



# Our Gods Wear Spandex: The Secret History of Comic Book Heroes

By Chris Knowles

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From occult underground to superhero! Was Superman's arch nemesis Lex Luthor based on Aleister Crowley? Can Captain Marvel be linked to the Sun gods on antiquity? In Our Gods Wear Spandex, Christopher Knowles answers these questions and brings to light many other intriguing links between superheroes and the enchanted world of estoerica. Occult students and comic-book fans alike will discover countless fascinating connections, from little known facts such as that DC Comics editor Julius Schwartz started his career as H.P. Lovecraft's agent, to the tantalizingly extensive influence of Madame Blavatsky's Theosophy on the birth of comics, to the mystic roots of Superman. The book also traces the rise of the comic superheroes and how they relate to several cultural trends in the late 19th century, specifically the occult explosion in Western Europe and America. Knowles reveals the four basic superhero archetypes--the Messiah, the Golem, the Amazon, and the Brotherhood--and shows how the occult Bohemian underground of the early 20th century provided the inspiration for the modern comic book hero. With the popularity of occult comics writers like Invisibles creator Grant Morrison and V for Vendetta creator Alan Moore, the vast ComiCon audience is poised for someone to seriously introduce them to the esoteric mysteries. Chris Knowles is doing just that in this epic book. Chapters include: Ancient of Days, Ascended Masters, God and Gangsters, Mad Scientists and Modern Sorcerers, and many more. From the ghettos of Prague to the halls of Valhalla to the Fortress of Solitude and the aisles of BEA and ComiCon, this is the first book to show the inextricable link between superheroes and the enchanted world of esoterica.

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## **Editorial Review**

### **Amazon.com Review**

"You think superheroes are something new? Wait'll you read the exciting spin that Knowles and Linsner put on them!"

### **Book Description**

*From occult underground to superhero!*

Was Superman's arch nemesis Lex Luthor based on Aleister Crowley? Can Captain Marvel be linked to the Sun gods on antiquity? In *Our Gods Wear Spandex*, Christopher Knowles answers these questions and brings to light many other intriguing links between superheroes and the enchanted world of estoerica. Occult students and comic-book fans alike will discover countless fascinating connections, from little known facts such as that DC Comics editor Julius Schwartz started his career as H.P. Lovecraft's agent, to the tantalizingly extensive influence of Madame Blavatsky's Theosophy on the birth of comics, to the mystic roots of Superman. The book also traces the rise of the comic superheroes and how they relate to several cultural trends in the late 19th century, specifically the occult explosion in Western Europe and America. Knowles reveals the four basic superhero archetypes--the Messiah, the Golem, the Amazon, and the Brotherhood--and shows how the occult Bohemian underground of the early 20th century provided the inspiration for the modern comic book hero.

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\* Chris Knowles is associate editor and columnist for the five-time Eisner Award-winning *Comic Book Artist* magazine, as well as a pop culture writer for UK magazine *Classic Rock*.

\* Knowles worked with Robert Smigel on *The X Presidents* graphic novel, based on the popular *Saturday Night Live* cartoon, and has created designs and artwork for many of the world's top superheroes and fantasy characters.

\* Features the art of Joe Linsner, creator of the legendary *Dawn* series, and more recently a collaborator with comics maestro Stan Lee.

**An Exclusive Preface to *Our Gods Wear Spandex: The Secret History of Comic Book Heroes* by Christopher Knowles**



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Following the example of Joseph Campbell, some academics have claimed that our society has no room for myth, no room for legends, and certainly no room for gods. But look around; modern Western culture is not lacking in mythology, it's actually swimming in it. Everywhere you look there are comic books, cartoons, video games, novels and movies recycling ancient mythological themes, as well as incorporating ideas and imagery from paganism, the occult, Gnosticism and the ancient Mysteries. And ironically, it was with the Star Wars films, created by Campbell's patron George Lucas, that this whole modern mythological explosion began.

Many younger people don't realize how much Star Wars changed the landscape of pop culture. Prior to Star Wars, science fiction and fantasy were pretty much box office poison. It didn't help that most sci-fi films on the early-to -mid 70's were dystopian sermons such as Westworld, Silent Running, Soylent Green and Logan's Run. In fact, Lucas had to fight tooth and nail just to get financing for his sci-fi epic.

Besides raking in billions of dollars, Star Wars single-handedly injected mythology back into the mainstream. And to do so, George Lucas hijacked a whole buffet of riffs straight from the comic books. Despite this success, it would take some time for Hollywood to consolidate the formula for broad-spectrum branding and marketing that Lucas had pioneered. But not coincidentally, one of the most successful initial attempts was the first Superman film. Ultimately, it would be the first Batman film in 1989 that truly perfected the idea of the big-budget movie franchise. Hot on its heels, the comic book property Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles would launch a film and toy franchise that would rake in billions and codify this formula.

Today, these franchises not only produce massive revenues at the box office, they also sell lunch boxes, breakfast cereals, action figures, party favors, and yes, even comic books. And aside from franchises like Harry Potter (which bears a very strong resemblance to the earlier Books of Magic comic series), and the Pirates of the Caribbean and James Bond series (both of which draw heavily upon the feel and rhythm of comic books), it's the comic book properties like Spider-Man and The X-Men that make the rest of Hollywood weep with numismatic envy. But these films would never do so if the themes they put forward did not strike a powerful chord in the collective unconscious.

