

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 331

“Caped Crusaders”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Pulp fiction inspired stories in radio and in motion pictures, and sometimes vice versa. It also influenced the new medium of comic books, where detective stories were all the rage, at least until superheroes came along.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 331. Caped Crusaders.

Last week, I talked about pulp fiction magazines and the kinds of stories they published, with a particular eye on the development of science fiction as a distinct branch of literature. Pulp fiction embraced many genres, but science fiction is the only case of a new genre of story having been first identified and cultivated in pulp magazines.

I want to talk more about pulp magazines today and take a different tack. To begin with, I want to take a step backward and note that pulp magazines did not originate the business model of cheap, popular, sensational fiction. The first instance of such a thing appeared in Victorian Britain, with the emergence of the so-called “penny dreadfuls.” I mentioned these briefly last week. These were serialized novels sold in installments for a penny apiece. Penny dreadfuls most often told either crime stories, or stories about the supernatural, what we today would call “horror.” There were also more general adventure stories.

Tween and teenage boys represented a major share of the market for these penny dreadfuls. The name seems to have had a double-meaning. They were dreadful in the sense that they frequently told stories that were scary or gruesome, but the term was also an indirect, wink-wink, nudge-nudge, commentary on the quality of the writing.

America had its own version of penny dreadfuls, which were known as “dime novels,” which were exactly what it says on the label, novels that cost a dime, and were actually the first paperback novels.

These penny dreadfuls and dime novels were the very first of what today we would call mass market entertainment. They explored the kinds and styles of fiction that would have mass market appeal.

Then came the pulp magazines, which mostly superseded their predecessors. It's not difficult to see why. If a would-be reader wants to buy a novel, they would have to go to a shop, look over a number of titles, maybe read the first few pages, in order to find a story that appealed to them. Pulp magazines were more convenient. If you recall from last week, I told you how they began as general interest fiction magazines like *Argosy*, and later sorted themselves out by genre, with magazines dedicated strictly to Westerns or romances, and so on. The advantage such a magazine offered was that it published the kind of stories you already knew you liked, and if you subscribed, the magazine could even be delivered directly to your home.

Book publishers had trouble competing with that, and pulp magazines largely replaced the dime novels. In the United States, pulp magazines also benefited from the discount mailing rates the Post Office offered to magazines, but not books. As far as I can tell from my research, the Royal Mail of Victorian Britain did not offer a special rate for magazines, though they did for newspapers, so that would not have been a factor in the UK, although pulp magazines prospered there as well.

Can you believe the sorts of rabbit holes I find myself delving into when preparing this podcast? Now you can add "Victorian British postage rates" to the list.

Anyway, now that's settled, let's take a closer look at the kinds of stories these pulp magazines published. I've already rattled off lists of literary genres you might find in a pulp magazine, so I won't repeat myself—nice change, huh?—but I also mentioned action-adventure in a generic sense, which in a pulp magazine of the period might mean stories about explorers or aviators or spies or soldiers.

But who are the heroes of these stories? This is the topic I want to focus on this episode, and specifically on the heroes of American action-adventure stories, as compared to what you might find in other countries. There is a distinctly American type of hero. Let's suss out what he looks like, and I say "he," because in pulp fiction, action-adventure heroes were invariably men, in stories written for a predominately male audience.

I'll begin with the quintessentially American action-adventure genre: the Western. Western stories have been around for a long time, longer than there have been cowboys, in fact. I can't resist pointing out that the heroes of these stories are often not cowboys. A cowboy is an itinerant horseback cattle herder. It is a job that calls for difficult, dirty, dangerous work, lots of travel, and living and sleeping out of doors with no fixed abode. The job kind of sucks, to be honest. While cowboys are thought of as uniquely American, Americans actually borrowed the idea from the Spanish, who introduced it to the Americas. The Spanish name for them is *vaquero*,

which derives from *vaca*, which means cow. The American name is thus a translation of the Spanish name.

