



# On the Origin of Superheroes: From the Big Bang to Action Comics No. 1

*Chris Gavalier*

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Most readers think that superheroes began with Superman's appearance in *Action Comics* No. 1, but that Kryptonian rocket didn't just drop out of the sky. By the time Superman's creators were born, the superhero's most defining elements—secret identities, aliases, disguises, signature symbols, traumatic origin stories, extraordinary powers, self-sacrificing altruism—were already well-rehearsed standards. Superheroes have a sprawling, action-packed history that predates the Man of Steel by decades and even centuries. *On the Origin of Superheroes* is a quirky, personal tour of the mythology, literature, philosophy, history, and grand swirl of ideas that have permeated western culture in the centuries leading up to the first appearance of superheroes (as we know them today) in 1938.

From the creation of the universe, through mythological heroes and gods, to folklore, ancient philosophy, revolutionary manifestos, discarded scientific theories, and gothic monsters, the sweep and scale of the superhero's origin story is truly epic. We will travel from Jane Austen's Bath to Edgar Rice Burroughs's Mars to Owen Wister's Wyoming, with some surprising stops along the way. We'll meet mad scientists, Napoleonic dictators, costumed murderers, diabolical madmen, blackmailers, pirates, Wild West outlaws, eugenicists, the KKK, Victorian do-gooders, detectives, aliens, vampires, and pulp vigilantes (to name just a few). Chris Gavaler is your tour guide through this fascinating, sometimes dark, often funny, but always surprising prehistory of the most popular figure in pop culture today. In a way, superheroes have always been with us: they are a fossil record of our greatest aspirations and our worst fears and failings.

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