

COMICS

COMIC BOOK HEROES

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Comic books have become reference points in the most popular and the most esoteric fiction and art. Everyone understands a Superman allusion or a Batman joke. . . . The critics, teachers, philanthropists, and religious leaders who once denounced comic books as a national disgrace have embraced them. . . . Nothing has tested or proven or forced the fluidity of contemporary arts like comic book superheroes.

— Gerard Jones, *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book*

THE “GONIFFS, SHMENDRICKS, AND SHLEMIELS” who gave birth to the comic book,¹ that “cultural form,” in the words of Gerard Jones, “that came like a revelation to kids of every class and ethnicity, that would evolve to become part of adolescent and adult fantasy,” certainly could not have anticipated that their creation “would outlast its initial fad of sixty years and set an entertainment norm in an era vastly different from the one that spawned it.” *Heroes* — the most indebted-to-the-comic-book-aesthetic American television program ever — is, of course, the latest manifestation of that form.

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COMIC COLLABORATORS

As we discussed in “The Creation of *Heroes*,” Tim Kring may well be an unlikely comic book television mastermind. Jeph Loeb recalls, for example, a revealing moment on their walk when he first realized his friend’s ignorance about the form in which he wanted to work:

Tim had absolutely no knowledge of comic books. My favorite moment was when he talked about how one of the characters would have the powers of a magnet and could lift up a car with a wave of his hand and throw it. I said, “That’s Magneto,” and Tim’s reaction was that he didn’t know whether “Magneto” was a person or a power.

Consequently, as *Wired*’s profile of Kring suggests, *Heroes* had to be “reverse engineered.”² Its comic-book-ishness had to be layered on top of a character-based foundation, and Kring’s ignorance was actually essential to this process, as Masi Oka (Hiro) observed:

[Tim Kring’s] a great barometer for people who are not into comics. . . . If Tim understands it, the whole world will. The writers might geek out and come up with some time-traveling, mind-bending fifth-dimensional thing. Tim says, “Whoa, what does that *mean*?”

The people with whom Kring surrounded himself, however, and Loeb in particular, definitely have their comic credentials in order.

In an interview with www.gthwonders.com, *Heroes*’ own “official unofficial” Web site, we nevertheless find Loeb discounting his own qualifications and commending his collaborators’ comic chops:

. . . between Jesse Alexander, Aron Coleite, Joe Pokaski, Michael Green — and guys like Harrison Wilcox and Oliver Grigsby working in the writing office, I’m just another geek

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with a lame excuse on Wednesdays to sneak out of the office to buy new comics!

Fans of television series such as *Alias* (Alexander), *Lost* (Alexander), *Crossing Jordan* (Coleite, Pokaski), or *Smallville* (Green, Loeb) may recognize some of these names. Scratch below the surface and we find that Coleite, Loeb, and Chuck Kim (not yet working for *Heroes* at the time of the interview quoted above) are likewise involved in comic books at more than just a fan level.

Coleite, for example, wrote the 2006 graphic novel *The Covenant*, prequel to the film of the same name released in the same year: the story of young men coming to terms with newfound powers that passed from father to son through the generations. Sound familiar? Kim (“07%” was his first television script), who joined the team through his friendship with artist Tim Sale (see below), came to the show with extensive experience as a comic book writer for both Marvel and DC, contributing to *Justice League Showcase Giant*, *Superman*, *Dexter’s Lab*, and *Powerpuff Girls*. Not surprisingly, Coleite (author/co-author of twelve to date) and Kim (author of two) have both contributed to *Heroes’* online graphic novels, but other staff writers like Alexander (four) and Joe Pokaski (ten), with no prior experience as comic scribes, have also written/co-written *Heroes* graphics. (For more on the graphic novels, see Chapter 3: “Empowering *Heroes*” and Chapter 9: “The *Heroes* Kaleidoscope.”)

And Loeb, of course, has authored a wide variety of popular comics over the past ten years. From *Batman: The Long Halloween* (a thirteen-issue stand-alone series published monthly by DC Comics in 1996 and 1997), to *Superman/Batman Public Enemies* (a six-issue mini-series published in 2003) to *Spider-Man: Blue* (another six-issue, self-contained story, published by Marvel Comics in 2002 and 2003) Loeb has plied his trade with the two biggest comic book publishers in the world and written for not only these superheroes but Challengers of the Unknown, Daredevil, and Hulk as well. As if this

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were not confirmation enough, Loeb served for a time as supervising producer for *Smallville*, the “no tights/no flights” series about the early years of one Clark Kent. Like the DNA of many of its protagonists, *Heroes*’ own is thus suffused with comic book heritage and inflection.

