

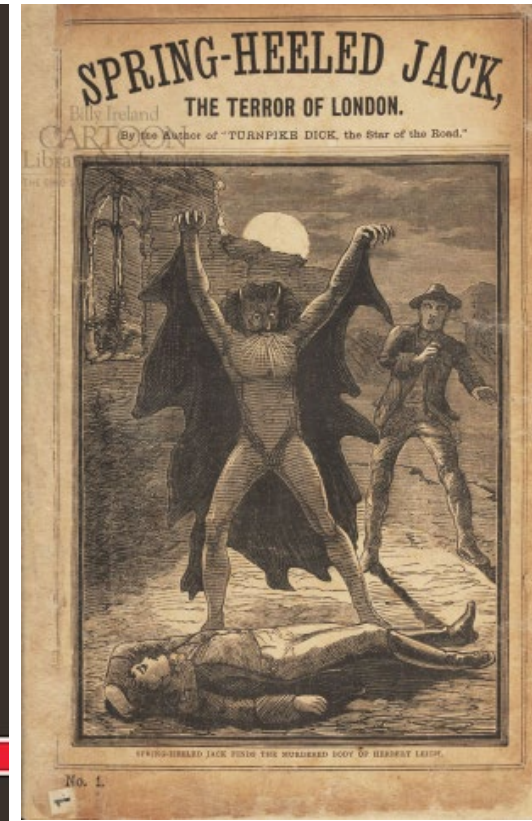
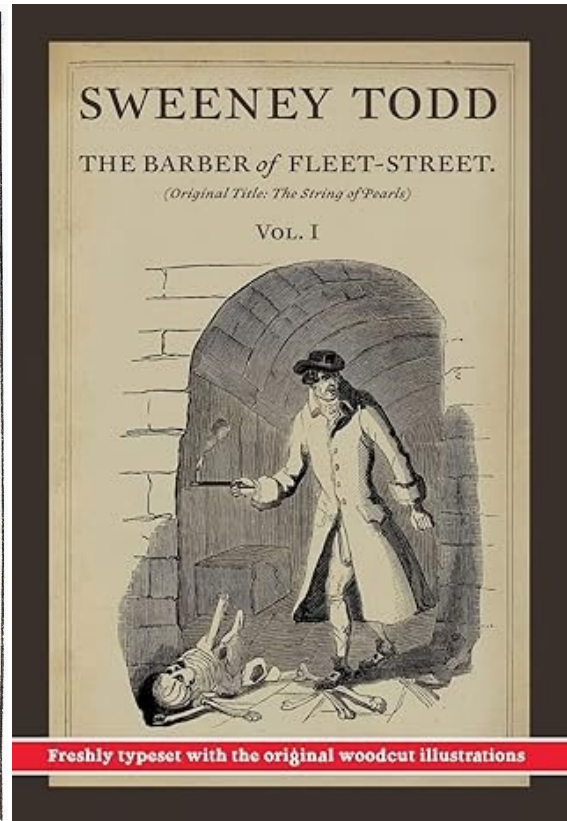
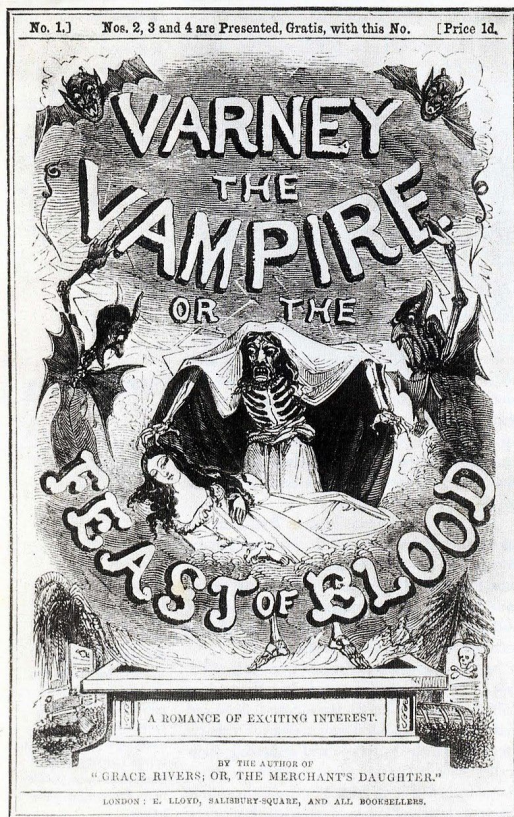
# A SURPRISING HISTORY OF SUPERHEROES (AND SUPERVILLAINS!)

PRESENTED BY DR. MEGAN BRYAN,  
PHD IN ENGLISH FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF YORK, UK

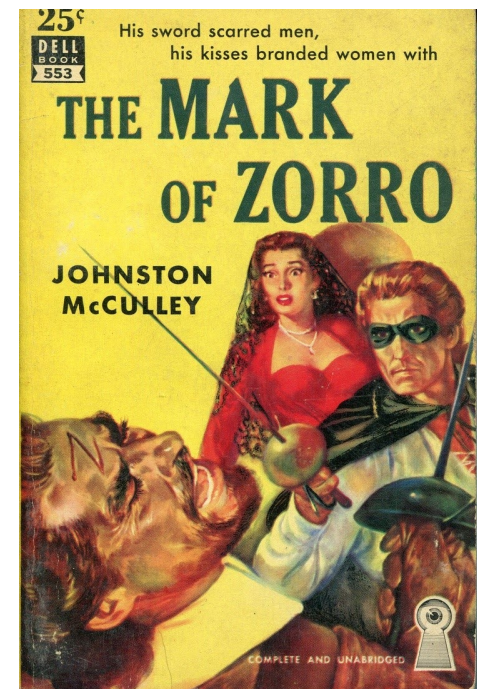
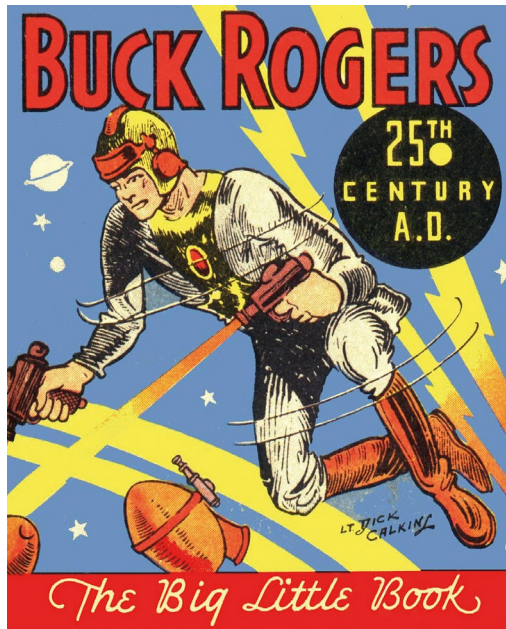


