the term cowboy. No one would mean to imply, nor would anyone infer, that either of these presidents was a ranch hand who drove cattle. Cowboy here is a metaphor rooted in the Western genre, not in the actual lives of 19th century employees of cattle barons. The metaphoric use of superhero is similarly rooted in the superhero genre and in the protagonists' selfless, prosocial mission.The mission convention is essential to the superhero genre because someone who does not act selflessly to aid others in times of need is not heroic and therefore not a hero. But the prosocial mission is not unique to the genre. Superman's mission is to be a "champion of the oppressed … sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need"—that is, to "benefit mankind."2 This mission is not essentially different from that of the pulp adventurer Doc Savage, whose "purpose was to go here and there, from one end of the world to another, looking for excitement and adventure, striving to help those who needed help, punishing those who deserved it."3 Nor does Superman's mission differ materially from the missions of the dime novel or pulp and radio heroes of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.The superhero's mission does, however, distinguish him or her from certain other hero types. Many Western and science fiction heroes do not have the universal mission of the superhero or pulp vigilante because they are not seeking to "do good" for the sake of doing good.* Instead, many of these heroes reluctantly get drawn into defending a community. In contrast, superheroes actively seek to protect their communities by preventing harm to all individuals and to right wrongs committed by criminals and other villains.Powers—or superpowers, to emphasize the exaggeration inherent in the superhero genre—are often put forward as the central, defining element of the superhero; they put the super in superhero. They are all those abilities and qualities that raise a person's performance above that of ordinary people. Often these are thought of as supernatural abilities—abilities that defy the laws of physics in some way—which is why people often claim that Batman does not have superpowers. But superpowers need not violate the laws of physics. Wildcat and the Golden Age Atom are merely highly trained athletes, but their physical abilities allow them to interact with the godlike Spectre or Dr. Fate as part of the superhero community.* Nor do superpowers need to be inherent in the body of the superhero. Although Tony Stark's genius may have enabled him to create his advanced armor for Iron Man, his genius is not a superpower; rather, it is the armor that provides Iron Man's superpowers. The same is true of Hal Jordan's willpower: It makes him an excellent wielder of the power of the Green Lantern ring, but it is the ring and not the willpower that gives him his superpowers. Superpowers can come from extraordinary abilities, like the X-Men's mutant abilities (extra-ordinary in the literal sense); advanced technology, like Iron Man's armor; or highly developed physical or mental skills, like Batman's martial arts prowess or his supreme tactical abilities. Superpowers can also include mystical abilities that result from years of study and training, like Dr. Strange's mastery of the mystic arts.†Superpowers distinguish Superman from his pulp and science fiction predecessors and contemporaries. Each of Superman's powers amplifies the abilities of the science fiction supermen who came before him. Hugo Danner, the protagonist of Philip Wylie's novel of social commentary, Gladiator (1930), was bulletproof, super-strong, and super-fast.‡ In the first issue

of Action Comics, published in 1938, Superman displays super-strength, super-speed, super-leaping, and invulnerability at only slightly greater levels than Danner. Over time, though, Superman's powers went far beyond merely exaggerating the strength, speed, and toughness of ordinary human beings as science fiction supermen's powers had done; he gained the powers of flight, heat and x-ray vision, super-cooling breath, faster-than-light speed, and even time travel. Superman also differed from science fiction supermen in that he used his extraordinary powers within contemporary society in pursuit of his selfless prosocial mission. Prior to Superman, these sorts of powers were typically employed in narratives set far in the past or future or on other planets, not in a realistic version of modern, urban America.The identity convention is the clearest marker of the superhero genre. The identity is composed of two elements: the code name (e.g., "Superman" and "Spider-Man"), with the secret identity being a customary counterpart to the code name (e.g., "Clark Kent" and "Peter Parker"), and the costume. The code name conveys some aspect of the character, typically his or her mission or powers or the character's origin or personality. "Superman" indicates someone who is a superior person, the peak of physical, mental, and moral evolution. "Captain America" indicates someone whose patriotic mission is paramount. "Spider-Man" indicates spider powers. "Batman" refers to the bat that flew through Bruce Wayne's window and symbolizes the fear he inspires that turns him into a mythic figure of terror for the criminal underground of Gotham. "The Hulk" conveys, as Stan Lee learned from a thesaurus, "a gargantuan creature, a being of awesome strength coupled with a dull and sluggish thinking process."4 Superman's code name is particularly important, as it is likely the source of superhero as a designation for the characters that sprung from his popularity.Like the code name, the costume also conveys a sense of the superhero's mission, powers, origin, or personality. For instance, Superman's costume is made from blankets that accompanied him from Krypton in the rocket ship, and the S chevron on his chest is his El family crest; the costume represents his Kryptonian heritage and the source of his powers. Captain America's costume is a stylized American flag. Spider-Man's spider chevron announces his powers, and Batman's bat chevron records the bat that inspired his identity.Similar to his code name, Superman's costume formed the template for superhero costumes—form-fitting tights with shorts worn over them, a cape, a chevron, a belt, and boots; these are the basic components of a costume. Batman added the cowl and mask, and Captain America (among others) ditched the cape. But Superman's costume remains the base from which other superhero's outfits are built.Further, the costume announces the superhero and places him or her within the superhero community. In Nightwing #102, Dick Grayson, who had recently quit being Robin, visits Superman in Metropolis to get some guidance from the Man of Steel about what to do with his life. During the trip, Grayson and Superman separately face down members of a political hit squad. The assassin facing Superman knows exactly what the Man of Steel is there to do—stop him. But when Dick Grayson, wearing jeans and a windbreaker with a bandana over his face, drops down on the ledge where the assassin is perched, the villain wonders who he is and why he's there. Grayson thinks, "Without the mask and colors I had to

explain myself."5 The costume explains why the hero is fighting crime; without the costume, Dick Grayson has no immediately understandable purpose on that ledge—there's no community or context to which he belongs.The costume continues to announce the superhero genre to this day. Put a kid in a bathing suit with goggles and flippers, and he's ready for the beach. Tie part of a towel around his neck so the rest flows down his back, and suddenly he's Beach Boy! The cape alone—in this case, a towel doing double-duty—stands for the idea of the superhero. Superheroes are often referred to as "capes" or "masks" by the fictional cops and criminals who populate superhero stories. In fact, the superhero can be suggested without depicting the costume directly. A man using both hands to open his shirt to reveal his chest, bare or clothed, is so suggestive of superheroes—specifically Superman—that DC Comics has trademarked the pose and threatened legal action to protect it.*These three elements—mission, powers, and identity—establish the core of the genre. But specific superheroes can exist who do not fully demonstrate all three of these elements. This apparent indeterminacy originates in the nature of genre. No one example within a genre displays every convention of its genre, but all examples from a genre share common elements that form a "complicated network of similarities overlapping and crisscrossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail" that can be best thought of as "family resemblances."6 These family resemblances are all the conventions that mark a character as belonging to the superhero genre, and which I designate as generic distinction.† Examples of superheroes without all three core elements of mission, powers, and identity abound. The Hulk is a super-hero without a mission: At times he seems absolutely antisocial, and his adventures do not typically arise from his attempts to fight crime or improve the world. Batman was originally designed as a superhero without superpowers.7 Wildcat and the Atom are highly trained athletic fighters and lack even Batman's advanced technology (which Batman lacked in his early appearances). The Fantastic Four debuted without costumes (although they did have code names). But whichever primary convention is weak in these heroes, they fully possess the other two, and their stories are full of the other conventions of the superhero genre—costumed supervillains, science fiction technology, superhero teams, headquarters, supporting casts, and all the other accoutrements of superherodom. The preponderance of conventions, or generic distinction, determines the identification of a character as a superhero (as the protagonist of the superhero genre) if one or more elements of the core triad are weak or missing.This sort of superhero—the one with mission, powers, and identity—is the genre superhero and is distinct from heroes of other genres who are sometimes called super-heroes. Such characters—Buffy the Vampire Slayer, The Shadow, Beowulf, Luke Skywalker—all do good while using their superior physical or mental skills; they are heroes who are super, or super heroes.‡ Generic distinction—the preponderance or totality of generic conventions—roots these characters firmly in other genres (respectively, horror, pulp vigilante, epic, and science fiction), which means that while (as Meatloaf put it) "two out of three ain't bad," it's not enough.8 There is a distinction between these heroes who are super and superheroes. In fact, this distinction is widely and intuitively, if not formally, understood. Writers who include

