

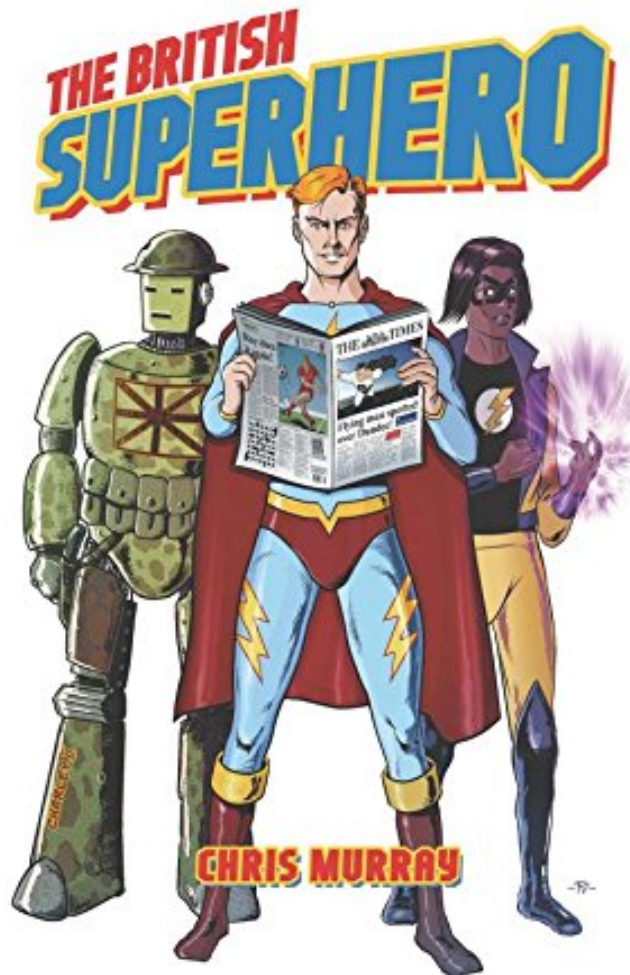
[Get free] The British Superhero

The British Superhero

Chris Murray

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Chris Murray : The British Superhero before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The British Superhero:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. informative and thoroughBy B. CapossereOne certainly cannot fault Chris Murray on his research for The British Superhero, and ones reaction to it will probably depend on just how exhaustive a look at the topic one desires. Ill confess that at times my eyes glazed a bit at some of the summaries of the more obscure storylines, especially those that lasted only a single issue or two, but despite those occasional moments,

the book is an informative exploration of an often over-looked realm of superhero comics. Murray moves in chronological order for the most part, beginning not with superheroes but with their precursors in the 19th Century and early 20th Century, after a quick little skim of the usual basic introductory sort of material every comic non-fiction work is obligated to cover: various definitions of superhero, reference to Joseph Campbell's monomyth, etc. After dispensing with the basic, Murray does a thorough and usually engaging job of explaining the form and function of the Penny Dreadfuls, Story Papers (also known as boys weeklies), and early newspaper strips, and how the characters in these works presaged the later superheroes. Some of this will be familiar if you either read a lot of the history of heroes or 19th Century literature (I do both), but most will probably find this new, and despite my prior knowledge Murray offered up more than a few surprising tidbits of information and/or unknown characters. For instance, I hadn't heard at all of Sexton Blake, a detective very much in the mold of Sherlock Holmes (he even lived on Baker Street), even though he for a long time was the more popular and well-known character. One of the more interesting, and refreshingly new, aspects of this chapter was Murray's opinion that many of these early hero-type characters were actually quite dull and more often than not outshined by their far more compelling adversaries, even to the point, Murray argues, that it was these supervillains more so than the alleged heroes that could more justifiably be labeled prototype superheroes. Less substantively but still interesting is the odd pattern Murray lays out of so many winged characters (both heroes, villains, and something in-between) throughout this time period, such as Batsowl, Captain Q, The Scarlet Bat, and, a bit on the nose this one, The Winged Man. From the newspaper strips Murray moves more directly into superhero mode with the introduction of Superman in the late 1930s and then detailing a host of British superheroes (often Superman/Captain Marvel imposters) through the first half of the century and fleshing out more fully a topic he'd broached earlier: how British comics privileged satirical and parodic treatment of the genre and provided a somewhat subversive view of the superhero than their American counterparts, tracing back the historical antecedents to such publications as *Punch*. Also up for examination in this chapter are the differing styles and formats between American and British comics (the American ones considered more visually dynamic for instance, or how British stories were shorter and the artwork usually in black and white), the impact of a wartime ban on imports, the influence of American GIs stationed in Britain, and the (often bizarre) ways British distributors would cut up American comics to fit standard British models. Chapter Three deals with the postwar decade of the 50s, which saw the moral panic backlash against comic books, the rise of small publishers, the increasing influence of science fiction, and the heavy impact of Captain Marvel on British superheroes (Murray calls them doppelgangers) such as Electroman, Mr. Apollo, and Masterman. Despite the heavy debt so transparently owed to Captain Marvel, Murray makes a good case for the individual quality of some of these doppelgangers. He also points to the Britification (my word, not his) of the American version in how many were melded with the most classic of British stories: the school series. A good time is spent on Marvelman, a particularly important superhero, one meant not to be just another Captain Marvel rip-off; it had to be the definitive Captain Marvel rip-off. One of the most detailed plot summaries, and one of the most fascinating, comes when Murray discusses yet another doppelganger, Captain Miracle, and his story arc involving a rescue of a young black man from being lynched by the Klu Klux Klan (*Way Down South* 1961). A story that I'd have to agree with Murray on when he declares nothing like it could have been published in America at the time. Murray also notes how it acts not simply as a critique of race relations in America, but also doubles as a cover to address British concerns about race . . . [due to] increased racial tension in Britain with immigration from Africa, India, and Pakistan resulting in race riots in rapidly changing communities. Chapter Four delves into the impact of Marvel Comics in the 1960s and the early careers of some of the most influential (and to many readers, most recognizable) names in the business, such as Chris Claremont, Alan Moore, Dave Gibbons, Grant Morrison, Neil Gaiman, and others as Murray carries through to the end of the 70s. The way in which these authors turned to subverting/revising the superhero comic in the 80s and early 90s is the subject of chapter five, detailing their move from British comics to American ones as the first wave of the British Invasion when many of them became the principal influence in that most-dominant segment of the industry. Here Murray dives a bit more deeply into some of the most well-known and well-respected comic series/graphic novels, such as *Watchmen*, *V for Vendetta*, *Marvelman*, *Arkham Asylum*, and *Sandman*. The final chapter, saving the conclusion, brings us from the mid-90s to the present day, tracing the rise of independent and adult comics, the later work by those first-wave British Invasion writers/artists, and the inevitable reaction to their revisionary style by up-and-coming writers of the second wave, such as Mark Millar (*The Ultimates*, *Civil War*, *Kick-Ass*), Garth Ennis, and Warren Ellis, whom Murray describes as equally cynical about America, power, and superheroes, but their approach was different. Later, he becomes more explicit about that difference, arguing that: These second-wave comics were not reliant on literary or esoteric references or metafiction, or even necessarily parody or satire; rather they were exceptionally well-crafted adventure stories with a political edge. In some ways, if the writers of the first British Invasion were deconstructing the superhero, then the second-wave writers were reconstructing the hero in a different form. Throughout, Murray keeps a tight focus on how the shifting economic and political relationship between America and Britain influenced the comics industry, both in a macro sense with regard to the two countries' relative global power and form of politics at the given time (i.e. liberal, conservative) and in a micro sense via detailed explanations of the export-import/licensing/distribution aspects of the comics trade.

