Translated excerpt

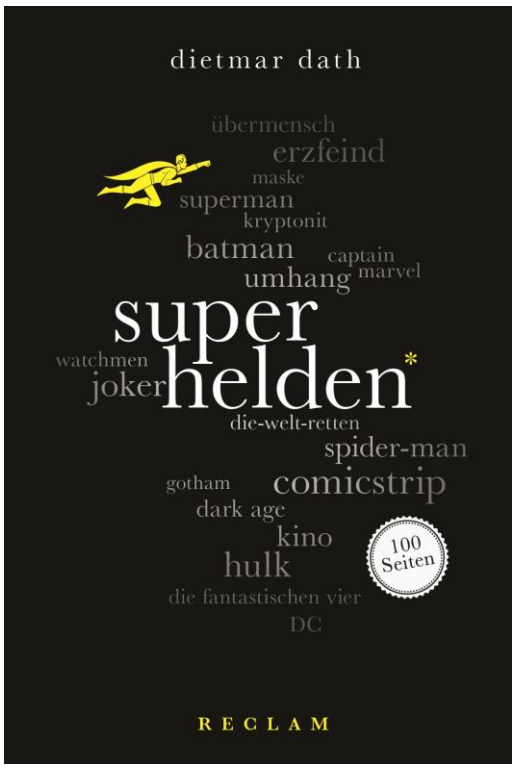
Dietmar Dath
Superhelden. 100 Seiten

Philipp Reclam jun. Verlag, Stuttgart 2016
ISBN 978-3-150-20420-7

pp. 1-19

Dietmar Dath
Superheroes. 100 Pages

Translated by David Brenner



Preface: School of the Superhumans

When post-pubescent adults continue to occupy themselves with the fictional characters who populated their fantasy worlds when they were still children or adolescents, the pop-psychological stereotype is that what attracts them is that these fantasy figures never age. Rather, these characters remain true to themselves, be it on paper or in other media. They preserve our youthful energy, enthusiasm and naiveté, like some external hard drive of our hearts. They preserve our wonder at the world, our earliest desire to transform it, and our multifaceted hopes for it.

It's a stereotype that sounds compelling.

But it wasn't that way in my case.

My childhood idols didn't stay young. Their life experiences haven't favored them. Several times already, Batman has retired, died or been rendered a paraplegic. Superman has married; Spider-Man, too. The X-Men are no longer recognizable. The Green Lantern has committed serious crimes in a state of mental and/or moral confusion, and the Avengers have had more leaders than the former Soviet Communist Party (which, unlike them, no longer exists).

All this is documented, in comics, books, films, and in the varieties of data carriers that have since emerged. For even the media that are supposed to preserve it all haven't stayed the same.

Since the 1970s, *superheroes* – and in this work, I use that term to refer to both males and females -- have experienced worse changes and defeats than the adult I've meanwhile become. As a child I needed these figures, and as a teenager I liked them; and then I forgot about them for a while. If I wish to meet up with them again today, I can simply select that stage in their lives in which it should occur. For my library of comic books allows me access to their best and their worst days. And if that were not enough, I can still go to the movies, turn on the TV, surf the Internet or use some other form of playback. The life stories of these people who never existed have become like a short-order menu: I know them as boisterous children, moody teenagers, conflicted adults, or valiant seniors.

We are even able to encounter one of them in his retirement: it is the mutant Wolverine, whom the comics canon dictates should age more slowly than most other living beings. Having had already proven himself in World

War II, he will still be puffing on his ghastly cigars in the distant future, bearing the face of Hugh Jackman at the cinema. He can even be found in multiple variants, from Chris Claremont's *Days of Future Past* (1981) to Mark Millar's *Old Man Logan* (2008).