# WHAT IS A PENNY DREADFUL?

- “An expressive term for those penny publications which depend more upon sensationalism than upon merit, artistic or literary, for success.” – John Camden Hotten, *The Slang Dictionary, or the Vulgar Words, Street Phrases and “Fast” Expressions of High and Low Society*, 1874.
- AKA “Penny Bloods” – Promised “a penny’s worth of blood in every issue.”
- Multiple issues with familiar figures to tell loosely plotted story, similar to comics today.



# PULP FICTION



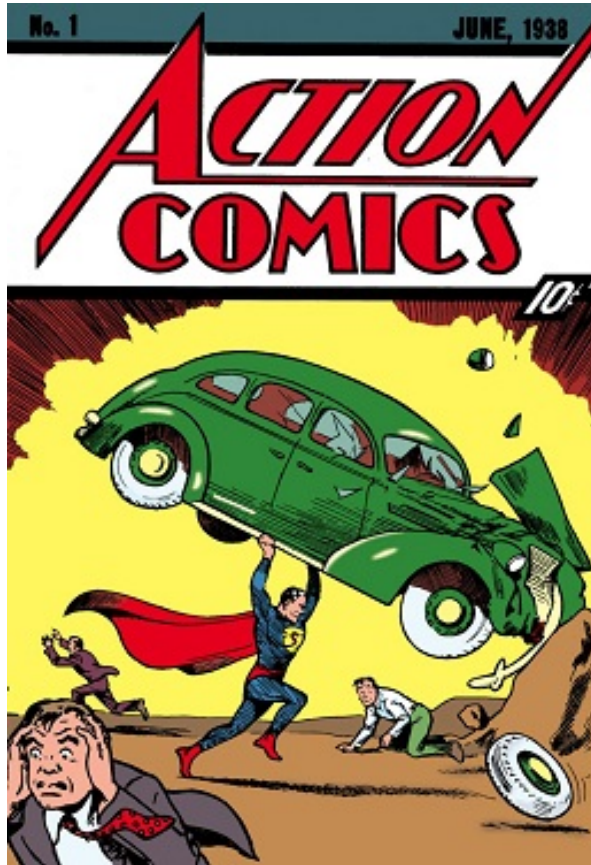
# NEW FORMS OF MEDIA



Radio and movies became the dominating forms of mass entertainment, later joined by television

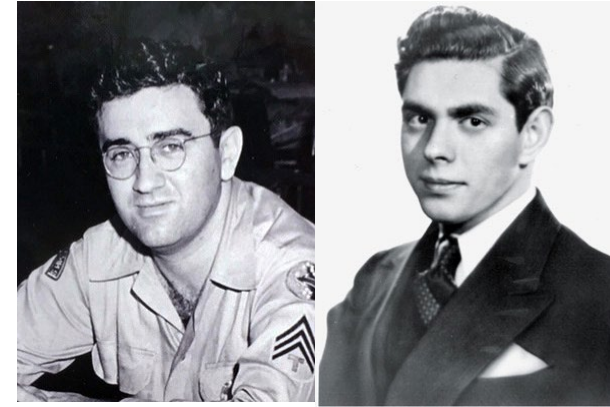


# THE ONE THAT STARTED THE GOLDEN AGE

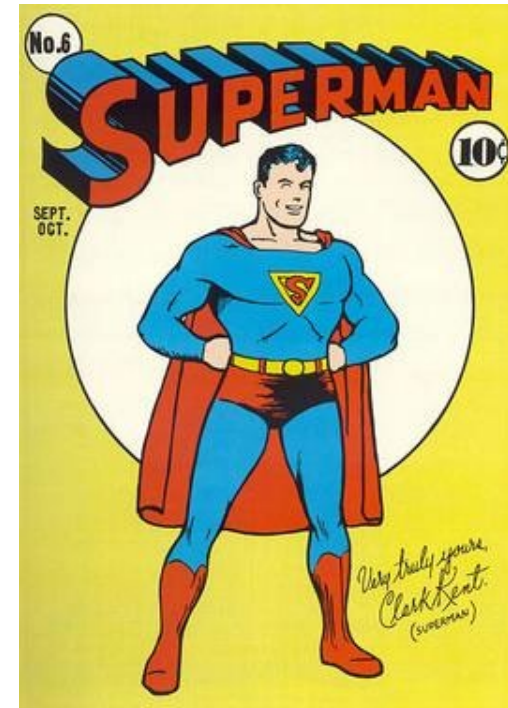


- Published in Action Comics #1 on April 18, 1938 and an instant success – Superman has been published without interruption to this day. This first issue sold in January 2026 for \$15 million, setting a new all-time record for any comic book sale.

- Siegel and Shuster met in 1932 while attending Glenville High School in Cleveland and collaborated on many comic strips pre-Superman
- Told to make their comic strip more sensational than anything on the market in order for it to sell
- Rejected many times before Jack Liebowitz agreed to publish – Siegel and Shuster were paid \$130 (\$2,900 in 2024) for their work and gave away copyright for Superman to Liebowitz's company, Detective Comics, Inc.



Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, creators of Superman



# THAT DEMMED ELUSIVE PIMPERNEL!



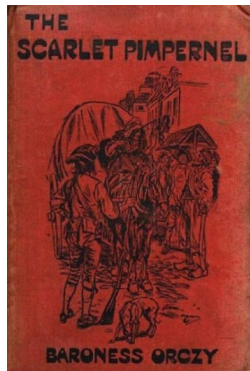
Fred Terry originating the role on stage (1905)



Leslie Howard as The Pimpernel (1934)



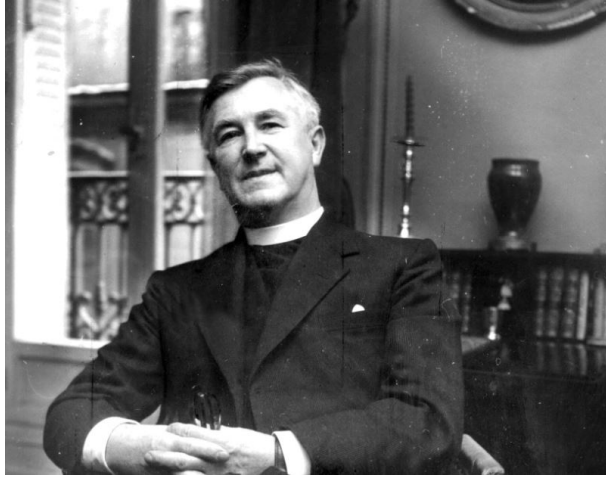
Anthony Andrews and Jane Seymour as Marguerite St. Just and Sir Percy Blakeley (1982)



- Sir Percival Blakeney, Baronet, aka the Scarlet Pimpernel, originally portrayed on stage by Fred Terry, brother of Ellen, who played opposite Irving, great-uncle of John Gielgud
- Marvel Comics co-creator Stan Lee, who had read Scarlet Pimpernel stories as a child, said that their protagonist was "the first character who could be called a superhero."



# THE REAL PIMPERNELS



Donald Caskie, "The Tartan Pimpernel"



Harald Edelstam,  
"The Black Pimpernel"



Varian Fry, "The American Pimpernel"



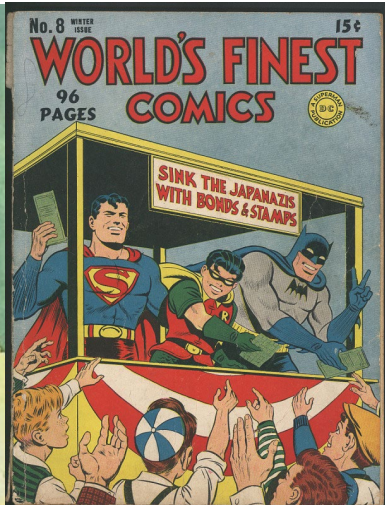
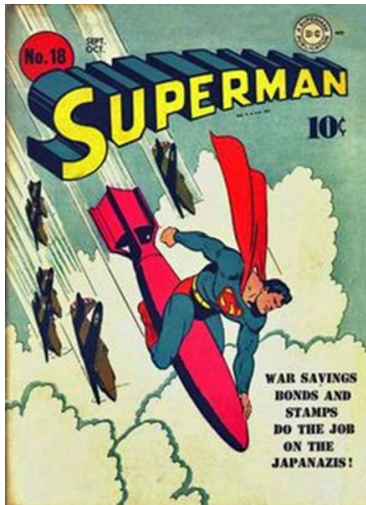
Monsignor Hugh O'Flaherty,  
"The Scarlet Pimpernel of the Vatican"



Raoul Wallenberg



# PATRIOTIC HEROES (AND VILLAINS!) IN WARTIME



Patriotic covers and stories during WWII, and much later, Joker attacking Red Skull in the crossover comic *Batman & Captain America* from 1996



# CAPTAIN AMERICA



Cover of *Captain America Comics #1*  
(December 1940, cover dated March 1941)

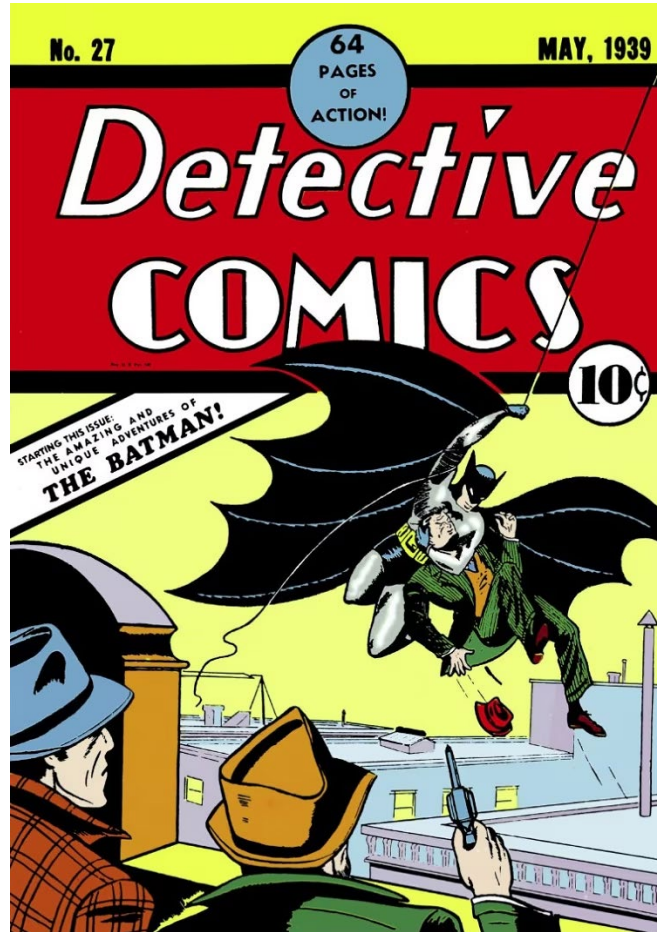
- Following the success of Superman at rival Detective Comic, Inc., Timely Comics, later Marvel Comics, hired Joe Simon and Jack Kirby to create a new superhero
- Simon began to develop the character by determining who their nemesis could be, noting that the most successful superheroes were defined by their relationship with a compelling villain, and eventually settled on Adolf Hitler. He rationalized that Hitler was the “best villain of them all” as he was “hated by everyone in the free world.”
- Unique approach in comics at that time for a superhero to face a real-adversary rather than a fictional one
- Instant success, with first issue selling out in days – circulation figures remained close to a million copies per month, which outstripped circulation of *Time* magazine during the same period.



Joe Simon and Jack Kirby,  
creators of Captain America



# THE DARK KNIGHT



Debuted in *Detective Comics* #27 in May, 1939

- In early 1939, following the success of Superman, Detective Comics, Inc. requested more superheroes. Bob Kane and Bill Finger jointly created Batman
- Early adventures drew inspiration from contemporary pulp fiction and characters like Zorro and the Shadow, establishing Batman as a master detective with a dark, brooding persona driven by the murder of his parents. Early stories were dark and Batman killed a lot.
- Tone was lightened in 1940 by introducing Robin, as well introducing iconic villains like the Joker and Catwoman, which boosted sales.



