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“To me, Superman is the living antithesis to the adage that absolute power corrupts absolutely”: an interview with Phillip Kennedy Johnson

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ABSTRACT

In September 2023, as part of the Superman’s Cleveland: Lineage and Legacy programme honouring Superman’s 85th anniversary, Phillip Kennedy Johnson was interviewed live at Literary Cleveland’s Inkubator Conference. During the interview, Johnson shared his thoughts on Superman, what it means to shepherd a character with such a legacy and reflected on his run on *Action Comics*. He shared stories about his break into comics, gave insight into his writing process, and offered advice on working collaboratively in comics and how that process works. Johnson, who is also a trumpet player, spoke about the connection between comics and music. Finally, Johnson answered audience questions about Superman, the character of Clark Kent, and how he thinks about writing the Green Lantern, John Stewart.

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In September 2023, as part of the Superman’s Cleveland: Lineage and Legacy programme honouring Superman’s 85th anniversary, Phillip Kennedy Johnson was interviewed live at Literary Cleveland’s Inkubator Conference. During the interview, Johnson shared his thoughts on Superman, what it means to shepherd a character with such a legacy and reflected on his run on *Action Comics*. He shared stories about his break into comics, gave insight into his writing process, and offered advice on working collaboratively in comics and how that process works. Johnson, who is also a trumpet player, spoke about the connection between comics and music. Finally, Johnson answered audience questions about Superman, the character of Clark Kent, and how he thinks about writing the Green Lantern, John Stewart.

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Katharine Trostel: It's an honour to be here today, and as a native Clevelander, I never expected that I would get to interview someone writing Superman in the 21st century. So, thank you for joining us today.

Phillip Kennedy Johnson: Huge honour.

Trostel: Thanks, and thanks to all of you for joining us. One thing that's really struck me throughout this whole journey, what I'm learning as we developed this programming, is the degree to which Superman has this staying power. He's just as relevant it seems for the 21st century as he was 85 years ago. We live in very uncertain times: so how and why does Superman continue to have such a cultural pull? What lessons does he still have for us? And why does he speak especially to our contemporary moment?

Johnson: Superman has that staying power because he has always represented the best of what humanity is supposed to be. Whatever it is in that moment. In *Action Comics* #1, he's referred to as the 'champion of the oppressed' and that's always going to be important. Part of it is also that he was the first actual superhero. There were other comics before *Action Comics*, but of what we now recognise as a superhero, he is the archetype. He's changed a bit over the years, but he's always got that gravitas to him. To me, it was always this aspirational thing; it's that he is meant to be the best of us. Writing the book bears this weight in a way that other books don't. When I got the call to do it – and I did not expect to get to get the call to write Superman – but when I did, I had such a clear voice for Superman in my head. I know exactly who he is. I'm sure every other writer who's ever taken him on, and most readers too, they have their impression of who Superman is and I just knew I could not wait to get my version on the page.

For me he was also important because he was my first hero. I was this lonely, frustrated kid and these were amazing stories for me. My first impression of Superman was from the Christopher Reeve film, the first one led me to the comics. The idea of this kid who was sent to rural America by people who loved him to do great things is this incredibly powerful fantasy that I needed right then. It was this unbelievable thing and Christopher Reeve's portrayal of this egoless person who just wants to help everyone – between that and the John Williams music, the opening credits with the shield overhead – it was all such a powerful fantasy that is always going to be important to me. It's the purity of the vision of what Superman is, the bulletproof man who's always going to be there to help, this is such a powerful, fundamental thing. I think the simplicity of the concept is what gives it the staying power.

Trostel: Can you say more about how you draw upon that experience when you write Superman?

Johnson: My first books on Superman were part of the Future State¹ event. One of those was *Superman: Worlds of War* and then *Superman: House of El*. *Worlds of War* was a story that takes place 10 years in the future after Superman has left Earth. The idea for the issue that sprang to mind was inspired by *Superman* #400. That issue is an anthology from the eighties and the theme that tied the issue together was Superman in the future. That was my first-time experiencing Superman as high art, it was unlike other books I'd seen. Superman wasn't even in some of the stories in that issue and it was just very eye opening as to what comics could be. The *Worlds of War* issues were my tribute to *Superman* #400, exploring what

Superman means to us. So, the first of those two issues is all about humanity. We meet a bunch of people that Superman saved during his lifetime. They gather together – because everyone knows who he was – at what they now call Rocket Field where they think he came to Earth and honour his memory; they talk about how he saved them, and where they think he is now. It's this exploration of what he means to all of us.

The next issue we see where he actually is, and we read an old op-ed by Clark Kent and we see what we – human beings – mean to him. He writes about how we inspired him. The op-ed is about a homeless man that many people would walk right by and not notice, but that Superman holds in the highest regard; he holds that man as the standard to live up to. He writes about this old homeless man who died with nothing and didn't have a pot to piss in. But then Superman lays out the homeless man's past life as a jazz musician. He was once a jazz pianist who had a foot disability that prevented his enlisting to serve in World War II but finds a way to get in anyway. He fights the Nazis, comes home, fights for civil rights. Superman learns about being on our level and he aspires to be one of us. It was my 'just in case I get hit by a truck' story. I wanted my mission statement on Superman to be out there. The three years of stories I've written since then about Superman have all been tied to and have been in service to that original story. This is what Superman is, what he represents, this is what we should be. When you're writing Superman, you're making a statement on what humanity should be, on what we should all aspire to be. Writing Superman stories carries weight and importance and responsibility in a way that other superhero books don't, in my opinion.

Trostel: So, I wanted to pick up on this idea of you carrying forward Superman's legacy. In preparation for this interview, I listened to other interviews that you've given, and I know you really resist this idea of a gritty Superman. Still, I want to ask you a question about Rust Belt connections because this programme is called Superman's Cleveland. I'm wondering if there are other kind of Rust Belt characteristics that you see, or Cleveland characteristics, that have emerged from this region like tenacity in the face of adversity, resilience, maybe something else?