The original Western hero was Daniel Boone, who was a real pioneer, born in 1734, in a house just a few miles from mine, as a matter of fact. Boone explored Kentucky, which was the West back then. Boone was real, and died in 1820; afterward, numerous writers devised fictional accounts of his adventures. The same was true of Davy Crockett, and of Christopher Carson, known as Kit Carson, a hunter and explorer who participated in the conquest of California during the Mexican-American War. Afterward, tales of his travels through the newly conquered lands stirred public interest and led to many stories and novels about his adventures, also largely fictionalized.

Buffalo Bill was a young man named William Cody, who acquired his nickname by killing large numbers of bison. A writer from New York paid Cody for the use of his name and wrote tales of his adventures for Street and Smith, a New York publishing house that specialized in dime novels. As you know from last week, Street and Smith would later move into pulp magazines. More about that later. And I should mention Deadwood Dick, a wholly fictional character who was popular in the late 19th century.

Westerns generally take place in a Western wilderness, or perhaps an isolated frontier town. The hero is generally a scout, a hunter, a sheriff or Federal marshal, or a gun for hire combating evildoers in a remote location. They were always white men, even though perhaps as many as half of the real cowboys were African-American or Mexican-American. The stories typically involve a town or a ranch or a railroad project threatened by criminals, or “outlaws” as they are usually called, in an environment where conventional law enforcement is scarce or nonexistent. The hero fills the role of law enforcement, protecting the innocent and defeating the outlaws. Gun fights are inevitable, and the bad guys are often dealt with not through conventional legal processes, but by the hero himself. This is called “frontier justice.” Sometimes law enforcement is itself corrupt, or even the villain of the story, forcing the hero to oppose them as well.

The later years of the 19th century saw the rise of detective stories. Edgar Allan Poe wrote detective stories earlier in the century, but they didn’t catch on at first. It is possible that the rise of the Pinkerton Detective Agency in the late 19th century helped launch detective stories. One of the most famous fictional detectives of the time was Nick Carter, first introduced in a dime novel from Street and Smith in 1886.

A year later, in 1887, in Britain, Arthur Conan Doyle published the first Sherlock Holmes story, a novel titled *A Study in Scarlet*. Sherlock Holmes is, as I’m sure you know, the most popular detective character in literary history and has appeared in more novels, short stories, and adaptations for film, radio, and television than you can shake a stick at.

Sherlock Holmes used investigation, observation, and deduction in order to solve crimes. Nick Carter did as well, but he also fought bad guys, relied on disguises, got into car chases, and was generally more action-adventure-y than the cerebral Mr. Holmes.

American detectives are, in sum, Eastern urban versions of the heroes of Western stories. Sometimes they are police detectives, but more frequently private detectives. Like the protagonists of Westerns, they get involved in a case where they must protect the innocent against the lawbreakers, although in a detective story it may be more difficult to work out which is which. They fill the role of law enforcement. In a Western, law enforcement is absent. In a detective story, law enforcement is either less perceptive than the detective or corrupted, and therefore it is the detective's responsibility to do what they should be doing, but can't or won't. There will frequently be gunplay before the end of the story.

Do you see a pattern here? I do. The archetypal American hero is a loner, a man—they're always men—who is shrewd and perceptive, but can use his fists or a gun when needed. He is a seeker after justice, but is guided by his own sense of right and wrong, which sometimes is at variance with the authorities of the society in which he operates. You could call him a vigilante, but he is seldom called that because the story wants you to believe that his moral compass is superior to that of society. Sometimes there are also vigilantes in the story, but these are antagonists; it is typically the hero's role to find a just resolution before the vigilantes impose an unjust one.

This archetypal American hero originated in Westerns, then migrated into other kinds of stories. Sherlock Holmes sometimes resorts to violence, or works at cross-purposes with the police, but he prefers not to. This must be a British versus American thing. Am I crazy to see a parallel with Doctor Who? That is, in mysteries, the British Sherlock Holmes is to the American Nick Carter as in science fiction, the British Doctor Who is to, let's say, the American Captain Kirk?

As the pulp magazines became more successful and more popular in the US, the types of stories and the heroes who populated them became more varied. The hero might be an aviator, a soldier of fortune, an explorer, a Royal Canadian Mounted Policeman, an FBI agent, a reporter, a pirate, a doctor, or a magician. You name it. But most of them were Western gunslingers at heart.