Zorro, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Jack Bauer, or John McClane (Bruce Willis's character from the Die Hard series) still distinguish between these heroes who are super and genre superheroes. The distinction is indicated through phrases like "the super-powered, costumed, comic book variety," "a costumed superhero," or "the comic book crowd"9 because the difference between genre superheroes like Superman, Batman, Captain America, and Spider-Man and heroes who are super is well understood, if sometimes difficult to articulate. This difficulty is rooted in the slipperiness of genre generally and the indistinct boundaries between genres due to the sharing of conventions across genres, and it arises primarily when someone attempts to define the superhero. If Zorro 3 and Iron Man 3 were to come out the same weekend and a friend said, "Let's go see a superhero movie," your friend would mean Iron Man. But ask that friend to define "superhero," and in comes Zorro. The distinction between Iron Man as a superhero and Zorro as a costumed vigilante is understood, but the act of articulating the definition causes this distinction to dissolve.The reason for the general indeterminacy of the definition of the superhero lies in the way the genre is understood. The superhero genre is a genre of its own, but most people don't recognize it in the way they do science fiction, or Westerns, or fantasy. These other genres, like all genres, have their own definitional difficulties, but the difficulties with the superhero genre are particularly knotty because the superhero genre shares its primary conventions of mission, powers, and identity, as well as secondary conventions such as supervillains, advanced technology, urban settings, and helpful authority figures, with many other genres, particularly adventure genres. Adventure genres—which include superhero, war, Western, and fantasy—feature a "central fantasy" of the hero "overcoming obstacles and dangers and accomplishing some important and moral mission."10 Luke Skywalker puts himself in harm's way to defeat Darth Vader and the Empire, as does Flash Gordon in his struggle against Ming the Merciless, as does James Bond when he takes down Goldfinger or Dr. No. These heroes clearly have selfless, prosocial missions, so distinguishing between them and superheroes is understandably difficult. The superhero mission's universality is one thing that differentiates it from the missions of these other heroes. Luke Skywalker doesn't go out on patrol to stop muggers on Tatooine. Flash Gordon largely limits his activities to Mongo. James Bond serves M16; he doesn't diffuse hostage crises or respond to burglar alarms.Powers are common to heroic characters in many adventure genres, whether genuinely supernatural powers of mythological heroes such as the strength of Hercules, the heightened human powers of legendary heroes such as the endurance of Roland, or the abilities of heroes from genres more rooted in a realistic depiction of the laws of physics, such as the ability of 24's Jack Bauer to withstand torture or the fighting abilities of Die Hard's John McClane. Jack Bauer's and John McClane's abilities certainly seem beyond those of ordinary people, even if they are not at the level of Hercules' strength, Beowulf's grip, or Luke Skywalker's Jedi mind tricks. Although the powers of Superman, Green Lantern, Dr. Strange, and the Spectre do seem to be exaggerated or expand beyond the limits of those of most other genre heroes, these superheroes' powers are different in degree rather than in kind relative to the powers of heroes of other genres. Moreover,

many “street-level” superheroes like Batman, Daredevil, or Wildcat operate at power levels far below those of science fiction heroes such as Neo of the Matrix trilogy or fantasy heroes like Harry Potter, so superpowers are not distinct to the superhero genre.Both the code name and costume portions of the identity convention are shared with other genres, but much less frequently than mission and powers. Pulp vigilantes like The Shadow, the Spider, the Phantom Detective, the Crimson Clown, the Green Hornet, and the Black Bat employ code names in the same way superheroes do. But outside the pulp vigilante genre, code names are rarer and operate in different ways. Although Buffy is known as “the Slayer,” the Slayer is not a public identity in the way the identities of the Fantastic Four or Spider-Man are. Residents of Sunnydale are not aware of the Slayer the way the residents of Marvel’s New York are of Mr. Fantastic and the Invisible Woman. The Fantastic Four’s code names operate similarly to stage names like Madonna, Lady Gaga, or Ke$ha—these are public names that everyone recognizes. Just as some fans know the names Madonna Ciccone, Stefani Germanotta, or Kesha Sebert, some residents of Marvel’s New York know the names Reed Richards and Susan Storm. “The Slayer” does not keep Buffy’s family and friends safe from harm the way “Spider-Man” does Peter Parker’s Aunt May. Nor does “the Slayer” entail a different personality, as the Superman identity does for Clark Kent. In the television series Dark Angel, the protagonist Max Guevera is never called “Dark Angel” in a story; the name is completely external to the world of the story and is known only to viewers. So the parallels between the superhero genre’s use of the code name convention and similar uses in other genres are much more limited.The costume, while not absolutely unique to the superhero genre, is identified much more with the superhero genre than with other genres. Genre superheroes are often referred to as costumed superheroes or long-underwear heroes (as well as “capes” and “masks”). The producers of Smallville wanted to hold off on identifying the show with the larger Superman mythos and the superhero genre, so they employed the motto “no flights, no tights” when thinking about the show (highlighting two main identifying features of Superman—and hence superhero—stories).11 More importantly, a superhero’s costume tends to be a visual embodiment of the character’s mission, powers, origin, or personality in a way that pulp vigilante costumes are not, and it also tends to be much more iconic in terms of how the costume expresses the connection with the mission, powers, origin, or personality. Zorro is often put forward as a costume wearer, but his all-black outfit, cape, mask, and broad-brimmed hat do not iconically suggest “fox,” which is what zorro means in Spanish. The Shadow’s black cloak enables him to hide in the shadows, but it does not suggest the idea of a shadow in the way that Iron Man’s armor suggests a man made of iron. Even the costume of the Black Bat, a pulp vigilante who wears an all-black body suit with a scalloped cape that suggests bat wings, is not as iconic as Batman’s pointy-eared cowl and bat chevron. The chevron—the chest shield or logo that has been central to the superhero genre since the debut of Superman in 1938—is a convention of the costume that is almost unique to the superhero genre, and it is probably the clearest marker of the genre.The superhero genre shares many of its other conventions—the supervillain, the helpful authority figure, the sanctum sanctorum, the

team, the sidekick, and even the dual identity—with other genres but usually has emphases that are specific to it in the way these conventions are deployed or have come to be firmly identified with the superhero genre. The damsel in distress, who is often the hero's love interest, is common to adventure genres in general. But the two-person love triangle—best embodied by the Superman–Lois Clark relationship in which the woman is attracted to the superhero who spurns her advances, while she similarly spurns the advances of the secret-identity alter ego who pursues her—is firmly identified with the superhero genre.The superhero genre has changed over time because, like all genres, it responds to changes in the culture. But the core conventions of mission, powers, and identity have remained stable. These primary conventions are an economical way to indicate firmly that a heroic character is a superhero. So what is a superhero? A superhero is the protagonist of the superhero genre. Other heroic figures—whether real or fictional—are called superheroes because they are super (they have powers) and/or heroes (with selfless, prosocial missions). But these uses of superhero can be considered metaphoric references to the superhero genre. All answers to the question "What is a superhero?" are ultimately rooted in the superhero genre.NOTES1. Peter Coogan, Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre (MonkeyBrain Books, 2006), p. 30. I have added "universal" to the description of the mission to clarify an aspect of the super-hero mission that distinguishes it from those of other genres.2. Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, Action Comics #1, June 1938, p. 1.3. Kenneth Robeson [Lester Dent], Man of Bronze. New York: Banta, 1933/1964, p. 4. Doc Savage is Clark Savage, Jr., a pulp adventurer whose adventures were published by Street and Smith from 1933 to 1949 and has appeared in numerous paperback and comic book revivals, as well as a campy 1975 feature film, Doc Savage: The Man of Bronze, starring Ron Ely.4. Stan Lee, Origins of Marvel Comics. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974, p. 75.5. Scott Beatty, Chuck Dixon, and Scott McDaniel, "Bombs Away!" Nightwing 102 (March 2005), p. 8.6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, cited in Brian Henderson, "Romantic Comedy Today: Semi-Tough or Impossible?" Film Genre Reader. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin, TX: U. of Texas P., 1986, p. 314.7. Bob Kane and Tom Andrae, Batman and Me. Forrestville, CA: Eclipse Books, 1989, p. 99.8. Jim Steinman, "Two Out of Three Ain't Bad," on Meatloaf, Bat Out of Hell, Epic Records, 1977.9. Joe Quesada, "the super-powered, costumed, comic book variety"; Jennifer Stuller, "a costumed superhero"; and Kurt Busiek, "the comic book crowd."10. John Cawelti, Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture. Chicago: U niversity of Chicago Press, 1976, p. 40.11. Christine Mersch, "Alfred Gough." Writers Digest, February 11, 2008.ONEThe Hero Defines the Genre, the Genre Defines the HeroPeter CooganPeter Coogan is director of the Institute for Comics Studies, co-founder and co-chair of the Comics Arts Conference, and an instructor at Washington University in St. Louis, MO. He holds a Ph.D. in American Studies and authored Superhero: The Secret Origin of the Superhero, a monograph on the development, history, and functioning of the superhero genre. He is a nationally known commentator on comics and superheroes, has a semi-regular pundit gig on the Major Spoilers Podcast, and is co-editor of this volume.Peter Coogan is director of the Institute for Comics Studies, co-founder and

co-chair of the Comics Arts Conference, and an instructor at Washington University in St. Louis, MO. He holds a Ph.D. in American Studies and authored Superhero: The Secret Origin of the Superhero, a monograph on the development, history, and functioning of the superhero genre. He is a nationally known commentator on comics and superheroes, has a semi-regular pundit gig on the Major Spoilers Podcast, and is co-editor of this volume.The superhero is the protagonist of the superhero genre. The first superhero—the founding character in the superhero genre—was Superman, whose debut in Action Comics #1 (cover date June 1938) established the major conventions of the superhero genre. What made Superman different from the heroes of the science fiction, fantasy, pulp, Western, war, and jungle adventure genres? It was the specific conventions—mission, powers, and identity—that coalesced in Superman's heroic portrayal, and which were then imitated and repeated by other comic book creators. Imitation and repetition are important—without them, a genre doesn't exist. Every genre has a central dynamic: Westerns are about civilization triumphing over savagery, detective stories detail the solution of a mystery, and superhero stories concern the responsible use of extraordinary power in the service of justice. The definition of the superhero, as the protagonist of the superhero genre, written dictionary style, isSu•per•he•ro (soo'per hîr'o) n., pl. -roes. A heroic character with a universal, selfless, prosocial mission; who possesses superpowers—extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical and/or mental skills (including mystical abilities); who has a superhero identity embodied in a code name and iconic costume, which typically express his biography or character, powers, and origin (transformation from ordinary person to superhero); and is generically distinct, i.e. can be distinguished from characters of related genres (fantasy, science fiction, detective, etc.) by a preponderance of generic conventions. Often superheroes have dual identities, the ordinary one of which is usually a closely guarded secret.—superheroic, adj. Also super hero, super-hero.1This dictionary definition is concise and specific to the superhero genre.*The superhero's mission is to fight evil and protect the innocent; this fight is universal, prosocial, and selfless. The superhero's mission must fit in with the existing, professed mores of society, and it must not be intended to benefit or further the superhero. The mission fulfills the hero part of superhero. We see the concept of the superhero's mission operating when the news media in our world designate people as "local super-heroes," ordinary citizens who selflessly act to better their community. It's the selflessness and the prosocial nature of their acts that cause such people to be labeled as superheroes, a metaphor that is rooted in the superhero genre. When George W. Bush and Ronald Reagan were called "cowboys," both the speakers and the audiences recognized the metaphorical application of the term cowboy. No one would mean to imply, nor would anyone infer, that either of these presidents was a ranch hand who drove cattle. Cowboy here is a metaphor rooted in the Western genre, not in the actual lives of 19th century employees of cattle barons. The metaphoric use of superhero is similarly rooted in the superhero genre and in the protagonists' selfless, prosocial mission.The mission convention is essential to the superhero genre because someone who does not act selflessly to aid others in times of need is not heroic and therefore