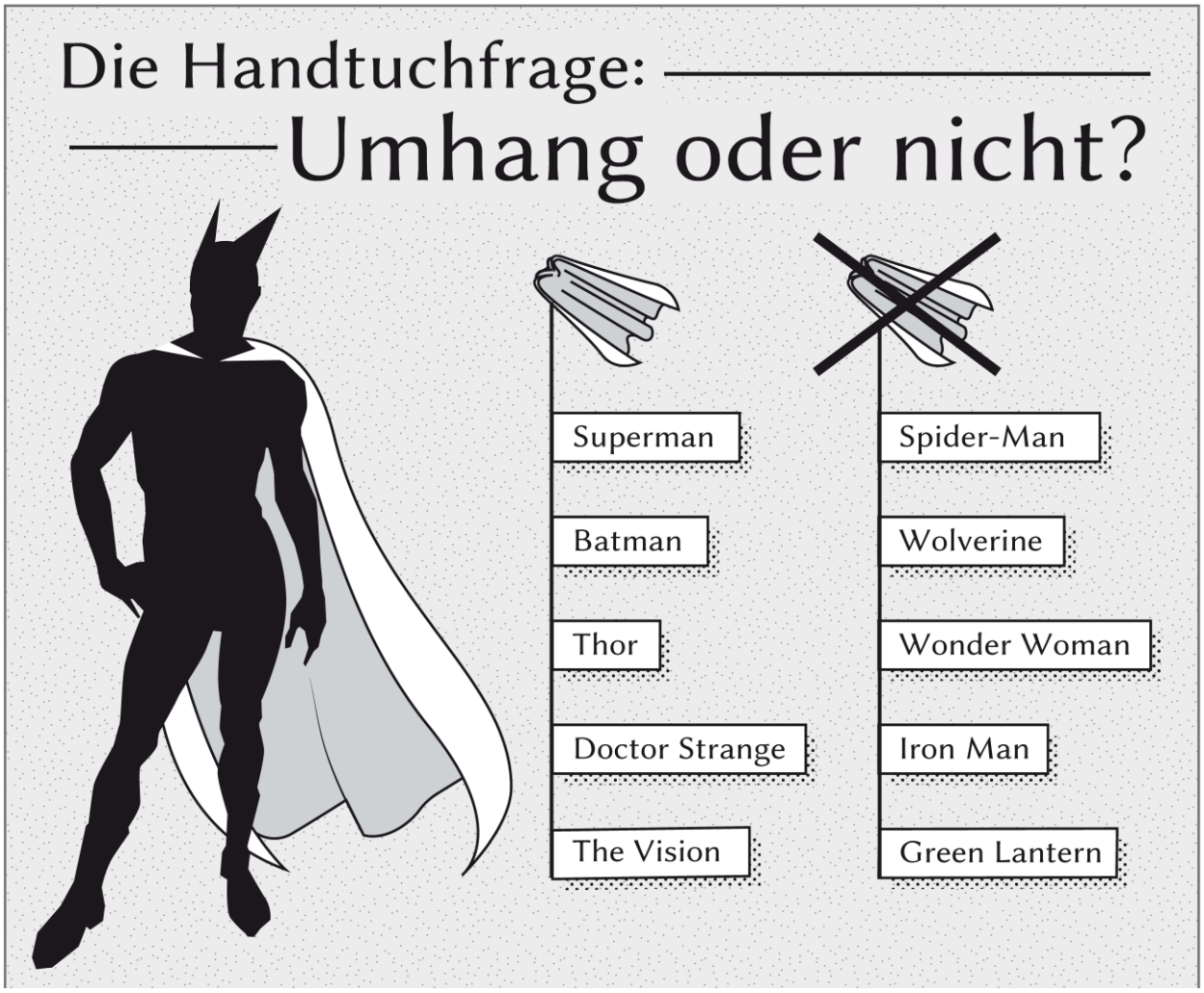
Nevertheless, I haven't forgotten how it all was in the beginning. On the playground, we regarded the superheroes as virtually immutable beings, as immortal and indestructible – and thereby ourselves as well. For the appropriate form of first love for such figures is identifying with them. We knew them better than one another, meaning: we even shared secrets with them, such as their famous "secret identities," i.e., the truth about the double lives so many of them led. The physician Donald Blake, who can barely walk, is "in reality" Thor, the Nordic god of thunder; the uptight reporter Clark Kent is the indestructible "Man of Steel." Because we were children and knew that no one could see on the outside everything that was really inside us, it made complete sense to us that the colorful and powerful side of these people -- what couldn't be overlooked once revealed -- was what was real about them. It was definitely not the tattered shell of the all-too-human in which they purportedly spent more time -- indeed, in which they had to scrape by as though serving time in prison. Now that might signal to children the hopeful truth regarding who they might become. Yet at the same time, it serves as a great metaphor, to the adult readers of such comics, of the self-consciousness of modern humanity more generally. Because our public existence is legally and politically equal to all others -- and thus no longer "something special" or important from birth onwards as was the case with the aristocrats of the pre-modern era (whose coats of arms live on in the insignias of the superheroes, e.g., the large "S" or the bat icon) – we regard these superheroes as all-the-more-important to our rich inner lives. Hence, it might be said that Petrarch in the fourteenth century became the first superhero. For, as the author of "Secretum Meum," he developed the notion that boring everyday humans might conceal something that was quite incredible (to a super-poet and philosopher at least). It was something so potent that its remnants in modern and postmodern psychoanalysis still afford us -- and not just children -- a little narcissistic excitement amid the hardships of formal equality in modern polities.

Yet we kids were so clever that we assumed adults should've been able to detect something about who we actually were behind our (still human) masks. Thus, we would hide in our waistbands a pocketknife, a minicomic, a magnifying glass, and a couple of ballpoint pens, because Batman had a multifunctional "utility belt" where he kept his fingerprint powder, a stick of dynamite, and a collapsible helicopter. And if another kid

claims that Thor was stronger than The Hulk, there'd be an argument, more intense than any we'd later have as grown-ups about politics.

