AMERICAN SUPERHEROES

SUPERHEROES GO TO WAR:
THE DEPRESSION & NEW DEAL 1938-1945

With the introduction of Superman in *Action Comics* #1 in June 1938, the superhero genre was established as the dominant form of comic book storytelling in what became known as the Golden Age of comics (1938-1950). Writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster created Superman as an archetypal character who was, in their words, "A genius in intellect—A Hercules in strength—A Nemesis to wrongdoers!" Superman's dual identity as the all powerful superhero and mild-mannered reporter Clark Kent derived from the adolescent, masculine wish-fulfillment fantasies of his creators, fascinated with such double life avengers as the Scarlet Pimpernel and Zorro. The latter character in the movie *Mark of Zorro* also served as a prototype for Superman's costume, as did the outfits of the circus strongmen of the day. His super-strength was rooted in such 20th century characters as Tarzan and Popeye the Sailor.

Superman's unique identity as an all powerful alien from another planet, Krypton, also established him as an immigrant and thus part of the American dream/myth. His main role, however, during this era was that of champion of the oppressed, a progressive super-reformer aligned against the forces of corporate and government greed to serve the public welfare. He was soon followed by The Batman (*Detective Comics* #27 May 1939), a darker, vigilante crime-fighter who relies on his own scientific knowledge, detective skills, and superior athletic abilities, rather than superhuman powers.

As international conflicts loomed ever larger during this era, the conflict resolution role of superheroes soon expanded into the international arena. Months before the United States entered World War II, American comic book superheroes began fighting the Axis enemies, as seen on the cover of *Captain America Comics* #1 (March 1941) where the definitive patriot slugs Hitler. He was joined by Green Lantern, Captain Marvel, and the first female superhero, Wonder Woman (launched in 1941). Many of the young artists creating these propagandistic comic books were liberal Jews expressing their politics of moral revulsion in their work (i.e. Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, co-creators of Captain America).

Wonder Woman leaping into action from an unpublished 1942 story, "Racketeer's Bait"

NEXT: The Cold War, Conformity & Censorship

AMERICAN SUPERHEROES

COLD WAR, CONFORMITY & CENSORSHIP:

SUPERHEROES IN THE POSTWAR ERA & 1950s

At the end of World War II, superhero comic books suffered a decline in sales when a number of their high-minded, somewhat simplistic characters no longer seemed to address the complexities of the postwar world. DC and other comics increasingly de-emphasized social relevancy in favor of light-hearted juvenile fantasy, reflecting the era's emphasis upon family and social conformity. Although major characters like Superman and Batman continued to sell well, comic book publishers turned to crime, horror, science fiction, westerns, and romance to save the day.

Other comic books revealed serious anxieties about the dawning atomic age and deepening Cold War tensions. As America mobilized for the war against Communism, influences over young people, especially comic books, became hotly contested. Thus, as with rock 'n roll music, the comic book industry found itself increasingly under attack for corrupting impressionable youth and promoting juvenile delinquency. Calls for censorship, comic book burnings, bans, and boycott culminated in Dr. Frederic Wertham's book, *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), a lengthy indictment of the comic book industry as subverting America's "adolescent bandits."

Even in the fifties, Superman became involved in current events.

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To avert the collapse of their business, comic book publishers developed the Comics Code Authority in 1954 to regulate the contents of all comics published with its cover seal of approval—a type of self-censorship by which they gave up much of their creative latitude. Nevertheless, superheroes came back to the forefront and the Silver Age was launched in 1956 with the publication in *Showcase* #4 of a new version of DC's *The Flash* (last seen in 1949), "the fastest man alive," whose immersion in a mysterious combination of chemicals that induce his super-speed evokes cold war, atom bomb-related anxieties.

