In *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us about Ourselves and Our Society*, Danny Fingeroth offers something unique: a work of popular comic book criticism that explores why comic book superheroes have continued to matter so much to so many of us over the past several decades, and why characters such as Batman, Spider-Man, and Superman have not only entered into popular consciousness, but, moreover, remained so firmly rooted there. Though Fingeroth doesn't offer much that's really revolutionary or new in the way of insight or knowledge into what might be best termed "superhero psychology," nor, for that matter, does he probe too forcefully at the boundaries of our concepts and understandings of what superheroes are or the underlying factors of the cultural
phenomena that has surrounded them, he's nevertheless written a sharp and entertaining study that manages to be easily approachable for both general and academic readers alike without sacrificing anything in the way of respect for its subject. This is owed in part, certainly, to the fact that Fingeroth is not approaching his subject from a strictly academic perspective but, rather, from that of a comic book professional and, even more so, as a true and unadulterated lover of superhero comics.

2. One of the most interesting and relevant aspects of the book is the brief history of the standard comic book superhero psyche that Fingeroth provides in the first two chapters. Fingeroth starts off by offering something of a definition as to what constitutes a superhero. Defined broadly, "a hero is someone who rises above his or her fears and limitations to achieve something extraordinary … a hero embodies what we believe is best in ourselves" (14). But, as Fingeroth well knows, this definition is applicable to most heroic figures, whether they're entirely fictional heroes such as Batman or Superman who live in a world that is quite obviously not our own, or "real world" firefighters who go storming into burning buildings on a regular basis fully aware that they could be maimed or killed. Yet, as Fingeroth points out, there is a clearly discernable difference between a "hero" per se and what we tend to consider to be a "superhero." Superheroes, Fingeroth argues, are "individuals with fantastic powers … as well as people who fight their battles with advanced technology … or people who are just plain brave/crazy/lucky," (16) in short, heroes who, for all purposes, cannot possibly exist in our own world. Whether they're super-powered aliens, lone vigilantes, or teenage sidekicks, all superheroes share certain characteristics in common, "some sort of strength of character (though it may be buried), some system of positive values, and a determination to, no matter what, protect those values … the superhero-more than even the ordinary fictional hero-has to represent the values of the society that produces him" (17).

3. Unlike ordinary fictional heroes, superheroes must have abilities that normal people do not and, even more importantly, cannot have, even if they do not have any actual "super powers." "Even the 'real world' heroes of our popular culture seems to operate on planes where various kinds of magic are at work," (32) Fingeroth claims, for even a superhero such as Batman, who certainly fits into the "just plain brave/crazy/lucky" category, "is bigger than life and displays superhuman characteristics," (32) and whose stories are not entirely unlike the "tall tales of characters such as John Henry, Paul Bunyon, and Buffalo Bill" (33). Fingeroth suggests that "it's a matter of incremental leaps" from those types of stories "to the next levels" (33) of heroic stories, namely those of the superhero. According to him, the main difference between those types of heroes and superheroes is simple-immortality. A superhero must, by definition, be virtually ageless and immortal, capable of rising from the grave even after being killed (or, for that matter, canceled). Not only are superheroes unable to die, but they also can not retire, quit, or decide to radically change themselves in any fashion (be it their costume, general appearance, or disposition). Superheroes must remain, to a large and significant measure, forever static. Sure, as readily Fingeroth acknowledges, some "permanent" changes do seem to have occurred in popular superhero narratives over the years. Superman and Lois Lane have gotten married,
as have Spider-Man and Mary Jane Watson, and Dick Grayson has retired from being Robin. But these changes, as Fingeroth claims, "are merely the illusion of change . . . they could be classified as actual changes, but they are the exception rather than the rule" (34). Indeed, every dramatic change in most every superhero narrative is eventually undone—even Captain America's long dead former sidekick Bucky Barnes has recently returned from the dead (at least seemingly), as has Jason Todd, the second, and infamously murdered, Robin. Superman has also died and returned; Green Lantern (the Hal Jordan version) has turned evil, committed genocide, died, been resurrected, redeemed and returned to his original status quo (though it took the better part of ten years for all of that to happen); Spider-Man has retired, been replaced by a clone of himself, and then returned as if nothing significant had actually occurred; the list goes on and on. And someday, certainly, Superman and Lois will no longer be married and Spider-Man will once again be single. That's simply the way comic book superheroes work—nothing is ever permanent. In superhero stories, everything is possible while nothing is possibly permanent.