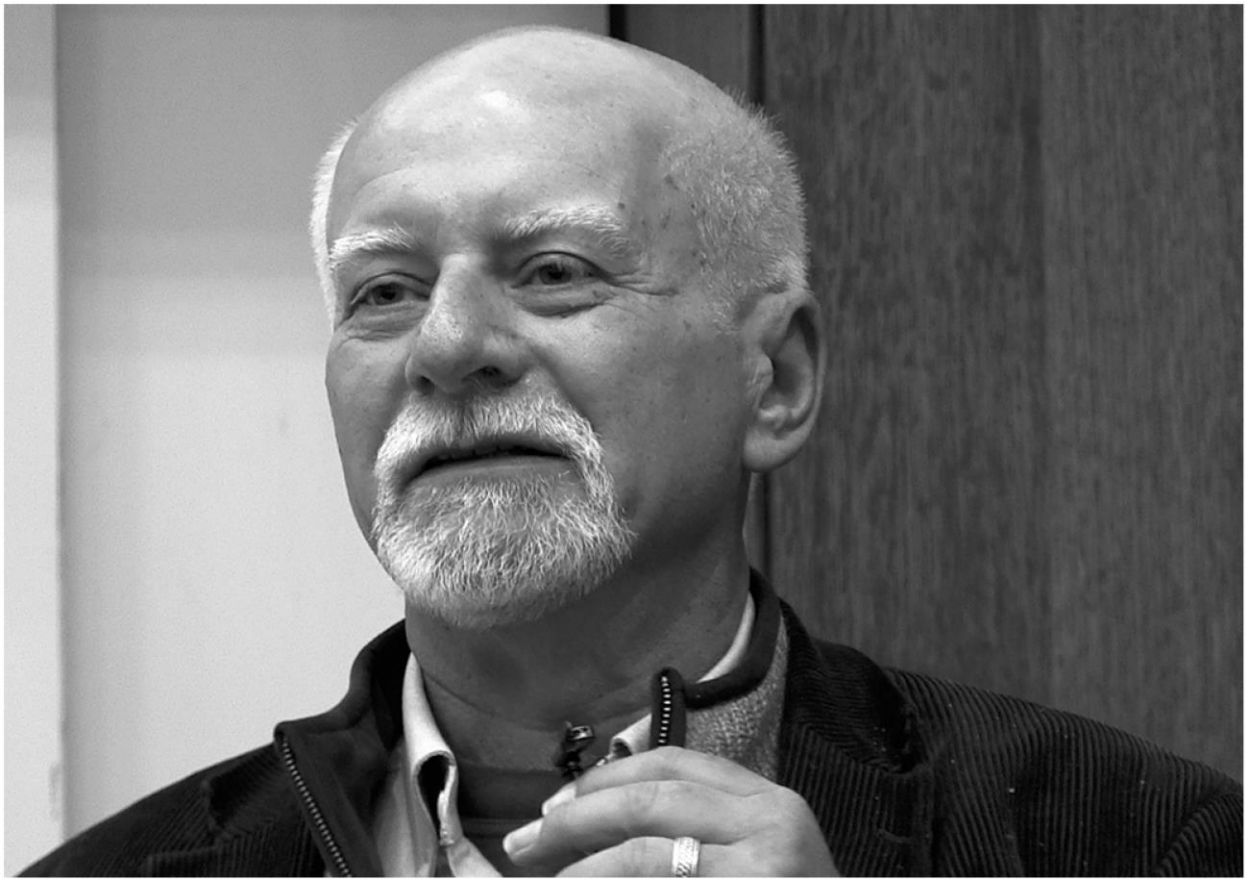
If the adults wanted to know why we weren't into collecting trading cards but instead were spending our allowances on Superman and Batman -- and a bit later on anything that had "Marvel" on the cover -- then we'd teach them the right way to read a comic book: "You have to start here, in the upper left-hand corner. Now read diagonally, toward the lower right. No, don't just go right. You have to move across the opposite page: it's supposed to be read vertically, too!"

In particular, the illustrator Neal Adams made it truly difficult for laymen back then, with his eagerness to experiment with layouts. Even today, having learned from Adams in the 1970s how to see, I hold the greatest respect for artists who understand how to guide the eye in a sovereign manner through the wildest of montages (as is the case with Dave Sims, a dedicated student of Adams. With Sims you know at every moment where you are and where you're going, even if the story being told is more than just a little insane).



[Figure] The "towel question": Cape or no cape?

In the summer of 1982, I visited the United States for the first time ever, and my luck was far better than my beginner's English. For I was in the right place at the right time: Chris Claremont, at that time lead author of the Marvel series *Uncanny X-Men*, was at the apex of his efforts to revalue all values in the cosmos of that group of mutants who protected a world that feared and hated them.

