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Dare to Know

Superhero Comics

Comics that focus on characters with superhuman abilities.

A genre in which characters have extraordinary physical or mental capabilities. The protagonist often displays superhuman strength or other special abilities, creating a juxtaposition between “normal” humans and those with “superhuman” traits. Alternately, some characters do not possess superhuman aptitudes, but combine heroic qualities with exceptional dedication, training, and skill. Regardless of any powers, superheroes use their abilities to right wrongs, protect the innocent, and combat menaces ranging from mundane crime to threats to humanity. This mission is often self-imposed due to an innate sense of responsibility or an earlier trauma. They typically battle evil counterparts known as supervillains, especially the one who becomes their particular archenemy. These superpowered antagonists are driven by greed, ego, mental instability, or other negative motivations to misuse their abilities. Long-running superhero series can each amass a “rouges gallery” of opponents.

Superhero comics are notable for their action and memorable characters who operate on a far grander scale than ordinary people. Indeed, in American popular culture, superheroes have become a form of mythology that conveys modern society’s moral codes in a manner that is more exciting, topical, and timely than earlier traditions. Superhero mythology, with its simple plots, complex symbolic language, and vividly colorful art, can powerfully communicate societal values; they embody humanity’s greatest dreams and deepest fears. The “Golden Age” of comics (1938-1956) introduced iconic, flawless heroes and codified the superhero archetype. The “Silver Age” (1956-ca. 1970) began the trend toward flawed, imperfect heroes while maintaining a sense of innocence. The “Bronze Age” (ca. 1970-1986) retained the earlier conventions, but was marked by a growing maturity in introducing more serious storylines that dealt with issues of social relevance. The “Dark Age” (1986-2000) exhibited a self-awareness of the limits of the genre, a gradual move toward an older audience, and an increased focus on sex, violence, and grittier portrayals. Writers examined the psychological dimensions of the superhero identity to a greater degree, created darker anti-heroes, or had earlier such characters rise in popularity, and commenced deconstructing the traditional characters, storylines, and tropes of the superhero genre. The “Modern Age” (2000-present) has seen a shift away from the extremes of the previous era and a limited return in tone and atmosphere to traditional Silver Age archetypes. The industry has also experienced a decline in the comic book as a regularly published periodical and an increase in the graphic novel as legitimate reading material. As part of this trend, superhero graphic novels take the most popular form of comics and transform brief episodic adventures into epic sagas.

National Allied Publications/National Periodical Publications/DC Comics’ *Adventure Comics* (1935-1983), *Action Comics* (1938-ongoing), *All-American Comics* (1939-1948), and *All-Star Comics* (1940-1951, 1976-1978); Fawcett Publications’ *Fawcett Comics* (1939-1953) and *Whiz Comics* (1940-1953); Timely Comics’ *Marvel Mystery Comics* (1939-1950) and *Daring Mystery Comics* (1940-1942); Quality Comics’ *Police Comics* (1941-1950) are early examples of publishers and their signature series. Superhero comics have since become dominated by a small

number of mainstream publishers, including DC Comics, Marvel Comics, Darkhorse Comics, and Image Comics.

Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster's Superman (1938); Bob Kane and Bill Finger's Batman (1939); C. C. Beck and Bill Parker's Captain Marvel (1939); Will Eisner's The Spirit (1940); Joe Simon and Jack Kirby's Captain America (1940); William Moulton Marston and Harry G. Peter's Wonder Woman (1941); Mort Weisinger and George Papp's Green Arrow (1941); John Broome and Gil Kane's Green Lantern (1959); Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's The Fantastic Four (1961), The Incredible Hulk (1962), and The X-Men (1963); Stan Lee and Steve Ditko's Spider-Man (1962); and Stan Lee, Larry Lieber, Jack Kirby, and Don Heck's Iron Man (1963) are classic characters.

Common Elements

Good vs. evil
Superheroes
Superheroines
Supervillains
Masks and costumes
Secret identities and alter egos

Mysterious origins
Duality
Vigilantism
Crime fighting
Individual bravery

Graphic Novel Examples

<i>Agents of Atlas</i> (2006) by Jeff Parker
<i>All-Star Superman</i> (2021) by Grant Morrison
<i>The Amazing Spider-Man</i> (2022) by Stan Lee and Steve Ditko
<i>Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth</i> (1989) by Grant Morrison and Dave McKean
<i>Astro City: Life in the Big City</i> (1999) by Kurt Buseik
<i>Aquaman: Underworld</i> (2018) by Dan Abnett, Stjepan Sejic, and Steve Wands
<i>Batman: The Black Mirror</i> (2011) by Scott Snyder, Jack Francavilla, and Francesco Francavilla
<i>Batman: A Death in the Family</i> (1988) by Jim Starlin and Jim Aparo
<i>Batman: The Killing Joke</i> (1998) by Alan Moore
<i>Batman: The Long Halloween</i> (1998) by Jeph Loeb
<i>Batman: Year One</i> (2005) by Frank Miller