NEXT: Questioning Authority in the 1960s and 70s

AMERICAN SUPERHEROES

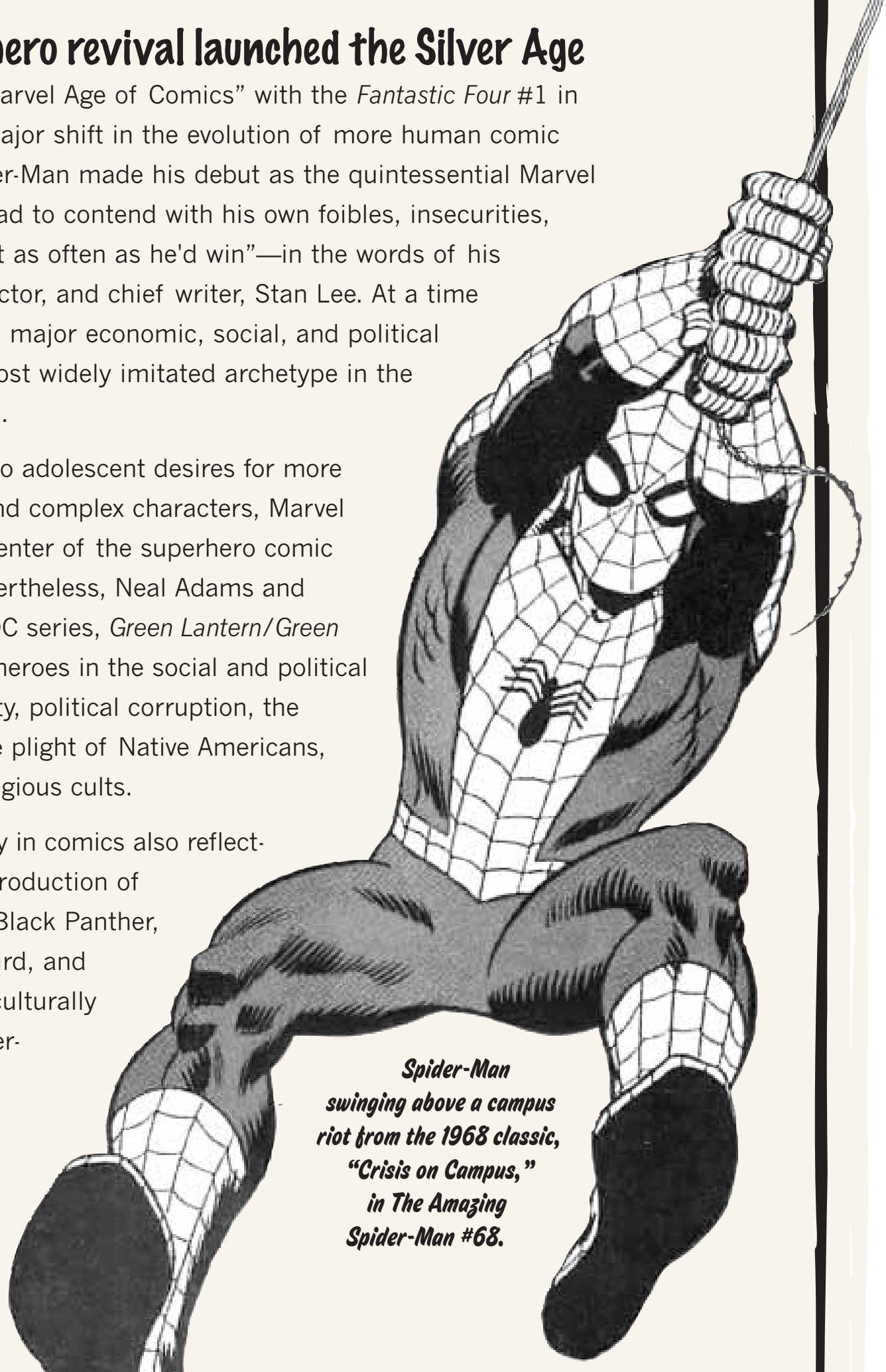
QUESTIONING AUTHORITY:

SUPERHEROES & SOCIOPOLITICAL CHANGE IN THE 1960s & 70s

Although the DC superhero revival launched the Silver Age (1956-1970), the birth of the "Marvel Age of Comics" with the *Fantastic Four* #1 in November 1961 represented a major shift in the evolution of more human comic book superheroes. In 1962 Spider-Man made his debut as the quintessential Marvel superhero—an adolescent who had to contend with his own foibles, insecurities, and confusion, while "los[ing] out as often as he'd win"—in the words of his co-creator, Marvel editor, art director, and chief writer, Stan Lee. At a time when youth culture emerged as a major economic, social, and political force, Spider-Man became the most widely imitated archetype in the superhero genre since Superman.