Then came radio.

[music: Rossini, Overture from *William Tell*]

Remember when I talked about the evolution of radio programs, back in episodes 308 and 309? You'll recall that in the Twenties, during radio's early days, there was a great demand for programming.

In 1915, Street and Smith began publishing *Detective Story Magazine*, which published...well, you don't need me to tell you. *Detective Story Magazine* thrived. It became so popular that it went to a weekly publication schedule, rather than monthly, which was more common for pulp

magazines. In 1929, Street and Smith got the idea of presenting stories from this magazine on the radio. The show began with the unwieldy name *Street and Smith's Detective Story Magazine Hour*, and was initially conceived as a way to boost sales of the magazine.

At first, the program consisted of nothing more than a male actor giving a dramatic reading of a story from the magazine in a sinister voice. Soon after the program premiered, Street and Smith's advertising agency suggested the narrator himself be a mysterious character. After batting around a number of possible names, they settled on The Shadow.

The Shadow, who appeared on the show every week, attracted more audience interest than the stories he read. In 1931, the show was revamped and The Shadow became the protagonist of the stories, which were described as taken "from The Shadow's private annals." Street and Smith began a pulp magazine dedicated exclusively to the adventures of this single character, called *The Shadow Magazine*.

The Shadow was a human being, but he had some supernatural abilities. Exactly who he was and what he could do varied over the run of the radio show and the magazine, but he was always a shrewd detective, skilled in firearms and hand-to-hand combat, and supernaturally stealthy. This was sometimes explained as him having the psychic power to make himself unseen by other people, except for his shadow, because that's why they call him The Shadow, don't you know. And The Shadow had a secret identity, which also varied, but most often he was millionaire playboy Lamont Cranston. The Shadow, sometimes aided by a circle of associates, fought evildoers, and you may recall I mentioned previously that for one season, the character was portrayed by Orson Welles.

Every episode began with "Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows!" This line is still well known in American culture today, even by people who otherwise know nothing about the radio show. Less well known is his closing line, "The weed of crime bears bitter fruit! Crime does not pay...The Shadow knows!"

The Shadow may have been inspired in part by an older pulp magazine hero, created in 1919, called Zorro, which is Spanish for *fox*. Zorro is a masked hero living in Alta California, back in the days when it was a Mexican territory. He dresses in black, with a flowing black Spanish cape and black Cordovan sombrero, wears a black mask, and operates mostly by night, defending the common people and indigenous people, usually against the tyrannical excesses of the local government. He does not have superhuman powers, but he is an uncommonly skilled acrobat and sword fighter; his preferred weapon is the rapier, which he also uses to carve the letter Z as his calling card. Zorro also has a secret identity: by day he is Don Diego de la Vega, the young son of the wealthiest landowner in California. In order to avert suspicion, Don Diego conceals his fighting skills, pretending to be a coward and a wimp.

Film stars Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford chose Zorro as the subject for the first motion picture they would perform for their new studio, United Artists, in 1920. The film was titled *The*

Mark of Zorro, with Fairbanks in the title role. It was a big success, and the character became popular. He appeared in numerous short stories, novels, films, and in radio and television programs.

Zorro began a trend in masked heroes in pulp fiction and on radio, including The Black Bat, who first appeared in a pulp magazine in 1933. By day, he was an assistant district attorney who was believed to be blind, by night a crime fighter not afraid to mete out his own punishments when the law failed. In 1936, another masked crime fighter debuted on radio, The Green Hornet, who dressed in a green overcoat and green fedora, and wore a green mask. By day, he was a wealthy newspaper publisher named Britt Reid; by night he fought crime, ably assisted by his Asian valet, Kato—who is Japanese, maybe?—who also drove their sophisticated car, called Black Beauty.