Johnson: That's a really interesting question. I'll admit I do not usually associate him with the city of Cleveland. I associate him with the farm where he supposedly grew up. I'll explain. First, I apologise to anyone who loved the movie *Man of Steel*. There are a lot of things about that movie that are great and I know that that movie is this whole generation's Superman, that's the one that they know and love, but one big moment in that movie that got it wrong in my opinion was the characterisation of Pa Kent, and how Pa Kent in that story was trying to hide Clark and not let him be a hero. In that story, Jor-El was the one that sent him to us to be this great leader and this great protector and this champion of the oppressed as he's described in issue one of *Action Comics*. In that story, though, Pa Kent was the one trying to tell him, 'don't show anyone who you are, they'll try to take control of you. It's not safe.' To me that makes Jor-El his only parent that matters and Pa Kent must be something to be overcome. I couldn't disagree with that much more than I do.

For me, he does have a legacy as a Kryptonian. Supergirl and all the other elements notwithstanding, if he was the last son of Krypton, he would be the last bastion of Kryptonian culture; that's his legacy, that greatness that is in a way genetic, but the Kents made him Superman. The Kents gave him his compassion and his humility, his humanity. Forced him to do chores without his powers and other little things that made him learn humility to see himself as the same as everyone else, or less than everyone else, to

serve others before yourself. He got that from the Kents. So that to me is the fundamental element of who he was. If he actually was the Kents' biological son, he would still be that thing, he would still be Superman. He would just do it with the power he was given, the way that we all strive to do. So as far as the Rust Belt connections, it's broader than that. I guess it's not so much about Cleveland or Kansas or anywhere else. It's about learning the principles of middle America that made him humble and taught him how to work hard. All those characteristics that we are proud of in ourselves as Americans.

Trostel: And you started to touch on my next question. So maybe we can elaborate a bit on the parent child relationship. A lot of your stories centre on the relationship between father and son.

So, I'm wondering if you want to expand a bit on the parent child relationship that is so much a part of your work.

Johnson: Yeah, so, I've got a little boy that I'm super close with. We're best friends and most of my stories are about him. I'm also active duty military, so a lot of my stories are about America in some way. Things I'm proud of, things I want to be better, ways in which I want us to be better, but these days, most of my stories are about my son in some way. It's not usually on its face, but because Superman has a son now, I've been able to tell stories about his relationship with his son. In the *Action Comics* annual from 2022, we tried to course correct a little bit and tell a very important story about Ma Kent and about the role of mothers on Warworld. That was a story that Si Spurrier actually proposed that I thought was important to tell.

As far as father and son stuff, it's become very important in the current stories in part because of what happened with Clark's son, Jonathan Kent, before I came along. The idea is that Superman's got a son in the comics that a few years ago was about 10 years old and then through some sci-fi trickery, he became more like 17 or 18. And the fans just loved it! I'm joking. That was not during my time and I also admittedly did not love it, but it was not just in the hands of the previous writer, there was also a bigger picture. DC is a shared universe and they had other plans for various things including *Titans*. The guy in charge at the time, Dan Didio, had his own plans. So that was all kind of part of that. But one thing that that did for us is give us all this emotional drama to pull from. We all loved seeing Superman and Lois as parents to a small kid. It was just this awesome dynamic. We just love seeing Superman as a dad. At least I do. And then when we lost that, we felt the loss of it. All of us did. I wanted to explore what Superman felt from that. He's still Superman. He's still supposed to be the best of us, but he's lost those crucial years with his son, years in which his son was discovering his powers and making the most of them and figuring out who he was going to be. He doesn't have that now and I wanted to explore that, but it was too late.

So, when fans found out there was a new writer coming on board, they were like, 'yes, he's gonna fix it!' And I did intend to fix it but not the way that people want. They wanted us to just Spider-Man 'One More Day'² the whole thing and pull a Mephisto, it's all different now.

I thought it was really important not to just magic wand the whole thing away, though. It's so disrespectful to the character, to the readers. As if to say, hey, all that stuff you've been reading since then, it's all made up now. None of it matters. We're just gonna go



Figure 3. Cover art by Steve Beach for *Superman: Warworld Revolution*. ©DC Comics Reprinted with permission.

Johnson: Well, it is a huge honour that I can't believe I get to have, but I don't want to waste a second of it. I try to make every issue somebody's favourite issue. Sometimes we're working on the script, especially Superman, and I kind of stop, look back and think, is this great? I think it's good, but is this going to be anybody's favourite? If I don't think it is, I must step back and just take a minute. And then I read, and I rework it and I try to remind myself what the mission statement is for Superman. You can't ever lose track of what you're trying to do in every issue. I'm trying to give readers a beat where they hear John Williams' music in it. I want a beat where he says something concise and hopeful, inspirational, where the reader feels those chills and they get that feeling that I remember having as a kid. This is all I want. I'm trying to get that moment in every issue of the book. Usually it's a very concise line that fans will be able to carry with them. For example, there's a fight with Superman and Mongul when they first go to Warworld, they're in this big arena, everyone's chanting Mongul's name and he's fighting them all. He's trying to free them all, but they're chanting 'Mongul.' They want Mongul to kill him, and he says to Superman, 'They're shouting for me to kill you. These people you came here to save, they want me to kill you. You've lost already. These people didn't ask you to come here.' Then Superman gets one really great shot and knocks Mongul down as he's boasting and says 'One of them did' (Johnson and Mendonça 2022a, 14). And that's enough for him in those moments. I want people to get those chills. Or later when his team has lost, Superman has been beaten to a pulp, he's in prison and one of his teammates, Midnighter says, 'We're leaving.' He says, 'We can't.' He can barely speak, he's so beaten. He's saying they're not done there. Midnighter says to him, 'Do you think we