4. Fingeroth argues that the nature of a great story involves, at least in a traditional respect, "characters com[ing] into conflict-physical and psychic-and through dealing with that conflict grow and change. Ishmael is a different character at the conclusion of Moby-Dick from what he was at the beginning. Tom Joad is a different character at the beginning of The Grapes of Wrath from what he is at the ending" (34). But can it be said that superheroes change and develop in any significant way over the course of their narratives? Can superheroes actually grow and mature? No, not really, Fingeroth claims, for such would involve closure and some measure of significant transition, and after all, "too many real people's dreams… too many real people's incomes … depend on the heroes staying evergreen" (36). Unlike characters in closed fictions who must shift over the course of a story that must ultimately conclude, the relationships that develop between readers and serial comic book characters "never have to end" (36). Superheroes and their worlds are ultimately permanent and stable, which, as Fingeroth argues, serve as dramatic counters to the very nature of our own world, for the lives of our superheroes "will transcend that of any actor or writer or artist-or audience member … we achieve immortality through the superheroes," (37) which explains at least some aspect of their eternal appeal to mass audiences. We can always trust that everything will work out in superhero comic universes—that death will never truly come knocking, that oblivion will never finally arrive. In this respect, I suppose we might consider superhero universes to be examples of the impossible: closed, unified systems in which order seems to always trump chaos.

5. Yet if change doesn't occur in superhero narratives, what makes their stories often so stimulating and, at times, so great? Don't they, as Fingeroth suggests, violate the primary rule of great storytelling? Perhaps, but, as Fingeroth argues, superheroes and their stories also embody everything that our own world lacks, and operate on the rather naïve principle that "someone … must always intervene in the domestic and global squabbles that comprise human existence. We can't do it on our own" (156). Though I don't doubt that there's some genuine truth to this concept, I can't help thinking that there's another dimension to this issue that
Fingeroth is neglecting, some other significant element of our attraction to superhero narratives despite their inherently static and downright unrealistic nature. In being forever caught in such a static, closed systems, I wonder if superhero narratives actually offer us something of a reflection of the nature of our own reality. Though our own world seems to be governed by sudden and cataclysmic and traumatic changes, there's also, at the same time, often a sense of wearing mendacity to reality, leading us to often feel as if our own lives are eternally static, that we're living in a reality that continues to repeat itself with little adjustment or change. Like Batman, Superman, and Spider-Man, we're often forced to face the same worries, pressures, and dangers on a day to day basis, month after month, year after year, usually with little hint or hope for possible change. I wonder if part of what draws us to superheroes is the fact that they never seem to bend under weariness, that they never fully surrender or die, if, perhaps, they serve as metaphors for our own gumption and fortitude, or, at the very least, as metaphors for our very condition, fighting, as we so often do, various never-ending battles, whether it be stopping a madman from poisoning the city reservoir, or, perhaps more realistically, steering a bus down the same street everyday, or grading endless piles of student essays. It seems remarkable that every hero that seems to enter into public consciousness has experienced some significant form of trauma in his or her life that has practically defined them, a trauma that serves to motivate them in their lives as superheroes (Batman and Spider-Man serve, of course, as the perfect examples), traumas to which they are, and will always be, unable to reconcile themselves or fully resolve. But though both Batman and Spider-Man will, out of necessity, never be able to reconcile their respective traumas, they do, in fact, manage to live with them. I wonder if this is another aspect of what endears superheroes to us, the fact that they, in a Becketian fashion, always "go on" even despite their occasional protests to the contrary (how many times have either Batman or Spider-Man hung up their costumes for good only to put them back again, often in the same issue or page?) and despite their own turmoil and doubt. Perhaps superheroes serve as grand metaphors for our own endurance in the midst of the apparent absurdity and impossibility of existence.

