

Why Do American Comic Book Heroes Have Super Powers?

Not long after I saw Superman II at the local cinema in 1980 I was handed my first ever comic book, featuring the Man of Steel. Forever known as “the one with the hairy thing”, it sits among a collection of my favourite comics reminding me of a time past. The story of a bizarre Chewbacca-esque monster that makes high school students float, I read it from cover to cover almost constantly for the first few weeks, intrigued by the adverts and stories within, totally aware that it had come from America and yet strangely unaware that you didn’t go to high school in Britain.

At this time in my life, Superman was the most important man in the world. He felt totally real, yet I knew really that it was all fiction – but wonderful, imaginative and new, capable of taking me places television couldn’t.

Superman comics were tricky to get hold of in my part of the country – luckily my uncle was a fan of the legendary British comic 2000AD. “Traditional” superheroes were espoused here in favour of gritty violence and bizarre science fiction twists. This amazing weekly comic book had kids and teenagers around the British Isles hooked with several serial adventures each week wrapped in covers portraying the stone faced lawman, Judge Dredd.

It became clear at this point that there was a lot more to comic books than Superman and his NHS-inspired diversions into fighting cigarette addiction by taking on the yellowing Nick O’Teen.

After flicking through a few 2000ADs when my uncle wasn’t looking, I couldn’t help feeling that something wasn’t right.

Being under 10, I couldn’t quite put my finger on it; it’s taken until now to come to terms with it.

The “something” was this: iconic British comic book heroes don’t have superpowers and American ones do.

It’s quite fundamental, but I’ll bet it’s something the majority of comic book fans haven’t fully realised. Of course there are British characters with powers, the odd hero perhaps – Captain Britain has been given a new lease of life thanks to Paul Cornell – but the iconic, memorable British creations such as Judge Dredd, Dan Dare or even Desperate Dan are all just regular, determined men.

Sure Batman is nothing more than a psycho who can fight well without any special powers, and Iron Man is a guy with too much time on his hands, but these are DC and Marvels exceptions that prove the rule (and interestingly both are insanely rich).

In the late 1980s I developed a particular fondness for my Dad’s expensive Dan Dare reprints and learned all about the alternative 1980s as seen from the 1950s, the one in which Earth was routinely terrorised by a floating green super-villain known as The Mekon. It’s worth mentioning here that The Mekon had a super intelligence and a little hover platform, not to mention every male on Venus as a member of his army. Yet super-power free, Dan Dare and his team would thwart takeover attempt

after takeover attempt without nothing more than a spaceship, good manners and a solid right hook.

Around the same time, the big US comic book publishers were revamping their major franchises – and while Marvel’s continuity was recovering from the mess of the Secret Wars and in the DC Universe Superman was losing members of his family, Marvel UK developed yet another mutant-free hero – Death’s Head.

More of an anti-hero (created as a character in the British Transformers comic) Death’s Head soon spun-off into his own series with nothing but a quirky speech pattern, occasional scaling issues and a desire to complete his bounty hunting contracts. There were several incarnations of the character, each a little more violent than the previous, but Death’s Head didn’t need to read minds, create walls of ice or scale walls.

Annual visits to the cinema over the last 10 years reveal at least one superhero movie on each occasion – the super powers of the mutants and last sons of Krypton are well understood by the many millions worldwide who have flocked to theatres and lapped up the superpower angst of Spider-man, The X-Men and others.

It could be said that the mutant or alien powers make the characters into heroes – meaning therefore that they have each been liberated into heroism due to the discovery of their powers. At a deeper level however, is there something else going on?

Is the repeated creation of a jaw dropping range of super powers and habits, pretentious hero (or mutant) names more than simple character creation? Does it in fact betray a superiority complex in US comic book writers as the world’s biggest Super Power throughout the twentieth century?

After all, it is also true that each of the gifted heroes have super powers; as we’ve seen, none of the British icons of comic books do, lending the flip side of this theory nicely to the idea that a British inferiority complex has dominated the creation of our comic book characters.

This is something that tends to extend beyond British comic books and into the wider culture. Super spy James Bond is an archetypal hero working for the secret service; he has no special powers outside of the bedroom. Doctor Who is an archetypal alien fighting hero who has no special powers other than the ability to regenerate at the point of death, and a box to travel through time. Sherlock Holmes solved the most ingenious crimes with opiates and a sharp mind.

So why do the X-Men, Spider-man, the Fantastic Four, Superman, the Hulk and the rest of these amazing and uncanny characters need their special powers? Why can’t they be heroes without them?