between America and Great Britain. As noted, there's a lot of superheroes listed and a fair amount of summarizing of story arcs, and there were times I wondered if I really needed to know about this character who appeared in all of one or three issues of some obscure comic in the mid-50s. But then again, if one is going to cover a topic, why not cover it fully? And there's no doubt that all those summaries and listings do create an overall vision or pattern, whether it be the outsized influence of Captain Marvel, the greater use in British comics of humor and satire, the shift toward a revised, far more critical view of the superhero story, or even just that for a time there British adventure story writers were really enamored of guys with wings who flew around and did neat stuff. Fans of the history of superheroes/comics will probably find the early chapter on superhero precursors and the later chapters that dip into the best-known works such as *Watchmen* or *V for Vendetta* a bit familiar, though Murray does an excellent concise job of detailing/explaining those areas. And it's true I did wish for more analysis/interpretation to break up some of the longer passages of summary. But I also found the lesser-known heroes mostly utterly fascinating, and appreciated the connections Murray made between the comics and British/geopolitics. And there's no doubt Murray writes in an engaging, fluid manner and from a clearly evident base of knowledge and experience. Meaning between author and content, *The British Superhero* is an easy book to recommend for those interested in gaining a somewhat different perspective on superhero comic history. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Fascinating, academic, and accessible. By JDA
fascinating look at cultural and historical connections to the comic book and graphic novel medium generally, and the superhero narrative specifically. I enjoyed this book as a work of academic research and literary explication, and I also enjoyed this book as an avid comic book/graphic novel reader. This would be on my list of recommended reading if I taught a graphic novel course.

Chris Murray reveals the largely unknown and rather surprising history of the British superhero. It is often thought that Britain did not have its own superheroes, yet Murray demonstrates that there were a great many in Britain and that they were often used as a way to comment on the relationship between Britain and America. Sometimes they emulated the style of American comics, but they also frequently became sites of resistance to perceived American political and cultural hegemony, drawing upon satire and parody as a means of critique. Murray illustrates that the superhero genre is a blend of several influences, and that in British comics these influences were quite different from those in America, resulting in some contrasting approaches to the figure of the superhero. He identifies the origins of the superhero and supervillain in nineteenth-century popular culture such as the penny dreadfuls and boys weeklies and in science fiction writing of the 1920s and 1930s. He traces the emergence of British superheroes in the 1940s, the advent of fake American comics, and the reformatting of reprinted material. Murray then chronicles the British Invasion of the 1980s and the pivotal roles in American superhero comics and film production held by British artists today. This book will challenge views about British superheroes and the comics creators who fashioned them. Murray brings to light a gallery of such comics heroes as the Amazing Mr X, Powerman, Streamline, Captain Zenith, Electroman, Mr Apollo, Masterman, Captain Universe, Marvelman, Kellys Eye, Steel Claw, the Purple Hood, Captain Britain, Supercats, Bananaman, Paradax, Jack Staff, and SuperBob. He reminds us of the significance of many such creators and artists as Len Fullerton, Jock McCail, Jack Glass, Denis Gifford, Bob Monkhouse, Dennis M. Reader, Mick Anglo, Brendan McCarthy, Alan Moore, Grant Morrison, Dave Gibbons, and Mark Millar.

About the Author Chris Murray, Dundee, Scotland, is professor of comics studies at the University of Dundee and director of the Scottish Centre for Comics Studies. Murray is author of *Champions of the Oppressed: Superhero Comics, Popular Culture, and Propaganda in America during World War II*. He is also editor of *UniVerse Comics*, coeditor of *Studies in Comics* (Intellect), and co-organizer of the International Comics and Graphic Novel conference.