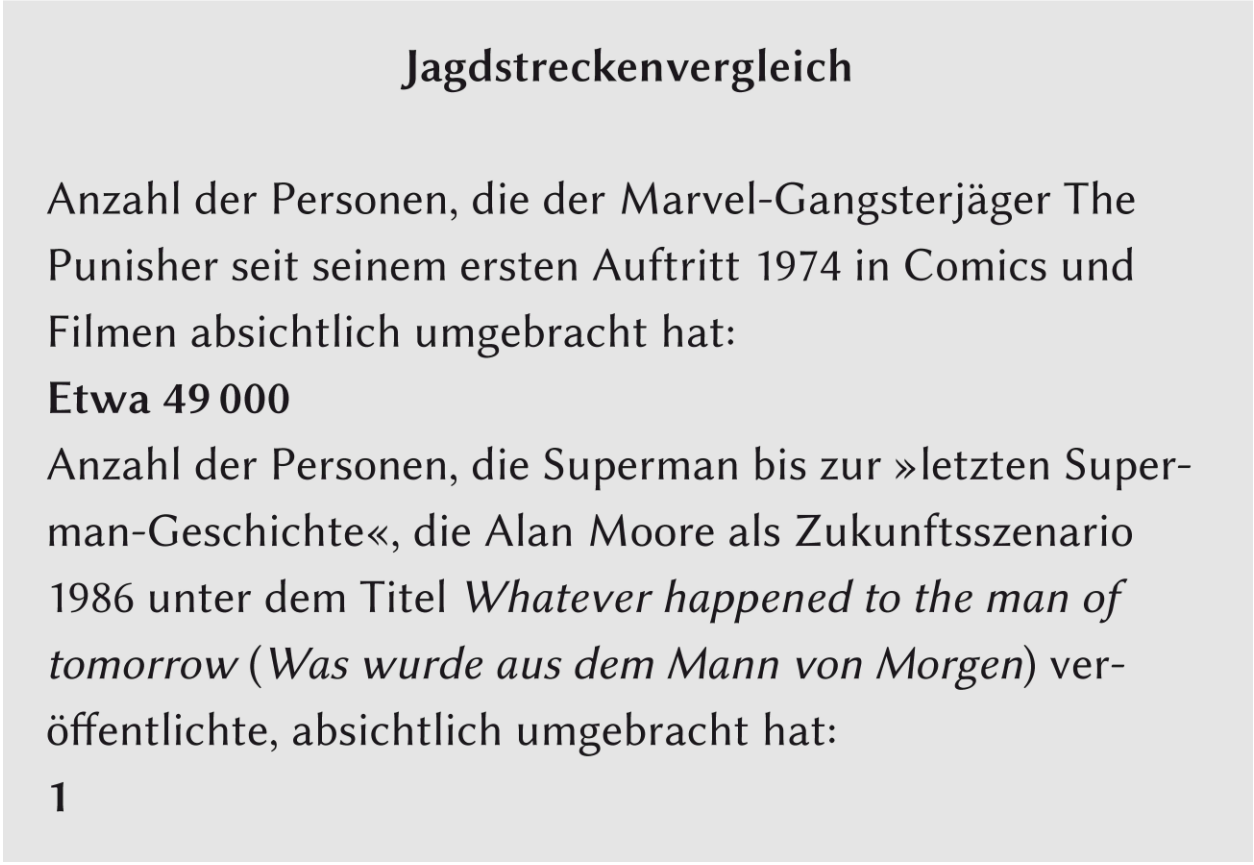


[Figure] Mr. X-Men Chris Claremont (* 1950), here at Columbia University in 2014.

In the previous year, he had shocked his fans with a revelation about one of the most dangerous adversaries of the group around the noble Professor Charles Xavier. It turns out that Magneto -- the radical enemy of humanity, the "Master of Magnetism" -- had not arbitrarily made war against humanity. In Claremont's fictional world, we the members of the genus *homo sapiens* discriminate against and persecute the mutants. And Magneto has become a terrorist only because he was forced to experience being marginalized, oppressed, and ultimately threatened with extermination on account of a community to which he belongs. Magneto, the pseudonym of Erik Magnus Lehnsherr, is portrayed by Claremont as a survivor of the killing machinery of the Nazis.

This revelation was a profound blow against the moral certainty of the playground, in which the evil were from the outset absolutely evil and the good were absolutely good. It would not be the last such blow. Soon thereafter, adolescent comics fans would be told that even a hero is capable

of violating his own integrity in proportion to the wrong done to him. In Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* of February 1986, the stalwart crime fighter Batman (of all people) emerged as an authoritarian psychopath. And in Alan Moore's *Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?* (appearing in September of that same year), Superman said goodbye to his long career as the virtuous defender of "truth, justice and the American Way," by defying the prohibition on killing that he had made the chief principle of his own honor decades earlier.



[Figure] Comparison of hunting results

Number of people intentionally killed by the Marvel gangster hunter The Punisher in comics and films since his first appearance in 1974: **Approximately 49,000**

Number of people deliberately killed by Superman up to the "last Superman story" published by Alan Moore in 1986 under the title of *Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?*:**1**

The fascinating thing, of course, about Claremont's X-Men was far more than how he breached the dam of the conventional morality tale. What upset the usual structure was not just what the author put forward but also how he chose to present his characters. He provided more dialogues than elsewhere, and some monthly episodes no longer centered on the struggles of the good versus evil characters, but instead on their private relationships and worries or their friendships and misfortunes in love.