Bob Kane and Bill Finger, creators of Batman



# THE HAYS CODE (1934-68)

- In Hollywood, Hays Code was in effect from 1934-1968
- Replaced by the MPAA film rating system in 1968, which continues today
- Established due to notorious celebrity scandals in the 1920s which led people to believe that the film industry was morally questionable

August 11, 1934

MOTION PICTURE HERALD

11

## TEXT OF THE PRODUCTION CODE

tent of the Code appear in two parts—first, a working abstract of the Code which has been widely accepted as the complete Code, and, second, the Code proper, which has been referred to as "Reasons Supporting a Code".

### GENERAL PRINCIPLES

1. No picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin.
2. Correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented.
3. Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation.

### PARTICULAR APPLICATIONS

I. OBSCENITY AND THE LAW

stimulate the lower and baser element.

3. **Seduction or rape**
  - a. They should never be more than suggested, and only when essential for the plot, and even then never shown by explicit method.
  - b. They are never the proper subject for comedy.
4. **Sex perversion** or any inference to it is forbidden.
5. **White slavery** shall not be treated.
6. **Miscegenation** (sex relationships between the white and black races) is forbidden.
7. **Sex hygiene** and venereal diseases are not subjects for motion pictures.
8. Scenes of **actual child birth**, in fact or in silhouette, are never to be presented.
9. **Children's sex organs** are never to be exposed.

### III. VULGARITY

3. **Indecent or undue exposure** is forbidden.
4. **Dancing costumes** intended to permit undue exposure or indecent movements in the dance are forbidden.

### VII. DANCES

1. Dances suggesting or representing sexual actions or indecent passion are forbidden.
2. Dances which emphasize indecent movements are to be regarded as obscene.

### VIII. RELIGION

1. No film or episode may throw ridicule on any religious faith.
2. **Ministers of religion** in their character as ministers of religion should not be used as comic characters or as villains.
3. **Ceremonies** of any definite religion should be carefully and respectfully handled.

### IX. LOCATIONS



THOU SHALT NOT

1. LAW DEFEATED
2. INSIDE OF THIGH
3. LACE LINGERIE
4. DEAD MAN
5. NARCOTICS
6. DRINKING
7. EXPOSED BOSOM
8. GAMBLING
9. POINTING GUN
10. TOMMY GUN

*Thou Shalt Not*, a 1940 photo by Whitey Schafer deliberately subverting some of the Code's strictures



# SCARFACE (1932)

Every incident in this picture is the reproduction of an actual occurrence, and the purpose of this picture is to demand of the government: "What are you going to do about it?"

The government is your government. What are YOU going to do about it?

Message shown to audiences at the beginning of the movie



George Raft as Guino Rinaldo in *Scarface* (1932) and as "Spats" Colombo in *Some Like It Hot* (1959)



The Ventriloquist and Scarface (created in 1988) and Two-Face, aka Harvey Dent (created in 1942)



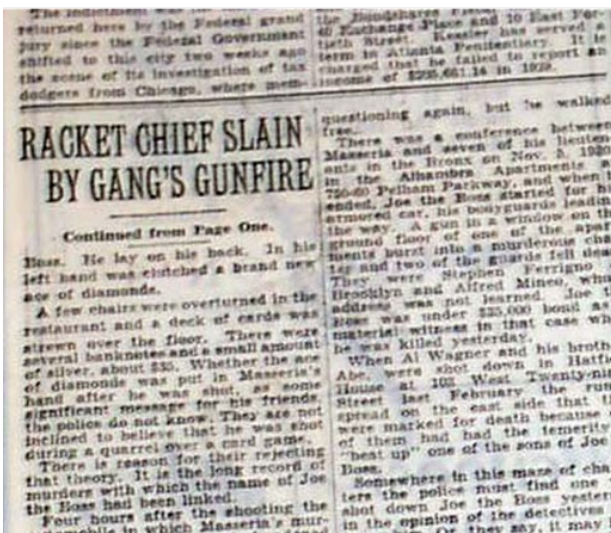
# MORE GANGSTERS



Climax of *White Heat* (1949) in chemical factory



Axis Chemicals, birthplace of the Joker, in *Batman* (1989)



Death of Giuseppe "Joe the Boss" Masseria on April 15, 1931



Batman cover from 1973 featuring the Joker (right)



# GANGSTER MOLLS, OR GUN MOLLS

**IDENTIFICATION**  
ORDER NO. 1221  
April 6, 1934.

**DIVISION OF INVESTIGATION**  
U. S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE  
WASHINGTON, D. C.

**Fingerprint Classification**  
25 27 W I 18+  
4 W 00 15+

**WANTED**  
MARY EVELYN FRECHETTE, with aliases,  
ANN HARTIN, EVELYN SPARK, EVELYN FASCHETTI, EVELYN FRISBETTE, ✓  
GRACE EDWARDS, MRS. JOHN DILLINGER, "BILLIE" ✓

**OBSTRUCTION OF JUSTICE.**


**DESCRIPTION**  
Age, 25 years (1909)  
Height, 5 Feet, 3 Inches  
Weight, 125 Pounds  
Build, plump  
Hair, black - wavy  
Eyes, brown  
Complexion, fair  
Scars and marks, mole on right cheek, 2 1/2 scars on face  
Remarks: Full round face, hair may be dyed light red.

**CRIMINAL RECORD**  
As Ann Hartin, 1927, arrested Police Department, Tucson, Arizona, January 25, 1927, charged, fugitive from justice; disposition, released January 26, 1927.

**RELATIVES:**  
Mrs. Mary Frechette Sprague, mother, Brown, Minnesota.  
Mrs. Ann Boland, sister, Brown, Minnesota.  
Mrs. Frances Frechette Smith, sister, 2612 North Halsted Street, Chicago, Illinois.

*not previously listed as missing by Winton*  
*Am. Mar. N. 4373*  
*Waltman*

Evelyn Frechette is wanted at St. Paul, Minnesota, for harboring a fugitive and obstructing justice. Law enforcement agencies kindly transmit any additional information or criminal record to the nearest office of the Division of Investigation, U. S. Department of Justice.  
If apprehended, please notify the Director, Division of Investigation, U. S. Department of Justice, Washington, D. C., or the Special Agent in Charge of the office of the Division of Investigation listed on the back hereof which is nearest your city.