<i>Batwoman: Elegy</i> (2010) by Greg Rucka and J. H. Williams
<i>Black Panther</i> (2022) by Don McGregor, Rich Buckler, Billy Graham, Stan Lee, and Jack Kirby
<i>Captain America</i> (2022) by Jack Kirby, Joe Simon, Stan Lee, and John Romita
<i>Captain America: Winter Soldier</i> (2005) by Ed Brubaker and Steve Epting
<i>Civil War</i> (2016) by Mark Millar, Steve McNiven, Dexter Vines, John Dell, and Tim Townshend
<i>Crisis on Infinite Earths</i> (1998) by Marv Wolfman and George Pérez
<i>Daredevil Omnibus Volume 1</i> (2020) by Brian Michael Bendis, Alex Maleev, and Matt Hollingsworth
<i>Daredevil: Born Again</i> (1987) by Frank Miller and David Mazzucchelli
<i>The Dark Knight Returns</i> (1986) by Frank Miller

<i>Fantastic Four: Future Foundation – Volume 1: Tomorrow</i> (2011) by Jonathan Hickman
<i>Final Crisis Omnibus</i> (2018) by Grant Morrison and J. G. Jones
<i>Gotham Central Volume 1: In the Line of Duty</i> (2008) by Greg Rucka, Ed Brubaker, and Michael Lark
<i>Green Arrow: The Longbow Hunters</i> (1989) by Mike Grell
<i>Green Lantern: Rebirth</i> (2005) by Geoff Johns and Ethan Van Sciver
<i>Hawkeye</i> (2012) by Matt Fraction, David Aja, and Javier Pulido
<i>Infinite Crisis Omnibus</i> (2020) by Geoff Jones, Gail Simone, Phil Jimenez, and Ivan Reis
<i>Iron Man: Extremis</i> (2006) by Warren Ellis
<i>JSA: Book One</i> (2017) by David S. Goyer and Geoff Johns
<i>Justice League Volume 1: Origin</i> (2012) by Geoff Jones, Jim Lee, and Scott Williams
<i>Kingdom Come</i> (1996) by Mark Wald and Alex Ross
<i>Marvels</i> (1994) by Kurt Busiek and Alex Ross
<i>The Mighty Thor Omnibus</i> (2011) by Walt Simonson
<i>Nextwave: Agents of H.A.T.E. Volume 1</i> (2006) by Warren Ellis and Stuart Immonen
<i>New Avengers: Everything Dies</i> (2014) by Jonathan Hickman and Steve Epting
<i>New Avengers Volume 1</i> (2007) by Brian Michael Bendis

<i>New X-Men</i> (2002) by Grant Morrison
<i>The Saga of the Swamp Thing Book One</i> (2012) by Alan Moore, Stephen Bissette, and John Totleben
<i>Secret Six Volume 1: Villains United</i> (2015) by Gail Simone, Dale Eaglesham, and Brad Walker
<i>Spider-Man: The Gauntlet: Electro and Sandman</i> (2009) by Mark Waid et al.
<i>Spider-Man: Life Story</i> (2019) by Chip Zdarsky and Mark Bagley
<i>Superman: Birthright</i> (2004) by Mark Wald, Leinil Francis Yu, and Gerry Alanguilan
<i>Superman for All Seasons</i> (1998) by Jeph Loed and Tim Sale
<i>Superman: Red Son</i> (2003) by Mark Millar and Dave Johnson
<i>Tom Strong</i> (2009) by Alan Moore, Chris Sprouse, Al Gordon, and Art Adams
<i>X-Factor Omnibus Volume 1</i> (2021) by Peter David
<i>X-Men: The Dark Phoenix Saga</i> (1990) by Chris Claremont, Jo Duffy, John Byrne, Mike Collins, and John Buscema
<i>X-Men: Noir</i> (2009) by Fred Van Lente and Dennis Calero
<i>Watchmen</i> (1987) by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons
<i>Wolverine</i> (1989) by Chris Claremont and Frank Miller
<i>Wolverine: Old Man Logan</i> (2010) by Jeff Lemire and Andrea Sorrentino
<i>Wonder Woman: The Hiketeia</i> (2002) by Greg Rucka and J. G. Jones