not a hero. But the prosocial mission is not unique to the genre. Superman's mission is to be a "champion of the oppressed … sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need"—that is, to "benefit mankind."2 This mission is not essentially different from that of the pulp adventurer Doc Savage, whose "purpose was to go here and there, from one end of the world to another, looking for excitement and adventure, striving to help those who needed help, punishing those who deserved it."3 Nor does Superman's mission differ materially from the missions of the dime novel or pulp and radio heroes of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.The superhero's mission does, however, distinguish him or her from certain other hero types. Many Western and science fiction heroes do not have the universal mission of the superhero or pulp vigilante because they are not seeking to "do good" for the sake of doing good.* Instead, many of these heroes reluctantly get drawn into defending a community. In contrast, superheroes actively seek to protect their communities by preventing harm to all individuals and to right wrongs committed by criminals and other villains.Powers—or superpowers, to emphasize the exaggeration inherent in the superhero genre—are often put forward as the central, defining element of the superhero; they put the super in superhero. They are all those abilities and qualities that raise a person's performance above that of ordinary people. Often these are thought of as supernatural abilities—abilities that defy the laws of physics in some way—which is why people often claim that Batman does not have superpowers. But superpowers need not violate the laws of physics. Wildcat and the Golden Age Atom are merely highly trained athletes, but their physical abilities allow them to interact with the godlike Spectre or Dr. Fate as part of the superhero community.* Nor do superpowers need to be inherent in the body of the superhero. Although Tony Stark's genius may have enabled him to create his advanced armor for Iron Man, his genius is not a superpower; rather, it is the armor that provides Iron Man's superpowers. The same is true of Hal Jordan's willpower: It makes him an excellent wielder of the power of the Green Lantern ring, but it is the ring and not the willpower that gives him his superpowers. Superpowers can come from extraordinary abilities, like the X-Men's mutant abilities (extra-ordinary in the literal sense); advanced technology, like Iron Man's armor; or highly developed physical or mental skills, like Batman's martial arts prowess or his supreme tactical abilities. Superpowers can also include mystical abilities that result from years of study and training, like Dr. Strange's mastery of the mystic arts.†Superpowers distinguish Superman from his pulp and science fiction predecessors and contemporaries. Each of Superman's powers amplifies the abilities of the science fiction supermen who came before him. Hugo Danner, the protagonist of Philip Wylie's novel of social commentary, Gladiator (1930), was bulletproof, super-strong, and super-fast.‡ In the first issue of Action Comics, published in 1938, Superman displays super-strength, super-speed, super-leaping, and invulnerability at only slightly greater levels than Danner. Over time, though, Superman's powers went far beyond merely exaggerating the strength, speed, and toughness of ordinary human beings as science fiction supermen's powers had done; he gained the powers of flight, heat and x-ray vision, super-cooling breath, faster-than-light speed, and even time travel. Superman also differed from science fiction supermen in that he used his extraordinary

powers within contemporary society in pursuit of his selfless prosocial mission. Prior to Superman, these sorts of powers were typically employed in narratives set far in the past or future or on other planets, not in a realistic version of modern, urban America.The identity convention is the clearest marker of the superhero genre. The identity is composed of two elements: the code name (e.g., "Superman" and "Spider-Man"), with the secret identity being a customary counterpart to the code name (e.g., "Clark Kent" and "Peter Parker"), and the costume. The code name conveys some aspect of the character, typically his or her mission or powers or the character's origin or personality. "Superman" indicates someone who is a superior person, the peak of physical, mental, and moral evolution. "Captain America" indicates someone whose patriotic mission is paramount. "Spider-Man" indicates spider powers. "Batman" refers to the bat that flew through Bruce Wayne's window and symbolizes the fear he inspires that turns him into a mythic figure of terror for the criminal underground of Gotham. "The Hulk" conveys, as Stan Lee learned from a thesaurus, "a gargantuan creature, a being of awesome strength coupled with a dull and sluggish thinking process."4 Superman's code name is particularly important, as it is likely the source of superhero as a designation for the characters that sprung from his popularity.Like the code name, the costume also conveys a sense of the superhero's mission, powers, origin, or personality. For instance, Superman's costume is made from blankets that accompanied him from Krypton in the rocket ship, and the S chevron on his chest is his El family crest; the costume represents his Kryptonian heritage and the source of his powers. Captain America's costume is a stylized American flag. Spider-Man's spider chevron announces his powers, and Batman's bat chevron records the bat that inspired his identity.Similar to his code name, Superman's costume formed the template for superhero costumes—form-fitting tights with shorts worn over them, a cape, a chevron, a belt, and boots; these are the basic components of a costume. Batman added the cowl and mask, and Captain America (among others) ditched the cape. But Superman's costume remains the base from which other superhero's outfits are built.Further, the costume announces the superhero and places him or her within the superhero community. In Nightwing #102, Dick Grayson, who had recently quit being Robin, visits Superman in Metropolis to get some guidance from the Man of Steel about what to do with his life. During the trip, Grayson and Superman separately face down members of a political hit squad. The assassin facing Superman knows exactly what the Man of Steel is there to do—stop him. But when Dick Grayson, wearing jeans and a windbreaker with a bandana over his face, drops down on the ledge where the assassin is perched, the villain wonders who he is and why he's there. Grayson thinks, "Without the mask and colors I had to explain myself."5 The costume explains why the hero is fighting crime; without the costume, Dick Grayson has no immediately understandable purpose on that ledge—there's no community or context to which he belongs.The costume continues to announce the superhero genre to this day. Put a kid in a bathing suit with goggles and flippers, and he's ready for the beach. Tie part of a towel around his neck so the rest flows down his back, and suddenly he's Beach Boy! The cape alone—in this case, a towel doing double-duty—stands for the idea of the superhero.

Superheroes are often referred to as "capes" or "masks" by the fictional cops and criminals who populate superhero stories. In fact, the superhero can be suggested without depicting the costume directly. A man using both hands to open his shirt to reveal his chest, bare or clothed, is so suggestive of superheroes—specifically Superman—that DC Comics has trademarked the pose and threatened legal action to protect it.*These three elements—mission, powers, and identity—establish the core of the genre. But specific superheroes can exist who do not fully demonstrate all three of these elements. This apparent indeterminacy originates in the nature of genre. No one example within a genre displays every convention of its genre, but all examples from a genre share common elements that form a "complicated network of similarities overlapping and crisscrossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail" that can be best thought of as "family resemblances."6 These family resemblances are all the conventions that mark a character as belonging to the superhero genre, and which I designate as generic distinction.† Examples of superheroes without all three core elements of mission, powers, and identity abound. The Hulk is a super-hero without a mission: At times he seems absolutely antisocial, and his adventures do not typically arise from his attempts to fight crime or improve the world. Batman was originally designed as a superhero without superpowers.7 Wildcat and the Atom are highly trained athletic fighters and lack even Batman's advanced technology (which Batman lacked in his early appearances). The Fantastic Four debuted without costumes (although they did have code names). But whichever primary convention is weak in these heroes, they fully possess the other two, and their stories are full of the other conventions of the superhero genre—costumed supervillains, science fiction technology, superhero teams, headquarters, supporting casts, and all the other accoutrements of superherodom. The preponderance of conventions, or generic distinction, determines the identification of a character as a superhero (as the protagonist of the superhero genre) if one or more elements of the core triad are weak or missing.This sort of superhero—the one with mission, powers, and identity—is the genre superhero and is distinct from heroes of other genres who are sometimes called super-heroes. Such characters—Buffy the Vampire Slayer, The Shadow, Beowulf, Luke Skywalker—all do good while using their superior physical or mental skills; they are heroes who are super, or super heroes.‡ Generic distinction—the preponderance or totality of generic conventions—roots these characters firmly in other genres (respectively, horror, pulp vigilante, epic, and science fiction), which means that while (as Meatloaf put it) "two out of three ain't bad," it's not enough.8 There is a distinction between these heroes who are super and superheroes. In fact, this distinction is widely and intuitively, if not formally, understood. Writers who include Zorro, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Jack Bauer, or John McClane (Bruce Willis's character from the Die Hard series) still distinguish between these heroes who are super and genre superheroes. The distinction is indicated through phrases like "the super-powered, costumed, comic book variety," "a costumed superhero," or "the comic book crowd"9 because the difference between genre superheroes like Superman, Batman, Captain America, and Spider-Man and heroes who are super is well understood, if sometimes difficult to articulate. This difficulty is rooted in the