won? All of Warworld watched us get our asses kicked, and they cheered! Did you forget what they did to Apollo, and June? Lia's dead, Blue.' And Superman said, 'What should we do then? Abandon the ones who don't cheer for us?' I thought that would be the line people gravitate towards, but the one that they grabbed instead was later in the issue where Midnighter says, 'We're the ones who risked everything to come up here with you, Blue. Not the Warzoons. Us. You gave us your big line about hope, and we followed you. Hope. . . . Are their lives really worth more to you than ours?' And he says, 'No. Not more. But not less' (Johnson and Mendonça 2022b, 19-21). That was the line people grabbed onto. I try to give every issue a beat like that, or a beat like the movie when Chris Reeve saves Lois in the helicopter scene and he smiles at her and he's like, 'I've got you.' Later he says, 'I certainly hope this doesn't put you off flying. Statistically speaking, of course, it's still the safest way to travel' (Donner 1978). It's this little PSA, like 'wear your seatbelt' kind of a thing. Those little detailed moments of care, like lifting the car that's falling off the bridge and putting it back, and then opening the back door to check on the little kids in the back. That's another scene that I really wanted to get across: the moment when he opens the door, the kid tries to give him his toy and he said, 'No, you keep it, but there's one thing you can do for me: make sure you always wear your seatbelt just like you did today. The seatbelts did more to protect you than anything I did.' He deflects the credit for the save to the kids and then they think, 'we did this awesome thing and they think we're heroes, too.' That kind of thing. I want every issue to have that. It can't just be the bombast of the fights, it has to have those moments. That's really key.

So that's how I try to carry the legacy forward. I want to make sure people still get those moments like, 'This is why Superman matters.' Some people will say Superman's boring or Superman's not relevant and those are just the people that have not gotten the gospel of Clark Kent. I don't hate it when people say that. It's like here's someone who needs to be converted. They just need to have those moments where I can be more than I am. When you read a Superman comic, I want them to open it, close it and think, 'I want to be more now because of what I just read.' You don't get that from other books. Even Batman, and Batman's awesome, but that's a different kind of power fantasy. It's like, I know I can make myself anything through sheer force of will and endless money. Superman, though, makes me want to be more than I am. I want to be better. It's a different fantasy and I feel like it's so important. That's how I feel the legacy of it. I really want people to get those same feelings that I had. It's a crucial thing that I needed as a kid and still do now. I still read, and there are moments when I still get that same feeling that I want to be better, and the best Superman stories do that (Figure 4).

Trostel: Amazing. I guess a follow up question would be: How do you know when it's time to expand the canon as it sits and add new characters, update situations that are more appropriate for maybe twenty first century readers? How do you find that balance?

Johnson: When there are things in the canon that are dated or stupid, sometimes it's best to just ignore it. I'm not going to mention that in the canon (if you don't take into account the reboots like New 52 and Rebirth³ and all the things that have changed over the years), that the reason that Lex Luthor is so mad is that Superman blew his hair off in high school chemistry and that's why he's evil now. We don't need to talk about that, right? It makes him less threatening. There are elements of the story from back then, those stories are intended for kids, and I still want them to be approachable to kids, but it's also for us, right? I want to tell more sophisticated stories, too, that still are awesome for kids to read, but have depth that we recognise and still find rewarding. So, there are things I just ignore, and whenever someone asks me, 'do you have an idea for a Mr. Mxyzptlk story?' I'm like, 'I sure don't.' I'm just not interested. I don't want to do it. There are other writers that would do a great

Mr. Mxyzptlk story. Grant Morrison, for example, just really embraces the ludicrousness of comics in a way that I don't. I don't know how. Our voices are so different, and I hold Grant in the absolute highest regard. We hung out in Glasgow last year and it was incredible. We talked about Superman and it was the most amazing conversation, but our approach to writing, to what literature is, to what comics is, is so different. Mr. Mxyzptlk is best handled in the hands of Grant Morrison or others like that who are extremely talented.

I'd rather tell a story about Metallo (Figure 5). I want every villain, every nemesis, to be the dark twisted mirror image to that hero in some kind of way. With Mongul, it was because he was the intergalactic slaver. He is the opposite of the 'champion of the oppressed.' In terms of Metallo, I've seen a bunch of different iterations of him as well, and I have my favourites, and there are versions of Metallo that I just kind of don't care about. That's another origin that was kind of up for grabs. Originally, he was just this guy that looked like Clark Kent and that was the whole thing. But in the first Metallo story that I read as a kid, he was just a guy in a car crash and some mad scientist turned him into Metallo. He gave him this metal body. He said, 'Now you're the thing I want to make, you're the brain in a metal body, you're my art.' Metallo didn't ask for any of it. He was this guy and then he kind of turned evil and I couldn't really make sense of why he wanted what he wanted. He was just kind of somebody else's puppet, which wasn't that



Figure 4. Variant cover art by Julian Totino Tedesco for *Action Comics* #1030. ©DC Comics. Reprinted with permission.

interesting to me. Grant Morrison had retold the Metallo story and made him a soldier who had volunteered for a thing. I had to take these various streams of origin and tell something that I wanted to last. DC let me take about six issues and tell a longer form story with Metallo. I thought, if there's ever a Metallo on film or in a game or something, I want this to be the reference that people turn to. I was trying to codify the Metallo origin using these other ones that have been done, so sometimes you just kind of combine it and do your best to make it make sense.