There were other, less popular, masked crime fighters on the radio and in the pulps during the Thirties. I won't trouble you with them, but the most popular and well known of them all is undoubtedly The Lone Ranger, who first appeared on radio in 1933, and later in television and motion pictures. The Lone Ranger is a Western featuring the titular masked character, who was the only survivor of a group of six Texas Rangers who fell victim to an ambush. He was left for dead, but discovered and nursed back to health by the man who became his partner, an indigenous man named Tonto, who gave the Ranger a name in his own language, Kemo Sabe, which supposedly means "trusty scout." The Lone Ranger is also a crusader for justice. He lives by a strict moral code. He keeps his identity secret and doesn't call himself The Lone Ranger; only other people do. He uses a silver bullet as his calling card, and famously, when he leaves the scene after righting wrongs, one of the beneficiaries of his intervention typically asks, "Who was that masked man?"

I've already mentioned writer and journalist H.L. Mencken a few times on the podcast, and I told you that in the early Twenties Mencken and his business partner owned and edited a glossy magazine called *The Smart Set*, which published fiction and non-fiction aimed at an upscale market. *The Smart Set* was never very profitable, so Mencken came up with the idea of publishing a pulp fiction magazine on the side, one that might earn some money and help keep *The Smart Set* in business. Mencken took note of Street and Smith's successful *Detective Story Magazine* and decided on his own mystery magazine, which would be called *The Black Mask*.

The Black Mask cost Mencken and his associates \$600 to launch. It was successful, but Mencken and company never liked the magazine. After eight issues, they sold it for \$12,500, a handsome profit.

By the way, Mencken sold *The Smart Set* as well. That magazine folded in 1930, a victim of the Great Depression, but *The Black Mask* thrived. At first, the characters that inhabited its mystery stories were upper class. They had maids and chauffeurs and country homes. But out in the real world of the 1920s, Prohibition was in force, and it had brought with it organized crime and

corrupt cops. In 1923, a young writer named Carroll John Daly began selling stories to *The Black Mask* that were told in an entirely different register. His detective narrated his own stories. He was tough, experienced, cynical, cold blooded, and had a narrative voice to match. His name was Race Williams, and he described himself like this: “I’m what you might call a middleman—just a half-way house between the cops and the crooks...I do a little honest shooting once in a while—just in the way of business—but I never bumped off a guy what didn’t need it.”

Race Williams was one of the most popular pulp fiction characters in the Twenties, and Carroll John Daly had devised a whole new kind of character: the hard-boiled detective.

Daly invented the character type, but left it to more skillful writers to flesh it out. The writer who turned the hard-boiled detective into a complex, nuanced character was Dashiell Hammett, who began selling stories to *The Black Mask* at about the same time. His first stories were told in the first person by a private detective who never gave his name. He worked for the Continental Detective Agency in San Francisco, so he became known as the “Continental Op.”

Hammett had himself worked for the Pinkerton Detective Agency, so he knew the business first hand, and it showed in his stories, as when the Continental Op remarks that “Ninety-nine percent of detective work is a patient collecting of details.”

Dashiell Hammett’s experience as a detective taught him that a real private detective does not aspire to be Sherlock Holmes, but rather, in Hammett’s words, “he wants to be a hard and shifty fellow, able to take care of himself in any situation, able to get the best on anybody he comes in contact with, whether criminal, innocent by-stander, or client.”

In 1929, Hammett produced a mystery novel, in which the protagonist is that detective other detectives aspire to be. The novel was serialized in *The Black Mask*. It was called *The Maltese Falcon*, and this detective had a name: Sam Spade.

Hammett published just one novel and three short stories featuring Sam Spade, but the character became the archetype of the hard-boiled detective, especially after *The Maltese Falcon* was made into a motion picture in 1941, with Humphrey Bogart as Sam Spade, directed by John Huston. It was Huston’s first film. *The Maltese Falcon* became an instant classic, and Bogart’s interpretation of Hammett’s complex character navigating an intricate mystery became an archetype.

A few years after Sam Spade appeared, in 1933, at the low point of the Great Depression, a 45-year-old down-and-out businessman who was a fan of these kinds of mysteries tried his hand at writing one of his own. It was titled “Blackmailers Don’t Shoot,” he sold it to *The Black Mask*, and Raymond Chandler began a second career. Over the following six years, Chandler honed his detective protagonist, who went through various names. In 1939, Chandler published his first novel, in which he had finally settled on the detective by whom he is best known. The novel was titled *The Big Sleep*, and the detective was named Philip Marlowe.