When visiting Miami back then, I noticed that these comics had more to do with my everyday life as a high schooler in Germany than I was accustomed to at that point: Their narratives encompassed petty jealousies, the alternating phases of elation and dejection, the cliques comprised of very different individuals, the feeling that adults didn't understand us (for we too were fighting to protect "a world that feared and hated" us) and the rebellion against their order ... The X-Men? They were us.

The distinctions didn't escape me, either. None of us were able to fly, penetrate walls, read minds, or randomly set things aflame. But the parallels between Claremont's Kitty Pryde and the real-life Stefanie, between Claremont's Ororo Munroe and the real-life Claudia, between Claremont's Rogue and the real-life Karin -- they weren't anything you could ignore. Certainly these were moments of madness, but ones that were hard to stop.

From Claremont, I therefore learned how human trifles could be studied through the magnifying lens of heroic narratives. In my own initial attempts at writing stories, I was not only able to cast the people I found around me into all sorts of adventures revealing their best and worst sides, but I also knew that it was characters who ultimately made a story what it could become.

Telling stories about people requires paying attention to easy-to-understand, memorable types as well as to what is unassailably distinctive about them. Whoever one really is revealed most clearly when one is under attack or in distress. The second lesson I owe to Chris Claremont is the insight that hyperbole is not necessarily the opposite of reality – especially social and psychological (i.e., *human*) reality -- but that it can significantly improve reality instead of merely recording what is already there.

For if we want to depict a social and psychological reality -- one that is humanly constructed and not natural -- then it is not only important what humans are or what they do, but also what they are thinking about. Sometimes we feel as if we could fly or read the thoughts of others

(especially when we really don't want to do). At times we feel as if we were in ice or on fire, and at others as if we were invisible or weighed a ton.

The magnifying lens of popular art exaggerates and distorts affect, emotion, and fantasy, until all of these appear if they were facts. Yet the funny thing about them is that they really are facts but occur in our heads and can't be measured easily from without.

Now this doesn't mean that they aren't subject to judgment or valuation. I remember, for example, how I sat with a friend in front of an old farmhouse outside of Freiburg in the early 1990s, and how we talked all night about which classic *X-Men* episode from the Claremont era was the best, and why that was the case. Was it the "Dark Phoenix Saga" on account of its super-sad ending? Or was it "Asgardian Wars" because of its gigantic frames? Or "Days of Future Past," because it was such a flawless example of science fiction by the master? Or was it "The Trial of Magneto," because its analysis of contemporary politics was integrated so effortlessly into its plot?

Around 3 am at the latest, the two of us gave up any pretense of discussing objectively the technical, i.e., literary or visual, qualities of the material, and we were simply talking like fans do. It turned out that, ten years earlier, we had each had a crush on Kitty Pryde. We asked how that could've been possible, and my friend finally surmised: "If it at least had been a film, it might've made some sense. It would've just been about the actress playing her. But Kitty Pryde as a cartoon character, who is never drawn quite the same way by each illustrator? How could one really fall for somebody like that?"

Twenty years after this conversation, in 2014, I was sitting in the Frankfurt press screening of Bryan Singer's *X-Men: Days of Future Past.* There I saw Kitty Pryde -- that is, Ellen Page as Kitty Pryde -- on the big screen, and I thought, "Yes, that's her."

It was like meeting someone again whom you'd once known well. Describing that odd mixture of emotion, irritation, and surprise is almost impossible. It would mean composing an essay comparable to Sigmund Freud's 1936 "Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis."

I'm not going to write such an essay. Instead, the present book attempts to sketch at least the outline of an answer to a closely related question: Why does this stuff mean so much to some people?

To get at that question more closely, of course, means addressing another one first: What kind of stuff is *this* stuff, anyway?

