

Caped fear and other superhero psychoses

by Scott_LaFee

It's not easy being a superhero.

The hours are lousy, and the pay is worse. You deal with the criminal dregs of society, though occasionally one turns out to be an evil genius or extraterrestrial interloper, which can make things interesting.

CAPED FEAR - You don't need X-ray vision to see that superheroes have super psychoses. CNS Illustration by Cristina Martinez Byvik. The bad guys always want to kill you. It's what they do, and they come equipped for the task, with diabolically clever schemes involving exotic elements and distressed damsels or giant ray guns capable of vaporizing an unsuspecting metropolis in less than a nanosecond (one-billionth of a second). Sometimes they bring friends.

Invariably, though, the bad guys fail and you prevail - along with truth, justice and the American Way. But the work is draining. Not physically (because superheroes are superfit), but mentally. With great powers come great responsibilities and even greater psychological problems.

"Batman is so wound up," said Danny Fingeroth, a veteran comic book editor and author of the semi-seminal treatise "Superman on the Couch."

"He tries so hard to never betray any emotion, yet underneath he's still the little kid who saw his parents murdered in front of his eyes. We're always waiting to see if he'll lose it!"

Not to mention the others:

Superman has commitment issues with Lois Lane, a consequence perhaps of being abandoned by his birth parents and planet. The Hulk, the Thing, Judge Dredd and Wolverine all exhibit anger management problems. The Atom and Doll Man won't grow up. The Silver Surfer won't talk. Galactus, devourer of worlds, has an eating disorder. Two-Face is a poster child for multiple personality disorder.

You don't need X-ray vision to see that superheroes have super psychoses. They are flawed human beings (well, most of them are human) with really big muscles. Watching them grapple with their mental monsters is not only entertaining, it's an international obsession.

Consider: Attendance at the recent four-day Comic-Con International convention in San Diego may have hit 125,000.

Comic book and graphic novel sales in the United States and Canada in 2006 topped \$640 million.

At last count, the combined worldwide gross from the three "Spider-Man" movies was \$2.4 billion, according to www.the-numbers.com, a movie industry database. That's more than the 2006 gross domestic products of at least 33 countries, according to International Monetary Fund estimates.

All of which got us wondering: Why do superheroes suffer so? How do you fix a sick id, a broken superego? And what does it say about the rest of us that we still love them?

WHAM!

These are difficult questions.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV, a guide to the ailing mind used by professionals, clinicians, researchers and insurance companies, is 886 pages long and lists 297 disorders, without a single mention of superheroes.

"I think you'd find a lot of their symptoms under obsessive-compulsive disorders," said Mike McKee, a staff psychologist who works at the Cleveland Clinic in Ohio - "Not far from where Superman grew up," he noted.

With the medical literature lacking, we turned to actual psychologists.

"It's psychotic for us to have superhero notions, but not for them," declared Karl W. Stukenberg, a clinical psychologist at Xavier University in Cincinnati. "Superheroes believe that they can do incredible things, and they can. We think we can, and the world consistently reminds us that this is psychotic."

But for the superhero, superness comes at a cost. Many, notes Jonathan Gale, a psychologist in San Diego, take up the mantle only after being compelled to do so by tragedy or circumstances beyond their control.

They may be destined to save worlds, but they would rather save for a condo in Florida.

"Comic superheroes are an offshoot, almost a collective fear of what's going on in the world," Gale said. "They initially became big right before World War II. They're almost like a wish-fulfillment type of thing, a dream. They represent a person with special powers who can take care of any problem."

Burdened by such high expectations, many superheroes act out. Some become violent. Many parade in outlandish costumes or semi-nudity, an obvious cry for attention. A few do just the opposite: They turn invisible.

From a merely mortal point of view, the stress of being a superhero seems crushing, like being caught in the pincers of a giant Nictornesian acid beetle.

If you're a full-grown red-skinned demon with horns, tail and an oversized, stony right hand, it must be hard on your self-esteem to be called "Hellboy."

And it's probably not baseless paranoia to think people are out to get you if the Secret Society of Super-Villains has publicly vowed to seek your demise.

At such times, it's OK to seek help.

BANG!

McKee at the Cleveland Clinic says he doesn't treat superheroes - at least none who aren't in disguise. But he says he would handle their cases the same way he would any new patient.

"First, I'd have them diagram their lives, rate themselves on a scale of 1 to 10 in a bunch of areas like job,

finances, friendships, spirituality, sex life, physical well-being, sense of purpose.

"My guess is that superhero lives are imbalanced. They'd probably have a strong but conflicted sense of purpose and excellent physical well-being, but wouldn't be so great in terms of friendships, love or family. They'd probably say there wasn't enough time."

McKee would advise his superhero patient to make a plan, identify goals and plot how to achieve them.

"We'd go slow. Most of the work would be outside my office. It would be up to the patient. But if the plan wasn't working, I'd probably look more carefully at how the patient got to be the way they were.

"Was there a role model in childhood? Is there something interfering with the ability to establish relationships? Is the patient choosing badly, setting impossible goals? Together, we'd chip away at the problems."

Because you can't save the world in a day. Even when that's what you do.

Other psychologists use different methodologies. Lucy Jo Palladino is a San Diego psychologist and author of "Find Your Focus Zone: An Effective New Plan to Defeat Distraction and Overload."

And the occasional planet-munching cosmic entity.

"Peter Parker - Spider-Man - risks losing Mary Jane because he doesn't speak up for himself," said Palladino. "He could benefit from assertiveness training.

Batman's phobia, she added, could best be treated by a therapy called systematic desensitization.

"First, we teach Batman how to relax, then start him off imagining bats while still feeling relaxed. Then he stands far away from some real bats while remaining relaxed. Then, step by step, he approaches the bats, all the while remaining relaxed.

Finally, Palladino said, "The Hulk, the Thing, Wolverine and Daredevil all need to learn how to control their tempers. Their HMO would no doubt recommend they form an anger management group to keep expenses down. I myself would not be available to lead that particular group."

KAPOW!

To be sure, dysfunctional superheroes are easy to scoff at, to dismiss as simplistic and two-dimensional. After all, it's not like they have to cope with the real world, where there are unpopular foreign wars, steroidal athletes and you have to do your own laundry.

But as different and distant as they seem, superheroes are us, says Fingerhuth - a reflection of ourselves and our society. Their problems are ours.

"Reality and fantasy always overlap a little," he said.

In a sense, don't we all wear a mask?

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