The Big Sleep was well-received, commercially and critically, and it has made several lists of the best novels of the twentieth century. In 1946, it was adapted into a film, with Humphrey Bogart again, starring as Marlowe, and Lauren Bacall, directed by Howard Hawks.

Chandler would write six more novels featuring Philip Marlowe, notably 1940's *Farewell, My Lovely* and 1953's *The Long Good-Bye*.

I've already mentioned Edgar Rice Burroughs. He was an early pulp fiction writer, from the First World War era, in the days before pulp magazines had sorted themselves out by genre. He created John Carter of Mars in 1912, but is best remembered for the character Tarzan, who debuted in a novel, *Tarzan of the Apes*, published that same year. Tarzan was an Englishman, born to a noble family, lost in Africa as an infant and raised by apes. Because he was the progeny of the English upper class, he was smarter, stronger, and better at everything than anyone else, including the native Africans, because Burroughs was a strong believer in eugenics. Tarzan relied on these skills in a series of adventures set in Africa. Burroughs published 25 Tarzan novels in his lifetime, and the character was adapted for motion pictures many times, beginning with a silent film in 1918.

There is one final pulp fiction hero I want to talk about, another Street and Smith character. With *The Shadow* magazine selling so well, Street and Smith wanted to create another character who could support his own magazine. This character was designed by committee, and you can tell. They named him Doc Savage, described as having bronze skin and hair and resembling Clark Gable, one of the biggest film stars of the time. He debuted in 1933 in a story titled "The Man of Bronze," which became the character's nickname.

He was given the first name Clark, a reference to the film star, and became Clark Savage, Jr. Doc Savage did not have superhuman abilities, not exactly, but his back story was that he was trained by a team of scientists since his early childhood to be the best at everything. He was a doctor, a scientist, and an inventor. He was a master of disguise, an expert martial artist, and had many other remarkable abilities, as required by the plot.

He had a team of regular supporting characters who assisted him as he fought crime and threats to world peace around the globe. He was based in an office on the 86th floor of a Manhattan skyscraper, but he also maintained a secret hangar by the Hudson River, where he kept cars, boats, and airplanes available for use in his adventures. He also held a secret retreat in the far north, in the Arctic, called his Fortress of Solitude. Lester Dent, who wrote the Doc Savage stories, summarized the character as having "the clue-following ability of Sherlock Holmes, the muscular, tree-swinging ability of Tarzan, the scientific sleuthing of Craig Kennedy [he was a pulp fiction scientist-detective] and the morals of Jesus Christ."

The character clicked, and *Doc Savage Magazine* quickly became one of the best-selling pulp magazines.

[music: Rossini, Overture from *William Tell*]

The first comic books were just that. They were books containing reprints of comic strips. I told you about the development of comic strips in episode 287. Comic strips became popular, especially after the First World War, and by the Twenties, virtually every newspaper had a comics page; most had more than one.

Some fans of comic strips took to cutting out their favorite strip every day and pasting it in a scrapbook, so they would be able to read them over again. In 1911, the Chicago *American* tried a promotion: a collection of reprinted strips from the popular comic *Mutt and Jeff* could be yours in exchange for coupons clipped from the newspaper. The paper handed out 45,000 copies.

In 1929, Dell Publishing Company, a publisher of pulp magazines, produced a periodical called *The Funnies*. *The Funnies* resembled a newspaper's Sunday color comics section in tabloid format, except that it was sold as a standalone property for a nickel. *The Funnies* was not well received by the public, possibly because it too closely resembled a Sunday color comics section that readers were accustomed to receiving at no cost along with their Sunday newspaper, and it seemed they were unwilling to pay money for another comics section, even if it did contain comics you couldn't get anywhere else.

The Funnies folded, but the Eastern Color Printing Company in New York, which had printed it for Dell, began looking for another way to sell color comics. In 1933, they convinced Gulf Oil to give away a weekly collection of comic strip reprints with every fill-up at a Gulf Gas Station. *Gulf Comic Weekly* ran for thirteen weeks; Eastern followed up by arranging another promotional deal with the consumer product company Proctor & Gamble. Along the way, Eastern discovered the most economical way to print their color comic books was in eight-by-eleven-inch pages stapled together—the beginning of comic books as we know them today.