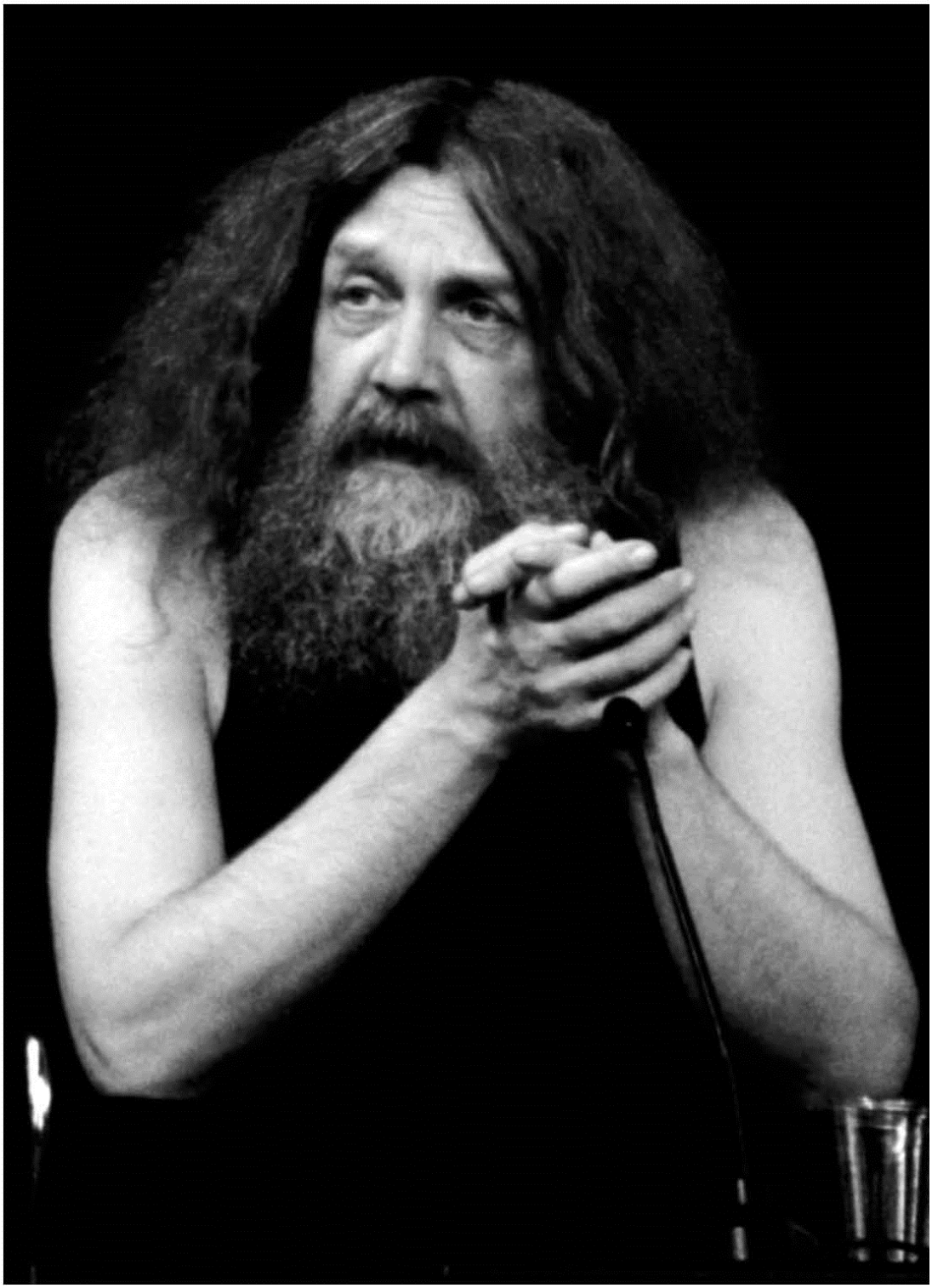
Those who really want to know and understand this stuff won't be able to avoid reading the comics being referred to here. Yet whoever's already done so will hopefully also learn a thing or two they hadn't known considered before reading this book.

After all, what does Superman always say before uses his X-ray vision on some locked, armored door? "Let's see!"

Part One: How They Became What They Are

Superhero Love

In the October 1986 issue (no. 53) of the American comic series *Saga of the Swamp Thing*, British author Alan Moore relates a political discussion about the applicability to superhumans of the North American sex laws—a matter as confusing as it is unsympathetic to his enlightened European sensibility. What may and may not be done out of love or passion continues to be quite unclear in today's United States: something may be prohibited in one city or state that is legally permitted in another. Many of the relevant laws concerning sexual offences are over a century old and are rarely enforced anymore. Time and again, however, they prove well-suited for garnering mass media attention to the legal complexity of a system marked by tension and (at times bitter) conflict between the rights of individual states ("state's rights") and the larger legal order ("federal laws") to which they belong. The differences between a subjective sense of justice, written statutes, and actual court precedent are thereby registered at all levels of texts. Whoever wishes to tell stories about good and evil, right and wrong, will find in them a fascinating playing field replete with traps and dangers.



[Figure] The great master Alan Moore (* 1953) at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in June 2009.

At issue in Alan Moore's *Swamp Thing* is whom one may kiss and spend the night with. The interlocutors are the "Dark Knight" Batman and the mayor of Gotham, that conurbation which he protects from an uncommon assortment of hardened criminals and madmen, the most famous of whom is the Joker, his archenemy. In the episode in question, Batman is not out to defeat or obstruct another of his enemies. In fact, the Dark Knight even thinks that what the Swamp Thing wants is justified. It is only the manner in which the latter wants to realize it that “Caped Crusader” rejects. When the situation escalates and the terror drives the city to the brink of anarchy, Batman ultimately attempts to mediate between the terrorist and city officials.

The enemy here is "Swamp Thing" of the eponymous series, a kind of elemental spirit of the forest, swamp, and earth. He is a golem-like creature comprised of mutable wood, moss, vines, and leaves. In Moore’s rendering, the creature is in love with a woman, the beautiful Abby Cable, who also loves him.

