

Superheroes offer insights into human nature, social observers say_20705

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WASHINGTON (RNS)-When he was growing up, Mike Mignola had two great loves-monster movies and superheroes. So when Dark Horse Comics offered him the chance to write and illustrate his own comic book, Mignola decided to combine the two.

The result is Hellboy, a wisecracking, good-hearted, old-fashioned superhero with one problem: He's a red-skinned, cloven-hoofed demon summoned by the Nazis to bring about the end of the world. When the Nazis' plans are foiled, the then-infant Hellboy is taken in and raised by human beings. He forsakes his demon heritage and pledges to fight for good.

But can he really escape his destiny? Mignola, who has been writing Hellboy comics since 1993, isn't sure.

"It's the ultimate question of predestination versus free will," said Mignola

from his home in New York City. "It really is a quandary."

Mignola has discovered one of the untold secrets of the comic book world. It's the characters, not the costumes and secret identities, that matter most. From Superman to the recent Pixar film *The Incredibles*, comics have served as social parables, with superhuman characters revealing insights about the human condition.

In *The Incredibles*, superheroes are forced into hiding when public opinion turns against them. Mr. Incredible turns in his costume and "Incredible-mobile" for a Yugo-sized commuter car and a desk job at an insurance company.

But he can't give up the desire to save people, no matter what it costs his family.

"It's not about super powers," says Michael Brewer, lifelong comics fan and author of a new book about "finding virtue, vice and what's holy" in comics, *Who Needs a Superhero?*

"It's about finding your place in the world and, dare I say, family values."

Brewer, pastor of Crescent Springs (Ky.) Presbyterian Church, has been weaving comic book stories into his sermons for 25 years.



Some
observers
see Hellboy
(above) as
an example
of how
comic book
characters
can
become
parables
portraying
the human
condition.
(Illustration
courtesy of
Dark Horse
Comics)

He says *The Incredibles*, like classic comics *Batman* and *Superman*, shows characters who find meaning in suffering.

“*Batman* has a choice when his parents are killed,” Brewer said. “He can be crippled for life or deal with tragedy in a way that makes the world a better place. *Superman* loses everything—his world, his family, his home.

“Instead of remaining a stranger, he decides to adopt these people of Earth as his own.”

Another example can be found in the pages of the *Green Arrow* comic. *Green Arrow* has recently taken on a sidekick named *Mia*, who was once a teenage runaway. During her days on the street, she contracted HIV.

“Having faced the trouble in her life,” Brewer said, “she wants to make a difference in the world. I can't think of a more heroic thing to do.”

Brewer, whose comic book collection tops 10,000 issues, argues that comics often showcase Christian virtues like humility and being a servant.

In one of his favorite storylines, super villain Lex Luthor programs a computer to discover the connection between Superman and Clark Kent. When the computer concludes Kent is Superman, Luthor cannot believe it.

How would a being with Superman's powers be content as a lowly newspaper reporter?

Superman is content as Clark Kent, “because he is genuinely good,” said Brewer.

“He has superhuman power, and he has chosen to use it responsibly and not for his own benefit. That's not a far cry from Jesus, who could have summoned legions of angels to save himself from the cross and didn't.”

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