The popularity of pulp magazines did not escape their notice, and in 1934 Eastern tried marketing their comic books on newsstands for ten cents, right alongside the pulp magazines, and a phenomenon was born. Seeing an opportunity, a pulp fiction writer named Malcolm Wheeler-Nicolson formed a company called National Allied Publications to produce *New Fun*, the first comic book with all-original comics, rather than reprints of comic strips. It was a success.

Wheeler-Nicolson and his partner were well aware of the pulp fiction magazines, and noted in particular the popularity of detective stories. They conceived of a comic book that would tell detective stories and set up a second company, Detective Comics, in 1937, which published a comic book of the same name, *Detective Comics*, which would present original detective stories in comic format.

Up to now, all comic books were still organized as collections of comic strips; the artwork was arranged in horizontal lines of three or four panels. The creators at *Detective Comics* soon

realized that it was possible to change up the layout. Comic panels could be different sizes or shapes, as the story required. Artists could even devote a whole page to a sufficiently dramatic moment.

Detective Comics was doing well enough, but it suffered from a problem. In the newsstand environment, where eye-catching covers were essential to finding an audience, *Detective Comics* covers weren't very eye catching. Detectives are mostly people who look like everyone else and do ordinary things. The solution was a new comic book, with flashier stories that could inspire flashier covers. In 1938, the company began this companion comic book, an anthology magazine for action-adventure stories, and called it *Action Comics*.

If the idea behind *Action Comics* was to produce more eye-catching covers, the first issue certainly hit the mark. The cover featured a man in blue tights and a red cape, holding a car over his head and smashing it into a rock, while around him, people were fleeing in terror. But get this: the people running away are the bad guys. The man smashing the car? He is the hero.

Where did this outlandish hero come from? He came from the creative talents of two Jewish-Americans from Cleveland, Ohio, named Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. Siegel and Shuster were both—say it with me, everyone—the children of Jewish immigrants from what was then the Russian Empire.

Siegel was a budding writer with an interest in science fiction. Shuster was an artist. They met in high school in 1932. Siegel wrote and published his own amateur science fiction magazine. Shuster contributed illustrations. One of Siegel's early stories was titled "The Reign of the Superman." The title character was a sort of Frankenstein's monster, the result of a science experiment gone horribly wrong.

After high school, Siegel and Shuster worked together in an effort to launch a syndicated comic strip. After other ideas were rejected, Siegel decided to return to the Superman character, only in this iteration, he would be a hero instead of a villain. They created some sample Superman comic strips and submitted them to newspaper syndicates for consideration, but received only rejection letters in return.

While they were working on selling Superman to a syndicate, they landed their first paid work, creating comics for National Allied Publications' *New Fun* comic book, and later for *Detective Comics*. Meanwhile, their side project was going nowhere. Their proposed Superman comic strip drew seventeen rejections. United Features called it "immature." Esquire Features described Shuster's artwork as "crude." The Bell Syndicate opined that the strip lacked appeal.

Siegel and Shuster weren't particularly interested in selling Superman to a comic book, but when the syndicates turned them down, they figured something was better than nothing, while the editors at *Detective Comics* figured that Superman was ideal for the cover of their first issue, and paid Siegel and Shuster \$10 per page for 13 pages of a Superman story, \$130 in all. But the

comic book business was different from pulp magazines or newspaper syndicates. In those businesses, the artists retained rights to their work. The contract Siegel and Shuster signed with Detective Comics, on the other hand, designated Superman a “work for hire,” meaning Detective Comics owned the rights to the character.

Siegel and Shuster had already worked out most of Superman and his background by the time *Action Comics* Number One hit the newsstand. He wore tights, like a wrestler or a circus strongman, and a cape, because that made it easier for Shuster to convey movement. The tights were blue and the cape red to make the character eye catching. He was the only survivor of the planet Krypton. His father’s name was Jor-El, which is a contraction of Jerry Siegel. He was raised on Earth by human parents, and, in the mold of Samson or Hercules, had phenomenal strength, which he used to battle criminals. Like Zorro, Superman had a secret identity as an ordinary, unremarkable person named Clark Kent.

