

Ballad of Reading Gaol. Wilde, argues Robbins, refused ‘totalizing explanations’ and it is on this line of thought that Robbins executes this more than merely ‘introductory’ volume. She concludes that Wilde’s writings positively invite a biographical approach which is a welcome shift of thought in Wilde studies.

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Ben Saunders. *Do Gods Wear Capes? Spirituality, Fantasy, and Superheroes*. London: Continuum, 2011. Pp. 192. £16.99.

Superheroes, it seems, are everywhere in the current cultural moment. Barely a week goes by without the announcement or release of yet another adaptation/reboot/sequel/prequel following the epic post-traumatic post-human exploits of some Nietzschean copyright-branded iconic figure. In retrospect 2012 may be viewed as the apotheosis of the cinematic superhero boom, with the release of fan-boy auteur Joss Whedon’s much anticipated Marvel comics team up *Avengers Assemble*, along with the concluding chapter in Christopher Nolan’s noirish *Dark Knight* trilogy, not to mention yet more reboots for *Superman* and *Spider-Man* (with a post-Nolan take on *Batman* already lined up by Time-Warner). Superheroes have also become an increasingly popular source of critical scholarship: to take just one example that could easily be multiplied, Continuum are also publishing Will Brooker’s treatise on *The Dark Knight* — ironically, itself a sequel to Brooker’s revised thesis published little more than a decade ago under the title *Batman Unmasked* (2001).

The sheer ubiquity of superhero fantasies across multiple media, and their overdetermined, fascinating and frankly contradictory dialectical narratives combining liberating bodily transcendence and authoritarian social excess, surely more than justifies the attention that they command. Saunders’s engaging concise study possesses a title that somewhat misleadingly suggests a light-hearted, even fan-ish, approach to the topic of superheroes and spirituality. In fact Saunders’ account is largely philosophically and theologically sophisticated in his analysis of mainstream Anglophone, predominantly American, characters.

Superheroes have always been creatures of a multi-media environment, having descended from the masked crime fighters of inter-war pulp fiction to become re-mediated and defined within comics from the 1930s onwards (much to the chagrin of many), only to be re-mediated once more via film, radio and computer games. Saunders’

focus is, however, exclusively on the comic book iterations of such characters; a slightly arbitrary demarcation that works to allow both a concentration on the technical splendour of material signifying texts but also excludes a substantial number of further iterations in other visual narrative media. This is to be expected in such a deliberately circumscribed and concise study, but does however result in a restricted viewpoint for what is, after all, an ambitious, if at times vaguely worded, argument.

Saunders makes a crucial point early on by proposing that, while superheroes are undoubtedly hyperbolic fantasies, it is precisely this aspect that attracts him to them:

The very reason that some critics find superhero comics contemptibly immature — the sheer obviousness of the refusal to accept ‘the given as given’ on display in these noisy, spectacular and hyperbolic fantasies — is also why I find them so wonderful; so entertaining, interesting, and profound. (5)

The phrase ‘the given as given’ derives from moral philosopher Susan Neiman, whose work Saunders leans on heavily. Saunders’ arresting introduction poses the question ‘What would it feel to be a superhero in love?’, going on to look closely at the 1980s Alan Moore written character Marvelman, weaving in a discussion of the divine etiology of desire with the self-reflexive attributes of the character. This is a bravura opening tactic that promises much in the positive valences attributed both to fantasy as method of imagining difference and to the spiritual as a dimension necessary to existential contentment.

Saunders is quick to distinguish between the spiritual and the religious, though he concedes that the two categories can overlap. He sets up a fascinating critical dialogue between deconstructionist theologian John Caputo and Lacanian Marxist Slavoj Žižek to illustrate this point (wavering, like a soul in torment one might say, between the two before coming down on the side of Caputo but with reservations). He is also eager to distance his argument from clumsy ideology critique, as well as sign-posting his avoidance of Joseph Campbell-style allegorical religious or mythical interpretations. Instead, he constructs a theological hermeneutic which proposes that ‘the ethical and existential questions that inspire so many of our philosophical inquiries are also *constitutive* of the superheroic fantasy’ (15). It is therefore not so much a question of imposing a theological status on to superhero comics but

rather that they are, according to Saunders, ‘especially, *generically*, suited to the task of engaging, expressing, and addressing urgent ethical and existential questions’ (15). In other words, their popular status bestows upon them, in the comic book iteration at least, a kind of privileged status in this regard.

The following chapters trace out this argument by selectively focusing on particular stories of what may be considered archetypal superhero comics characters. And so chapter one deals with Superman, the first of the modern superheroes who first appeared in *Action Comics* in 1938, and the tensions and kinships between absolute power and moral goodness. Chapter two focuses on Superman’s female counterpart, Wonder Woman, drawing comparisons between representations of the literal bound submission of the body and the liberating ecstasies released by submitting to a higher state or power. Inevitably there is a digression concerning Wonder Woman’s creator, the (for the time) unconventional and polyamorous psychiatrist William Marston. Chapter three looks at Spider-man as a traumatised figure via the ideas of Freud and Kierkegaard, and how he is morally transformed by the death of his beloved Uncle Ben and girlfriend Gwen Stacy. Chapter five concentrates on Iron Man, a figure who seeks redemption from alcohol in a post-human state of technological wholeness, but whose revivification, according to Saunders, arises from the same drive to dominate and control.

A concluding coda recapitulates and reiterates Saunders general argument that superheroes, far from rendering ‘sacred concepts for a sceptical secular audience’, instead work to ‘deconstruct the oppositions between the sacred and the secular, religion and science, god and man, the infinite and the finite, by means of an impossible synthesis’ (143). An oddly positioned appendix polemicises against the emergence in the nascent field of comics studies of a hierarchical division between commercial superhero comics and alternative indie comics.

This apparently belated retro-legitimation of the subject of study seems superfluous and awkward. Saunders makes a point early on of justifying his focus on long standing characters rather than the more self-reflexive iterations that have become prevalent since the 1980s, his initial use of Alan Moore notwithstanding. By Saunders’ own admission, a character such as Dr. Manhattan, from Moore’s revisionary masterpiece *Watchmen*, is possibly the most ambitious elision of the superhero with the divine, but does not fit into his thesis which has deliberately sought examples from older sources. However, revisionary re-tellings such as Moore’s surely slip between the always already fluid

categories of ‘commercial’ and ‘alternative’, thereby destabilising the binary Saunders warns against.

It is a shame that Saunders does not engage with more recent examples of superhero comics, often produced by independent publishers such as Avatar and Dark Horse. Furthermore, Saunders’ argument would have been supplemented by superheroes’ immense popularity in film: it is surely the case that superheroes are consumed and experienced now more and more by large audiences who may never have even picked up a comic book. Moreover, the nuances of Saunders’ arguments are sometimes lost by his overuse of a colloquial, sub-Mencken register that is depressingly common in American cultural studies. Caveats aside, this is a fascinating, if flawed, study that rewards attention and deserves to be extended.

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