(over) Issued by: J. EDGAR HOOVER, DIRECTOR.

Billie Frechette FBI wanted order (above) and detail from DC Comics' "Lawless in Love" statue from my personal collection (below)



- A gun moll is early 1900s slang for the female companion, girlfriend or mistress of a male professional criminal or mob leader. Some gun molls were themselves gangsters and they were accomplices in criminal activities.
- In film noir movies about crime, the gangster's moll is usually an attractive, blonde — often a variant of the bimbo stereotype — who may be a former showgirl. The gangster often uses the moll as a "trophy" to boost his status.
- Fictionalized molls appeared in "The Public Enemy" (1931) and "The Housekeeper's Daughter" (1939). The Joker's own gun moll, Harley Quinn, was created in 1992 in *Batman: The Animated Series*



Bonnie and Clyde (above) and DC Comics' "Lawless in Love" statue from my personal collection (below)



# GERMAN EXPRESSIONISM



Conrad Veidt (left) and Claude Rains in *Casablanca* (1942)



Conrad Veidt as Cesare in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920)



Stills from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) (left) and Tim Burton's *Batman Returns* (1992)

Johnny Depp as the title character in Tim Burton's *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) (right)

# GERMAN EXPRESSIONISM IN BATMAN



Stills from *Faust* (1926) (left) and Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989)



Stills from *Metropolis* (1927) (left) and Gotham City in Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989)



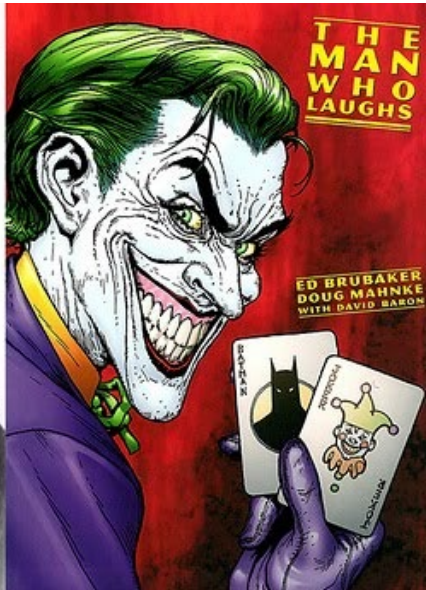
# THE MAN WHO LAUGHS



Conrad Veidt as Gwynplaine and Mary Philbin as Dea (left) Joker and Harley Quinn (right)



Bunch of Jokers (left) – Conrad Veidt as Gwynplaine (1928), and Cesar Romero and Jack Nicholson as the Joker (1966 and 1989)



Conrad Veidt as The Man Who Laughs, and a Batman comic with the same title (2005)



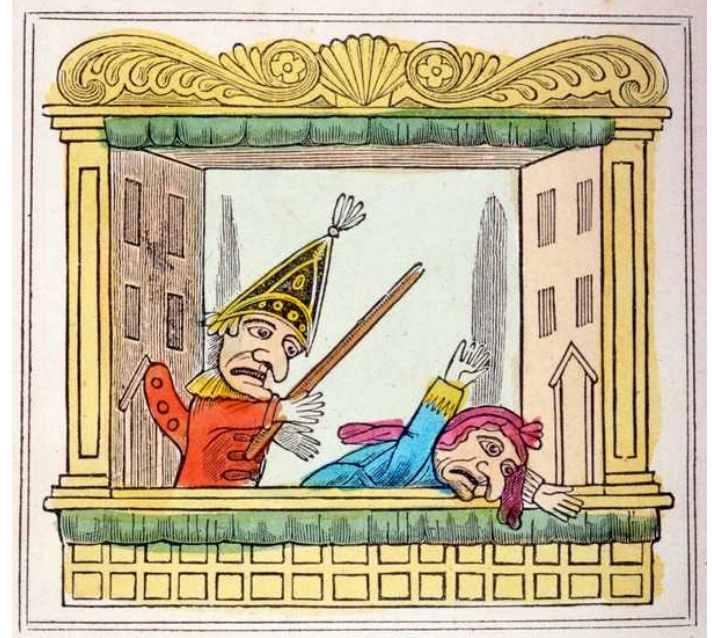
# DARK CLOWNS



Woodcut of a jester  
by Heinrich Vogtherr the Younger, c. 1540



Drawing of Harlequin from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> c.



