COMIC BOOK
SUPERHEROES:
UNMASKED

(First broadcast on American television, History Channel, in June 2003)

RECORDED AND DOCUMENTED BY

SIMON SIMPSON
Michael Chabon

(Author, “The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay”):

“Superman comes from this other place to America; he can never go back there, it’s been destroyed. Very much as the Europe that especially the European Jews left behind was eventually destroyed.

“He is adopted by this ultimate American couple. He leaves behind the vaguely sounding Kal-El, and becomes Clark Kent. The ultimate American. Even if you don’t look at him as an allegory of the immigrant, he is an immigrant, he did come to America and he did make good.”

Narrator (Keith David):

“Superman’s secret identity was an especially potent fantasy for the primary readers of comic books, boys. They were powerless like Clark Kent, but inside they dreamed that they were invincible heroes. Soon it seemed like the whole country was caught up in the fantasy.
He says, ‘That’s good, that’s good. What else?’ I said, ‘Well, he wears gloves.’ ‘Oh,’ he says, ‘go with that! That’s good.’ (Chuckles) So anyway, that was how the Spirit got a costume.”

Narrator (Keith David):

“By 1940, costumed superheroes were flooding the newsstands. At D.C., Superman and Batman were joined by the Flash, Hawkman, Green Lantern and more. Rival companies offered Catman, Bulletman and scores of others. D.C. was the biggest comic book publisher. But, there were more than a dozen competitors. One was Timely Comics, which would one day be known as Marvel.”

Jim Steranko

(Author, “History of Comics”):

“D.C. Comics were certainly better drawn and better written, but the Timely books seem to embrace more mavericks and wilder ideas.”
knew that their magazines were read almost exclusively by children.”

Paul Levitz

(President and Publisher, D.C. Comics):

“Kids began reading comics as soon as they could read. It was the first purchase you made yourself, except for Avia, pack of gum, or penny candy.”

Narrator (Keith David):

“So instead of getting more mature, superheroes began changing to better reflect the juvenile market. To make Batman more appealing to kids, his creators transformed him from a weird avenger of evil, into a father figure.

“They invented Dick Grayson, a young acrobat who like Batman, sees his parents murdered. Batman takes the boy under his wing, and comic’s first kid-sidekick Robin, the Boy Wonder is born. The theory was that young readers would identify young heroes. And in fact, Batman sales doubled after the introduction of Robin.”
Narrator (Keith David):

“The legal battle lasted 12 years, until 1953 when Fawcett finally agreed to stop publishing Captain Marvel. Readers at the time weren’t aware of the battle between Superman and Captain Marvel. To kids, there was room enough on the newsstands for both, and more. Superhero fantasies were a new wave for readers to deal with realities of the Depression. Now, an even bigger challenge would just be over the horizon. The superheroes would be going to war.”

Stan Lee
(Chairman Emeritus, Marvel Comics):

“We were fighting Hitler, before our Government was fighting Hitler.”
Narrator (Keith David):

“Simon and Kirby occasionally mixed action with political prophesy. In the spring of 1941, Cap’ and Bucky stop an unnamed Asian power from destroying the U.S. Pacific Fleet. Seven months before Pearl Harbour was attacked. When the Japanese actually did cripple that same fleet, Captain America’s wrath echoed the nations. With war declared, the men in tights cast all restraint to the winds.”

Michael Chabon

(Author, “The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay)

“The superheroes went off to war with great gusto. Week after week, month after month, just pounding the hell out of the Nazis!”

Stan Lee

(Chairman Emeritus, Marvel Comics):

“The stories had so much pro-American propaganda that you’d almost think that they were subsidized the government, but it was just, we felt we had to do that.”
Narrator (Keith David):

“In 1956, Editor Julius Schwartz oversaw the creation of the Flash, a sleek modern version of the fastest hero of the ‘40’s. D.C. had found new success with science fiction updates of old characters. Green Lantern, Hawkman and the Atom. Meanwhile, on a golf course in New York, comic book history was about to change forever.”

Stan Lee

(Chairman Emeritus, Marvel Comics):

“My publisher, Martin Goodman, played golf with the publisher of D.C. Comics.”

Michael Chabon

(Author, “The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay”):

“At least the legend is that the publisher of D.C. Comics said, ‘You know we’ve actually had some luck with these superheroes.’”