slipperiness of genre generally and the indistinct boundaries between genres due to the sharing of conventions across genres, and it arises primarily when someone attempts to define the superhero. If Zorro 3 and Iron Man 3 were to come out the same weekend and a friend said, “Let’s go see a superhero movie,” your friend would mean Iron Man. But ask that friend to define “superhero,” and in comes Zorro. The distinction between Iron Man as a superhero and Zorro as a costumed vigilante is understood, but the act of articulating the definition causes this distinction to dissolve.The reason for the general indeterminacy of the definition of the superhero lies in the way the genre is understood. The superhero genre is a genre of its own, but most people don’t recognize it in the way they do science fiction, or Westerns, or fantasy. These other genres, like all genres, have their own definitional difficulties, but the difficulties with the superhero genre are particularly knotty because the superhero genre shares its primary conventions of mission, powers, and identity, as well as secondary conventions such as supervillains, advanced technology, urban settings, and helpful authority figures, with many other genres, particularly adventure genres. Adventure genres—which include superhero, war, Western, and fantasy—feature a “central fantasy” of the hero “overcoming obstacles and dangers and accomplishing some important and moral mission.”10 Luke Skywalker puts himself in harm’s way to defeat Darth Vader and the Empire, as does Flash Gordon in his struggle against Ming the Merciless, as does James Bond when he takes down Goldfinger or Dr. No. These heroes clearly have selfless, prosocial missions, so distinguishing between them and superheroes is understandably difficult. The superhero mission’s universality is one thing that differentiates it from the missions of these other heroes. Luke Skywalker doesn’t go out on patrol to stop muggers on Tatooine. Flash Gordon largely limits his activities to Mongo. James Bond serves M16; he doesn’t diffuse hostage crises or respond to burglar alarms.Powers are common to heroic characters in many adventure genres, whether genuinely supernatural powers of mythological heroes such as the strength of Hercules, the heightened human powers of legendary heroes such as the endurance of Roland, or the abilities of heroes from genres more rooted in a realistic depiction of the laws of physics, such as the ability of 24’s Jack Bauer to withstand torture or the fighting abilities of Die Hard’s John McClane. Jack Bauer’s and John McClane’s abilities certainly seem beyond those of ordinary people, even if they are not at the level of Hercules’ strength, Beowulf’s grip, or Luke Skywalker’s Jedi mind tricks. Although the powers of Superman, Green Lantern, Dr. Strange, and the Spectre do seem to be exaggerated or expand beyond the limits of those of most other genre heroes, these superheroes’ powers are different in degree rather than in kind relative to the powers of heroes of other genres. Moreover, many “street-level” superheroes like Batman, Daredevil, or Wildcat operate at power levels far below those of science fiction heroes such as Neo of the Matrix trilogy or fantasy heroes like Harry Potter, so superpowers are not distinct to the superhero genre.Both the code name and costume portions of the identity convention are shared with other genres, but much less frequently than mission and powers. Pulp vigilantes like The Shadow, the Spider, the Phantom Detective, the Crimson Clown, the Green Hornet, and the Black Bat employ code names in the

same way superheroes do. But outside the pulp vigilante genre, code names are rarer and operate in different ways. Although Buffy is known as "the Slayer," the Slayer is not a public identity in the way the identities of the Fantastic Four or Spider-Man are. Residents of Sunnydale are not aware of the Slayer the way the residents of Marvel's New York are of Mr. Fantastic and the Invisible Woman. The Fantastic Four's code names operate similarly to stage names like Madonna, Lady Gaga, or Ke$ha—these are public names that everyone recognizes. Just as some fans know the names Madonna Ciccone, Stefani Germanotta, or Kesha Sebert, some residents of Marvel's New York know the names Reed Richards and Susan Storm. "The Slayer" does not keep Buffy's family and friends safe from harm the way "Spider-Man" does Peter Parker's Aunt May. Nor does "the Slayer" entail a different personality, as the Superman identity does for Clark Kent. In the television series Dark Angel, the protagonist Max Guevera is never called "Dark Angel" in a story; the name is completely external to the world of the story and is known only to viewers. So the parallels between the superhero genre's use of the code name convention and similar uses in other genres are much more limited.The costume, while not absolutely unique to the superhero genre, is identified much more with the superhero genre than with other genres. Genre superheroes are often referred to as costumed superheroes or long-underwear heroes (as well as "capes" and "masks"). The producers of Smallville wanted to hold off on identifying the show with the larger Superman mythos and the superhero genre, so they employed the motto "no flights, no tights" when thinking about the show (highlighting two main identifying features of Superman—and hence superhero—stories).11 More importantly, a superhero's costume tends to be a visual embodiment of the character's mission, powers, origin, or personality in a way that pulp vigilante costumes are not, and it also tends to be much more iconic in terms of how the costume expresses the connection with the mission, powers, origin, or personality. Zorro is often put forward as a costume wearer, but his all-black outfit, cape, mask, and broad-brimmed hat do not iconically suggest "fox," which is what zorro means in Spanish. The Shadow's black cloak enables him to hide in the shadows, but it does not suggest the idea of a shadow in the way that Iron Man's armor suggests a man made of iron. Even the costume of the Black Bat, a pulp vigilante who wears an all-black body suit with a scalloped cape that suggests bat wings, is not as iconic as Batman's pointy-eared cowl and bat chevron. The chevron—the chest shield or logo that has been central to the superhero genre since the debut of Superman in 1938—is a convention of the costume that is almost unique to the superhero genre, and it is probably the clearest marker of the genre.The superhero genre shares many of its other conventions—the supervillain, the helpful authority figure, the sanctum sanctorum, the team, the sidekick, and even the dual identity—with other genres but usually has emphases that are specific to it in the way these conventions are deployed or have come to be firmly identified with the superhero genre. The damsel in distress, who is often the hero's love interest, is common to adventure genres in general. But the two-person love triangle—best embodied by the Superman–Lois Clark relationship in which the woman is attracted to the superhero who spurns her advances, while she similarly spurns the advances of the secret-identity alter ego

who pursues her—is firmly identified with the superhero genre.The superhero genre has changed over time because, like all genres, it responds to changes in the culture. But the core conventions of mission, powers, and identity have remained stable. These primary conventions are an economical way to indicate firmly that a heroic character is a superhero. So what is a superhero? A superhero is the protagonist of the superhero genre. Other heroic figures—whether real or fictional—are called superheroes because they are super (they have powers) and/or heroes (with selfless, prosocial missions). But these uses of superhero can be considered metaphoric references to the superhero genre. All answers to the question “What is a superhero?” are ultimately rooted in the superhero genre.NOTES1. Peter Coogan, Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre (MonkeyBrain Books, 2006), p. 30. I have added “universal” to the description of the mission to clarify an aspect of the super-hero mission that distinguishes it from those of other genres.2. Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, Action Comics #1, June 1938, p. 1.3. Kenneth Robeson [Lester Dent], Man of Bronze. New York: Banta, 1933/1964, p. 4. Doc Savage is Clark Savage, Jr., a pulp adventurer whose adventures were published by Street and Smith from 1933 to 1949 and has appeared in numerous paperback and comic book revivals, as well as a campy 1975 feature film, Doc Savage: The Man of Bronze, starring Ron Ely.4. Stan Lee, Origins of Marvel Comics. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974, p. 75.5. Scott Beatty, Chuck Dixon, and Scott McDaniel, “Bombs Away!” Nightwing 102 (March 2005), p. 8.6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, cited in Brian Henderson, “Romantic Comedy Today: Semi-Tough or Impossible?” Film Genre Reader. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin, TX: U. of Texas P., 1986, p. 314.7. Bob Kane and Tom Andrae, Batman and Me. Forrestville, CA: Eclipse Books, 1989, p. 99.8. Jim Steinman, “Two Out of Three Ain’t Bad,” on Meatloaf, Bat Out of Hell, Epic Records, 1977.9. Joe Quesada, “the super-powered, costumed, comic book variety”; Jennifer Stuller, “a costumed superhero”; and Kurt Busiek, “the comic book crowd.”10. John Cawelti, Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture. Chicago: U niversity of Chicago Press, 1976, p. 40.11. Christine Mersch, “Alfred Gough.” Writers Digest, February 11, 2008.TWOWe Could Be HeroesWill BrookerWill Brooker is Professor in Film and Cultural Studies at Kingston University, London. His Ph.D. thesis focused on a cultural history of Batman and involved a three-year study of the Dark Knight across all media from 1939 to 1999. The research was published as Batman Unmasked and earned him the title Dr. Batman in the media. He has since published widely on popular culture and its audiences.Superheroes are about wish fulfillment. They’re about imagining a better world and creating an alternate version of yourself—bigger, brighter, bolder than the real thing—to patrol and protect it. That’s the way it’s always been, right from the start. That’s how it was for Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, misfit young men from immigrant families who dreamed up a Superman in the 1930s; that’s how it was for Bob Kahn, a little later, sketching a Bat-Man who could soar above the roofs of his run-down Bronx neighborhood. Kahn even changed his own name, hiding his Jewish roots in a new brand—Bob Kane—and a carefully crafted logo; when he put his signature to Bat-Man, he also confirmed a new identity for himself, and he made sure it rhymed with Bruce Wayne.The best heroes are those with hidden