There have been so many generations of stories for some of these characters, you can't always make it make sense. Grant likes to say that it all happened, and I just fundamentally disagree with that. Grant was talking about Batman, and I said, "So Batman '66, *Dark Knight Returns*, current continuity stuff, his own stuff, Silver Age, Golden Age, it's all on the table?" I admire that take, but it's just too much. The question becomes, 'So does Batman kill or not?' Because back in the day, Batman was dropping pianos on people, and then there have been changes that you just can't walk back. To say that Batman '66 is the same Batman that we see in *Dark Knight Returns* or in the arc of video games or whatever is just silly. So, you have to decide what your take is going to be and accept it. It's all just made up, just tell the story. In theory, *Dark Knight Returns* is not canon, but it's one of the best Batman stories ever, so to me every story should exist on its own merit. Just take the stories that you love and make them count if you want them to count. I see it more and more like Norse mythology: over time, various people do their own translations of things or collections of things. We're getting closer and closer to what we consider to be the truth of what actually happened with Thor and Loki and all that, the same way that over time, the origin of the Joker is fleshed out. We get a sense that the Red Hood thing was a big part of it, and he was probably the guy underneath, but there were all these stories and many of them conflict and that's okay. It gives us this really beautiful tapestry to choose from where everyone can choose for themselves. If Batman '89 is your jam, you get to have that. If you want your Batman to be super-duper gritty Black Label⁴ stuff, we've got that too. Just ignore the ones you don't like.

Trostel: That leads me nicely into the next question that I have, which is, I'm really struck by the way time works in these comics. Superman and his son both go to the future, they have seen the present as the past, but they exist in this present moment. It strikes me that they have future knowledge and they have knowledge of what's going to happen. Does that shape how he reacts in the present moment when thinking about what's just? I'm wondering, how does his sense of time or his unique perspective on time shape Superman's sense of justice in your opinion?

Johnson: I don't know that it would. I don't think Superman worries about how a thing he does will be perceived. I do think he would get a much broader view of what justice means, of what morality means, if he gets to see the future. Okay, I think about Captain America a good bit and what it would be like if he was really unfrozen now as opposed to in the comics. What would happen if he was frozen at the end of World War II and he was a perfect hero, perfect soldier – would he still be that now? I mean, the social norms were so different back then. His views would be so different. I think Superman's actions would be coloured in that he has ideas about ethics and morality that continue to evolve and hopefully evolve for the better for the next 1000 years and he sees where we land. I do think that would give him a different outlook on what justice means now. For example, let's say that in the future the idea of eating meat is just abhorrent. It's not something someone would ever do: eat another living thing, like a sentient thing. If Superman sees a version of that in the future, I do think

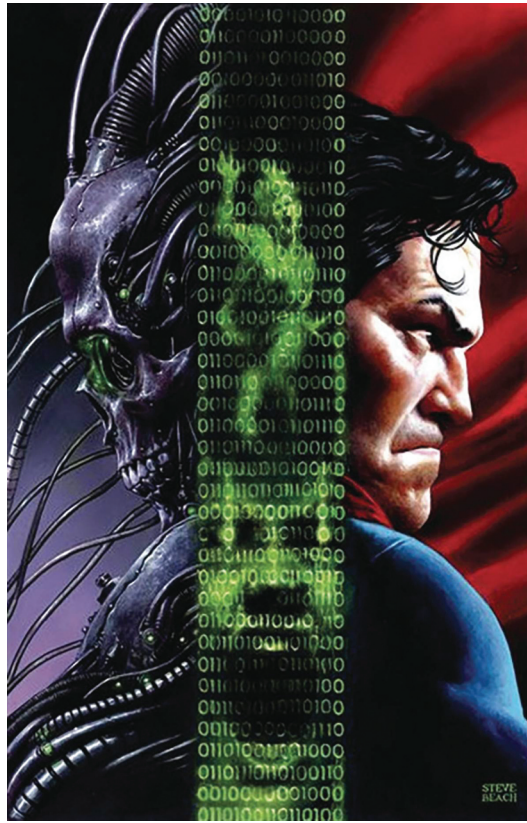


Figure 5. Cover art by Steve Beach for *Action Comics* #1056. ©DC Comics. Reprinted with permission.

that kind of thing would impact how he sees things now. It would be hard to not see this in the past after having seen the future, but I do think he also understands that the future is fluid and that he lives in this multiverse, this omniverse, where anything and everything happens. So, in that way, having seen so many different versions of the future and so many different universes across time and space, I think that would give him a ‘don’t worry about it’ kind of view because everything has happened and will happen. I don’t think he would be paralysed with the thought, the worry of, ‘How is this gonna be remembered on the internet in 1000 years.’ I think it would give him a much broader view of justice.

Trostel: We’re going to wrap up the section on legacy and Superman. So, I’m just wondering, what does Superman mean to you? That’s a very broad question, but could define what Superman means to you?

Johnson: To me, Superman is the living antithesis to the adage that absolute power corrupts absolutely. I want to see somebody who has essentially absolute power who wields it with absolute compassion and humility. And to answer your earlier question again about whether he’s relevant now: I personally need to believe that somebody can be all powerful and still open the back car door and check on the kids’ seatbelt and make them feel like a hero for what they did. I mean actually care about a little kid. To me, it’s like Superman is my religion. I teach my son morality and ethics through Superman stories. I want to believe that somebody can be all-powerful and wield it with absolute compassion and humility and be unburdened by it and uncorrupted by it. I need to believe that that’s possible. I want to believe that it is possible not only to have great power but to seek great power and not let that

define you as a monster. It is okay for you to want to be billionaires as long as it is not to become a monster, or even let that change you throughout the process of getting a billion dollars. Don't let it change you into another thing that we all know exists now. So that is what Superman is to me. He is absolute compassion and humility; he is the champion of the oppressed.

Trostel: That was really beautiful. Okay, I think we want to shift gears a little bit to your process since we are at a writing conference. So, I think people are probably interested in how you approach your work. How do you collaborate when you have to work with artists and other collaborators? Do you co-envision images and texts together? Maybe you can give us a couple of examples?