Narrator (Keith David):

“When the new and old heroes joined forces as the Justice League of America, the series provided D.C. with a new
successful title. While D.C. was on a roll, this was not the case at Martin Goodman’s company where writers and artists were turning out little morality tales, featuring giant monsters. And they were tired of it.”

Stan Lee
(Chairman Emeritus, Marvel Comics):

“I would make up a name, like ‘Gru’, or ‘Mongor’, or anything that was as sound and Jack would make a story out of it, anyway he wanted. And I’d put in the insipid copy.”

Narrator (Keith David):

“Then Martin Goodman came back from his golf game with tales of the Justice League sales.”

Stan Lee
(Chairman Emeritus, Marvel Comics):

“‘Stan, I want you to make up a group of heroes, ‘cause I think that’s what’s selling today.’”
the bad guys. They were able to do this simply saying the army is trying to do what it thinks is best. It just happens to be a little misinformed in this case.”

Stan Lee
(Chairman Emeritus, Marvel Comics):

“The Hulk looked like a menace! He looked like a monster!”

Bradford Wright
(Author, “Comic Book Nation”):

“There was nobody else who understood him, except the teenager whose life he saved with chance. The teenager understands, but the world doesn’t understand.”

Narrator (Keith David):

“Characters like the Hulk, struck a chord with a new generation of readers who were growing up, questioning authority.”
a suit jumping off the building, there’s somebody inside of that suit that you care about.”

Narrator (Keith David):

“D.C. heroes like Superman and Batman acted like the readers parents. Marvel heroes often acted like the readers. To some extent, this was true. Even back in the 40’s.”

Michael Chabon

(Author, “The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay)

“At that time, the world view presented in D.C. books was a much simpler, easier to understand kind of world view. Superman was good, Lex Luthor was evil. As I got older and more sophisticated, ten, eleven, I started to look for greater degrees of ambiguity in my characters. And that meant that it was time to graduate to Marvel Comics.”
Denny O’Neil
(Retired Editor and Freelance Writer):

“D.C. was the old establishment company, Marvel was the upstart that led people to believe there was a rivalry, and there became a rivalry when Marvel started outselling D.C., and then it became very real in terms of good old bottom line.”

Narrator (Keith David):

“One of Marvels boldest moves came in 1964, when Stan Lee and artist Jack Kirby brought back Captain America, Timely’s World War II hero whom Kirby had co-created, readers were told that Captain America had been frozen in ice for twenty years. And shockingly, his kid-sidekick Bucky had been killed in action. The infallible, one-dimensional hero of World War II blamed himself for his partner’s death. And in between fights, Captain America brooded like a Star Spangled Hamlet.”

Stan Lee
(Chairman Emeritus, Marvel Comics):

“He felt he didn’t belong to our age. He was as I say an anachronism. He
years. O’Neil and Adams had saved the character from the clutches of camp. But, their next resurrection job would involve more than stylistic change. O’Neil and Adams were about to bring social commentary to comics in a radical new way.

“D.C. editor Julius Schwartz thought putting more messages in the adventures of Green Lantern might save the book from cancellation.”

Denny O’Neil
(Retired Editor and Freelance Writer):

“So let’s try it. Let’s see if we can start using as a springboard what’s-happening-in-the-newspapers.”

Narrator (Keith David):

“Green Lantern was hero with a lot of power, but no personality. A test pilot inducted in a cosmic police force, he uses his power-ring to fight supervillains and creatures from outer space.”
the X-Men didn’t always deal with specific political issues, but they were relevant in a broader sense.”

Stan Lee
(Chairman Emeritus, Marvel Comics):

“The X-Men are very relevant because above and beyond everything else, it’s a story of bigotry. Of these people who are hated because they’re different, even though they’re good. And they’re trying to help the world. I mean there’s almost a little bit of a Jesus Christ feeling in there.”

Michael Chabon
(Author, “The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay”):

“The X-Men are sort of the most consciously, deliberately and successfully metaphorical of any comic book superhero.”

Narrator (Keith David):

“The X-Men are a team of teenage mutants. Each born with a superpower that manifests around puberty.”
“Even Frank Miller felt he could do more. His next project – a four issue fantasy of the future – The Dark Knight Returns. It pits an aging Batman against psychotic foes and a corrupt society.”

Frank Miller

(Writer/Artist, “The Dark Knight Returns”):

“I just wanted to do this older Batman, and then to make him really nasty. I thought, what better way than to bring out bad-ass than to have him be the Dirty Harry out there? The guy that nobody likes?”

