SECTION I

Super and Hero: Powers and Mission

What 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.

ONE

The Hero Defines the Genre, the Genre Defines the Hero

Peter Coogan

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, is

> **Su•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**.[1]

This 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.

NOTES

1. 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: University of Chicago Press, 1976, p. 40.

11. Christine Mersch, "Alfred Gough." *Writers Digest*, February 11, 2008. www.writersdigest.com/article/Alfred_Gough