Even Masi Oka, the former Industrial Light and Magic software engineer, who admits to trying to smuggle “geeky references” into his performance, might be considered a comic collaborator. He told *Wired* his portrayal of the full of wonder and exuberance teleporter is based on a *Dragonball* anime role model, and hopes the writers will include more references to manga.

If Tim Kring, the comic book novice, remains the primary instigator of *Heroes*’ comic book aesthetic and ethos, and Loeb, the comic book veteran, his chief informant, the impact of another Tim (Tim Sale) can scarcely be overestimated. A “Marvel zombie” as a boy who has grown up to become a prolific comic artist and frequent Loeb collaborator (it was Loeb, in fact, who served as matchmaker between his old friend Kring and the artist), Sale has worked on *Heroes* since the pilot. Sale has compared his work to that of the real cops brought in to coach the character of Detective Sipowicz (Dennis Franz) on *NYPD Blue*, and admits that his involvement as a full-time comic book artist has been limited primarily to working with the props department.

But Sale’s contribution is much more tangible than that. Isaac’s artwork is his — originally created by Sale as washes on comic book paper, then computer-colored by Dave Stewart and transferred (enlarged as necessary) to canvas. The 9th *Wonders* comic books that figure so prominently in the season 1 narrative are likewise Sale’s work (see the discussion below).

Sale acknowledges noirish tendencies, a penchant that has no doubt contributed to the series’ tendency to “go dark” (see Steven Peacock’s essay on page 141) and which may have more than a little to do with his already mentioned color blindness. Sale’s monochrome vision is far from the only influence on Isaac’s ominous art: in talking with actor Santiago Cabrera, Sale learned of his love for the Spanish

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master Francisco Goya (1746–1828), an artist known for his gruesome, grotesque visions of human depravity, and has tried to incorporate Goyan touches into his *Heroes* work.

Color blindness is not Sale's only limitation as an artist: by his own admission, he isn't terribly good at likenesses and can't render recognizable faces unless working from a photograph. As he tells Robert Taylor, however, he compensates for this failing by "Eisnering" — trying to capture mood and theme in the style of the great comic book artist Will Eisner (1917–2005).

With Isaac now dead, it remains to be seen how much of a hands-on role Sale will play in subsequent seasons, but his foundational influence on the basic look of *Heroes* will certainly endure.

FRAMES WITHIN FRAMES: HEROES AND COMIC BOOKS AESTHETICS

Not surprisingly, *Heroes* translates some of the distinctive appearance of the comic book from the page to the small screen. In an interview with Comic Book Resources before *Heroes*' first episode had aired, Kring explained his intent to provide shout-outs to comic book fans in the very look of the series, including graphic novels: "There are certain very wide shots and the 16:9 format we shoot in allows us to have a frame that sort of pays homage to a lot of comic book angles and graphic design."

This tendency announces itself in the pilot (directed by David Semel) and continues throughout season 1. When Mohinder and Nirand visit his late father's apartment in Madras, the pillar of the staircase they climb in the right half of the frame separates them from the teeming street scene below and to the left, thus creating in effect two frames. Moments later, an internal shot of the apartment shows Mohinder approaching Chandra Suresh's wall map from the left and a mysterious man (Mr. Bennet) on the other side of the wall. Separated by the wall, and at that point unaware of each other, the two characters exist within the same space but are completely isolated, as if drawn separately on a page.

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We can also see how some character shots approximate the arrangement of the comic book page. Whether it's Mohinder standing in front of a framed atlas of the world, its extremities forming the frame within a frame in which he stands, or Hiro encased within the verticality of the metal tubing of a subway train, the parallels are obvious. We see examples of single character framing when we are introduced to Niki/Jessica Sanders as she lies on her bed, "entertaining" a client, the position of the laptop in the foreground not only creating a frame for her but also showing the character in digital form in a frame on its screen. We are also introduced to Nathan Petrelli as Peter sits in a taxi and his brother's picture on the side of a passing bus is not only within a frame but framed by the window of the taxi.

In another much-remarked-upon deviation from standard television conventions, *Heroes* not only shows us, in-frame, always inventively, and in a font type with definite leanings toward the comic book world, the title of every episode (see the "Episode Title Locator" among the Enhancements at the end of this book), but reminds us — again in-frame at the end of each episode (even the season finale) — that the story is "To Be Continued."

The use of subtitles for the Japanese dialogue of Hiro and Ando likewise affirms *Heroes'* heritage. While many of the subtitles are positioned more conventionally at the bottom of the frame, in some cases the position relative to the character is reminiscent of the comic book speech bubble. In the case of Hiro exclaiming in "Genesis" that he has managed to stop time, if only for one second, we see the words "I did it!" following him as he runs through the cubicles at Yamagato Industries.