Johnson: So making comics is extremely collaborative, obviously. The art will just make or break a story. For writers, it's really important to think about how you find an artist. I got into comics with my brother. I'm a musician by trade. When I'm not doing comics, I play trumpet with one of the military bands in DC. I have a younger brother who also was a musician and an artist. He had gone the other way and he wanted to do comic art professionally and had no idea how to break in. He was just a kid in the sticks like I was. We didn't have the internet, didn't know anything about anything. He wanted to do comics and didn't know how to get out of where he was, didn't know how to get started. On a phone call one time, I was already living in DC and he was telling me, 'I really want to do this. I'm going to college and it's going ok, but I don't really like it and I just want to draw.' I said, 'Come move in with me, we'll figure it out. There are people that do this job, we'll figure out how they do it.' So, he moved in with me, and we started going to conventions and found a good comic shop and bought the *How to Write Comics for Dummies* book and other ones that are much better. There are books about how to write comics, how to make comics, how to draw, write, whatever step. I bought those. Some trade paperback collections of comics will have script excerpts in the back, too, you can read and see what a script looks like, or you can just Google 'comics script' and I'm sure you can get a ton of hits for what scripts look like. Unlike screenplays, comics are kind of the Wild West. As far as format, there's not a very standardised way to write a comic script. You'll see if you look at 10 different scripts, you'll see a lot of commonality but not a format that you must use. Whereas if you turn in a screenplay or a pilot for a show that you wrote, and if your dialogue is left justified instead of centred, they'll laugh you out of there, like, 'get this trash out of my face, you clearly don't know anything' because there's a very standardised way to write that stuff. With comics, it's a little looser. But anyway, as a writer, it's important to not see the artist as working for you. Sometimes writers fall into the trap that since their step comes first and they pass it on to the artist and then they do their step and then they colour it, letter it, it's easy to fall into the trap of thinking, well, 'I'm the boss.' But that's not how it is. We are all collaborators and it's important to see your collaborators as having co-ownership of it. The conversation between the group should continue all the way to the end.

In my scripts I write a lot of detail, put a lot of stuff in every panel with the understanding and express permission that the artist can change whatever they want. I see it as telling the artist stories so that they can then tell the story. So, you're not dictating the set of laws, like, 'everything must be exactly how I see, how I say.' For one thing, because their visual instincts will be better than yours, certainly better than mine. There is a scene where Batman's on the hood of an SUV and is driving down the street in the rain, chasing this other SUV. Somebody from the front fires a machine gun at Batman, the front vehicle hits a lamp post, he jumps off and swoops onto the next car. There was this shot that I described in which I wanted to see the shot of Batman swooping in the air from a certain perspective. The artist changed it and I said, 'Oh, how would you feel about going back to the way this is in the script?' And he said, 'The up perspective is so much cooler looking.'

And he was totally right. I expressly described it in a different way because of some other payoff that mattered for the next panel, but Dani [Sampere] was right. It was just a better panel. I had the story going in a different direction after that visually. They need to have permission to change stuff like this. I don't think I've ever turned in a script that did not get panels either added or removed or both. It's almost always for the better. Sometimes if there's an artist that's on a deadline, they might make a change just because something else is way easier or it's a pose they are much more comfortable with, and sometimes you have to navigate that working relationship to make sure the book comes out as good as it can look, but you can't be giving orders. It's still a collaboration.

That would be some advice I would strongly encourage you to take to heart. Don't dictate orders. It's a collaboration and ideally you want to be a part of the whole process. Usually I'll send that script and they'll send me back what we call thumbnails, which are very loose kindergarten versions of what it's going to look like just to see the perspectives and layouts. Like, 'How does this look? What do you think?' And usually you want to give thoughts like, 'yeah, it all looks great' or if there's anything that you think could be better in some way, if you can take those notes for how to change your part of it. When I was doing the 'Golden Age' story about Superman and his son, there was a spread I'd written with a bunch of panels for Phil Hester to draw. Hester sent me back the thumbnails and it had a couple of really big panels and a bunch of small ones along the bottom. I didn't love it. Rather than say, 'Phil Hester, Mr. Legend, sir, I think you could do better.' Instead what my takeaway from that was, 'Well, I overcrowded the spread. There's so many panels in the spread and if I can find a way to cut three panels out of this, that's going give Hester a lot more room to do something way cooler with this.' So, because the layouts were weak, that doesn't mean Phil did it wrong. He did the best he could with what I gave him. So instead of telling him what would be better, I said, 'Give me a couple of hours and I'm going to give you another script excerpt for these pages.' Then he did something awesome and it looked way better as a result. Then we saw the colour pages as they came back and had notes for them. You want to be part of the process as much as you can. After all the art is done, you want to collect it all and look at it all in sequence with your writing and change everything you can to make it marry up with the art better because it will never come back looking exactly as you envisioned. If there's a facial expression where you've got somebody saying, whatever, 'Oh no! How are we gonna get out of this?' and the face looks more sad than worried, or if somebody else in the panel is more prominent than the person you had speaking, or if they're standing in a place that makes the speaking order weird, you have to go back and tighten everything up to make it fit with the art because it's a lot easier for you to fix your words than for them to fix their art. So, you just roll with it. As they say in improv, you want to try to 'yes and' everybody instead of telling them, 'No, this is not how I envisioned it, draw like it is in my brain, monkey.' Instead, take what they're giving you and 'yes, and' it. Keep it a collaboration and not a dictatorship.

Trostel: This reminds me of the conversation we had last night, and I wanted to make sure we talked about the connection between music and creating comics. I know you're both a musician and a writer. The process of creating comics is like jazz, right? You're riffing off of one another, you're recombining characters and bringing pieces back from the past but trying to make them new. Can you talk a little bit about how your involvement in music influences the way that you see comics?