hurt and secret wounds—the ones who channel some of their creators' outsider status and reflect back some of their readers' insecurity. Superman is arguably the least interesting of the bunch. He's annoyingly untraumatized for someone who witnessed the destruction of his home planet and grew up as an alien on Earth, and his stuttering, stumbling alter-ego persona Clark Kent is just a front. Most of his pals in the first wave of superhero comics were similarly confident heroes, in the mold of cinema's handsome matinee idols—sure, they had a token weakness, like Superman's Kryptonite or the Green Lantern's vulnerability to wood,* and they suffered the odd romantic quarrel with their girlfriends, but at heart they were square-jawed, barrel-chested, all-American, stand-up guys. Even Wonder Woman, an Ebook Library from the peacefully feminist Paradise Island with presumably no stake in World War II, integrated herself happily into "Man's World," dated a U.S. Army officer, and fought the Nazis. Batman's sidekick, Robin, was meant to provide a way in for the young reader, but again, he was pretty perky for an orphan.Marvel Comics did something new in the 1960s by introducing a superhero with a genuinely geeky private life. Teen boys could see themselves for the first time in Peter Parker, the bullied bookworm, whose life was much closer to theirs than Clark Kent's metropolitan whirl or Robin's high-wire history as a circus acrobat. When Parker transformed into Spider-Man, his becoming a man was as significant as his getting the abilities of a spider, and Spidey's confident wise-cracking was as important as the web-slinging and wall-crawling. Sam Raimi's Spider-Man film of 2002 had the right idea, depicting Parker's transition through sequences of sticky web fluid and embarrassing homemade costumes—becoming a man can be a messy business.Superhero mythology is about escape, about creating an alternative identity and becoming someone different, someone better. Arguably, superheroes are at their finest when they're the alter-ego creations of geeks and loners, not handsome hunks. In Grant Morrison's Doom Patrol comic of the early 1990s, it's clear that the author understood that: it's a story of misfits and rejects, including puny Wally Sage, who sketched a muscle-bound hero called Flex Mentallo and brought his imaginary friend to life. Together, Wally and Flex look like the "before" and "after" pictures in the Charles Atlas ads: the boy who got sand kicked in his face, and the superman he wants to become. "There is a better world," runs a caption in Doom Patrol, quoting Morrissey, a singer who fully understands the lost and the lonely; "Well … there must be."Perhaps the most poignant example of the way a misfit can transform himself through a mask is Rorschach, from Alan Moore's epic graphic novel Watchmen. Rorschach first appears as a stone-cold, hard-boiled urban vigilante dressed in a private eye trench coat. His face is obscured by shifting patterns of black and white, symbolizing his binary worldview: "Never compromise. Even in the face of Armageddon." One of the story's major twists is the revelation that Rorschach is Walter Kovacs, a bigoted loner who wears platform shoes, lives in a tiny room, never washes his stinking trench coat, and slurps beans straight from the can. But along with the squalor, the sadness, and the madness of Kovacs's existence, we're shown how he turned out that way—a childhood of beatings, bullying, and abuse—and we understand why he needed a new identity: to escape his own real life. His mask isn't just a mask. The mask is his face, a face

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and 1940s, when Superman and his co-stars made their first appearances in comics, Archibald Leach and Marion Morrison were ditching their slightly wimpy names and recreating themselves as the debonair Cary Grant and the solidly masculine John Wayne; a little later, a model-actress called Norma Jeane Mortenson followed suit. Her chosen identity, Marilyn Monroe, even sounds like a superhero name—or a superhero's secret alter ego, along the lines of Peter Parker and Reed Richards—and perhaps more tellingly, the double "M," which she felt was a lucky omen, looks like a superhero logo, a lightning bolt or zigzag.†In the 1950s, when Elvis took on the brand "The King,"‡ British singers with everyday names dreamed up flashier, manlier, comic book alternatives for themselves as the basis of their bolder stage personas. Just as Walter Kovacs branded himself "Rorschach" and covered his face with a black-and-white blot to close the door on his old life, so Terry Nelhams-Wright took on the name "Adam Faith"—with its Biblical connotations of belief and the creation of a brand new man—as part of his transformation into a TV star and teen idol. And as Bruce Wayne was inspired by a bat crashing through his window and adopted its name as a dark totem, so a British singer called Harry Webb took on "Cliff," for its towering evocations of rock music, and "Richard," as a tribute to his idol, Little Richard. Of course, Cliff Richard's group, the Shadows, was a guitar band rather than a crime-fighting team, but the importance of the origin story—the concept of choosing a new name, of baptism and rebirth—is as central to celebrity as it is to superhero culture.*It was in late-1960s New York that the costumed heroes of comic books truly collided with their real-world counterparts. Warhol made himself into a distinctive brand, created a science fiction silver Factory, and surrounded himself with a clique of superstars. His followers, with alter egos like Ultra Violet, Billy Name, Ondine, Candy Darling, and the Velvet Underground, could have walked right out of Marvel comics. But the connections between costumed heroes and celebrities went further. Warhol and his contemporaries borrowed from superhero comics, enlarging panels to canvas size for gallery exhibition, and the comics borrowed back, marketing themselves as "authentic Pop Art." Warhol's crowd was even invited to the launch of the 1960s Batman TV show, and Warhol and German singer Nico dressed up as Robin and Batman for a 1967 Esquire shoot. Back in the UK, the Beatles disguised themselves as Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band (it even sounds like a superhero group), and in 1975, Paul McCartney made explicit reference to Marvel Comics villains in the song "Magneto and Titanium Man."†By the mid-1970s, of course, David Bowie's star had risen. Bowie had followed his own superhero-style origin story: Growing up in post-war London suburbia and possessed by the belief that he could be someone—or something—out of the ordinary, he ditched the dull name "Jones," re-christened himself after a type of knife (what could be more cutting edge?), and launched himself as a science fiction icon. In fact, a single persona wasn't enough for Bowie; he went through a host of incarnations. By 1975 he'd already killed off one larger-than-life character, Ziggy Stardust, and was moving through new masks, costumes, and names like a superhero on speed. The very idea of killing off his alien alter ego is a grand, pop-operatic statement suitable for a comic book cover—"Ziggy is DEAD! Call me … ALADDIN SANE!"The 1970s rock band KISS was even more

explicit in its debt to costumed heroes, and the debt was repaid when they and their on-stage alter egos—the Demon, the Starchild, the Space Ace, and the Catman—appeared in their own Marvel comic book in 1977. The back-and-forth relationship between comic books and popular culture continued when, three years later, Marvel created a new heroine to cash in on the disco craze. The new superhero, Dazzler, was planned as a cross-platform phenomenon, a comic book character who would also release records. In turn, the disco music style influenced long-running characters like Batman's sidekick, Robin: When the Boy Wonder grew up and, in a second re-birth, chose the new name Nightwing, he ditched the old-fashioned red and green costume for a midnight blue catsuit with a Dazzler-style disco collar (only a decade or so after they'd fallen out of fashion).The interplay between music and comic books continued into the 1980s and 1990s. When a superhero character was "reborn" (i.e., rebooted for a new generation of readers), his new macho attitude was often signaled by a leather jacket, inspired by the previous decade's pop music pin-ups. For instance, the new teenage Superman of 1993* (slogan: "Don't ever call me SUPERBOY!") wore leathers over his costume and looked like a missing member from the 1980s boy-band Bros or George Michael at the start of his solo career.British comic book writers were a little more knowing about the trend: creator Grant Morrison gave his home-grown superhero Zenith a pop career and showed him fuming at his pretty rivals Bros and A-ha, scorning Acid House music, and then selling out to the "baggy" Manchester fashions of the 1990s. Further examples from the decade emphasize the playful borrowings between pop music and superhero comics. Alan Moore's occult detective John Constantine was explicitly based on another rock star, Gordon Sumner, known to the world as Sting. John Smith's The New Statesmen depicted superheroes as gorgeous celebrities, prefiguring our current tendency to turn golden couples into brand names; Brangelina, TomKat, and Posh and Becks could be alternate versions of the comic book characters Bulleteer, Kitty Pryde, and Hawk and Dove.Meanwhile, in the music industry, the origin stories continued, as ordinary boys and girls dreaming of stardom took on outlandish costumed identities. More than ever, young hopefuls transforming themselves into potential pop stars went through a process of superhero-style baptism like Bowie's, deliberately elevating themselves above the ordinary into something glittering, transcendent, and larger than life.Take Paul Hewson, for instance, who grew up in an ordinary Dublin suburb, joined a rock band, and decided to take on a new identity. He could have gone for a version of the more modest stage personae of previous generations (like Cliff Richard and Adam Faith), but instead he adopted a stranger brand, "Bono Vox," and led a supergroup called U2. As with Rorschach and indeed Batman and Bowie, "Bono" seems to have taken over from the real person; rather than just a stage name, the persona has become the main identity. It's Bono, not Paul Hewson, who holds high-level discussions with politicians and popes. Like Rorschach and Batman, Bono wears a mask—the wraparound shades constantly shielding his eyes—but he also needs the symbolic mask of his chosen name, and the larger-than-life persona it implies, even off stage. Tellingly, Bono also calls his closest bandmate "Edge," rather than David Evans; the alter ego, for both men, has become (to quote

their own lyrics) even better than the real thing.*Equally telling is the way Bono, like Bowie, has consistently invented new personae over the years. Already an iconic character, Bono disguised himself further onstage as "The Boy in the Box," "The Fly," "Mirror Ball Man," and "MacPhisto," each a new construction of props, costume, voice, and gesture. The ability to ditch a former identity and adopt a new one—to start afresh, with a new face and name—is one of the powers that real-life celebrities share with superheroes, and the liberating joy of rebirth, of recreation, of relaunching yourself under a new brand (whether "Rorschach," "Batman," "Bono," or "Bowie"), can clearly be addictive.†The pop heroine of a new generation is of course Stefani Germanotta, better known as Lady Gaga; like sidekicks Kid Flash and Robin, she grew up learning from role models—drawing from rock stars Bowie, Madonna, and Queen's Freddie Mercury‡11—before changing her name, adopting a costume (or ten), and starting her own career. She even has an origin story: when her producer texted "Lady Gaga" to her phone, she declared, "That's it. Don't ever call me Stefani again."Lady Gaga is the closest thing we've got right now to a comic book superheroine, a living embodiment of the American dream that both Bruce Wayne and Clark Kent have embodied since the 1930s: The idea that anyone—especially someone from an immigrant background, like Superman himself—can dream big, work hard, and make it, even if "making it" means the construction of a whole new identity.It may seem like a raw deal, a pale copy of superhero comics. Gaga doesn't patrol the city fighting crime, after all, any more than Bowie donned his Ziggy Stardust guise to protect the innocent and make the streets safer. (As a pop star turned political campaigner and philanthropist, Bono is, arguably, a rare exception.) There might be something super about giving yourself a new name and baptizing yourself as a star, but there's nothing obviously heroic in the process.Not obviously, perhaps. But what our real-world costumed characters offer is the power of carnivalesque reinvention, which they hold out, as role models, to their followers. Lady Gaga modeled herself on the self-made stars of a previous generation, and just as Bowie, Madonna, and Freddie Mercury have inspired countless young people to find their own inner strength, to dress up and bravely parade even in the most conservative small towns and suburbs, so Gaga shows today's teenagers that it's just fine to be different—that being different, in fact, is a way of being special. It's a power.The TV show Glee picked up on this idea in a recent storyline. Its main characters are all, in one way or another, misfits, social rejects, and outsiders—a pregnant teenager, a young gay man, a student in a wheelchair, a football player who loves musical theater—brought together by their passion for song and dance. In a 2010 episode, they all dressed in either Gaga drag or KISS makeup and formed a united front—gay, straight, male, and female—against homophobic bullies who picked on one of their group for being different. Blocking a school corridor in their flamboyant masks, outfits, and makeup and facing down the burly football jocks, Glee's misfits didn't look like losers; they looked like superstars. They looked like superheroes.In comic books and pop celebrity, the origin story—the story of how Walter became Rorschach, of how Stefani became Gaga—is about gaining new confidence, ditching your old identity, and becoming someone new. Like superheroes, pop stars show us that a wimp, a persecuted loner, a nobody, can become a

