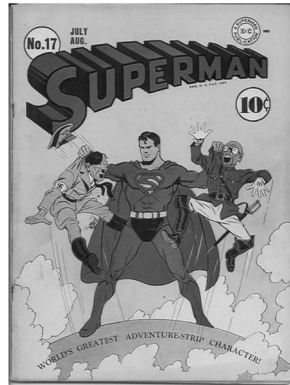# Birth of the Comic Book Industry

1

- In order for the first superhero comics to emerge, what was necessary?
  - supportive industry
  - creation of comic book format
  - existence of superhero archetype
  - an audience

2

- There was a growing (non-superhero) comic book industry in the 1930s
- publishers took newspaper comic strips
  - published them on separately, in color
- several small companies, not very lucrative
  - generally focused on "funnies"
  - led by Max Gaines (né Maxwell Ginsburg)
- National Allied Publishing
  - published two comics (*New Fun* and *New Comics*)
  - added 3ʳᵈ in 1937: *Detective Comics*
    - company changed its name to DC
    - headed by Max Gaines
- Comics farmed out to "shops" with freelance cartoonists and writers
  - artists didn't want to use their real names
  - why?
  - read Wright, p. 7

3

- Enter Siegel and Shuster
  - Jerry Siegel (1914-1996) - script
  - Joe Shuster (1914-1992) - artist
- young, sons of Jewish immigrants
- had idea for "Superman" for a while
  - but no one was interested
  - DC comics said 'yes'
  - would publish in new title
- *Actions Comics # 1* (June 1938)
- what was the response?

4

2

- Thoughts on *Action Comics* # 1?
  - what kind of hero was this?
    - class?
    - gender?
  - what historical moment was this a fantasy for?
  - what was his moral code?
  - what is the role of violence?
  - what does the art work convey?
  - fantasy of what?
    - read Wright, pp. 10-11
- Early issues of *Action Comics*
  - sold massive amounts!
  - others tried to capitalize on it
  - what kind of stories in the early issues?
- what did Superman represent in the late 1930s?
  - read Wright, p. 13

5

6

7

- Many early competitors to *Superman*

    - enabled by a rush from competitors to make money
    - Timely Comics
        - owned Martin Goodman (pulp magazine publisher)
        - created Human Torch, Sub-Mariner
    - Fawcett Publications
        - created Captain Marvel
        - became best-selling superhero of early 1940s
    - DC introduced new characters
        - Batman, The Flash, Hawkman, Green Lantern
        - Wonder Woman
    - General themes
        - in support of the 'common man'
        - in line with the new New Deal
        - against corruption, excessive bureaucracy

8

- Where did all this come from?
- Many historical archetypes or precedents
  - Greek, Roman, Norse mythology
  - Biblical stories from Judeo-Christian tradition
  - 19th/20th century adventure novels
    - Sir Arthur Conan Doyle - Sherlock Holmes
    - Edgar Alan Poe – mysteries
  - pulp fiction
    - Edgar Rice Burroughs – Tarzan, *Moons of Mars* series
  - 19th/20th century science fiction of the 19th century
    - Jules Verne, H. G. Wells
  - newspaper comic strips
    - "the funnies"

9

More immediate precedents in the 1920s/1930s

- *Hugo Hercules* strip in *The Chicago Tribune*, September 7, 1902
- Popeye the Sailor (1929-)
  - got strength from eating spinach
  - diversified into animation in 1930s
- The Shadow (1931-)
  - character able to stay concealed, adventures in the "Orient"
  - vigilante
- The Spider (1933-)
  - millionaire playboy Richard Wentworth, veteran of WWI
  - had a costume
  - fought crime
- The Phantom (1936-)
  - fought piracy on the African coast
  - no superpowers, but skintight and striking costume
    - enabled an identification with the extraordinary

10

11

- What did these pre-Superhero archetypes bring to comics?

    - normalized idea of fantastic feats in narrative stories
    - costumes
    - secret identities / dichotomous identities
    - justice served by non-normative means
    - individuality
    - men with extraordinary capabilities (not like us)

12

- **The Jewish Contribution**
  - "The Great Wave"
    - massive Jewish immigration to New York from Eastern Europe
    - beginning 1880s to c. 1920
    - 2.5 million people arrived in New York
    - poorer populations moved to Lower East Side
  - Jewish immigrants in 1930s sidelined from many creative endeavors
  - creative people from Jewish families had few outlets
    - could not get hired by mainstream literary outlets, advertising, etc.
    - joined staff of 'funnies' (Max Gaines, etc.)
    - often brought on board through family connections
    - e.g., Stan Lee (né Stanley Lieber) hired to work in Timely Comics in 1939 by Timely head (his uncle) Martin Goodman

  - what they brought to comics
    - notion of 'outsider' status
    - tradition of storytelling
    - myths rooted in Jewish tradition

13

- Explicit Jewish Allusions
  - The Golem
    - in the modern era, Golem was was a strongman responsible for defending Jews against pogroms in Europe
    - intense physical strength
    - men of clay = man of steel
  - "Kal-El"
    - similar to Hebrew name meaning "voice of God"
  - Moses' story
    - mother sent son adrift in a basket in the Nile river
  - "Man"

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