The chord these characters strike is something very deep and profound in the human psyche. It's the need to be protected, the need to have wrongs righted, and injustices avenged. It's one of the basic human impulses

that gave rise to mythology in the first place. But there is also a vicarious impulse there, to be something more than human, something better. Sometimes this impulse can go horribly awry and give rise to racism, genocide and totalitarianism. It can create the yearning for a strongman dictator, a big brother to protect us against inflated, often illusory threats. In contrast, the writers and artists who have created our most compelling modern mythologies have, consciously or not, by-passed the authoritarian strictures of religious and political mythology entirely and tapped into another current...

Throughout history there has been a parallel spiritual tradition, a counter-culture to the official cults of the state. In the pre-Christian west, there was a wide-ranging class of initiatic sects known today as the "Mystery" religions. These cults offered a personal revelation to their followers, something taken for granted by many modern believers, but deeply radical in those days. These cults often attracted the best and the brightest of their time, and from these cults some of the greatest scientific and cultural thought would emerge. Yet they were often the breeding ground for sedition and revolution, and so were often subject to bloody repression by the political elites. The Mystery tradition was strongest in Egypt, and the many of the finest thinkers of the Hellenistic world (like Plato and Pythagoras, to name two) would travel there to be initiated in the ancient pyramids and tombs.

The ecstatic cults of Egyptian gods like Osiris and Horus would mutate into the Greco-Roman Dionysian and Mithraic mysteries, respectively, but the "Great Mother" goddess Isis would rise to great prominence in Roman times with her identity intact. Yet, all of this would be swept away with the rise of totalitarian Christian theocracy in the Fourth Century. The magnificent schools and libraries of the ancient world would be unceremoniously destroyed, as would many of the great ancient teachers. Hypatia, the last of the great Platonic scholars, would be tortured to death in a Christian church by a fanatical mob of monks in the Fifth Century. The result of this suppression was the poverty, violence, ignorance and disease of the Dark Ages. Unsurprisingly then, followers of the ancient Mysteries went underground. But the ancient teachings would reemerge in the Renaissance, and would soon after give rise to powerful secret societies like Rosicrucians and the Freemasons.

A new flowering of the ancient Mysteries would come with the convulsions of the 19th Century, where millions of people were uprooted from the agrarian environment their families had known for ages and crowded into filthy, chaotic cities to work the "infernal machines" of the Industrial Revolution. This revolution created a social crisis of a scope unseen since the fall of Rome. At the same time, Charles Darwin's theories on the origin of species pulled the rug of cosmological certainty out from under the feet of the educated classes. Mankind didn't seem so special after all, and what's more, seemed destined to be replaced by smoke-spewing machines. It was in this environment that a group of eccentric thinkers turned once again to those dusty old books for an answer.

My book, *Our Gods Wear Spandex: The Secret History of Comic Book Heroes* tells you exactly how the pipe dreams of Victorian mystics would eventually mutate and filter down into the lowly comic book and then come to dominate the box office charts. It tells you exactly who helped bring the ancient gods back to life and dressed them to the nines in the latest synthetic fabrics. It tells you exactly why the idea of the superhero has become so compelling to the mainstream yet again. And it tells you exactly what brave new future superheroes may be unwittingly pointing to for the human race...

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## Review

I didn't realize just how much of an effect my pretending to be Doctor Strange when I was six (with, yes, cape, fake mustache and talcum-powered hair) really had on me as an adult until I read Christopher Knowles'

Our Gods Wear Spandex, the definitive history of the comics and mysticism crossover. Finally something new for both comics and occult readers alike. --Richard Metzger, author of Disinformation: The Interviews and Book of Lies: The Disinformation Guide to Magick & the Occult

Knowles brings fresh insights to the enduring appeal and mysterious power of superheros. --Gerard Jones, author of Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book

You think superheros are something new? Wait'll you read the exciting spin that Knowles and Lisner put on them! --Stan Lee, co-creator of Spiderman, The Fantastic Four, The X-Men, The Hulk, Thor, and many other comic book heroes

Anyone who wants to investigate the archetypal and esoteric roots of comics-the secret history-could hardly do better than to read this encyclopedic and up-to-the-minute study. --Greg Garrett, Prof. of English, Baylor University, and author of Holy Superheroes! and The Gospel According to Hollywood

#### About the Author

Christopher Knowles has worked in the comics industry for over 20 years, as both an artist and writer. He worked with Robert Smigel on The X Presidents graphic novel, based on the popular Saturday Night Live cartoon, and has created designs and artwork for many of the world's top superheroes and fantasy characters. Presently associate editor and contributing writer for the award-winning magazine Comic Book Artist and a contributing writer to Classic Rock Magazine.

Joseph Michael Linsner is creator of popular comic book goddess Dawn, has painted covers for many of the major comic book companies, and more recently a collaborator with comics maestro Stan Lee. He resides in Atlanta.

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**Sharon Bradley:**

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