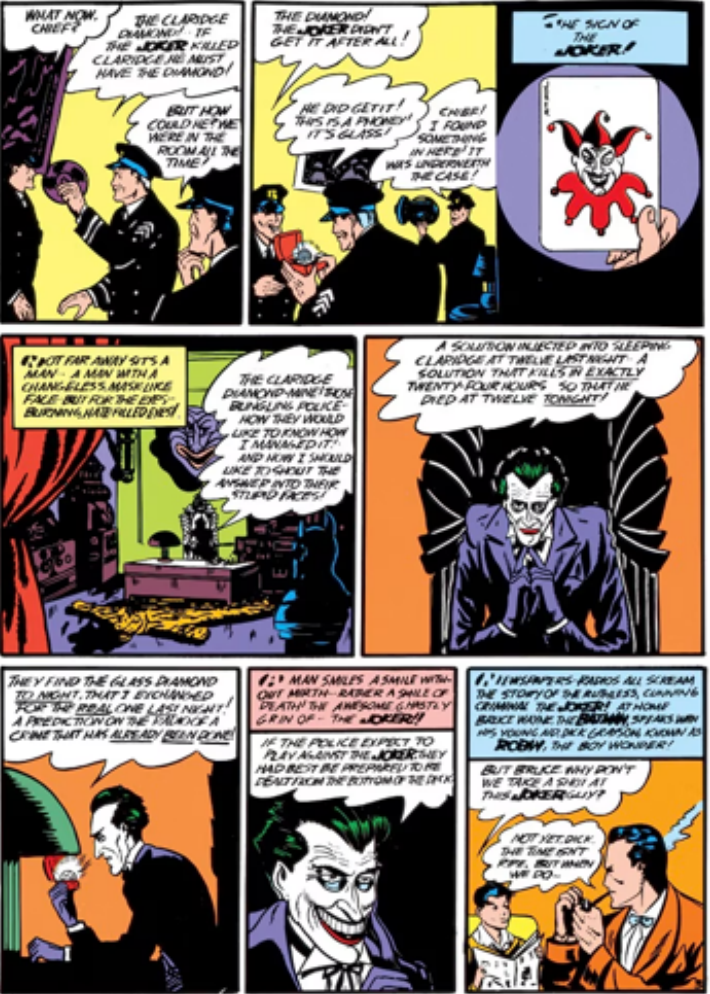
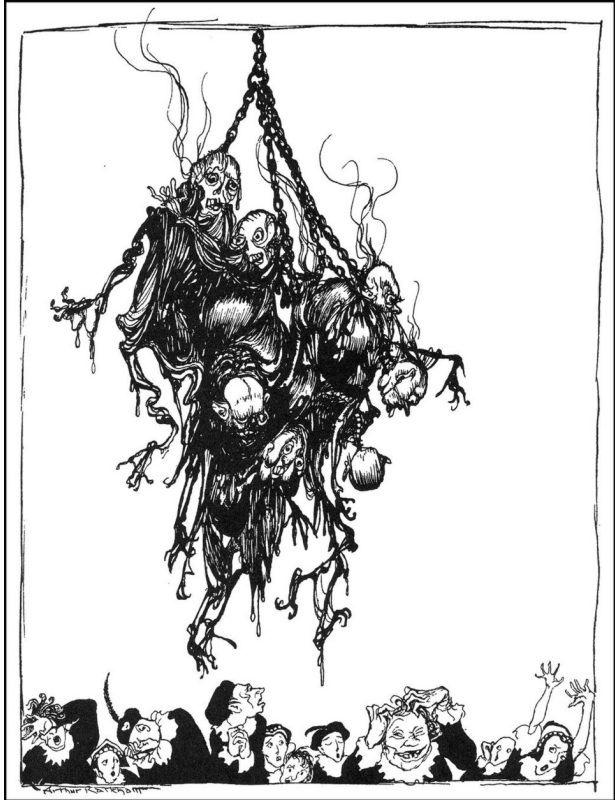
Drawing of Punch and Judy from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> c.



Joseph Grimaldi showing his own makeup design (left) and Lon Chaney in *He Who Gets Slapped* (1924) (right)



# EVIL CLOWNS



Hop Frog's last joke, 1935 illustration by Arthur Rackham (upper left); first appearance of The Joker in *Batman #1* (1940) (upper right); Tim Curry as Pennywise the Dancing Clown in *Stephen King's It* (1990) (bottom left); and John Wayne Gacy and his Pogo the Clown costume (bottom right)



# GOTHAM CITY



Three wise men of Gotham  
Went to sea in a bowl;  
And if the bowl had  
been stronger,  
My song would have  
been longer.



Illustration of *Three Wise Men of Gotham* from a 1901 edition of *Mother Goose* (left); The Joker reading the rhyme in *The Batman of Arkham* (2000) (right)



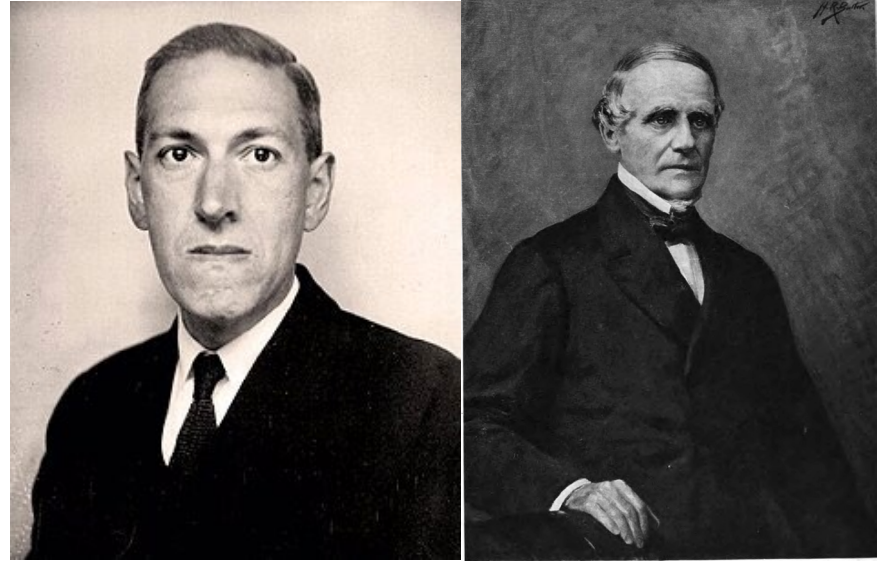
cc-by-sa/2.0 - The coolest village sign in... by Stephen Sweeney - geograph.org.uk/p/5030218

Gotham City skyline taken from the video game *Batman: Arkham Knight* (2015) (left); Gotham village sign in Nottinghamshire, UK (right)

# ARKHAM ASYLUM



Arkham Asylum in *Batman: The Animated Series* (1992) (above)



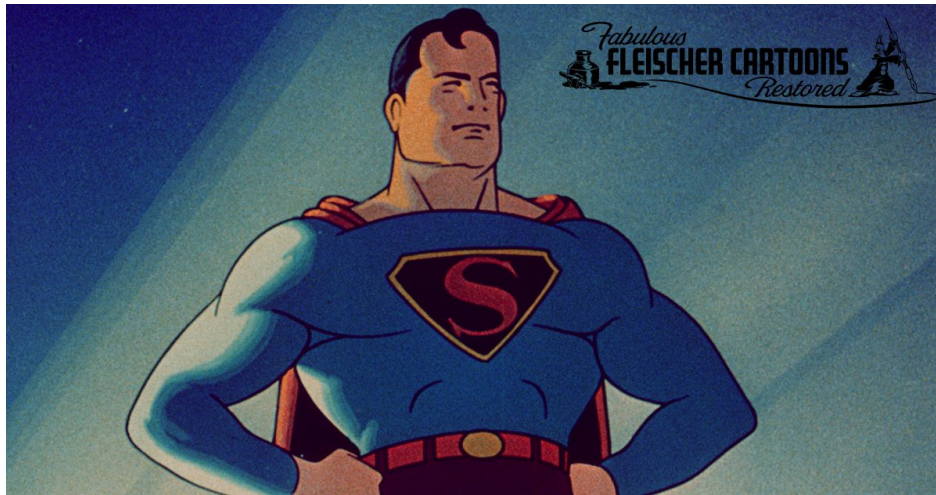
H.P. Lovecraft (left) and Thomas Story Kirkbride (right)