somebody. The science nerd can become a wise-cracking wall-crawler. The suburban dreamer, whether from London or Dublin, can dream out loud and conquer the world under a new name. This isn't just a conventional makeover, a sell-out to dominant ideals. The misfits don't become mainstream; they make their own style of strangeness big and bold. They dare the world to deal with them on their own terms, and they invite others to join them.And if they can do it, we can, too. It doesn't have to happen on a global scale; we can do it on our own terms, ditching our old, weaker, shyer selves and becoming someone else, someone bigger, better, brighter, bolder … and someone who belongs. Gloriously decorated, disguised in their face paint and ornate dresses, Glee's marginalized misfits weren't just new versions of their old selves; they were part of a team. They were part of something larger, pulling together to support each other, to defend the bullied and embrace the outsider, in the name of Gaga.TWOWe Could Be HeroesWill BrookerWill Brooker is Professor in Film and Cultural Studies at Kingston University, London. His Ph.D. thesis focused on a cultural history of Batman and involved a three-year study of the Dark Knight across all media from 1939 to 1999. The research was published as Batman Unmasked and earned him the title Dr. Batman in the media. He has since published widely on popular culture and its audiences.Will Brooker is Professor in Film and Cultural Studies at Kingston University, London. His Ph.D. thesis focused on a cultural history of Batman and involved a three-year study of the Dark Knight across all media from 1939 to 1999. The research was published as Batman Unmasked and earned him the title Dr. Batman in the media. He has since published widely on popular culture and its audiences.Superheroes are about wish fulfillment. They're about imagining a better world and creating an alternate version of yourself—bigger, brighter, bolder than the real thing—to patrol and protect it. That's the way it's always been, right from the start. That's how it was for Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, misfit young men from immigrant families who dreamed up a Superman in the 1930s; that's how it was for Bob Kahn, a little later, sketching a Bat-Man who could soar above the roofs of his run-down Bronx neighborhood. Kahn even changed his own name, hiding his Jewish roots in a new brand—Bob Kane—and a carefully crafted logo; when he put his signature to Bat-Man, he also confirmed a new identity for himself, and he made sure it rhymed with Bruce Wayne.The best heroes are those with hidden hurt and secret wounds—the ones who channel some of their creators' outsider status and reflect back some of their readers' insecurity. Superman is arguably the least interesting of the bunch. He's annoyingly untraumatized for someone who witnessed the destruction of his home planet and grew up as an alien on Earth, and his stuttering, stumbling alter-ego persona Clark Kent is just a front. Most of his pals in the first wave of superhero comics were similarly confident heroes, in the mold of cinema's handsome matinee idols—sure, they had a token weakness, like Superman's Kryptonite or the Green Lantern's vulnerability to wood,* and they suffered the odd romantic quarrel with their girlfriends, but at heart they were square-jawed, barrel-chested, all-American, stand-up guys. Even Wonder Woman, an Ebook Library from the peacefully feminist Paradise Island with presumably no stake in World War II, integrated herself happily into "Man's World," dated a U.S. Army officer, and fought the Nazis. Batman's sidekick, Robin, was meant to

provide a way in for the young reader, but again, he was pretty perky for an orphan.Marvel Comics did something new in the 1960s by introducing a superhero with a genuinely geeky private life. Teen boys could see themselves for the first time in Peter Parker, the bullied bookworm, whose life was much closer to theirs than Clark Kent's metropolitan whirl or Robin's high-wire history as a circus acrobat. When Parker transformed into Spider-Man, his becoming a man was as significant as his getting the abilities of a spider, and Spidey's confident wise-cracking was as important as the web-slinging and wall-crawling. Sam Raimi's Spider-Man film of 2002 had the right idea, depicting Parker's transition through sequences of sticky web fluid and embarrassing homemade costumes—becoming a man can be a messy business.Superhero mythology is about escape, about creating an alternative identity and becoming someone different, someone better. Arguably, superheroes are at their finest when they're the alter-ego creations of geeks and loners, not handsome hunks. In Grant Morrison's Doom Patrol comic of the early 1990s, it's clear that the author understood that: it's a story of misfits and rejects, including puny Wally Sage, who sketched a muscle-bound hero called Flex Mentallo and brought his imaginary friend to life. Together, Wally and Flex look like the "before" and "after" pictures in the Charles Atlas ads: the boy who got sand kicked in his face, and the superman he wants to become. "There is a better world," runs a caption in Doom Patrol, quoting Morrissey, a singer who fully understands the lost and the lonely; "Well … there must be."Perhaps the most poignant example of the way a misfit can transform himself through a mask is Rorschach, from Alan Moore's epic graphic novel Watchmen. Rorschach first appears as a stone-cold, hard-boiled urban vigilante dressed in a private eye trench coat. His face is obscured by shifting patterns of black and white, symbolizing his binary worldview: "Never compromise. Even in the face of Armageddon." One of the story's major twists is the revelation that Rorschach is Walter Kovacs, a bigoted loner who wears platform shoes, lives in a tiny room, never washes his stinking trench coat, and slurps beans straight from the can. But along with the squalor, the sadness, and the madness of Kovacs's existence, we're shown how he turned out that way—a childhood of beatings, bullying, and abuse—and we understand why he needed a new identity: to escape his own real life. His mask isn't just a mask. The mask is his face, a face he can bear to look at in the mirror. How many teenagers, male and female, have felt ugly and unlovable and wished they could cover their face with a clean, anonymous blank? Rorschach's transformation is far more important than just putting on a cloak and thinking of a cool name. It's the only way he can live with himself. Becoming a superhero—or an anti-hero, in his case—is a new start, a new history. That's one reason that an origin story, the tale of how a character gained his or her identity and chose his or her costume, is invariably of a "secret origin": The stories bury the old, battered, weaker self and give the character a new life as someone braver and bolder.Batman, of course, is the prime example of the self-made superhero. His appeal lies primarily in the fact that he's a human being. He's trained to the point of mental and physical perfection, but his powers are all based in human ingenuity and determination. Any reader could become Batman. Sure, you'd have to suffer a childhood trauma, inherit a fortune, hone your

body, study forensics, and craft your own gadgets, but if you really put your mind to it, you could become Batman—or that's what generations of fans have told themselves.* Christian Bale's recent casting in The Dark Knight Trilogy (2005–2012) only confirms the theory: Bale, according to director Christopher Nolan, bulked up, built muscle, learned martial arts, and climbed to the pinnacles of skyscrapers to inhabit the role.Christopher Nolan's Batman films are distinctive because of their realism; they ditch the camp and the gothic fantasy of earlier incarnations and reimagine the gadgets and costumes in plausibly militaristic terms—Batarangs become throwing knives, the Batsuit becomes spray-painted Kevlar armor, and the Batmobile becomes a tank. Similarly, Watchmen's big idea was to depict superheroes realistically, imagining how they'd work in a world very much like our own; thus, a vigilante like Rorschach is revealed as an unhygienic conspiracy nut. But of course, our real world is severely lacking in costumed heroes. Though we've read about their adventures for over 70 years in the comics, nobody has ever made a living out of dressing up and fighting crime. It would be unreasonable to expect a godlike patriot like Superman or the science fiction powers of Green Lantern, but we've never even had more plausible hard-ass masked vigilantes like Rorschach or self-made city guardians like Batman. Maybe that's because the concept of a masked protector just outside the boundaries of the law doesn't comfortably cross over. When real-life vigilantes do hit the headlines, they're not cool and stylish, but dangerous, pathetic nutjobs with a gun and a grudge. When guys dress up in superhero costumes to protest a cause or raise awareness, they invariably look saggy and paunchy rather than sleek and dynamic.*So, is ours a world without superheroes? Not entirely. Our versions do dress up, they just don't fight crime. In our own alternate universe, the closest we get to larger-than-life costumed characters are entertainers rather than vigilantes—ordinary people who transform themselves into bigger, brighter versions of themselves, and in doing so offer the same promise of escape and empowerment to their followers.Media icons with secret identities have been around at least as long as the comic book heroes. In the 1900s, Florence Lawrence, the first-ever movie star, was branded "The Biograph Girl" as if she were a real-life superheroine, and just as characters like Batman have passed on their cape, cowl, and code name to others, Florence shared her new name with another girl, Mary Pickford. In the 1930s and 1940s, when Superman and his co-stars made their first appearances in comics, Archibald Leach and Marion Morrison were ditching their slightly wimpy names and recreating themselves as the debonair Cary Grant and the solidly masculine John Wayne; a little later, a model-actress called Norma Jeane Mortenson followed suit. Her chosen identity, Marilyn Monroe, even sounds like a superhero name—or a superhero's secret alter ego, along the lines of Peter Parker and Reed Richards—and perhaps more tellingly, the double "M," which she felt was a lucky omen, looks like a superhero logo, a lightning bolt or zigzag.†In the 1950s, when Elvis took on the brand "The King,"‡ British singers with everyday names dreamed up flashier, manlier, comic book alternatives for themselves as the basis of their bolder stage personas. Just as Walter Kovacs branded himself "Rorschach" and covered his face with a black-and-white blot to close the door on his old life, so Terry Nelhams-Wright took on the name "Adam Faith"—with its

