

# SUPERMAN



# AN BECOMES A STAR

The surprising story behind the world's first superhero BY TOD OLSON

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WEB VIEW

CIA WOODRUM/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO (SUPERMAN); PICTURELUV/GETTY IMAGES (SIEGEL & SHUSTER)  
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It was 1938, and Americans were dealing with many hardships. Millions of people had lost their jobs, and hundreds of thousands were homeless. Times had been tough for nearly a decade, and there was still no end in sight.

But wait! *Up in the sky! It's a bird! It's a plane! It's . . .* the world's first superhero!

That's right. Superman first appeared in comic books in April 1938, in the midst of the Great Depression. Americans

needed an escape from the problems caused by the long **economic** crisis. They needed a hero who stood up for the poor and the powerless.

Their champion was Superman—and this is his *real origin* story.

## In the Beginning

Superman was invented by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. They went to high school together in Cleveland, Ohio, and they would have described themselves as nerds.

Siegel wrote the first Superman pages, and Shuster drew them. They gave their hero a **disguise**—as newspaper reporter Clark Kent. He would

## VOCABULARY

**economic:** having to do with money and how it is earned and used

**origin:** the point or place where something begins or is created

**disguise:** clothes or other things that you wear so that people will not recognize you

**politicians:** people who are active in government

**took advantage of:** used unfairly for personal gain



Jerry Siegel (left) and Joe Shuster



**TOUGH TIMES** People wait in line for bread during the Great Depression (above). The first Superman comic book (left) was created during this difficult time in American history.

be quiet and gentle “like Joe and I are,” Siegel explained. However, as Superman, he would fight for anyone who felt powerless.

## The People’s Hero

That’s exactly how a lot of people felt in the 1930s. During the Great Depression, one in four Americans lost their jobs, and millions left their homes in search of work. People stood in seemingly endless lines, waiting to get free food from soup kitchens.

Many Americans were left feeling angry. They blamed the rich and powerful for ruining their lives. Their villains—bankers, factory owners, and dishonest **politicians**—became Superman’s enemies too.

In the early comics, Superman’s favorite targets were crooked businessmen, such as a mine owner who put his employees in danger and

a carmaker who made unsafe vehicles.

Years later, Superman would defeat mad scientists who wanted to destroy Earth. But for now, his job was protecting ordinary people from real-world villains.

## Rise of Comics

In Superman, Americans got the hero they needed—and so did the comic book business. Just five years before Superman, comics were only printed in newspapers. After his arrival, however, the new 10-cent comic books flew off the shelves, with each Superman issue selling 1.3 million copies.

The biggest comic book companies created superheroes by the dozen. DC’s Green Lantern beat up on evil bankers, and Batman triumphed over criminals in Gotham City. Marvel’s Captain America, the Sub-Mariner,

the Human Torch, and others joined the superhero world.

Just a few years after Superman arrived, 90 percent of kids read comic books. They were popular with more than a third of adults too.

## Unhappy Ending

Superman’s creators should have been thrilled. Siegel and Shuster had made themselves famous, invented the superhero, and changed the way people read. They also made a fortune for DC Comics.

But Siegel and Shuster never got rich. They had sold their famous character to DC, so no matter how many comic books were sold, all they made was \$5 a page.

A big, powerful company **took advantage of** two ordinary guys.

Now that sounds like a job for Superman. •

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# SUPERHEROES TAKE OVER THE WORLD

They're everywhere these days. But . . . why?

Turn on the news, and you'll find frightening reports of big problems in our world: war, disease, climate change. It's likely you'll feel powerless.

But in the imaginary world of movies, the entire planet can be rescued by just one superhero. Wonder Woman can bring a war to an end by killing a god. And the Avengers can travel through time to save half the universe.

That's probably one of the reasons the world loves superheroes. Last year, fans spent more than \$6 billion to watch their favorite superheroes at the movie theater. And it's understandable, right? As you eat your popcorn, you escape from reality and enter a fantasy world—where good always triumphs over evil.

But that's not the only reason superheroes are so popular. Our favorites

reflect who we want to be. When we watch Clark Kent transform into Superman, we are reminded that ordinary people can achieve great things. When we see T'Challa fight for his throne in *Black Panther*, we feel brave. We believe it's possible to make a difference in our school or stand up for someone who is being bullied.

In other words, these characters inspire us to be our best selves and make us want to do what's right—even if we get nothing in return.

So with that in mind, let's pretend that the president of DC Comics just contacted you. He asks you to create a new superhero. Who will that superhero be? What will he or she fight against?

Your answers to those questions might tell you as much about yourself as they do about your superhero. •

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