6. I'm surprised that Fingeroth makes only passing references to what can be best termed the deconstructionist movement in popular superhero narratives as seen in such recent books such as Kingdom Come, The Authority and Planetary (to name only a couple), as well as some older books from the late Silver-Age, such as Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' Watchmen, Frank Miller's The Dark Knight Returns and Batman: Year One, all of which have actively called not only the role of the superhero into question, but also our own relationship to them as readers. Fingeroth argues, though, that the character founds in these deconstructive books are "not what the general public thinks of as superheroes," (157) which, I suppose, is true to some measure. After all, it's doubtful that most people on the street could name any members of the Watchmen or Planetary lineups. Still, Frank Miller's decidedly deconstructive visions of Batman has had a tremendous influence on both Tim Burton's Batman films and Christopher Nolan's recent Batman Begins, undoubtedly the versions of the Batman character that the public is now most familiar with. In this respect, can it not be said superheroes can and do, in fact, change, despite Fingeroth's suggestions to the contrary? After all, the Batman
featured in *Batman Begins* bears hardly any resemblance to the Batman seen in the TV show in the '60s. Moreover, the Batman that first appeared in the late 30s (with a gun attached to his hip no less), bears only a passing resemblance to the Batman found in current comics continuity. Changes do occur for superheroes, but on a wider social and cultural scale than Fingeroth considers. He suggests, interestingly, that this deconstructive movement actually began in the early 60s with Stan Lee's books at Marvel Comics, after which "it became de rigueur for characters to question their reasons for existing" (156). In that respect, the self-consciousness and anxieties of such early 60s Marvel characters as Spider-Man, The Hulk, and the X-men can be seen as having ushered in an entirely new breed of superheroes that were quite unlike the virtually infallible and all-powerful superheroes that had come before, a breed of superhero that served to completely shift the superhero paradigm and the manner in which the public perceived and incorporated them.

7. Though Fingeroth readily admits that there is "much objectivity in the creation of *Superman on the Couch*," (172) as, of course, we would well expect there to be, his primary area of interest and expertise here is in the psychology of Spider-Man. This is hardly surprising, given the fact that he ran Marvel's Spider-Man line for a number of years, wrote a number of Spider-Man books, and worked as a consultant on Fox's Spider-Man animated series in the mid-90s. He knows the character and his history quite well, and, indeed, offers more insight into his psyche (so to speak) and, moreover, his cultural relevance than I for one had ever considered. Fingeroth argues that Spider-Man "[broke] the mold of the teen hero, in ways both subtle and obvious" (145). Spider-Man was created in the early 60s, a time when "kids wanted to read less about kids . . . and more about what they would eventually become: teenagers." (145) Now, he claims, "so many characters have built upon and outright swiped from Spider-Man, that his shifting of the paradigm of what defines a superhero-teenage or otherwise-is taken from granted, which is always the mark of a sea-change character" (146). Spider-Man, as compared to the superheroes who preceded him, is not by any means perfect, but, rather is a hero readers have always been able to easily identify with, whose plights, despite taking place in a radically different reality than ours, tends to reflect are our own. Spider-Man is, as he's always been, a superhero readers can envisage themselves being. "After Spider-Man," Fingeroth suggests, "there was really, in many ways, nowhere for the superhero to go," (147) nowhere, that is, as Fingeroth neglects to fully realize, but further inward. That's where the deconstructive movement in the modern superhero narrative truly kicks in. After Spider-Man, superheroes were forced turned even further inward, to the point that many recent superheroes have seemed to become virtually self-conscious of themselves and their predecessors in the genre, as evidenced in books such as *The Authority*, *Powers*, and *Planetary*.

8. My biggest complaint about Fingeroth's book is that it suffers from a lack of scholarly rigor. Granted, Fingeroth is not writing for an academic audience readily familiar with the ins-and-outs of James Hillman and the various other post-Jungians (which, I think, is a good thing), nor is it necessary for Fingeroth to have delved into the particulars of Freudian psychology. After all, as Fingeroth writes, "you don't have to be Sigmund Freud to figure out that the fantasy of the
superhero involves empowerment" (119) to explore the inner workings of superheroes. It's just that the scholarship and research that he does offer seems, at a number of points, to be somewhat stitched together and forced. Many of the sources he draws from are only recounted second-hand, and are used scantily at best. Fingeroth has a terrific ability to synthesize and clearly explicate relatively complex material in a fairly simple and straightforward fashion. If he'd only borrowed a bit more generously from some of the principles of psychoanalytic theory, if even in a very general sense, he would have only provided further credence to his points and further demonstrated the cultural relevancy of these characters and stories.

9. All in all, Danny Fingeroth has written an important, all be it a somewhat imperfect, book that serves to adequately defend superhero comics again the charges of being either simple adolescent, male power fantasies, or, for that matter, perverted escapades intended to corrupt the minds of young readers everywhere, that have been leveled against them over the years. Fingeroth recognizes, and at a number of points well demonstrates, that superhero comics are, indeed, important cultural artifacts that deserve our critical attention.

10. All misgivings aside, this book is recommended. Just be sure to remember that what Fingeroth is pointing us toward here is only the tip of the proverbial iceberg. There is still far more to be considered about comic book superheroes and their relation to culture. Fingeroth, though, has provided us with a strong point from which we might begin.

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