Biblical connotations of belief and the creation of a brand new man—as part of his transformation into a TV star and teen idol. And as Bruce Wayne was inspired by a bat crashing through his window and adopted its name as a dark totem, so a British singer called Harry Webb took on "Cliff," for its towering evocations of rock music, and "Richard," as a tribute to his idol, Little Richard. Of course, Cliff Richard's group, the Shadows, was a guitar band rather than a crime-fighting team, but the importance of the origin story—the concept of choosing a new name, of baptism and rebirth—is as central to celebrity as it is to superhero culture.*It was in late-1960s New York that the costumed heroes of comic books truly collided with their real-world counterparts. Warhol made himself into a distinctive brand, created a science fiction silver Factory, and surrounded himself with a clique of superstars. His followers, with alter egos like Ultra Violet, Billy Name, Ondine, Candy Darling, and the Velvet Underground, could have walked right out of Marvel comics. But the connections between costumed heroes and celebrities went further. Warhol and his contemporaries borrowed from superhero comics, enlarging panels to canvas size for gallery exhibition, and the comics borrowed back, marketing themselves as "authentic Pop Art." Warhol's crowd was even invited to the launch of the 1960s Batman TV show, and Warhol and German singer Nico dressed up as Robin and Batman for a 1967 Esquire shoot. Back in the UK, the Beatles disguised themselves as Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band (it even sounds like a superhero group), and in 1975, Paul McCartney made explicit reference to Marvel Comics villains in the song "Magneto and Titanium Man."†By the mid-1970s, of course, David Bowie's star had risen. Bowie had followed his own superhero-style origin story: Growing up in post-war London suburbia and possessed by the belief that he could be someone —or something—out of the ordinary, he ditched the dull name "Jones," re-christened himself after a type of knife (what could be more cutting edge?), and launched himself as a science fiction icon. In fact, a single persona wasn't enough for Bowie; he went through a host of incarnations. By 1975 he'd already killed off one larger-than-life character, Ziggy Stardust, and was moving through new masks, costumes, and names like a superhero on speed. The very idea of killing off his alien alter ego is a grand, pop-operatic statement suitable for a comic book cover—"Ziggy is DEAD! Call me … ALADDIN SANE!"The 1970s rock band KISS was even more explicit in its debt to costumed heroes, and the debt was repaid when they and their on-stage alter egos—the Demon, the Starchild, the Space Ace, and the Catman—appeared in their own Marvel comic book in 1977. The back-and-forth relationship between comic books and popular culture continued when, three years later, Marvel created a new heroine to cash in on the disco craze. The new superhero, Dazzler, was planned as a cross-platform phenomenon, a comic book character who would also release records. In turn, the disco music style influenced long-running characters like Batman's sidekick, Robin: When the Boy Wonder grew up and, in a second re-birth, chose the new name Nightwing, he ditched the old-fashioned red and green costume for a midnight blue catsuit with a Dazzler-style disco collar (only a decade or so after they'd fallen out of fashion).The interplay between music and comic books continued into the 1980s and 1990s. When a superhero character was "reborn" (i.e., rebooted for a new generation

of readers), his new macho attitude was often signaled by a leather jacket, inspired by the previous decade's pop music pin-ups. For instance, the new teenage Superman of 1993* (slogan: "Don't ever call me SUPERBOY!") wore leathers over his costume and looked like a missing member from the 1980s boy-band Bros or George Michael at the start of his solo career.British comic book writers were a little more knowing about the trend: creator Grant Morrison gave his home-grown superhero Zenith a pop career and showed him fuming at his pretty rivals Bros and A-ha, scorning Acid House music, and then selling out to the "baggy" Manchester fashions of the 1990s. Further examples from the decade emphasize the playful borrowings between pop music and superhero comics. Alan Moore's occult detective John Constantine was explicitly based on another rock star, Gordon Sumner, known to the world as Sting. John Smith's The New Statesmen depicted superheroes as gorgeous celebrities, prefiguring our current tendency to turn golden couples into brand names; Brangelina, TomKat, and Posh and Becks could be alternate versions of the comic book characters Bulleteer, Kitty Pryde, and Hawk and Dove.Meanwhile, in the music industry, the origin stories continued, as ordinary boys and girls dreaming of stardom took on outlandish costumed identities. More than ever, young hopefuls transforming themselves into potential pop stars went through a process of superhero-style baptism like Bowie's, deliberately elevating themselves above the ordinary into something glittering, transcendent, and larger than life.Take Paul Hewson, for instance, who grew up in an ordinary Dublin suburb, joined a rock band, and decided to take on a new identity. He could have gone for a version of the more modest stage personae of previous generations (like Cliff Richard and Adam Faith), but instead he adopted a stranger brand, "Bono Vox," and led a supergroup called U2. As with Rorschach and indeed Batman and Bowie, "Bono" seems to have taken over from the real person; rather than just a stage name, the persona has become the main identity. It's Bono, not Paul Hewson, who holds high-level discussions with politicians and popes. Like Rorschach and Batman, Bono wears a mask—the wraparound shades constantly shielding his eyes—but he also needs the symbolic mask of his chosen name, and the larger-than-life persona it implies, even off stage. Tellingly, Bono also calls his closest bandmate "Edge," rather than David Evans; the alter ego, for both men, has become (to quote their own lyrics) even better than the real thing.*Equally telling is the way Bono, like Bowie, has consistently invented new personae over the years. Already an iconic character, Bono disguised himself further onstage as "The Boy in the Box," "The Fly," "Mirror Ball Man," and "MacPhisto," each a new construction of props, costume, voice, and gesture. The ability to ditch a former identity and adopt a new one—to start afresh, with a new face and name—is one of the powers that real-life celebrities share with superheroes, and the liberating joy of rebirth, of recreation, of relaunching yourself under a new brand (whether "Rorschach," "Batman," "Bono," or "Bowie"), can clearly be addictive.†The pop heroine of a new generation is of course Stefani Germanotta, better known as Lady Gaga; like sidekicks Kid Flash and Robin, she grew up learning from role models—drawing from rock stars Bowie, Madonna, and Queen's Freddie Mercury‡11—before changing her name, adopting a costume (or ten), and starting her own career. She even has an

origin story: when her producer texted “Lady Gaga” to her phone, she declared, “That’s it. Don’t ever call me Stefani again.”Lady Gaga is the closest thing we’ve got right now to a comic book superheroine, a living embodiment of the American dream that both Bruce Wayne and Clark Kent have embodied since the 1930s: The idea that anyone—especially someone from an immigrant background, like Superman himself—can dream big, work hard, and make it, even if “making it” means the construction of a whole new identity.It may seem like a raw deal, a pale copy of superhero comics. Gaga doesn’t patrol the city fighting crime, after all, any more than Bowie donned his Ziggy Stardust guise to protect the innocent and make the streets safer. (As a pop star turned political campaigner and philanthropist, Bono is, arguably, a rare exception.) There might be something super about giving yourself a new name and baptizing yourself as a star, but there’s nothing obviously heroic in the process.Not obviously, perhaps. But what our real-world costumed characters offer is the power of carnivalesque reinvention, which they hold out, as role models, to their followers. Lady Gaga modeled herself on the self-made stars of a previous generation, and just as Bowie, Madonna, and Freddie Mercury have inspired countless young people to find their own inner strength, to dress up and bravely parade even in the most conservative small towns and suburbs, so Gaga shows today’s teenagers that it’s just fine to be different—that being different, in fact, is a way of being special. It’s a power.The TV show Glee picked up on this idea in a recent storyline. Its main characters are all, in one way or another, misfits, social rejects, and outsiders—a pregnant teenager, a young gay man, a student in a wheelchair, a football player who loves musical theater—brought together by their passion for song and dance. In a 2010 episode, they all dressed in either Gaga drag or KISS makeup and formed a united front—gay, straight, male, and female—against homophobic bullies who picked on one of their group for being different. Blocking a school corridor in their flamboyant masks, outfits, and makeup and facing down the burly football jocks, Glee’s misfits didn’t look like losers; they looked like superstars. They looked like superheroes.In comic books and pop celebrity, the origin story—the story of how Walter became Rorschach, of how Stefani became Gaga—is about gaining new confidence, ditching your old identity, and becoming someone new. Like superheroes, pop stars show us that a wimp, a persecuted loner, a nobody, can become a somebody. The science nerd can become a wise-cracking wall-crawler. The suburban dreamer, whether from London or Dublin, can dream out loud and conquer the world under a new name. This isn’t just a conventional makeover, a sell-out to dominant ideals. The misfits don’t become mainstream; they make their own style of strangeness big and bold. They dare the world to deal with them on their own terms, and they invite others to join them.And if they can do it, we can, too. It doesn’t have to happen on a global scale; we can do it on our own terms, ditching our old, weaker, shyer selves and becoming someone else, someone bigger, better, brighter, bolder … and someone who belongs. Gloriously decorated, disguised in their face paint and ornate dresses, Glee’s marginalized misfits weren’t just new versions of their old selves; they were part of a team. They were part of something larger, pulling together to support each other, to defend the bullied and embrace the outsider, in the name of Gaga.