Like Clark Savage, his first name was a nod to film star Clark Gable. But Clark Kent was shy and socially awkward, quite unlike Clark Savage, or Clark Gable for that matter, but very much like Jerry Siegel. He was a newspaper reporter, because newsrooms are one of the first places to receive breaking news of a crime or disaster. At the newspaper, *The Daily Planet*, Clark Kent worked alongside a woman reporter named Lois Lane. Siegel liked the sound of “Lois and Clark.” It evoked Lewis and Clark, the American explorers of a century ago. Lois Lane was modeled on Torchy Blane, the fictional woman reporter who was the heroine of a series of Warner Brothers films of the time. Torchy Blane was a tough, wisecracking, no-nonsense reporter, “the lady bloodhound with a nose for news,” as the advertising copy went.

Lois Lane—notice the similarity in the names—was likewise a tough, no-nonsense reporter, the equal of any man, who maintained a friendly professional rivalry with Clark Kent. Clark was attracted to Lois, but his shy, awkward demeanor left her cold. Ironically, Lois was romantically drawn to the mysterious Superman and felt determined to learn more about him, never suspecting that he was the unassuming fellow who worked at the desk next to hers in the *Daily Planet* newsroom.

The character quickly drew one important critic, the publisher of Detective Comics. When he saw the cover of the first issue of *Action Comics*, he remarked, “We’re going to die with this.” To him this Superman stuff was just plain silly, and he decreed no more Superman in *Action Comics*.

As it turned out, his was the minority view. Superman captured the imaginations of boys and adolescents, a category of people who typically have no power and who were intoxicated by the thought of being so immensely strong they could do what they wanted and no one could stop them. Young people also tend to be idealistic and when confronted with the injustices and contradictions of adult society, ask why. Adults typically respond with a sigh and a

condescending, “It’s complicated.” Superman wasn’t complicated. When he saw something wrong, he acted to make it better.

Superman was absent from the next eight issues of *Action Comics*, but a funny thing was happening. Newsstand agents were reporting droves of boys asking for new Superman comics, when all they could do was shrug and say they didn’t have any. *Action Comics* Number One sold very well, but sales dropped off substantially after Superman was banned. *Action Comics* gave in. Issue ten saw Superman on the cover once again, along with a pledge that from now on, there would be a Superman story in every issue. *Action Comics* has kept that promise ever since.

Superman became a cultural phenomenon. Detective Comics spun off a *Superman* comic book, and between the two books, Superman accounted for more than 10% of the entire comic book market. Six months later, a Superman comic strip appeared at last, with twenty million daily readers in 300 newspapers. The year 1940 saw the debut of a Superman radio show. In 1941, Paramount Pictures began releasing Superman animated shorts, initially produced by Fleischer Studios. Detective Comics would begin billing itself as Superman-DC Comics, and eventually as simply DC comics.

Siegel and Shuster continued to create the Superman comic books and became increasingly frustrated when they saw how much money Superman was making and how little of it found its way to them. They complained and got paid more; by 1941 they were doing very well, thank you, though it was still work for hire.

The success of Superman led Detective Comics to search for more costumed heroes. An artist named Bob Kane took note of how much more money Siegel and Shuster were making than he was, and in collaboration with writer Milton Finger developed his own. This hero would not be an alien or super powered; he would be an ordinary human being, but then again, not so ordinary. Like Zorro, he would dress in black, with a black cape, and hunt criminals by night. Like The Shadow, he would be a mysterious, borderline supernatural figure, a threatening shadow in the dark of night, but an effete millionaire by light of day. Like Doc Savage, he would be a man of remarkable physical strength and endurance and keep a secret underground collection of cars and planes and other vehicles. He would be swashbuckling acrobat, like Douglas Fairbanks’ version of Robin Hood. And he would be a master detective with a rogues’ gallery of exotic criminal antagonists, like Dick Tracy. And he would dress like a bat.