Johnson: Yeah. One of the first things I did in the comics community was write an essay⁵ about the similarities of comics and jazz, and how making comics feels like small group jazz to me in how collaborative it is. If you change out any one person, even if it's just the inker or just the drummer, or just the bassist or whatever, everything changes everything around it and adapts. It's just really beautiful to me. I love the collaborative nature of it. And I also view the characters as jazz standards because we talk about different interpretations of characters. My Superman is different from Brian Azarello's, Azarello's is different from Scott Snyder's, from Mark Waid's, from everyone else's. And that's okay. It doesn't mean that one is in canon and the other is not, it's just different takes. Like 'The Way You Look Tonight,' the old jazz standard, we've got recordings of that song going back almost 100 years. It's just like when you see any artist at a comic convention, you'll see them all doing different takes on licensed characters or characters they don't hold licences for. Like somebody asked them to draw a Hellboy or Superman or Captain America or whoever. They're all going to be wildly different and you can't say one of them is not real. They're all their own thing. I love that fluidity. I love that we have these common characters, and if you follow the trajectory of any one character, it's got a long legacy in comics. You can see the history of comics in it, the history of America in it.

You can do the same thing with old jazz tunes. In the act of producing the thing, sometimes, if you're playing a tune and in the middle of it, the drummer hears some little kernel of an idea from something that the bass played and he starts going into double time, now you're playing in double time. What are you supposed to do? You can't just give him the hand and say, 'No, not yet.' He's a part of this, too. Now you're playing in double time and you let the thing become what it becomes. That fluidity and collaborative nature to the medium feels like jazz. To me, the big difference is that jazz is happening in the moment, all at the same time, and on the comic page, that happens in kind of slow motion where you do your part, go to somebody else, they take your part and make their part and next, next, next. But in every other way, it feels like jazz being made, especially in the best moments. But the times when that does not happen, if there is a collaborator that kind of puts up a hand – because sometimes you work with somebody who doesn't take notes well from you or the editor or both – or they turn in their art and just send it in the mail, basically because they don't want to talk about this anymore, then it's kind of a drag. Now it feels like we're just kind of making doughnuts. We can be making anything. We're making this thing together. It's supposed to be: we're making art. It's a thing that we agreed to make together, so let's do it together.

Trostel: It's really interesting what you're saying about this collaborative connection between jazz and comics. Okay, I think we'll end on a few fun questions and then we'll open it up to the audience. So, are you reading anything interesting right now? What's inspiring you?

Johnson: Lately I've been drowning in work and I've not been reading enough, frankly, but most of the stuff I've been reading has been for research. So, I cannot share everything I'm reading. Let's see, I just got back into John Gardner's *Grendel*, which is great. I need to finish that. I really want to finish that book. I also read to my son every night no matter what and sometimes I use that as an excuse to read something that I want to read. If I think it's something good for him to read, not just anything, like, all right, it's time for *House of Leaves*. Right now, we're reading *Roverandom*, which is a story that Tolkien wrote for his son when he lost his toy dog. For anyone that doesn't know, Tolkien and his

family were on the beach and his son lost his toy dog and he wrote this series of adventures that the dog goes on. I'm sorry, I'm seeing a lot of nods. Like, yes nerd, we know. Anyway, we're reading that right now. We just finished, what's it called? *Farmer Giles of Ham* before that. I've been reading him *Hellboy*. If you're talking about the comics and not the movies, they are not too rough. The art is impressionistic enough. He likes the Lovecraftian bits. He finds that fun. And folklore things about vampires and Baba Yaga and these cool, creepy things that he just really likes. My Hulk run, it is unapologetically influenced by both Del Toro and Mignola (Figure 6). I mean, the biggest influence on my run is the 'Crooked Man' story that Richard Corben did with Mignola on *Hellboy*. It's this walkabout in the American South, creepy Southern gothic monsters, very much a monster versus monster kind of book, like the original concept of Hulk kind of was. So, in that way, I've been getting back into *Hellboy*. I'm reading the original *Hellboy* stories, reading those to my son every now and then. Sometimes I'll separate one out like, 'this is just for Daddy.' I always go back to, *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* by Emil Ferris, which is a standby thing. I go back to that all the time. It's a high bar for what comics can be. Gosh, what else? I have this friend named Gannon Beck who did this series called *Space Corps*. That was a webcomic he did for a long time and he finally got it printed. I got a collection of his, his *Space Corps* stuff. I just read that.

Trostel: Well, you mentioned in passing that you can't tell us a lot about what you've been reading as you're researching something new. Are you allowed to hint at all about your next projects?

Johnson: I just wrapped up 007. *Action Comics* is still coming out. *Incredible Hulk*, *Green Lantern: War Journal* with John Stewart, those are all coming out monthly. I do have a creator-owned series coming out soon that I'm really excited about and it's somewhere between *Nightcrawler* and *Breaking Bad* in a way. It's kind of a psychological thriller. I'm really proud of it. It's going to be dope. We signed the artist, who is incredible. I shouldn't say much too much more about that, but it's going to be awesome.

Trostel: Last question from me and then we'll open it up: who's your favourite character to write?

Johnson: Superman. I'm sorry, let's take Superman out of the equation. It is him, but that seems a little over-obvious. Batman's really fun too. That seems like another low-hanging fruit. Who else is there? John Constantine, and he's appearing as a guest star in my final arc of *Action Comics* coming. Later in the arc, we're going to see a Superman and John Constantine team up. It's going to be pretty fun.

Trostel: I think we want to make sure people have a chance to ask questions, so I'll open it up to the audience.

Audience: You talk a lot about the legacy and you're clearly no stranger to big franchises. Did you have any apprehension or concerns about taking on the *Incredible Hulk* after such an acclaimed run on the series preceding you?