Since Swamp Thing is not human, the relationship between the two is punishable by law in Louisiana, their home state. A journalist from a tabloid newspaper has snapped a photo of them embracing. Once it’s distributed, the prosecutor decides to indict Abby for "unnatural fornication." Abby's disbelieving laughter at this error of justice -- for how can anything be “against nature” that brings together a human and an incarnation of nature itself? -- turns out badly. Her indiscretion gets her thrown in prison and then released on bail, whereupon she flees to the more liberal (and more anonymous) Gotham City.

Once there, she is arrested for loitering, put back in jail, and told she’ll soon be extradited back to the outrage of Louisiana, where she will once more be convicted and presumably given an even harsher sentence. At that moment, Swamp Thing reappears from a long “business trip” (in which he has partnered with John Constantine, a magician from the British working class, to prevent the greatest of all the super-villains --Satan himself -- from destroying the sky).

When the earth and forest spirit learns what they’ve done to his beloved, he initiates an extraordinary series of punishments upon the den of iniquity that is Gotham. On his command, the streets, squares, and buildings become overgrown with wild vegetation, and newly flowering plants become a magnet for a plague of insects. And as if that weren’t enough to get the city’s leaders to release Abby from custody, Swamp Thing threatens to order the tiny flora in everyone’s intestines -- which owe obeisance to him as do

all flora -- to turn against their host organisms, thereby triggering a medical catastrophe.

Batman, who doesn't normally give into blackmail, grudgingly realizes that he can't defeat the elemental organic force of this opponent, at least on terms that are ethical. For only the extensive deployment of toxins and fire -- and the indiscriminate destruction of all things (both beneficial and harmful) -- could possibly defeat Swamp Thing at this stage in the conflict.

The Dark Knight, who is his own man (and not a sworn deputy of the powers-that-be) subsequently examines both his heart and the law. For the validity of the latter is under threat throughout this episode. He undertakes to weigh the legal issues at hand. Which is more important, Louisiana's sexual codes or the American principle of equal protection under the law? Within Batman's superhero universe -- i.e., the publishing house of DC -- the U.S. Constitution is just as sacred and contested as it is in reality. However, Batman is concerned here not with politics but with a real crisis, as he explains to the mayor of Gotham: "Either we figure out how we can free this Ms. Cable, or we start evacuating this city immediately. There's no other option. That thing out there is almost a god, capable of crushing us all."

The bureaucrat starts to squirm, "B-but, you don't get it. This woman had a relationship with something that isn't human! We can't allow any exceptions to the law ... " To which Batman replies, "No exceptions: I get that. In which case, I propose we gather up all the other non-human creatures who have cultivated relationships outside their respective species. "

The mayor hesitates: "What?! What do you mean? "Batman explains, "I mean this -- if you want to be consistent, you have to remember that Swamp Thing is not the only non-human out there. Let's see ... well, we'd probably they have to arrest Hawkman and Metamorpho ... and then there's Starfire from the Teen Titans. Her kind evolved from felines, I believe ... and, of course, there's the Martian Manhunter, too. Captain Atom ... "

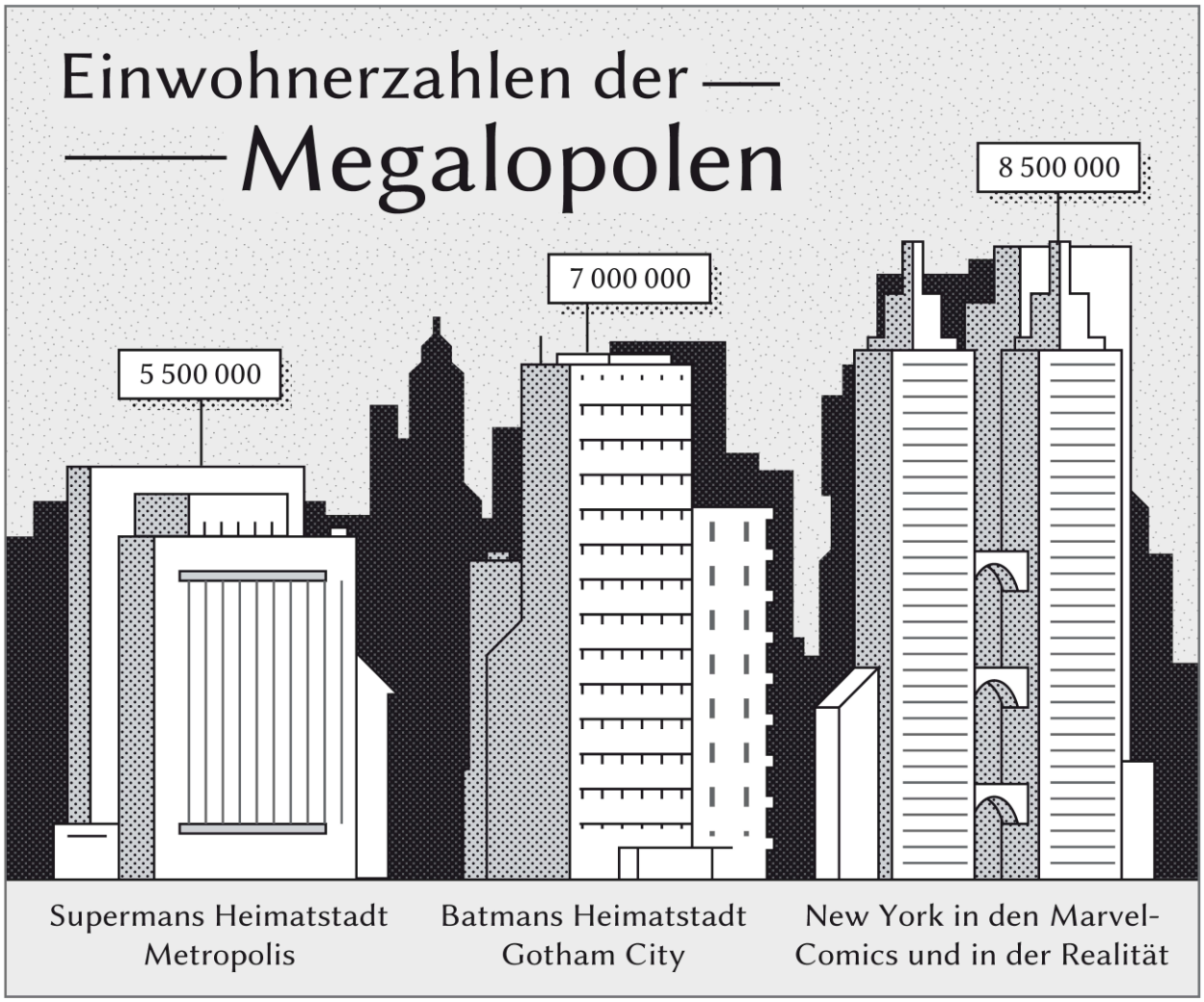
The illustration accompanying this listing shows the politician increasingly breaking into a sweat whenever another character from the DC universe is mentioned who has managed to save humanity from the worst of multiple crises.

