

SUPERHERO ETHICS

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10 COMIC BOOK HEROES
10 WAYS TO SAVE THE WORLD
WHICH ONE DO WE NEED
MOST NOW?

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For Katie Ditschun

Well now I'm no hero that's understood

—BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN

And then a hero comes along

—MARIAH CAREY

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SUPERHERO ETHICS

INTRODUCTION

Challenge of the Superheroes

WHICH SUPERHERO IS BEST?

ON SCHOOLYARDS, in comic book shops, at movie theaters, and all over the Internet, people quarrel over which of our costumed crusaders is supreme. But determining which man, mutant, or alien is the most impressive of them all requires us to first define our terms. What does it even mean to be “best” in this context?

Some would pick their champion by asking who would win any given fight, one-on-one. On those terms, you could make the argument that the Silver Surfer is the greatest; after all, he wields the power cosmic. But this is a troublesome measure, given the fact that virtually any hero can triumph in any given matchup, depending on the cleverness of the writer crafting the tale. Consider the fact that Marvel and DC allowed readers to vote for the winners of the main bouts in the 1996 matchup miniseries, *DC Versus Marvel*; regardless of who the voters chose, the publishers knew they could write their way to a winner. What if someone suggested that the superhero who racks up the most sales is obviously best—the market can’t be wrong, can it? But that maxim meets its match when we consider that Cable—a time-traveling mutant best known for his enormous guns and extraneous pouches—would then have to be considered one of the greatest superheroes of all time. After all, the debut issue of *X-Force*, featuring the team he led,

sold roughly five million copies back in 1992, putting it near the top of all-time single-issue sales.

Many people simply prefer characters who most resemble themselves, or, rather, the person they think they wish they could be. Batman attracts many fans on account of his vaunted humanity, his relentlessness and resourcefulness, and his apparent indomitability. Trends in the culture and the counterculture also play a part in deciding favorites. Lately, some characters have gained popularity because we want to see women and people of color empowered. The perception of an overbearing political correctness, however, can trigger a backlash against those very efforts. If Miles Morales, the Ultimate Spider-Man, or Kamala Khan, the new Ms. Marvel, are to retain recognition as great new characters, the reasons for rooting them on must transcend identity politics. Wonder Woman, for instance, is wondrous for reasons that exceed her womanliness. The relative status of a character within their fictional universe is another standard by which one may be measured—the immensity of the threats they face, the degree of villainy among the foes they thwart, not to mention the admiration that their fellow heroes have for them. Consider how Superman and Captain America are held up as moral exemplars within their respective universes: They are heroes even to the other heroes, like Michael Jordan is to other basketball players. Or, one might find more inspiration in those who struggle with adversity and distress on a personal scale, like Jessica Cruz, the newest Green Lantern, or Netflix darling Jessica Jones.

Instead of arguing over which character is “best,” with all the amorphousness that word entails, perhaps we can narrow our focus a bit. What if, instead, we try to decide which superhero is most praiseworthy?