Having successfully tapped into adolescent desires for more believable, morally ambivalent, and complex characters, Marvel generally supplanted DC as the center of the superhero comic book movement at this time. Nevertheless, Neal Adams and Denny O'Neil's ground-breaking DC series, *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* (1970) immersed its superheroes in the social and political issues of the time: racism, poverty, political corruption, the "generation gap," drug abuse, the plight of Native Americans, pollution, overpopulation, and religious cults.

A greater multicultural diversity in comics also reflected societal concerns, with the introduction of minority characters such as the Black Panther, Luke Cage, Shang Chi, Thunderbird, and others. Introduced in 1963, the culturally diverse, persecuted team of super-mutants, X-Men, has served as a metaphor for prejudice and intolerance. Feminism and women's liberation played a significant role as well, with "Wonder Woman for President" featured on the cover of the first issue of *Ms. Magazine* in 1972.



Spider-Man swinging above a campus riot from the 1968 classic, "Crisis on Campus," in The Amazing Spider-Man #68.

NEXT: Moral Complexity in the 1980s and 90s

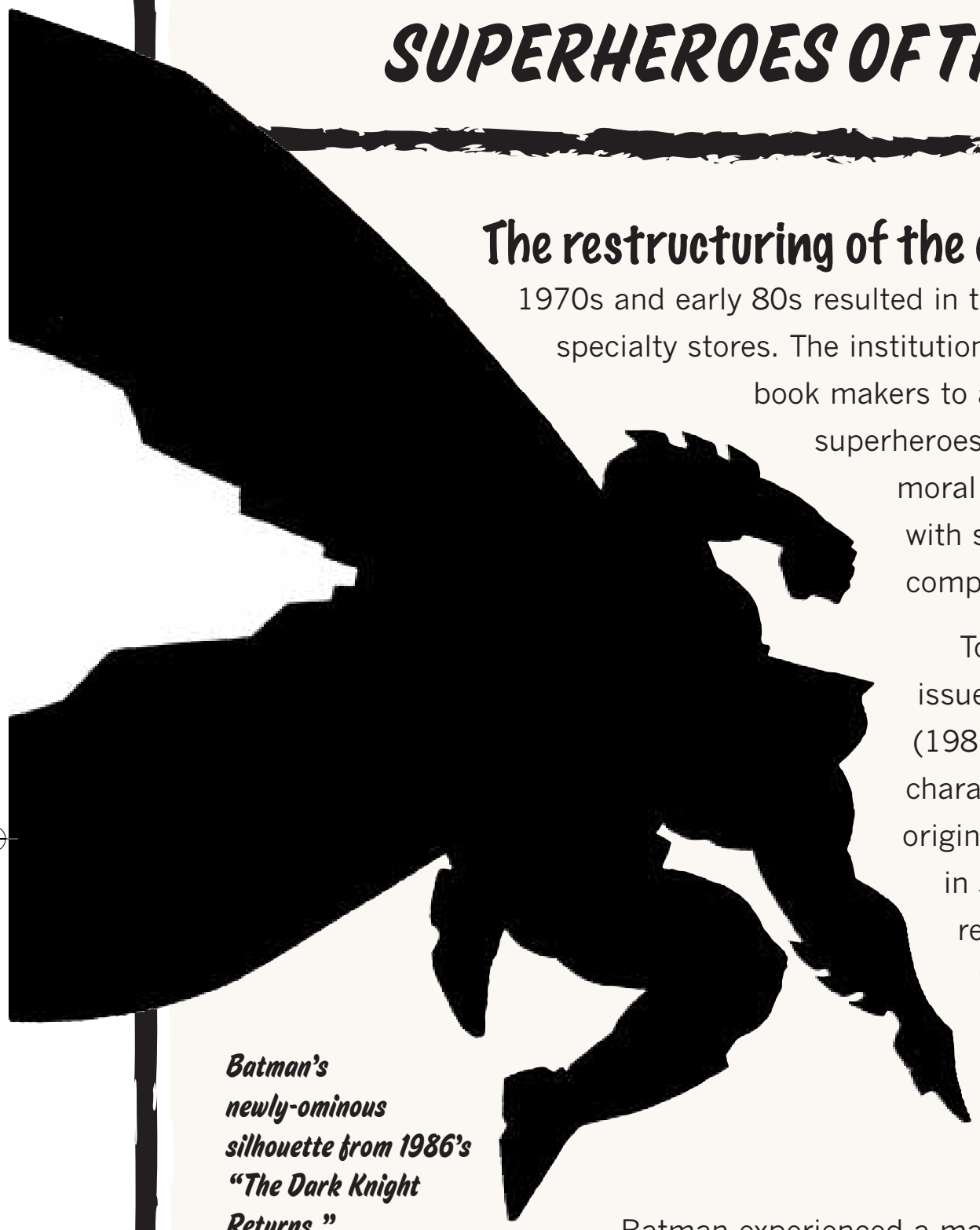
AMERICAN SUPERHEROES

DIVERSITY & MORAL COMPLEXITY:

SUPERHEROES OF THE 1980s & 90s

The restructuring of the comic book industry in the late 1970s and early 80s resulted in the direct marketing of comic books in specialty stores. The institution of creators' rights also encouraged comic book makers to accommodate the taste of the market for superheroes with more realism, violence, cynicism, and moral ambiguity. The industry also had to contend with slumping sales of comics due in part to competition from interactive technology.

To reinvigorate the aging superhero genre, DC issued the epic series *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (1985-86), in order to reintroduce such classic characters as Superman and Supergirl with new origin stories. The temporary death of Superman in January 1993, followed by his multi-issue resurrection and marriage to Lois Lane, focused much media attention on superhero comics. In *Marvel Super-Heroes: The Secret Wars* (1984), Marvel teamed up all of its superheroes and introduced a new black costume for Spider-Man.



Batman's newly-ominous silhouette from 1986's "The Dark Knight Returns."

Batman experienced a major resurgence as an older and slightly mad right-wing moralist in Frank Miller's gritty, four issue series *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), which was published as a graphic novel and expanded the notion of comic books as literature. This story was responsible for the rejuvenation of Batman as a dark character, whose renewed popularity culminated in the series of blockbuster films by Warner Brothers.

During this era the most complex and ambitious superhero series, *Watchmen*, was published by DC as a 12-issue series and then as a graphic novel. Featuring superheroes as real, flawed individuals largely lacking in superpowers, Alan Moore's and Dave Gibbon's *Watchmen* was a highly influential deconstruction of the conventional superhero archetype.

The comic book industry was also expanded with the launching in 1992 of Milestone Comics (a division of DC) by Denys Cowan, Dwayne McDuffie, and other African American creators who wanted to provide sorely needed models of black heroism. Although no longer in existence, Milestone enriched the superhero genre with such memorable characters as Static, a geeky high school student with a bizarre array of electrical powers.

NEXT: Spider-Man at Ground Zero and the New Century

AMERICAN SUPERHEROES

SPIDER-MAN @ GROUND ZERO:
THE NEW CENTURY

Superheroes had responded to national disasters before, yet none that had ever hit so close to home as the tragic events of September 11, 2001. The December 2001 issue of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, encased in a solid black cover, was the first to do so, featuring Spider-Man, Captain America, and Daredevil helping to clear the wreckage in the aftermath of the attacks. Bemoaning their inability to "see it coming... [and] stop it," they stand, on the last page, behind the real heroes—the firefighters, rescue workers, police, and armed forces.

The contemporary reality of a country that inspired cynicism, irony, and moral relativism among its comic book readers inspired some industry members to reevaluate the role of comics in American culture and society. Anxiety about the new century and the election of George Bush had already been reflected in such comics as *President Luthor: Secret Files & Origins* #1 (March 2001) and continued in such comics as *Justice League of America* #83 (September 2003) in which superheroes question President Lex Luthor's decision to unilaterally invade the fictional country of Qurac without evidence of weapons of mass destruction.

In the recent Marvel series, *Civil War*, America's superheroes have been divided against each other in the wake of a tragedy caused by a TV reality show and the government's subsequent requirement that all costumed superheroes unmask themselves and enlist as registered defenders of the country—thus challenging both their rights to privacy and the definition of superheroes. In the April 2007 epilogue issue, the murder of Captain America, characterized as "The Death of the Dream," was a cliffhanger event widely covered in mass media. It provokes questions as to whether comic book superheroes can continue to embody escapism, fantasy, and social relevance in this terrifying post-9-11 world of ours? Still functioning for many readers as metaphors of our dreams and transformative aspirations, they are needed, perhaps now more than ever before.

Captain America was assassinated while fighting for superhero civil liberties during the "Civil War" among the superheroes.

NEXT: Vist the 3rd floor to become a Superhero!