Batman now puts forth his most substantial argument, almost in passing: "And then, of course, there's what's-his-name who lives in Metropolis." The mayor's cigarette falls out of his mouth.

The readers holding this comic book in their hands know exactly who’s being referred to: it is the first, most famous and important figure in the entire genre of comics, film, TV, video games, and prose narrative. He’s the superhero whose name, concealed here by Batman, combines an adjective with a noun: Superman.

The mayor has gotten the point. He calls up Washington and arranges for Abby Cable to be pardoned. The problems for these unusual lovers are still far from over. Yet with this elegant little twist, Alan Moore has articulated a deep truth about the genre: superheroes are non-humans, whom we love "against nature" -- against our reason and life experience. They return this love so unreservedly that, as a consequence, incredible things are done, extreme suffering is endured, and entire societies are compelled to reexamine their highest moral principles.

Or, in any case, that’s what they do in print, at the movies, as well as on TV, clothing, buttons, jewelry, tattoos – and in millions of people’s heads.



[Figure] Megalopolis Population Statistics: Superman's hometown of Metropolis and Batman's Gotham City (in Marvel Comics), and New York City (in reality):

5,500,000

7,000,000

8,500,000

The Swamp They Come From

Batman and Superman are the two most popular protagonists and the commercial pillars of the publishing house of DC. Together, the publisher likes to call them the "World's Finest." Yet they are more than that, viz. two extremes at the ends of the entire superhero spectrum. One of them,

Batman, was born a human. He manages to work his way up, by virtue of his talents and hard work bordering on obsession, into the superhuman realms of achievement, endurance, and moral stature.

The other, Superman, is an extraterrestrial, who in our human world is assigned the traits of a demi-god, without having asked for them. From the moment that he discovers them for himself, they make him decide whether he will help or harm us, whether he should respect us at all, and how he should behave towards other super-humans, the good as well as the evil ones.

Whether self-made or from the sky and whether earned by or forced upon them—it is somewhere between those extremes that all the blessings and burdens are bestowed that distinguish superheroes more or less from the "manufacture of nature" (Schopenhauer), i.e., from the *homo sapiens* who is rightfully feared by other animals.

Admittedly, even those superheroes who became what they are by power of their own authority did not consistently act on the basis of free will. Batman's parents were murdered by small-time criminals, which is why he goes on to pursue the major ones. Many of his colleagues proceed to raise themselves up into larger-than-life figures, either acting out of a similar compulsion to revenge or somehow dealing with whatever physical or mental injury fate has assigned them. There is the DC super-archer Green Arrow (meanwhile known as "Arrow" on TV), who after a shipwreck was forced to survive on a hostile island where he learned to rise above himself. At the other extreme, there is the grim Punisher (a Marvel Comics figure), a former elite soldier who lost his wife and children in a shootout with a gang and who from that moment on dedicates his life to vengeance. In the process, he goes from being a sort of outlaw (in his first appearance in the Marvel World as an opponent of Spider-Man) to finally becoming a sort of masterless samurai *plus* one-man state of emergency. His methods in the normal course of action […]