



## The ages of the X-Men: essays on the children of the atom in changing times, edited by Joseph J. Darowski

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To cite this article: Valentino L. Zullo (2015) The ages of the X-Men: essays on the children of the atom in changing times, edited by Joseph J. Darowski, Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics, 6:3, 306-308, DOI: [10.1080/21504857.2014.1002858](https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2014.1002858)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2014.1002858>



Published online: 29 Jan 2015.



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will hopefully be regarded as an endorsement: *The Ages of Superman: Essays on the Man of Steel in Changing Times* tells its story so well that the reader cannot help but want another issue.

## References

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2014.984870>

**The ages of the X-Men: essays on the children of the atom in changing times**, edited by Joseph J. Darowski, Jefferson, NC, McFarland, 2012, 248 pp., US\$40.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-7864-7219-2

Joseph J. Darowski's *The Ages of the X-Men* is a welcome contribution to what is a very complicated corner of comics scholarship: the superhero narrative. While there certainly has been a boom in writing about superheroes, a vast amount of the scholarship is written by those who have not prepared in-depth readings of the comics themselves. I do not wish to suggest that all writing on the superhero lacks depth, though, as many of the authors included in this volume have written critically and extensively on superheroes outside of this edition. However, because superheroes are so pervasive in our popular culture, individuals from disciplines as various as physics, psychology and law have endeavoured to provide their own reading of these texts without truly understanding the vast histories of the characters, the creators and the industry. Thus, one of the great strengths of *The Ages of the X-Men* is the sustained critical focus on one series (and its many spin-offs) by 19 authors, which allows the reader to experience the evolution of the series itself over the past 50 years as the moving concept of the X-Men is reformulated through the different eras, contributions by different authors/artists and the evolving comics industry.

The collection opens with an essay by Brad J. Ricca, a proverbial origin story on how the X-Men series may have evolved out of the popular scientific discussions on mutants circulating at the time. The two essays that follow continue to explore the origins of the X-Men; John Darowski suggests that the first 13 issues of *X-Men* were not about the civil rights matters that we often associate *X-Men* comics with today but rather 'serve as a text that reflects an American society mediating between the hegemonic consensus of the Cold War and the countercultural spirit that would define the sixties' (p. 17). Jean-Philippe Zanco's essay considers the metaphor of the X-Men in light of sixties counterculture and views Xavier's school as a commune experience. These three essays that begin the volume contextualise the emergence of this series in light of popular science, the cold war and sixties counterculture to provide a new layer of understanding to the origins of the X-Men.

Many of the subsequent essays in this volume explore mutants as a metaphor and as a response to issues of race, gender, sexuality, religion, age and ableism. Margaret Galvan

delves into the emerging voice of third-wave feminism in the eighties and the X-Men's response with the creation of the character Kitty Pryde. Nicholas Pumphrey's essay contextualises the revision of Magneto's history in light of post-Shoah literature; Pumphrey's juxtaposition of Art Spiegelman's work alongside *X-Men* brings the two genres of autobiographical comics and superheroes together in one essay. Some other notable essays include Adam Capitanio's analysis of the lesser known *X-staix* series by Peter Milligan and Mike Allred wherein Capitanio uncovers depictions of race and racial bigotry written on the surface of the body, while Eric Garneau and Maura Foley examines Grant Morrison's depiction of the X-Men not as a homogenous group but instead 'as a social group rife with interdiversity' (p.180).

One of the many strengths of this collection is the way it is crafted so that the reader can view the X-Men as a serialised piece in its different incarnations through the work of various writers and artists. For example, Darowski suggests that the fear of nuclear warfare, which preoccupied the American people in the sixties was also expressed in *X-men*; as the prospect of nuclear destruction became a major fear with the advent of the new millennium, Jeff Geers notes that this again became a central focus in the X-Men comics with the *Age of Apocalypse* storyline. Or with the rise of televangelism in the seventies and eighties, Jacob Rennaker analyses Chris Claremont and Brent Anderson's *God Loves Man Kills*, in which the X-Men do not fight a costumed villain but rather a reverend 'whose vitriolic anti-mutant message mobilized Americans against mutants' (p. 77). Todd Kimball Mack offers readers a new way to think about the X-men as he suggests that the X-Men may serve as a metaphor for individuals on the autism spectrum through a close reading of Joss Whedon's first arc on *Astonishing X-Men*, 'The Cure'. Ultimately, if *The Ages of the X-Men* begins with the origins of the X-Men, it ends with something of a 'to be continued' as the final essay, written by Morgan B. O'Rourke and Daniel J. O'Rourke, explores the rhetoric of hope purported by Barack Obama. It is this same rhetoric that found its way into the X-Men comics in the character of Hope – a character that symbolises a new horizon and possible future for the X-Men and all mutants.