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Daniel, “A thoughtful collection of essay reflections on superheroes - our modern mythological figures. You can hardly turn around today without seeing a movie or television show featuring a superhero and they're often on the covers of magazines and there are novelizations of their stories. And of course there are the comic books and graphic novels from which many of them sprouted. But what is a superhero? Such is the general question asked and addressed in the collection of essays edited by Robin S. Rosenberg & Peter Coogan.There is a strong collection of writers included here, musing on what makes a superhero and the social issues surrounding a society's reasons for having superheroes. The collection includes essays from those who might understand the genre the best - writers of superhero stories such as: Stan Lee, Dennis O'Neil, Kurt Busiek, Joe Quesada, and a few others.I was impressed right out of the gate with Peter Coogan's article, "The Hero Defines the Genre, the Genre Defines the Hero." I'd like to quote from the article but the truth is I would simply copy the eight pages and reprint it - the article was packed with thoughtful reflection and commentary. Coogan clearly understands the modern mythology of superheroes.I did a lot of comic book reading in the 1970's so it's no surprise that talent from that era has a big impact on me. And perhaps it's because of this that I found Denny O'Neil's article, "Superheroes and Power," so meaningful. After all, who should know how to write about superheroes and their power than someone who did it so well? His words can be applied not just to superheroes, but to any character who is worth writing about. I really appreciated his comment:A writer fails the genre when a story depicts superheroes who are weak or do not use their powers. What makes a character interesting (both superheroes and

other types of characters) is what he does to solve problems. You give him a knotty situation and he gets out of it. Well, by definition, superheroes use extraordinary physical means.While I'm only pointing to two articles, this is one of those rare collections in which there are no duds. Every essay is thoughtful and well articulated. I gained some insight and felt that I left the book smarter than when I started. I like that feeling.This book contains the following:Foreword - Michael Uslan"Introduction: What Is a Superhero?" - Robin Rosenberg & Peter CooganSuper and Hero: Powers and MissionSection Introduction"The Hero Defines the Genre, the Genre Defines the Hero" - Peter Coogan"We Could Be Heroes" - Will Brooker"What is a Female Superhero?" - Jennifer Stuller"Straddling a Boundary: The Superhero and the Incorporation of Difference" - Clare Pitkelthy"Save the Day" - A. David LewisContext, Culture, and the Problem of DefinitionSection Introduction"Superheroes and the Modern(ist) Age" - Alex Boney"Heroes of the Superculture" - Richard Reynolds"Superhero by Design" - John Jennings"The Experience of the Superhero: A Phenomenological Definition" - Dana Anderson"What is a Superhero? No One Knows—That's What Makes 'em Great." - Geoff KlockSuperheroes Need SupervillainsSection introduction"Why Supervillains?" - Paul Levitz"Superheroes Need Supervillains" - Frank Verano"Superheroes Need Superior Villains" - Stanford Carpenter"Super and Villain: A bad guy with superpowers" - Curtis Deis"Supervillains Who Need Superheroes (Are the Luckiest Villains in the World)" - Andrew Smith"Sorting Out Villainy: A Typology of Villains and Their Effects on Superheroes" - Robin RosenbergFrom the Experts: Comic Book Writers Define the SuperheroSection Introduction"More Than Normal, But Believable" - Stan Lee"Making the World a Better Place" - Jeph Loeb"Nobility of Purpose" - Danny Fingeroth"Superheroes and Power" - Dennis O'Neil"The Importance of Context: Robin Hood Is Out and Buffy Is In" - Kurt Busiek"Superheroes Are Made" - Tom DeFalco"Extraordinary" - Joe Quesada"The Superprotagonist" - Fred Van Lente"Superheroes and Supervillains: An Interdependent Relationship" - Ivory MadisonLooking for a good book? The collection of essays, What Is a Superhero? edited by Robin Rosenberg and Peter Coogan is a thoughtful reflection on superheroes - who are our modern mythological figures. The book is highly recommended.I received a digital copy of this book from the publisher, through Netgalley, in exchange for an honest review."

B. Capossere, "generally strong writing, concise, engaging, some (if not a lot) of insights--very enjoyable read and good intro to superheroes. What is a Superhero?, a collection of 25 essays edited by Robin S. Rosenberg and Peter Coogan, doesn't aim to present "the" answer to this oft-asked question. Instead, it throws open to the door to an array of answers (some of which are directly contradictory) from people across a wide spectrum of fields: philosophers, psychologists, comic book creators, cultural critics, etc. If, as is almost always the case in any collection, the individual essays vary in quality of insight, depth, and style, taken as a whole, What is a Superhero? makes for an always enjoyable and sometimes insightful or thought-provoking read.The book is divided into four broad sections: a definition of the superhero

centering particularly on the three-legged stool of "mission, powers, and identity," an examination of the role of "context, culture, and costume" in the genre and how these aspects create problems of definition; an exploration of supervillains; and finally a series of essays from comic book writers offering up their personal definitions of the superhero (the authors in this section are Stan Lee, Danny Fingeroth, Kurt Busick, Ivory Madison, Jeph Loeb, Dennis O'Neil, Tom DeFalco, Joe Quesada, and Fred Van Lente). The essays range in length from three to over a dozen pages, with most in the 5-7-page range.As mentioned, they do span a breadth of quality and depth—none are "bad," but several felt a bit slight or self-evident in their conclusions/ analysis. Rather than focus on those ones though, I'm going to highlight a few (not an exhaustive list) of my favorite ones."The Hero Defines the Genre, the Genre Defines the Hero" by Peter Coogan.This essays sets the up the "mission, power, identity" triumvirate that is referenced by many of the later piece. Coogan uses the trio to separate the superhero from the merely heroic, in particular earlier pulp heroes, Western heroes, and science fiction heroes. He delves into the details of each aspect and offers up a slew of concrete examples, as for instance when he elaborates on the lack of "requirements" for the prowess:Superpowers can come from extraordinary abilities, like the X-Men's mutant abilities (extra-ordinary in the literal sense); advanced technology, like Iron Man's armor; or highly developed physical or mental skills, like Batman's martial arts prowess or his supreme tactical abilities. Superpowers can also include mystical abilities that result from years of study and training, like Dr Strange's mastery of the mystic arts.He is also quick to point out that this is not a proscriptive definition; many heroes will be missing an element or two: "The Hulk is a superhero without a mission . . . Batman . . . [is] a superhero without superpowers . . . the Fantastic Four debuted without costumes [part of the "identity" element]. The latter part of the essays moves away from a focus on the superhero character and into a broader look at the superhero genre, and how it blurs lines even as it distinguishes itself from other genres, such as the Western or the Adventure story."What is a Female Superhero" by Jennifer K. StullerThis relatively brief essay does a nice job of concisely analyzing how the female superhero tends to differ from the male one via three broad elements: the female hero collaborates with others rather than following the typically male "lone wolf" style; the female hero's story often has love "romantic, filial, platonic, or as an ethic . . . as narrative motivation;" and the female hero is usually mentored by a father figure while mothers are "absent or inconsequential . . . when girls kick ass, it's because of the assistance, guidance, and teaching they receive from men." Stuller leaves it to the reader to answer whether or not these difference "exaggerate or reflect culture gender norms," though she suggests that the answers to such questions will not be universal, but instead must be determined on a "case-be-case basis.""Superheroes and the Modern (ist) Age by Alex BoneyAn examination of how the hero grew out of chaotic and sometimes threatening cultural shifts, such as the movement from an agrarian to an urban society or from a pre-industrial to a post-industrial society. This was one of my favorite essays for its sharp insights and detailed yet concise "close reading", as in this passage:Whereas the power of the cities often overwhelms the protagonists of traditional

modernist novels, the power of uncontrollable modern forces was counteracted by the strength of superhero protagonists. Although trains and automobiles are recognized as powerful and dangerous, the superhero is able to control, destroy, or redirect these . . . In what is probably the most iconic single image of Superman—the cover of Action Comics #1— the hero hoists a car over his head . . . He isn't dwarfed by skyscrapers but leaps over them in a single bound . . . Batman, Starman, and Green Lantern were all rendered soaring high above the lights and buildings of nighttime cityscapes. These characters seemed to be able to control the cities that threatened to assert control over everyone else.Sorting out Villainy: A Typology of Villains and Their Effects on Superheroes by Robin S. RosenbergAnyone who makes list or like categories will like Rosenberg's essay that distinguishes amongst several sorts of villains, as well as ranking them from least to most interesting: the "straightforward criminal" who "seeks material gain . . . or power and acts illegally to get it" a la Kingpin or Penguin; the "vengeful villain" with a "personal vendetta," such as Lex Luthor; the "heroic villain" who "has a goal that isn't selfish, although it might be a bit twisted . . . From their point of view, they are heroes, and their ends justify their destructive means" (think Magneto); and the "sadistic supervillain who wreaks havoc simply because he or she can and who enjoys it," such as the Joker. Rosenberg also explains how each sort of villain has a different impact on the superhero and evokes a different sort of response, such as wrestling with their own motives or actions."Superheroes are Made" by Tom DeFalcoAn intriguing look at DeFalco's "construction process" with regard to four characters he created/worked on: Spider-Man, Spider-Girl, the original Thunderstrike, and the heir to Thunderstrike. It was an all-too brief look behind the scenes at a fascinating creative process.These five were in my mind the strongest of the collection, but many were close in quality and enjoyment and as stated above, none of the essays were bad or a chore to read; even the slightest ones offered up some tidbits and were written in an engaging style. What is a Superhero?, makes for a nice overview/introduction for those new to the superhero world (it would, for instance, make a good classroom starter text). And if those better versed in the genre will find less they hadn't thought of before, the specific examples, generally strong writing, concise nature, engaging voices, and reference to fondly recalled characters and events will more than make up for the lack of "I never thought of that!" moments. Recommended.(originally appeared on fantasyliterature.com)"

Niamh MacKenna, "I love love love this book. I love love love this book. Used it for thesis research and it proved not only very helpful and comprehensive for both people researching for specific papers or out of pure interest into the hero/villain diachotomy but each chapter is written by a different person keeping the book fresh as you read a collection of essays centred around the vast area of superheroes essentially moreso than a full book from just one or two authors perspectives, would buy from same publisher/writer again"

Charlotte, "great for educational needs as it is academic. Great for my A2 media coursework, big

thanks to Jennifer K. Stuller for her essay on female superheroes, slammed my media teacher with my references to it!But I also read it for leisure... yeah... THUMBS UP”

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