When, later in the same episode, he and Ando have been thrown out of the karaoke club after Hiro teleports himself into the ladies restroom, they are shown together, once again in two-shot framing, giving us the opportunity to visualize the position of any relevant speech bubbles through the use of the subtitles.

Even the actors' expressions, a sigh or growl of frustration, some-

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times end up in the subtitled dialogue, reminding us of *Batman's* fight effect of “oofs” and “arghs” in the 1960s’ television series, itself a direct link to typical comic book conventions.³

COMIC BOOKS IN THE HEROESVERSE

Throughout season 1 of *Heroes*, comic books put in regular and significant appearances. In one sense, these are analogous to creator cameos, akin to Alfred Hitchcock’s famous, ingenious stepping-out-from-behind-the-curtain in his films, inspiring a game of “Find the Hitch,” or Marvelous Stan Lee’s appearances in adaptations of his comic books. Though similarly playful, the role of comic books in *Heroes’* story world is actually of central importance.

When Peter Petrelli tells Isaac Mendez, *9th Wonders’* diegetic creator, that his paintings are “just like a comic book,” we smile at the meta-comment, a knowing nod to the behind-the-scenes work of comic artist Tim Sale, their real, extra-diegetic creator.⁴ We also chuckle at Hiro’s self-referential insistence to Simone (“Godsend”) that he is not so round-faced as his comic book likeness.

For some characters, comics are an obsession, while for others they are essential to their destinies. In his first appearance (“Genesis”), technopath Micah Sanders shows himself to be not only a computer whiz but a comic book geek: reading *9th Wonders* #13. Later in the season he will talk comics with his dad (“Better Halves”), agree with D.L. to be Batman and Robin together (“Homecoming”), listen, perplexed as Hiro explains how he actually performed the amazing feats in *9th Wonders* #14 (which he has brought back from the future), and be temporarily placated with a stack of comics (including *Silver Surfer* #1) during his kidnapping by Linderman (“Landslide”).

In “Don’t Look Back,” Hiro’s discovery of #14 at a Times Square newsstand convinces him he is acting out his fate and, in “One Giant Step,” enables him (after he performs the rescue of a young girl from an oncoming truck — just like in the comic) to persuade Ando too.

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For Isaac Mendez, *9th Wonders* is not only a means to share his visionary art with a wider world but the very reason he has lived. Having delivered the final issue of his comic to a courier (“.07%”), he is able to face his brutal, painful, self-prophesied death at the hands of Sylar with courage, steeled by the knowledge he has “at least . . . done one good thing before I died. I stopped the bomb. I finally get to be a hero.”

In a moment very near the end of “Unexpected,” Hiro prepares to part company with trusty sidekick Ando, who seeks to dissuade him from his course by reminding him of the destiny laid out for them together in *9th Wonders*. Hiro’s response seems heretical to the *Heroes* universe, particularly considering that the episode was written by the series’ resident comic genius Jeph Loeb: “Life is not a comic book,” Hiro insists. But for Hiro, it is a momentary conviction only, the product of a stage in the hero’s quest (described in “The Making of a Hiro” elsewhere in these pages): a customary moment of doubt and regret, but not the last word. As if to remind us that, though indeed life is not a comic book, *Heroes* might well be — an epic version of one, now brought to tv — the door of the Greyhound Bus Hiro is about to board opens to reveal none other than Stan Lee, creator of Spider-Man, the Incredible Hulk, the X-Men, the Fantastic Four . . . in the driver’s seat.

HEROES AT GROUND ZERO

The final chapter of Bradford W. Wright’s superb *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* is entitled “Spider-Man at Ground Zero: a 9/11 Postscript.” In it, he wrestles with the question of the future of the comic book hero in the aftermath of the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York in 2001 (and in particular the Big Apple’s most indigenous superhero). Comic books, Wright observes,

long ago anticipated the multi-billion dollar fantasy industry now dominated by video games, motion pictures, and television. And unfortunately, that is not all that they predicted.

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Countless buildings have been bombed and destroyed in comic books, especially in New York. . . . The real world has once again caught up to that of the comic books. In the most horrible sense, the fantasy of comic book nightmares has become our reality.

Such a recognition still leaves us with very large questions, however:

Can comic books continue to balance escapism and relevance in this frightening post-9/11 world? Will superheroes still hold the power to stir our imaginations and inspire our dreams? I hope so. For we need them now more than ever.

Does not *Heroes* come close, with its first season saga of an exploding human nuke that devastates New York — a 9/11-ish calamity averted thanks to several acts of superheroism — achieve just the equilibrium Wright contemplates? How apropos, then, that its climatic scene transpires not at 9/11's ground zero but in Kirby Plaza, named, of course, for comic book king Jack Kirby (1917–94)?