Arkham Asylum in the video game *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (2009) (left) and Danvers State Hospital in MA designed by Thomas Kirkbride (demolished 2007) (right)



# MORE SUPERMAN



- Featured in a series of cartoons by Max Fleischer, the creator of Betty Boop and Popeye the Sailor Man.
- These cartoons introduced many now familiar aspects of Superman, such as changing from Clark Kent to Superman using a phone booth, and the power of flight – previously in the comics, Superman jumped large distances.
- The cartoon also introduced the now famous lines: "Faster than a speeding bullet! More powerful than a locomotive! Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound!" The first seven cartoons used these opening lines, which, along with the now-classic exclamation "Up in the sky, look! It's a bird! It's a plane! It's Superman!", which was later used by the radio drama *The Adventures of Superman* which ran from 1940-1951, and the live action television series of the same name, which ran from 1952-1958, and starred George Reeves in the title role.
- The series was incredibly popular with children and adults alike, but was canceled after the death of George Reeves.

The Max Fleisher cartoon *Superman* (1941) (above) and George Reeves in the TV series *The Adventures of Superman* (1952-1958) (below)



# JUVENILE DELINQUENCY AND THE END OF THE GOLDEN AGE

The author of THE SHOW OF VIOLENCE and DARK LEGEND

## SEDUCTION OF THE INNOCENT

Fredric Wertham, M.D.

*the influence of  
comic books on today's youth*



- The Code banned not only violent images but also entire words and concepts, e.g. “terror” and “zombies,” and dictated that criminals must always be punished—thus destroying most horror titles, and leaving a sanitized subset of superhero comics as the chief remaining genre.
- Citing one of Wertham's arguments, that 95% of children in reform school read comics proves that comics cause juvenile delinquency (an example of the well-known logical fallacy correlation implies causation, Stan Lee recounted that Wertham "said things that impressed the public...but there was little scientific validity to it. And yet because he had the name doctor people took what he said seriously, and it started a whole crusade against comics."
- In 1953, the comic book industry hit a setback when the United States Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency was created.
- After the publication of Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954, which described overt or covert depictions of violence, sex, drug use, and other adult fare within "crime comics"—a term Wertham used to describe not only the popular gangster/murder-oriented titles of the time but also superhero and horror comics as well—and asserted, based largely on undocumented anecdotes, that reading this material encouraged similar behavior in children.
- Comic book publishers were subpoenaed to testify in public hearings, and as a result, the Comics Code Authority was created by the Association of Comics Magazine Publishers to enact self-censorship by comic book publishers. This marked the end of the Golden Age era of Comic Books.



# THE SILVER AGE



Debut of The Flash, in Showcase #4 (Oct. 1956) and  
*The Fantastic Four* (Nov. 1961)



Stan Lee reading *Spider-Man*

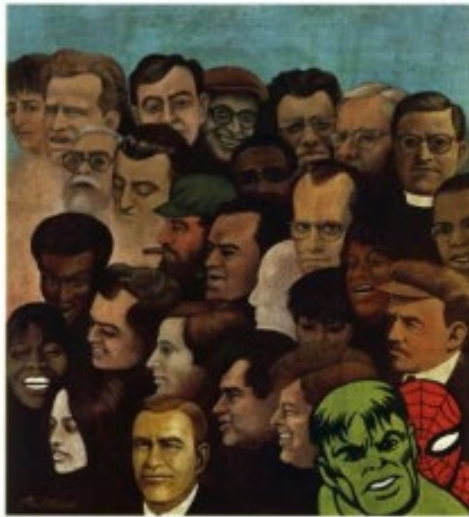
- In 1961, writer-editor Stan Lee revolutionized superhero comics by introducing superheroes designed to appeal to older readers than the predominantly child audiences of the medium, ushering in the success of Marvel Comics.
- Marvel's first superhero team, the titular stars of *The Fantastic Four #1*, broke convention with other comic book archetypes of the time by squabbling, holding grudges both deep and petty, and eschewing anonymity or secret identities in favor of celebrity status. Subsequently, Marvel comics developed a reputation for focusing on characterization and adult issues to a greater extent than most superhero comics before them, a quality which the new generation of older readers appreciated.
- This applied to *The Amazing Spider-Man* title in particular, which turned out to be Marvel's most successful book, and later inspired a cartoon. Its young hero suffered from self-doubt and mundane problems like any other teenager, something with which many readers could identify



# THE RISE OF MARVEL DOMINANCE

## 28 PEOPLE WHO COUNT

In this iconoclastic atmosphere, the kids have raised a few major scores, but are the heroes of our generation really laid up, or going to go for the rest?



Inaugural issues which debuted Spider-Man (Aug. 1962), The Incredible Hulk (May 1962) and the X-Men (Sept. 1963)

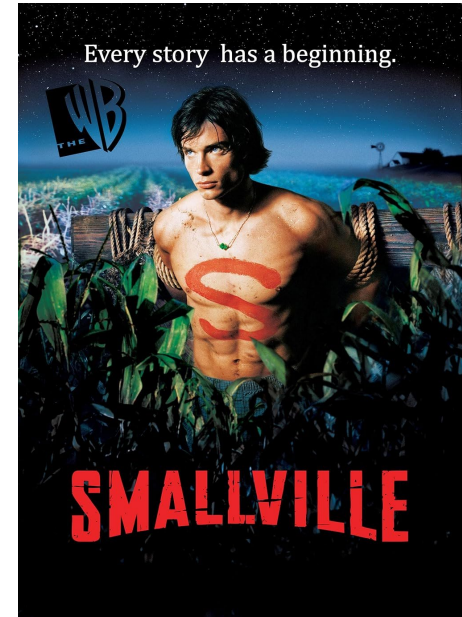
- In 2009, writer Geoff Boucher reflected that, “Superman and DC Comics instantly seemed like boring old Pat Boone; Marvel felt like The Beatles and the British Invasion. It was Kirby's artwork with its tension and psychedelia that made it perfect for the times—or was it Lee's bravado and melodrama, which was somehow insecure and brash at the same time?”
- Marvel comics frequently spoke directly to the cultural changes of 1960s, including the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and the Civil Rights movement, as well as the beginnings of the atomic age and the space race. Superhero origins began to be rooted more in science gone wrong, such as Spiderman being bitten by a radioactive spider, or the Hulk's exposure to gamma energy, demonstrating that humanity's foray into the atomic age could have both positive and negative results.



