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Is Superman Circumcised? The Complete Jewish History of the World's Greatest Hero by Roy Schwartz

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Review of *Is Superman Circumcised?* by Russell Schwartz.

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Abstract

In *Is Superman Circumcised?*, Russell Schwartz provides a historical overview of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's creation of the comic book character Superman, arguing that Siegel and Shuster's backgrounds in Jewish immigrants gives a particularly Jewish subtext to their character. Schwartz builds on this argument with a larger historical overview of American comic book publishing, showing how Judaism and Jewish-American immigrant experiences have informed that industry from its earliest days.

Additional Keywords

superman; jerry siegel; joe shuster; american comic books; jewish- american history; frederic wertham
seduction of the innocent; holocaust; 20th-century anti-semitism

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Norse mythology comprises the narratives of gods, heroes, and other superhuman beings passed down from Viking Age and medieval Scandinavian (“Norse”) poets and writers. [...] This course explores not only the myths themselves—the stories of the gods and heroes preserved in medieval Icelandic manuscripts—but also the nature of the source material, the relationship of the myths to the early history of Scandinavia and England, and the human level of mythical belief as expressed in religious activities and ideas about magic and the afterlife. (1)

I highly recommend this course to listeners of all ages and backgrounds. It comes with a 195-page *Course Guidebook* that reproduces the content of the lectures in print form. It is a colorful book that includes full-page illustrations of the Norse gods and illustrations including photographs of manuscripts and artifacts. Each lecture ends with titles for further reading and discussion questions that will help the listener to engage in the material and get the most out of the series.

In short, I highly recommend all of the works of Jackson Crawford mentioned in this review. He is a great educator—as audio lecturer, translator, and author of study aids. I recommend his course on *Norse Mythology* without qualification to all libraries—public, high school, or college. I also recommend *Two Sagas of Mythical Heroes: Hervor and Heiðrek and Hrólf Kraki and His Champions* to most libraries because the book introduces pieces of world literature. I do warn school and public librarians to be prepared for complaints because of the violence and nonexplicit sexual content of *Two Sagas*. Honestly, I would have let my children read the book when they were growing up. I think its value as a piece of world literature and its historical content outweighs any objectionable material that it contains.

—Phillip Fitzsimmons



BRIEFLY NOTED

IS SUPERMAN CIRCUMCISED? THE COMPLETE JEWISH HISTORY OF THE WORLD’S GREATEST HERO. Roy Schwartz. Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2021. 374 pp. ISBN 9781476662909. \$45.00

While there’s no question that Superman is one of the best-known fictional characters worldwide, few academics have studied him or the comic book industry that birthed him. Roy Schwartz combines past Superman

scholarship with a historical overview of the comic book industry from its genesis in the 1930s until today. Looking at Superman's creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, Schwartz highlights the fact they were both Jewish-American men from immigrant families, as was almost everyone in their generation of comic book professionals. Superman is the product of a Jewish-American context which, according to Schwartz, informs the character in various ways. Schwartz analyses Superman in various Jewish contexts (as a golem, a Moses figure, a hero in the Jewish folklore tradition, etc.), and how Jewish culture and symbols continue to appear in Superman comics to the present day. Schwartz also argues that it wasn't until Richard Donner's 1978 *Superman* movie that Superman became more a Christ figure than a Moses figure, detailing how different generations of writers have favored one side or the other. As he describes Superman's evolution over the decades, Schwartz describes how the evolution of Jewish-American identity has influenced comic book publishing across different generations.

Schwartz meticulously covers the history of Jewish comic book writers and illustrators, from Jerry Siegel to Neil Gaiman, and even works in some notes about how Jewish actors like Robert Downey Jr. have contributed to the current superhero movie trend. He makes a strong argument (using primary sources like Siegel's unpublished memoir) that Superman's Jewish writers gave the character a subtext tying him to Judaism and Jewish history. At the same time, Schwartz doesn't blindly support every claim about Jewish subtext in Superman stories, showing how some suggestions (like the possible Hebrew meanings behind the name Kal-El) are interesting but speculative. Schwartz also carefully references and builds on ideas from past essays about Superman and Jewish culture, with the odd exception of Harry Brod's 2012 book *Superman Is Jewish?* Since Brod's book only covers Superman in the first chapter, and Schwartz addresses the ideas that Brod brings up but with more detail, this doesn't present a real problem. Still, Schwartz misses the chance to dialogue with Brod's work, who explicitly connects his love for comics with his heritage growing up in a Holocaust survivor family in Forest Hills, Queens—the same neighborhood that Peter Parker hails from (Brod 95-96). Since Schwartz writes as a young "Israeli, born and raised in Tel Aviv" (1), the potential dialogue between these two Jewish scholars about comics and Jewish identity could have been fascinating. This missed opportunity aside, Schwartz presents a readable yet well-researched chronicle of an overlooked side of American speculative fiction and its Jewish roots.

—G. Connor Salter

WORKS CITED

Brod, Harry. *Superman Is Jewish? How Comic Book Superheroes Came to Serve Truth, Justice and the Jewish-American Way*. Free Press, 2012.