Johnson: No, I didn't have any trepidation about it, but I was mindful of it for sure. When I took that gig, I had just given up my beloved *Alien*. I love *Alien*. I was so out of bandwidth, though. I think, okay, I've done this for two years and I'm just pulling all-nighters constantly trying to keep up. Before the work starts to suffer, I feel like I should get out of this. I turned in my last *Alien* script and I swear the next day I got an email from Wil Moss. He says, do you want to write Hulk? I said, can I take a week and think about it? It wasn't even a bake off. It was, if you want it, it's yours. I was kind of surprised by that. I asked, 'Can I have *The Incredible Hulk* title back because it hasn't been called *The Incredible Hulk* for a long time?'

It's been *Immortal Hulk* and then just *Hulk*. Before that there were other like little events and things, so I wanted to show readers that it was a return to form. This is the real book.

The hardest part of deciding what to do is that I didn't want to just ape the Al Ewing run because it was perfect. I love Hulk as a horror vehicle, but I needed to figure out what I would do. So, I wasn't scared, but I definitely was mindful of it. How do I do this without just looking like an Al Ewing copy? The answer was in the kind of horror that I wanted to do. There's no question I wanted it to be a horror book. The Hulk in that vein makes sense to me as opposed to a superhero thing. While Al Ewing had an almost Cronenberg-like black science kind of body horror book, I decided to go the route more of Mike Mignola and Guillermo Del Toro and make it more of a folk horror kind of take. Rather than dark laboratories, it's taking place in potter's fields and rivers, abandoned coal mining towns and things like that. Plus, I wanted to put the South in it. I miss the old Bill Bixby walking the earth setup. I like the *Hellboy* setup where he just walks through the world of folklore and sees all these legendary monsters to which most of us are blind. So I thought of this setup with the Mother of Horrors – and Eldest just kind of brings it all together.

Audience: My question is a Superman related question. I feel like a lot of creators of Superman treat Clark Kent as an excuse and not an essential part of the character of Superman. He's just the answer to what is Superman doing when he's not Superman? But I feel like what Clark does as Clark is as essential to his story as what he does as Superman. So, what is your approach to him as Clark Kent and his non-Superman related activities?

Johnson: That's a great question. So, when I came on board the book, Brian Bendis had done away with the secret identity. The world knew that Superman was Clark Kent and, in a way, that kind of demolished the character of Clark. Visually, at least, there's no need for him to wear the glasses anymore. There's no need for the suit and tie, for the fedora and all that. It also kind of does away with the Lois and Clark relationship, in a way. It's now Lois and Superman, and there's that other fun vibe that has kind of been lost. One nice thing that came from it is that I think Superman would not hear his own name as 'Superman.' He would never call himself Superman because that word inherently means he is more than us. It's like his name was 'Better Than You.' He would just inherently fight that concept and say, 'My name's Clark, actually.' It was really nice for him to be able to save someone and say on the page, 'I'm Clark.' I think it's in *Action Comics* #1031 where this Warworld Armada is coming to Earth and he figures out they are all chasing one ship. Superman rips open that ship and it's actually these refugees that have managed to get here. He says, 'I don't know if you can understand me, but my name's Clark and nothing bad is going to happen to you' and he flies off. That just felt so awesome to say: 'My name's Clark, and you're going to be okay.' I have a lot of affection for that moment, and that feeling that he can just say his name and not call himself Superman. But now that the secret identity is back, I have to kind of handle it delicately. I still don't want to ever say 'I'm Superman' on the page because he just wouldn't. But obviously he answers to it because people call him that. But his name is Clark. That's what his parents called him. That's what his friends all called him growing up. That's the name that his wife knew him by when he was lying to her constantly. That's the name that he hears in his mind as his name. I mean, he'll answer to Kal-El and answer to Superman, but Clark's his name. So, when he is acting as Clark, he's still being himself.

Audience: Listening to you, I feel like I've learned a lot about how you think about Superman. Obviously, Superman has been very open to interpretation, but the role of the Kryptonian heritage is something that changes a lot depending on the writer. So, I guess my

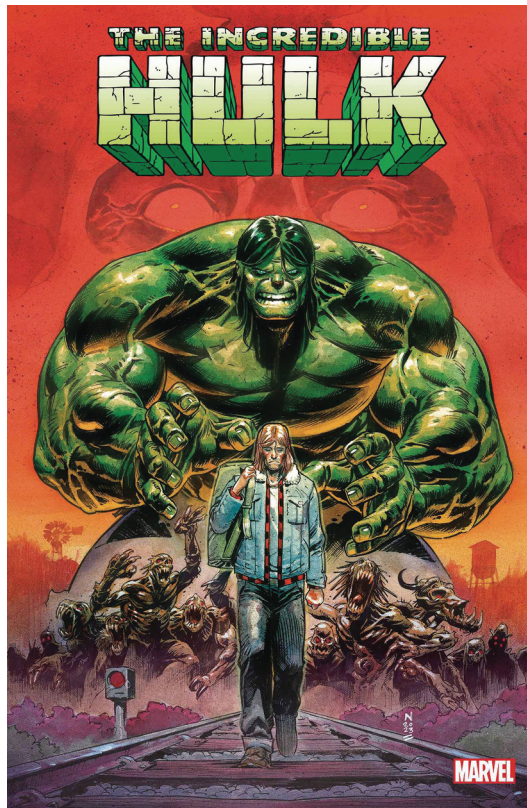


Figure 6. Cover art by Nic Klein for *Incredible Hulk* #1. ©Marvel Comics. Reprinted with permission.

question is, what role do you think his Kryptonian heritage plays in how he perceives himself versus maybe say someone like Supergirl or the Martian Manhunter who grew up amongst their culture and have a more intimate relationship to it?