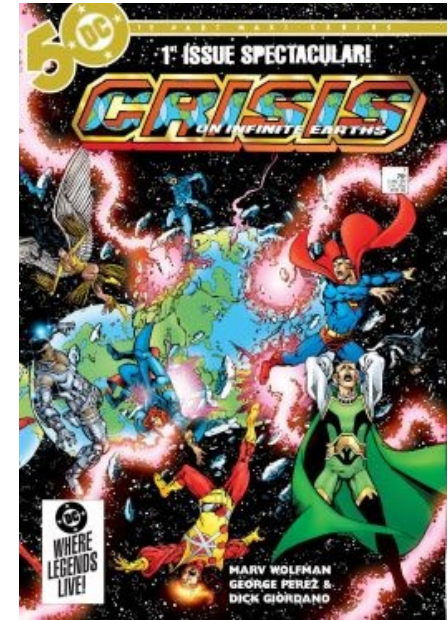
# MORE TV



Adam West as Batman doing the Batuisi in 1966 (upper left); Lynda Carter as Wonder Woman (1975-79) (bottom left); Bill Bixby as Dr. Bruce Banner and Lou Ferrigno as the Hulk (1977-82) (upper middle); John Wesley Shipp as *The Flash* (1990-91) (upper middle); first appearance of Harley Quinn in *Batman: The Animated Series* (1992-95) (upper right); Tom Welling as Clark Kent in *Smallville* (2001-2011) (bottom right)



# THE BRONZE AGE

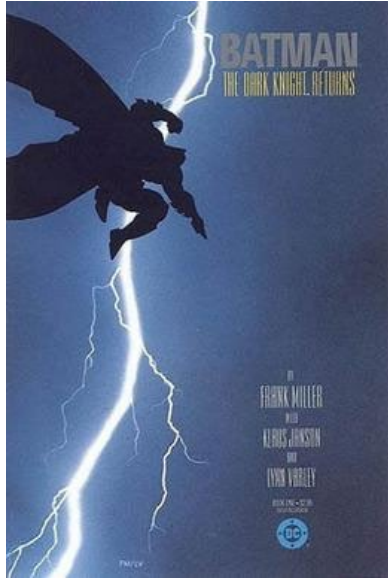


Introduction of Green Arrow (April 1970); the deaths of Green Goblin and Gwen Stacy (July 1973); The DC Explosion (1977-78) and *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (1985-86)

- Since the early 1970s, DC had seen its dominance of the market overtaken by Marvel Comics, partly because Marvel had significantly increased the number of titles that it published (both original material and reprint books).
- DC attempted to reclaim dominance in the comic book industry by launching the self-titled “DC Explosion.” This was a marketing campaign which increased titles, page count, and price (50 cents). However, DC experienced ongoing poor sales from the winter of 1977 to the winter of 1978. This has been attributed in part to the North American blizzards in 1977 and 1978, which both disrupted distribution and curtailed consumer purchases.
- Furthermore, the effects of ongoing economic inflation, recession, and increased paper and printing costs, led to declines in both the profitability of the entire comic book industry and the number of readers. It is also theorized that DC greatly overestimated the appeal of so many new titles at once, and that the market was saturated. Whatever the case, the DC Explosion nearly broke the company and the industry, leading to satirically be called the “DC Implosion”
- Marvel eventually gained 50% of the market. DC Comics ended up overhauling the history of the DC Universe in and several of the company’s major characters in “Crisis on Infinite Earths.” This revitalized sales of the company, again making it a serious market contender against Marvel.



# THE MODERN (OR DARK) AGE OF COMIC BOOKS

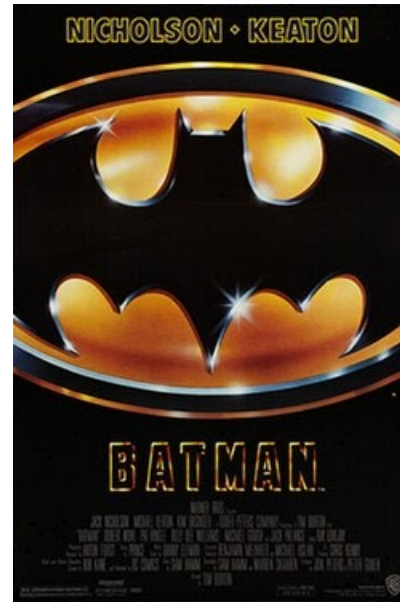


*Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986); *Watchmen* (1986-87); *Spawn #1* (May 1992) and *Hellboy* (introduced 1993)

- The Modern Age involved a deconstructive and dystopian re-envisioning of iconic characters and the worlds that they live in, as typified by Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* (1986-87), also known as the Dark Age of Comic Books.
- Other features that define the era are a higher amount of adult-oriented material, the X-Men becoming Marvel Comics' "dominant intellectual property", helped by the accompanying animated series from 1992-97, and the comics distribution system being reorganized throughout the industry.
- These changes would also lead to the appearance of new independent comic book publishers in the early 1990s—such as Image Comics which introduced *Spawn*, a government assassin anti-hero resurrected from Hell, and Dark Horse Comics which introduced *Hellboy*, a half-demon superhero. These titles also boasted a darker, sarcastic and more mature approach to superhero storylines.



# SUPERHERO MOVIES



*Superman: The Movie (1978); Superman IV: The Quest for Peace (1987); Batman (1989) and Batman Returns (1992)*



*Batman Forever (1995); Batman and Robin (1997); Batman Begins (2005) and The Dark Knight (2008)*



# SUPERHERO (AND VILLAIN!) MOVIES CONTINUED



*X-Men (2000); Spider-Man (2002); Iron Man (2008) and The Avengers (2012)*



*Man of Steel (2013); Wonder Woman (2017); Joker (2019) and Superman (2025)*



**THANK YOU! QUESTIONS?**