While there are many valuable essays in the volume, there are a few striking flaws with the text. First, it is difficult to appreciate truly a scholarly edition on comics when it lacks the images being discussed. A media form celebrated for its hybridity cannot be fully considered without the use of images. Furthermore, since this volume is invested in the 'Ages' of the X-Men, there is a feature to these 'Ages' that is lost when the images are not there to assist the readers in reflecting on the evolution of the characters' visual design. Credit must be given, though, to the individual authors who describe the costumes and design of the comics so well, particularly in Timothy Elliott and Robert Dennis Watkin's piece on Chris Claremont and Jim Lee's new *X-Men* #1 or David Allan Duncan's essay on the use of ugly mutants and the powerful art of Chris Bachalo. I am aware of the difficulties in obtaining copyright for images (and I do not wish to critique any one publisher), but discourse is no substitute for visual images. A reader – no matter how avid – cannot even begin to look up the countless comics referred to in these essays. I must admit this is a problem that needs to be addressed across comics scholarship and is not limited to this volume. Additionally, the lack of a critical introduction to the volume severely hinders its value. Darowski's introduction to the book reads more like an index than an introduction. The book lacks an opening piece that contextualises the discussion in terms of larger issues of scholarship, something that is sorely needed to show how this volume fits into the quickly expanding field of comics studies. While I must praise the work of Darowski and McFarland & Company for putting together such an excellent

edition of critical essays on the X-Men, the volume as a whole lacks the visual images and overarching critical voice that would make it truly stand out.

Despite my misgivings with the text surrounding its lack of a critical introduction and visual images, the book is a valuable contribution to the realm of comics studies. Some of the more notable essays in this collection that I have mentioned provide key insight into X-Men as a series. Furthermore, this volume serves as a useful critical overview to the X-Men for anyone new to these characters, and also provides keen insight into the series for any individual that has read the comics for decades. As comics studies continues to expand I hope that more volumes like this one emerge to explore from a critical standpoint the superhero series that so many of us have come to love over the years.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2014.1002858>

**Super boys: the amazing adventures of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster – the creators of Superman**, by Brad Ricca, New York, St Martin's Griffin, 2013, 423 pp., US\$17.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-250-04968-1

Brad Ricca's account of the lives, trials and tribulations of Superman's creators is as deceptively simplistic as the artwork of Joe Shuster and as well plotted as the scripts produced by Jerry Siegel. Accessibly written, the biography draws the reader in, setting a straightforward scene; the story of two teenage boys, living in Depression-era Cleveland, who, after years of failed attempts, eventually hit upon an idea that became a legend. However, just like Shuster's artwork, Ricca's narrative contains layers of detail that become increasingly meticulous the closer you look.

The book is arranged in three sections, each referencing the comic-book theme of the biography. Part 1, 'Distant Planet' deals with Siegel and Shuster's childhoods, focusing particularly on a robbery at Siegel's father's clothes store which resulted in his death – an event that Ricca uses as a framework for the entire book. The surroundings and circumstances that produced the young Siegel and Shuster are explored in depth. Ricca delves into concepts such as the Jewish diaspora, tracing the family histories of Siegel and Shuster, both the children of European Jewish immigrants. He focuses closely on pulp magazines and the newspapers' 'funny pages' as a precursor to the comics industry, as well as exploring the more specific background of Siegel and Shuster's high-school days. However, despite the inclusion of this large amount of contextual information, the book reads like a novel, bringing the characters of the two young men alive. Indeed, the characterisation is so vivid that, at times, it becomes slightly jarring. Sentences such as 'This was how Jerry always felt: *Hurry up*. He wanted to do everything he could in that very same second, even if others told him to slow down' (p. 5), although clearly artistic licence, seem to intrude on what is, after all, a non-fiction narrative. Such moments, however, are rare; more frequently, they make the biography an even more enjoyable read. Ricca sustains a remarkable sense of tension throughout this first section; despite the foregone conclusion, the reader cannot help a feeling of suspense over whether Siegel and Shuster will ever be successful.