Johnson: It's a hard question to answer concisely because he takes his heritage very seriously. He understands the weight that he carries, but he also sees himself as one of us. Even though he obviously is not blind to the weight that he carries being one of the last from this other place. In my run, one significant change I did make from canon, this is more in the subtext, but we all know that Kara, Supergirl, looks like his younger cousin, but of course she was older when she left Krypton. She's much older than him. To me she is really the torchbearer of Krypton. She's the one who remembers that place and the people there and what it was like to live there and to be a Kryptonian. So, she's really the matriarch of the El line to me. And there are a lot of moments in my run where Clark defers to Kara or she kind of scolds him. He's very mindful of the weight he carries as the 'Last Kryptonian,' but he defers to Kara on some questions of legacy. To me she is more the torchbearer even than Superman. In *Action Comics* #1058, Kara brings out a book that she rescued from the great library of Kandor and through it we understand more about the lore of Krypton. Does anyone here know the Nightwing and Flamebird story, at least in theory? We add to the canon a little bit in that way where Nightwing and Flamebird are the 'house fable' of the House of El. It's the idea that every great house of Krypton had a sigil, the crest that they wear, there is a banner, colours, and a house fable. The fable is a story that the elders would tell their youth to teach them the standards, the ethics, to which they were to aspire to live. And the story of the Els was Nightwing and Flamebird, which is why we know it so well in

Superman canon. We introduced a new house fable for the House of Ra, to which the Super-Twins belong. So we use that to flesh out their legacy and where that's going to go. So to answer your question: he tries to keep a foot solidly in both camps all the time. He's very mindful of both as far as who he is, as a person and his morality. He owes almost all of that to Ma and Pa Kent.

Audience: Superman goes around as Clark Kent most of the time and leads him to experiences, relationships, and so forth that Superman as a character doesn't have. What does that mean to Superman? Do you think he's learning things from those relationships he would not otherwise learn?

Johnson: Yeah, for sure. I mean, he's living his life as Clark Kent. If he was only ever the guy in the cape, he would have this weirdly superior vibe. His feet would never need to touch the ground, right? He could just hover over us, and would, and that gives him an almost authoritarian air. He could say 'I'm Superman' and it would make sense and that's who he is as a hero. Being Clark is how he learned to love and admire us. He's not just pretending. Sometimes we see Clark Kent portrayed like, 'Oh, I'm such a scared weakling,' pretending to be like the rest of us and that to me is almost a slam on humanity. It's like, 'look, I'm just like you, I'm a coward.' I try not to show him that way. I show him being polite and kind and soft-spoken and holding the door, and turning the other cheek when he gets smacked around by a bully and all that, but not ever be like, 'Oh my God, let me run away.' No, he aspires to be one of us because he legit admires us and loves us in the way we struggle without powers. He talks about that on Warworld as well. Mongul says something about how Superman 'surrounds' himself 'with lesser creatures' himself with the company of these pathetic lesser things, and as Superman smacks him around, he's like, 'You don't understand a damned thing. These people are stronger than you or I will ever be. They've been through trials that should have killed them. They've never had power gems or the strength of gods, but they never give up. They're not lesser they're more than we are. Can't you see that? Can you really not see . . . what I see in them?' (Johnson and Federici 2022, 15-16). He aspires to be as brave as us, and to me that's important. If he was only Superman, he would be scary in my opinion.

Audience: Are there comics or are there moments where Superman's privilege is addressed? He's an alien, but because of his appearance he has a certain privilege.

Johnson: I would recommend a book by Gene Luan Yang called *Superman Smashes the Klan*. That is actually a re-examining, a retelling, of an old Superman radio show. DC put it out recently as *Superman Smashes the Klan*. It is super great. Gene is Chinese American, and that radio show spoke to him, so he adapted it.

One more thing I want to say to your question: I am writing a series called *Green Lantern: War Journal* that just started (Figure 7). The first issue hit this past week and that's about John Stewart, who is the Black Green Lantern. He is to me, in a way, even more than Superman, the consummate superhero, because when he became Green Lantern, he took his mask off and threw it away. He said, 'I've got nothing to hide.' This is way back in the day, and the character has a mother who is very active in the Civil Rights Movement. She is his hero, and we explore that a lot in the story. How the mother, in a world where Batman and Superman and all these characters are the greatest heroes of their world, she does not trust them really because they are masked vigilantes. Even Superman wears a mask, Clark is his mask. We've established that Clark is who he is, but he does kind of wear a disguise and give a name that is not his own when he's saving people. Batman is the masked vigilante. To her, to John Stewart's mother, he's not a hero. Her son is



Figure 7. Variant cover art by Rahzzah Murdock for *Green Lantern: War Journal* #6. © DC Comics. Reprinted with permission.

the hero, because he's the one who has great power. He's the Green Lantern, John Stewart, and he doesn't care who knows it. He says, 'I'm going to do the right thing and I have the courage to show my face when I do it.' That's the book where you're going to get into questions of privilege and what it means to be the greatest superhero of all and be a Black guy in America at the same time.

Trostel: That's a great note to end on. This is a fascinating discussion. Thank you so much.

Johnson: Thank you.

Notes

1. 'Future State' is a series of comic book stories which documents one possible future of the DC Universe.
2. 'One More Day' is an infamous Spider-Man story where Mephisto, a demon character based on Mephistopheles from the *Faust* story, ended Spider-Man's marriage and any memory of it in the Marvel universe with a bargain that he made with Peter Parker.

3. 'New 52' was a line-wide relaunch of the DC Comics titles, which rebooted continuity. 'Rebirth' was a line-wide relaunch of the DC comics titles in 2016.
4. Black Label is an imprint of DC Comics aimed to focus on stories for mature readers.
5. Phillip Kennedy Johnson (2012), 'American Splendor: How Comics Are Becoming Jazz,' <https://www.phillipkennedyjohnson.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/American-Splendor-How-Comics-Are-Becoming-Jazz.pdf> Originally published in 2012 on Comicbookresources.com

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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