“For Millers Batman, the biggest problem isn’t the Joker, but Superman. A well-meaning boy scout in thrall to Ronald Reagan, conducting one man’s secret wars in Central America. Superman and Batman had been friends since 1940, but weren’t after 1986.”
former Batman writers saying I’ve ‘ruined their character.’”

Neil Gaiman
(Writer, “The Sandman”):

“Dark Knight has been accused of being a pro-fascist vision. I mean, that doesn’t make it any less interesting as a work of art. Nor does it say, particularly that’s a sign that Frank comes down on.”

Frank Miller
(Writer/A rtist, “The Dark Knight Returns”):

“I think my stuff is kind of jolly, but that’s just me.”

Mike Richardson
(President, Dark Horse Comics):

“The Watchmen and Batman: The Dark Knight Returns. There were two watershed books of that period. I think it was a good thing and a bad thing. I think that, even though those works are both brilliant works, the traditional innocence of superheroes went out of the market at that point.”
Narrator (Keith David):

“D.C. received 10,614 calls. The verdict – death, by 72 votes. When the mainstream press got wind of this, they were outraged.”

Denny O’Neil

(Retired Editor and Freelance Writer):

“I think most people thought it was Dick Grayson, people had an emotional investment in Robin, even if they hadn’t seen a comic book in twenty years. I used to have a little Batman symbol on my jacket lapel. I went into a 5th Avenue deli to buy a tuna-fish sandwich and the guy looked at that and asked who I was. And I said, ‘I edit Batman.’ And he said, ‘Hey, this is the guy that killed Robin!’”

Narrator (Keith David):

“Batman later found a third Robin. A nice kid named Tim Drake, whom fans did accept. But the death of Jason Todd continues to haunt Batman. And Denny O’Neil.”
Joe Quesada
(Editor-in-Chief, Marvel Comics):

“There was a point in the early 90’s where comic book creators, writers, artists, publishers were all becoming millionaires.”

Narrator (Keith David):

“Because comics were now sold in specialty shops, it was easier for publishers to put out one-shot issues that weren’t necessarily part of the heroes’ regular storylines. These were called graphic novels, which sounded more impressive than comic books. Occasionally, the stories were openly political. By the early 90’s, some politicians saw these graphic novels as a way of embracing or promoting controversial issues.

“A 1993 anti-handgun story from D.C. had politicians rallying around Batman, to help raise awareness for stricter gun laws.”
hoped that they’d one day be worth as the collector’s items from the 1940’s.”

Joe Quesada  
(Editor-in-Chief, Marvel Comics):

“And then the greed factor sort of set in with every publisher, where, you know, they started producing alternate covers. Special editions.”

Narrator (Keith David):

“Sales went through the roof and into space.”

Joe Quesada  
(Editor-in-Chief, Marvel Comics):

“Some books were selling like 6 million copies, when they were only half a million readers. But these half a million readers were all buying two and three, and four editions of this particular book.”
Narrator (Keith David):

“But sometimes, comics have anticipated reality. No one could have imagined September 11th, unless they read comic books.”

Bradford Wright

(Author, “Comic Book Nation”):

“Osama Bin Laden’s plan was to create so much chaos and so much destruction that there would be a general war and that Islamic fundamentalist or Islamic movements would take over governments and countries. Even the United States. And when I heard that, it sounded like a comic book plot. It sounded like something Dr. Doom would do, going to create chaos and take over the world. Unfortunately, the real world looks more like a comic book world than ever before.”

Joe Quesada

(Editor-in-Chief, Marvel Comics):

“No longer are two 110 storey buildings falling to the ground a stuff of fantasy, we felt it... in New York when it fell. I felt the ground tremble.”
only way I could do is to have Superman in the wreckage of Metropolis, finding a lock of Lois Lane, and finding out the love of his life is dead. And then move on. (Clears throat)"

Narrator (Keith David):

“Marvel, D.C., Dark Horse and Image put out commemorative comics that raised millions of dollars for the 9/11 victims and their families. Jim Steranko created a fundraising poster that recalled the glory days of World War II. When the superheroes were enthusiastically united against a common enemy. 21st century comic books had none of that.”

Stan Lee
(Chairman Emeritus, Marvel Comics):

“I think it would be too corny and it would be in bad taste, to have a cartoon figure punching a Muslim and saying, ‘We’ll get you!’ No. That wouldn’t work today, I think.”

Narrator (Keith David):

“A superheroes job isn’t mourning the dead, its fighting evil. And when your name is Captain America, and your