AMERICAN SUPERHEROES

AMERICAN INDIAN SUPERHEROES:

STEREOTYPES & REALITIES

For years, comic books have addressed social issues in a variety of settings. Unfortunately, much of what has been created perpetuates racial stereotypes. From the earliest portrayals of American Indians in dime store novels that were popular in the late 19th and 20th centuries to *Scalped*, published in 2007, American Indians are often portrayed as savage heathens, noble savages, simple-minded sidekicks, mystical new age shamans, or hopeless people living amidst insurmountable social problems on the reservations.

This bleak picture is changing with Native American artists and tribes using comic books as a way to raise awareness for not only the problems they face, but to tell stories that promote the positive aspects of Native American culture. These are tales that utilize native beliefs and oral traditions to help celebrate and understand what it means to be indigenous. Excellent examples of these are *Darkness Calls* (2006), by Red Earth Media, published by The Healthy Aboriginal Network in British Columbia, and *A Hero's Voice* (2007), by the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe that traces the story of the six Ojibwe leaders who have shaped the history of their people.

The concept of superheroes is not a new idea within native culture. For thousands of years the oral traditions of these cultures often talked about beings with the power to generate all of creation, steal the sun, help people to survive cataclysmic events, slay monsters, control the environment, and generally help humanity. Early comic book characters that were based on American Indian themes were usually somehow linked with the natural and supernatural world, and although characterized as indigenous, were in actuality, white men raised by natives. The first truly native character that was created and drawn by non-natives was Marvel's *Red Wolf* (1971), who is the alter ego of Johnny Wakely, a Cheyenne boy who was raised by a white couple in the late 19th century. He used his powers to promote peace between the white and American Indian people. Using stereotypical themes and the appeal of the western genre, Red Wolf was a popular comic. In contrast to this early character, the recent comic *Peace Party* (1999) by Rob Schmidt is an attempt to combine the super-hero genre with a multicultural character narrative that accurately depicts the lives and heritage of American Indians.

Arak, an early Native American "superhero" prototype.

Superheroes have taken on a new identity within indigenous cultures. They are found in the stories of ancient cultures, in everyday life, and in the pages of native comic books whose stories integrate modern life with powerful traditions. These stories compel people to realize that indigenous cultures have both history and a contemporary living presence.

— Twig Johnson, *Curator of Native American Art*

COMIC BOOK LEGENDS: JOE, ADAM, & ANDY KUBERT

This exhibition is the first museum presentation of works by the legendary comic book artist Joe Kubert and his sons Adam (b. 1959) and Andy (b. 1962). A multi-faceted, prolific talent in the comic book industry for over sixty-five years, Joe Kubert (b. 1926) has worked in all genres, from military themes and horror to westerns and superheroes. He is best known for his masterful work on Sergeant Rock, Hawkman, Tarzan, Tor, Firehair, Viking Prince, Ragman, and many other memorable characters which reflect his unique combination of careful research and bold, fluid draftsmanship. He has recently published the critically acclaimed graphic novels, *Yossel*, *Abraham Stone,* and *Jew Gangster* and is currently working on several others.

Kubert began his career at age 12 when, as a promising young artist, he was allowed to ink some pages of the teen-humor comic book *Archie.* In 1942 Kubert first worked for DC Comics, Inc., the company with which he has been most closely associated during his career. Kubert served as an editor for DC Comics from 1967 into the 1980s. In 1976, he and his wife Muriel founded the Joe Kubert School of Cartoon and Graphic Art in Dover, New Jersey. This first and only fully accredited school of its kind has educated many of the industry's leading comics artists, including Adam and Andy Kubert who now serve as instructors there.

Occasionally collaborating with their father, Adam and Andy Kubert have developed highly successful careers of their own. Andy is best known for his work at Marvel on the *X-Men* titles and *Wolverine: Origin* as well as his subsequent work at DC Comics since 2006 on *Batman*. Adam, also affiliated with DC Comics since 2006, has developed his reputation for drawing Superman in the *Action Comics* series. While at Marvel Comics, Adam launched two of their highly successful Ultimate series: *Ultimate X-Men* and *Ultimate Fantastic Four*. Before that, Adam drew numerous X-Men titles along with the *Incredible Hulk*. Bringing a multitude of comic book characters to life, the highly talented Kubert family is truly a legendary presence in New Jersey.

— Gail Stavitsky, Chief Curator

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