

Superman at 80

The iconic superhero, who turned 80 in 2018, has come in and out of fashion. A historian explores why.

Interview by Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

I grew up in Australia in the 1960s. The *Adventures of Superman* television show was on constantly. And I read a lot of comics—Superman, Batman, those kind of comics. You could buy black-and-white reprints of Superman comics, because at the time you couldn't get books published by DC Comics in Australia. So the superheroes were just there. Just part of the media.

Superman was a product of the Depression, and he was a symbol of hope. During the war, it was quite interesting that in the comic book, he never really engaged in war. The comic books themselves had very wide distribution among service personnel. Wherever American service personnel went, so too did American comics. But the way that DC Comics positioned him was that American service personnel didn't need his help, because in a democracy, people fought a war for that democracy. They really didn't need a kind of superhero to come and fight their battles for them.

Keeping Superman out of the war did something very important, in that it carried a message of normalcy in American life. That's what Americans were fighting for, which was often constituted as the "American way." And indeed, on the radio serial that existed at the time, the first episode after Pearl Harbor had Superman fighting for truth and justice and then, it was added, the American way.

The *Superman* TV show was one of the first TV shows, and the first season was generally described as dark. It really wasn't material for children. But in the 1950s, DC Comics domesticated Superman. Then in the mid-1960s, I think Superman kind of lost that position to Batman, who became very popular with the kind of arch, camp, pop sensibility of the *Batman* TV show. And the reinvigorated Marvel Comics had a certain coolness about them for some kids.

Ian Gordon '93 (PhD)

Home: Singapore

Associate professor of history, National University of Singapore; author of *Superman: The Persistence of an American Icon* (Rutgers University Press, 2017) and *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture, 1890-1945* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998); editor of *Ben Katchor: Conversations* (University of Mississippi Press, 2018) and coeditor of *The Comics of Charles Schultz: The Good Grief of Modern Life* (University Press of Mississippi, 2017)

The *Superman* movie, released at the end of 1978, was a turning point. On the one hand, it was the way that it was marketed that made it important, and made Superman important, in my view.

They enlisted Marlon Brando in a small role and at a very expensive salary, because Christopher Reeve was then an unknown. And they hired several other marquee names, like Gene Hackman. It was one of the first movies to use Dolby sound. And DC Comics was also a very successful licensor of toys and other products.

But I also think the movie came at a moment when America was ready for it. I'm pretty sure it wasn't designed to plug into post-Watergate angst, but it certainly was aware of that. There's a playfulness about Superman, so that he flies onto Lois Lane's balcony, and she interviews him as they flirt. She asks why he's there, and he says, "I'm here to fight for truth, justice, and the American way." And she says, "Wow, are you serious?" She's quite sarcastic about that, as one might expect a newspaper reporter in 1978 to be. And he says, "I never lie." Reeve said that Superman needed to express hope and not be cynical or sarcastic.

It's hard to assess what Superman means outside an American context. Living in Singapore, I constantly see people wearing Superman T-shirts.

So, what is it about Superman? Partly it might be the general sense that America is cool. Probably a good part of it has nothing to do with any ideology. But for many people, America does resonate as representing some very good values.

I remember some years ago, reading an interview with a woman in Singapore who had a sleeve tattoo and thought she wouldn't get as many looks in America, because people were more open minded there.

The sunny view of Superman isn't without critics, though. In the early 1960s, the Italian novelist and theorist Umberto Eco argued that somebody with the power of Superman could do transformative things, rather than being limited to small acts of charity, as Superman was. He thought this suggested an ideology that opposed necessary systemic change. I had thought that as well, for years. But more recently, it occurred to me that America can do transformative things, but often those things haven't worked out the way it was thought they would. So, if you read Superman as a stand-in for America, then maybe you do want him to dial back the power.  