Batman debuted in the May 1939 issue of *Detective Comics*, and afterward, there was no turning back. By the end of 1939, there were thirteen more costumed crime-fighting heroes. The year 1940 saw the introduction of an additional twenty-two. Writers and artists looked everywhere and anywhere for inspiration. Alan Scott acquired a magic ring right out of the *Thousand and One Arabian Nights*. He declared, “I must make myself a costume so bizarre that once I am seen I will never be forgotten!” He became The Green Lantern.

The science fiction magazines were always going on about “atomic” this and that, so how about a hero called “The Atom,” who can shrink to a very small size, because atoms are small, right? The Roman god Mercury inspired The Flash, who wore a winged helmet like his predecessor. The fad for ancient Egypt, mummies, and King Tut’s tomb inspired the mysterious Doctor Fate.

By 1940, there were so many superheroes that it was possible to create a team of them who fought crime in collaboration. They sat at a round table, like King Arthur and his knights, and styled themselves The Justice Society of America. This idea resonated with kids, because when kids play together, they can’t all be Superman, but they can each adopt the persona of one of the Justice Society. By the way, membership in the Justice Society was explicitly limited to heroes who did not have their own comic book, and yes they said that in the comic book, so Superman and Batman were not involved.

Superheroes were big business. But they were also a bit of a sausage-fest. Not that there weren’t female characters. There was Lois Lane, for instance, a tough, independent woman who eventually got her own daily comic strip, *Lois Lane, Girl Reporter*, in which she declared, “Now I get some stories of my own!” Lois proved tough and capable of bringing down the bad guys on her own, with no help from Superman. Batman acquired the Cat as a morally gray, sometime partner, sometime antagonist. She eventually became known as the Catwoman.

Still, there was no female superhero. In 1940, a psychologist named William Marston gave an interview in *Family Circle* magazine in which he deplored some comic characters, like Dick Tracy, but praised Superman as a character that made an excellent role model for young people. The folks at Detective Comics took note, and hired Marston as an advisor, and later as a writer.

Marston was an unusual character, with an unusual personal life. He lived with his wife, his lover, and their various children. That was pretty out there for 1940. Heck, that would be pretty out there in 2023. Marston was a feminist, one who believed that women were inherently more honest and virtuous than men and that the world would be a better place if it were ruled by them. He also lamented the lack of superhero role models for girls. With input from his wife Elizabeth, Marston created one, hoping to inspire a new generation of women leaders.

Strength was viewed as a masculine trait, Marston noted, even though it was not exclusively masculine, whereas virtues traditionally thought of as feminine, like kindness and caring, were often seen as the opposite of strength. In order to correct these societal misapprehensions, Marston created a female superhero. She would be as strong as Superman, but she would be beautiful, she would be caring, she would be kind. And she would explicitly present herself as an inspiration to girls. She would be introduced to the comic book world with these words, penned by Marston himself:

With a hundred times the agility and strength of our best male athletes and strongest wrestlers, she appears as though from nowhere to avenge an injustice or right a wrong!

As lovely as Aphrodite—as wise as Athena—with the speed of Mercury and the strength of Hercules—She is known only as Wonder Woman!

She would also become the secretary for the Justice Society. Oh, well. It was a beginning.

A beginning for women in comic books, but alas, we will have to stop here for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Erick and Carsten for their kind donations, and thank you to Kevin for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Erick and Carsten and Kevin help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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I'm pleased to be able to tell that a short story of mine appears in the just-released fantasy anthology, *Artifice and Craft*. It's a collection of stories about magical artifacts. The ebook is available at Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and Kobo, and I understand there will be a paperback edition as well.

Next week is a bye week for the podcast, but I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we turn to the political situation in the United States in the late Thirties. For the most part, America was preoccupied with domestic affairs during the run-up to the war, but it could hardly ignore the Second World War once it had begun. God Help Us All, in two weeks' time, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. As all this superhero craze was developing, over at Street and Smith, the creators of Doc Savage, the Man of Bronze, must have been kicking themselves for putting their creation into a pulp magazine rather than a comic book. In 1940, The Shadow and Doc Savage each got their own comic book, but by then the competition was too fierce, and they never caught on.

[music: Closing War Theme]