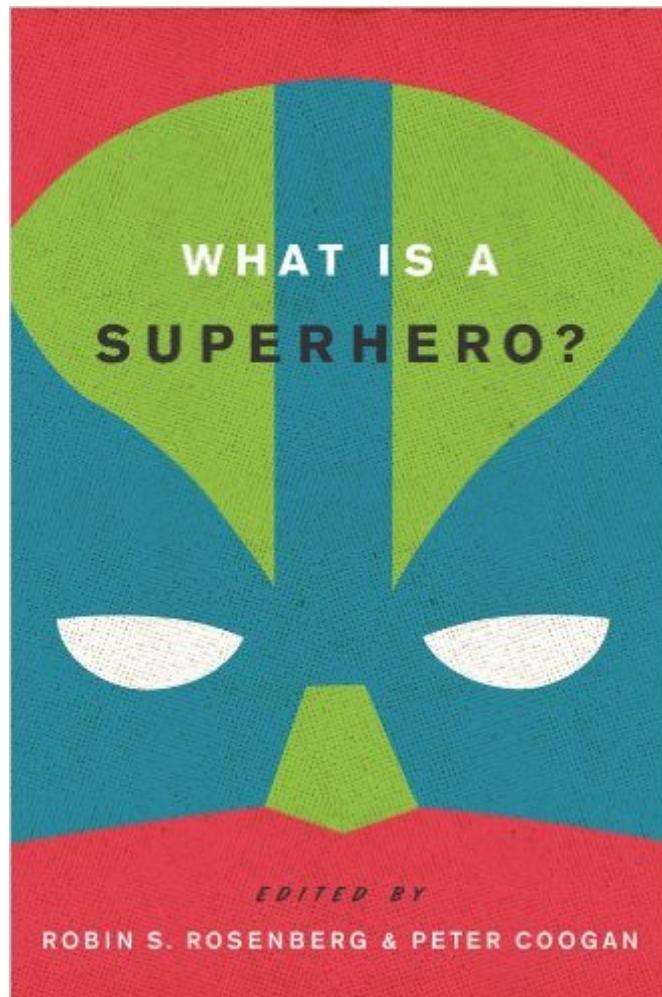


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What Is A Superhero?



Synopsis

It's easy to name a superhero--Superman, Batman, Thor, Spiderman, the Green Lantern, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Rorschach, Wolverine--but it's not so easy to define what a superhero is. Buffy has superpowers, but she doesn't have a costume. Batman has a costume, but doesn't have superpowers. What is the role of power and superpower? And what are supervillains and why do we need them? In *What is a Superhero?*, psychologist Robin Rosenberg and comics scholar Peter Coogan explore this question from a variety of viewpoints, bringing together contributions from nineteen comic book experts--including both scholars in such fields as cultural studies, art, and psychology as well as leading comic book writers and editors. What emerges is a kaleidoscopic portrait of this most popular of pop-culture figures. Writer Jeph Loeb, for instance, sees the desire to make the world a better place as the driving force of the superhero. Jennifer K. Stuller argues that the female superhero inspires women to stand up, be strong, support others, and most important, to believe in themselves. More darkly, A. David Lewis sees the indestructible superhero as the ultimate embodiment of the American "denial of death," while writer Danny Fingeroth sees superheroes as embodying the best aspects of humankind, acting with a nobility of purpose that inspires us. Interestingly, Fingeroth also expands the definition of superhero so that it would include characters like John McClane of the Die Hard movies: "Once they dodge ridiculous quantities of machine gun bullets they're superheroes, cape or no cape." From summer blockbusters to best-selling graphic novels, the superhero is an integral part of our culture. *What is a Superhero?* not only illuminates this pop-culture figure, but also sheds much light on the fantasies and beliefs of the American people.

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Customer Reviews

What is a Superhero?, a collection of 25 essays edited by Robin S. Rosenberg and Peter Coogan, doesn't aim to present the answer to this oft-asked question. Instead, it throws open to the door to an array of answers (some of which are directly contradictory) from people across a wide spectrum of fields: philosophers, psychologists, comic book creators, cultural critics, etc. If, as is almost always the case in any collection, the individual essays vary in quality of insight, depth, and style, taken as a whole, What is a Superhero? makes for an always enjoyable and sometimes insightful or thought-provoking read. The book is divided into four broad sections: a definition of the superhero centering particularly on the three-legged stool of omission, powers, and identity; an examination of the role of context, culture, and costume in the genre and how these aspects create problems of definition; an exploration of supervillains; and finally a series of essays from comic book writers offering up their personal definitions of the superhero (the authors in this section are Stan Lee, Danny Fingeroth, Kurt Busiek, Ivory Madison, Jeph Loeb, Dennis O'Neil, Tom DeFalco, Joe Quesada, and Fred Van Lente). The essays range in length from three to over a dozen pages, with most in the 5-7-page range. As mentioned, they do span a breadth of quality and depth; none are bad, but several felt a bit slight or self-evident in their conclusions/analysis. Rather than focus on those ones though, I'm going to highlight a few (not an exhaustive list) of my favorite ones. "The Hero Defines the Genre, the Genre Defines the Hero" by Peter Coogan. This essay sets up the omission, power, identity triumvirate that is referenced by many of the later pieces.

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