

Why I Read Superhero Comics

February 21, 2012 by Mark D. White (<https://goodmenproject.com/arts/why-i-read-superhero-comics/>)

At our office holiday party last December—which doubled as my 40th birthday party—my friends (fellow faculty and staff) gave me two large portraits of the Avengers and a 8×10 photo of Christian Bale’s Batman with my head Photoshopped in. (It’s online somewhere—you want it, you find it.) I work on scholarly books in economics, philosophy, and law, but I also edit books like *Batman and Philosophy* and *The Avengers and Philosophy*. Shockingly, I get more interview requests for the latter, and more often than not, I’m asked why I’m so fascinated with comics—especially superhero comics.

Thirty-odd years ago, I was a little kid hooked on the Saturday morning *Superfriends* show and the *Batman* live-action series with Adam West and Burt Ward. I soon started buying comics off the spinner rack at the local five-and-dime with my soda bottle deposit money. Like many kids, I was probably caught up in the wonder of seeing people fly, push planets around, make glowing green boxing gloves with their power rings, and just walk up the side of a building on a rope. As I got older I appreciated the stories themselves, following the development of my favorite characters as they battled adversity in the form of supervillains as well as their own personal demons.

That was then—but why do I read comics today? I guess I still have that same sense of wonder and awe I had as a kid, but it’s no longer focused on the amazing powers, high-stakes action, or flashy costumes. It’s **much simpler than that.**

It’s the heroism.

I love reading stories about men and women with fantastic abilities who choose to use them to help other people rather than to achieve wealth or fame. Not only do superheroes forego any benefits they could get from their powers, but they often sacrifice their own personal lives for the pursuit of justice and beneficence. They put their lives on the line to save others, as police officers, firefighters, and soldiers do every day in the real world. Death is an overused storytelling device in modern comics, but when used well it drives home the sacrifice that heroes—super or not—make in the service of others, and that shows the best we can be.

The most interesting stories to me involve superheroes having to solve problems that require judgment and reasoning rather than super-strength or speed. Superman having to decide whether he should shut down a factory polluting a local stream at the cost of hundreds of jobs. Batman having to decide whether to kill the Joker in order to put an end to his endless killing sprees. Spider-Man realizing he just cannot save everybody. All stories that parallel struggles any of us could encounter, tragic dilemmas with no satisfactory resolution, no matter how fast you can fly or how powerful your armor is. Deep down, heroes—even superheroes—are confronted with the same basic choices the rest of us are, which allows us to connect with them despite our lack of fantastic abilities.

Sure, the superpowers, costumes, and gadgets draw us in. But once you peel away the “super” part of these stories, you have simple tales of heroism, tales that can inspire each of us to do something for others. In the end, the best superhero comics show us that you don’t need superpowers or gadgets to be a hero.