

Author explores ways comic books shape character_11005

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By Ken Camp

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When David Zimmerman talks about comic book character development, he doesn't mean Clark Kent's progression from Superboy to Superman.

Zimmerman refers to development of moral character, and he believes superheroes offer a larger-than-life canvas for exploring questions of right and wrong, strength and weakness—even life and death.

Sometimes the answers X-Men, Spiderman and Daredevil offer correspond with real-life Christian experience, and sometimes they don't, he acknowledges.

“But as testing a car in extreme weather conditions flushes out its strengths and limitations, so by testing what appears to be virtuous or axiomatic in the extreme caricatures of comic book superheroes, we can discover what is true, good, right and noble. And once we've fixed our mind on these things, we can get on with living a heroic life,” he writes in his new book, *Comic Book Character*.

Zimmerman, an InterVarsity Press associate editor and self-described “fanboy,” wrote the book primarily for other “true believers”—comic book fans who are both immersed in the minutiae of the comics culture and interested in exploring the mythic themes of comics with a critical eye.

“A secondary audience would be those who are interested in having a relationship with fanboys and true believers—parents, youth ministers and culture watchers who care about the intersection of faith and culture,” he said. “I see myself as a mediator between the two groups.”

Zimmerman—a suburban Chicago-based writer whose parents now live in Dallas—grew up in Iowa as a Catholic. And he grew up reading comics.

“When I graduated from high school, I thought I had graduated from faith,” he said. “I stopped going to church. But I found myself surrounded by evangelicals, and there was something about them that was compelling to me.” Eventually, he made a personal faith commitment to Christ.

When Zimmerman went to see the “Daredevil” movie in 2003, he was struck by its Roman Catholic imagery and reminded how the comic books he read as a youngster shaped his own understanding of right and wrong. He decided to write a book to explore the moral and religious lessons comics teach—consciously or unconsciously—and compare those teachings to a Christian understanding of life.

Zimmerman’s book takes what he calls an “inductive approach” to examining superheroes’ cultural significance as moral guideposts—or at least barometers of social ethics.

“I begin with the person’s understanding of self-issues like strength and weakness, justice and vengeance, identity and body image,” he said. “That’s a critical developmental project of adolescents.”

He then explores relational issues such as race, gender and nationalism

before moving on to religious issues such as good and evil.

For instance, he sees Superman both as a Christlike figure and as similar in some respects to Pontius Pilate. Like Jesus, Superman was sent by his father to a far-off world where he used his extraordinary powers for good and stood for truth and justice. But whereas Jesus challenged the status quo and was crucified for it, Superman is its defender.

"As dramatic as superheroes' stories can be, at heart they are serving the interests of the status quo," Zimmerman said. "Like Pilate, Superman keeps the peace using the power at his disposal."

Zimmerman also offers tips to help parents, youth ministers and other people who are not part of the comic book culture learn how to select and read stories in what may be an unfamiliar medium.

Although many adults see comics as juvenile, most modern comic books are written for an older audience, he notes.

This provides their creators a platform for exploring some mature themes, but it also means some material may not be suited for children or even young adolescents, he cautions.

"It's important for parents to know what their kids are reading and to show discernment," he said.

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