Course Description

Once upon a time, the four-color world of the superhero was a comfortingly simple place. Whether they came from distant galaxies or our home planet, the super-powered beings of the 1930s and 40s were secure in their sense of righteousness and generally saw no contradiction between truth, justice, and the American way. But in the 1960s, superheroes experienced a crisis of confidence. They became neurotic, more driven by guilt than moral absolutes, more likely to be feared and misunderstood than revered and admired. By the 1980s it was sometimes hard to tell the heroes from the villains. In *Watchmen* (1986), one of the most influential comic-book narratives of the late 20th century, superheroes were variously reimagined as emotionally damaged and politically reactionary—symptoms of a broken society rather than symbols of fortitude, fairness, and decency. Then in the 1990s, the American comic book industry came close to financial collapse; sales fell, and publishers and stores across the country closed their doors. For a time it looked like it might be all over for the spandex set. But today, thanks to the global influence of Hollywood, superhero fantasies are more popular than ever.

What can we learn from all this? What are the key turning points in the progress of this curious, hybrid genre? What are the most influential superhero stories, and why? Who created them, and in what circumstances? And what might the history of the superhero tell us about our culture, politics, and values? In this class we will map the path of the American superhero and consider the ways in which that journey reflects larger processes of social change. We will also analyze superhero comic books as significant aesthetic achievements in themselves: expressions of a misunderstood and often under-appreciated genre and art form. We will try to formulate a suitable critical vocabulary to discuss this remarkable artistic legacy. By the end of the class, we will better understand the extraordinary imaginative appeal of the costumed crime-fighter—an appeal that apparently overlaps significant distinctions of age, gender, nation, and culture, and which no amount of silliness or cynicism seems quite able to dispel.

Texts For Purchase

See Canvas Site.

The books can all be acquired at The Duck Store or through the usual online retailers. A small number of copies will also be available at our best local comics shop, Books With Pictures, in downtown Eugene at 99 W Broadway C. (Founded and owned by UO Ph.D. Andréa Gilroy, this store is well worth a visit, even if you purchase your course texts from elsewhere.) It is your responsibility to ensure that you have access to these texts.

Many more additional readings will be supplied throughout the term as PDFs; please check the Canvas site to make sure you have read all the required texts for each module.

Requirements and Grading

Your grades will be based on seven short (timed) “Reading Responses” (totaling 50% of your final result); a Summary and Response to an academic article (15%); a short research assignment exploring the range of comics criticism on the Internet (15%); and either a final paper or creative assignment (20%). Please see “Assignments” on Canvas for detailed descriptions of all these tasks, including due dates.

Course lectures will be made available in the form of videos that you can watch each week on your own schedule; we will also hold a weekly synchronous Zoom session for live discussion and questions. In accordance with administrative guidelines during the Covid-19 crisis, we will not penalize students for non-attendance; instead, the meeting will be recorded, so any student who cannot attend our synchronous session can watch the discussions.
later. I strongly encourage attendance, however. It will be our one opportunity each week to compare notes as a group—providing you with a chance to ask questions, share insights, and bond with your classmates in real time. Please be sure to sign in on time for these weekly synchronous discussions, and to have all appropriate materials on hand (the course readings, and a paper and pen for taking notes).

You should anticipate devoting at least nine hours per week to this course (on top of the time spent in our weekly synchronous meeting), with that number rising to at least twelve hours when the longer assignments are due.

Late Work

Work is due by the times indicated on the assignments. Late assignments will be downgraded by a third of a letter grade for each day they are late, unless permission for an extension has been granted in advance by your Grader, Alex Newsom.

Extensions

Extensions will only be granted in the event of emergencies (for example, illness, a family crisis, or similar circumstance). Please request the extension as soon as you know it is required, and give your GE are realistic estimate of the time you will need to complete the work. We understand that life can sometimes throw us for a loop, upsetting even the most carefully laid plans, and we are willing to offer reasonable accommodations when we can; but we can only do so if we are informed. So, above all, stay in touch.

Contact Information

Outside of our scheduled synchronous (real time) online discussions, all announcements and general emails will be issued via Canvas. These will be automatically forwarded to your UO email. (Check and adjust your settings under Account > Notifications if you would also like to receive announcements via text.) The Professor, GE and FIG TA will each host office hours via Zoom at the times listed below. You can also email us with questions at any time throughout the term, as usual.

Professor Ben Saunders
Email: ben@uoregon.edu
Online Office Hours: Fridays 2-5 pm or by appointment.

Please email Professor Saunders during the prior week (up to 5 pm on the Thursday) to set up an office-hours Zoom meeting; allow forty-eight hours notice to schedule an appointment outside of regular hours.

Inclusive Learning Environments

This is an inclusive learning environment. Please contact the Accessible Education Center in 164 Oregon Hall at 541-346-1155 or uoaec@uoregon.edu for additional resources and support if there are aspects of the instruction or course design that result in disability-related barriers to your participation. If the AEC determines that you need accommodations, please get in touch with both Alex and Professor Saunders as soon as possible, so we can make appropriate adjustments.

Managing Disagreement With Respect and Tolerance

We won’t always agree. In a discussion-oriented classroom, agreement is not even the primary goal. The point is to be challenged by new ideas, to hear a diversity of perspectives, and to become more accomplished and discerning with regard to what constitutes a persuasive argument.
Unfortunately, we are all capable of giving offense accidentally—sometimes due to misunderstanding, and sometimes out of lack of knowledge. If the topic at hand is inherently sensitive or difficult, the risk of an accidental hurt is more likely. But in a college classroom setting, we must try to assume the good faith of all participants.

Remember, it is unlikely in such circumstances that anyone is deliberately trying to give offense; and our collective responsibility as a learning community is to try to help one another in the face of our misunderstandings and insufficiencies. That means being patient with one another when we express ourselves poorly, or speak from ignorance (something we all sometimes will do).

Nevertheless, good faith discussion is impossible in the absence of basic respect for human difference and diversity. No one in our class should be discriminated against on account of their age, race, gender, sexual orientation, class status, prior educational attainments, religion, or appearance; in addition, personal insults, name-calling, and mockery will not be tolerated. If you are ever subject to discriminatory language or behavior while participating in this class, please let me know, so that we can take steps to address the problem.

Let’s try to assume the best of one another, even when we disagree. In the end, that’s the only way we will learn from one another.

Course Content Advisory

Some people still think of comics as a form of children’s literature. This is a misapprehension. Just like novels and movies, comics treat adult themes and subject matter. As such, you can expect to encounter depictions of sex acts, violence, and profane language in these texts. In addition, some of the texts we read will express historical attitudes that we now broadly reject as a society; some will express political or religious ideas that do not accord with your own beliefs; and some may simply fail to satisfy your personal aesthetic preferences.

The ability to adopt an attitude of critical distance when discussing difficult and distressing representations—or even just works that don’t appeal to us much—is fundamental to the process of studying the arts and humanities at the college level. To do this intellectual labor we must also attend to the role played by different contexts (historical, institutional, national, political, personal) in the shaping of meaning.

It may help to remember that when we discuss artworks in a scholarly way we are trying to move beyond the simplistic binary logic of a “thumbs up” or “thumbs down” vote. That’s why you are not required to like everything you will be asked to read, even though you are required to read it.

To take a scholarly approach to literature and the arts does not mean we can no longer take escapist pleasure in our reading. But escapism is not the primary motive for scholarly reading: instead, our primary motive is the acquisition of knowledge (perhaps a more rarified form of pleasure). To gain scholarly knowledge, we need to be able to approach our readings with an open mind, and with an awareness that a text or artwork does not have to express current values in order to be worthy of careful analysis, interpretation, and discussion.

Indeed, as history shows, “current values” are not set in stone but always subject to revision and change. The study of art and literature is in part the study of these shifting processes of evaluation and interpretation. It becomes our job to try to understand why values—aesthetic and political—become established, and why and how they change. (For example, why comics were once regarded as the lowest form of print culture—not worthy of the designation of either “art” or “literature”—and why and how that changed, so that comics are now preserved in libraries, taught in schools, exhibited in galleries, and studied at the college level.)

The cultivation of such open-mindedness and contextual awareness is good practice not merely for scholars of literature, art, and media; it may also help prepare us to live as members of a diverse and inclusive society by encouraging a perspective of informed tolerance.

Academic Integrity and Plagiarism
Plagiarism is the use of another person’s words or ideas without due acknowledgment. The use of all external sources (whether quoted directly or paraphrased) must be properly documented. Cutting and pasting from online sources without due acknowledgment is obvious plagiarism; but so is rephrasing someone else’s work if you do so without acknowledging the source. If you paraphrase someone else’s ideas or words rather than quoting directly, you still must cite the source for all the ideas and concepts that you are paraphrasing, with in-text citations, footnotes, and phrasing that includes the author’s name. It is also considered plagiarism if you ask (or pay) someone else to do academic work in your name.

To avoid plagiarism you should:

- Accurately quote the original author's words when you are quoting.
- Enclose the quotation within quotation marks.
- Follow the quotation with an in-text citation.
- Introduce quotations and all instances of paraphrase with a statement that includes the author’s name (EG “Baxter argues that...”)
- Provide a list of references with full citation information at the end of the paper.

Students who are found to have committed plagiarism will receive an automatic failing grade. In addition, all incidents of plagiarism will be reported to the Office of Student Conduct.

For further guidance, see the UO library website (under “How-To Guides” on the library homepage) for more on citation practices. If you remain uncertain as to what constitutes plagiarism, definitions are available in the “Student Conduct Code” section of the Student Life website (http://studentlife.uoregon.edu). You are also welcome to contact me or Alex if you have any questions about these definitions.

**Anticipated Learning Outcomes**

Assuming you are able to devote yourself fully to the readings and assignments, by the end of the class you will know the historical origins of the superhero genre; you will be able to list the specific achievements of certain comic book creators such as Jerry Siegel, Joe Shuster, and Jack Kirby; and you will be able to describe how the economic and material conditions of superhero comic book production have shaped the content of the comics themselves at key moments.

You will also be able to distinguish between a variety of different critical explanations for the popularity of the superhero fantasy over the last eighty-plus years. Finally, you will be able to describe the ways in which these popular fantasies both reveal and shape the collective desires and anxieties of the culture from which they emerge.

In addition, you will have gained experience doing the following activities:

- Reading both superhero comic book and critical texts with a view to better understanding their conventions.
- Situating these popular texts within their cultural, political, and historical contexts.
- Performing formal analyses of a narrative medium that combines visual and verbal elements in a unique way.
- Writing focused analytical essays in clear, grammatical prose.
- Employing creativity and interpretive skills to produce original, persuasive arguments.
- Employing a diversity of primary and secondary sources, with proper acknowledgment and citation, to generate a persuasive written argument.