

This toolkit was created as part of the *Superman's Cleveland: Lineage and Legacy* celebration.

Superman's Cleveland honored the 85th anniversary of the creation of Superman by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster in 1938 in their hometown.

The program was organized by the Rust Belt Humanities Lab at Ursuline College and the Ohio Center for the Book at Cleveland Public Library with support from Ohio Humanities.

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Superman: Birthright

By Mark Waid and Leinil Francis Yu

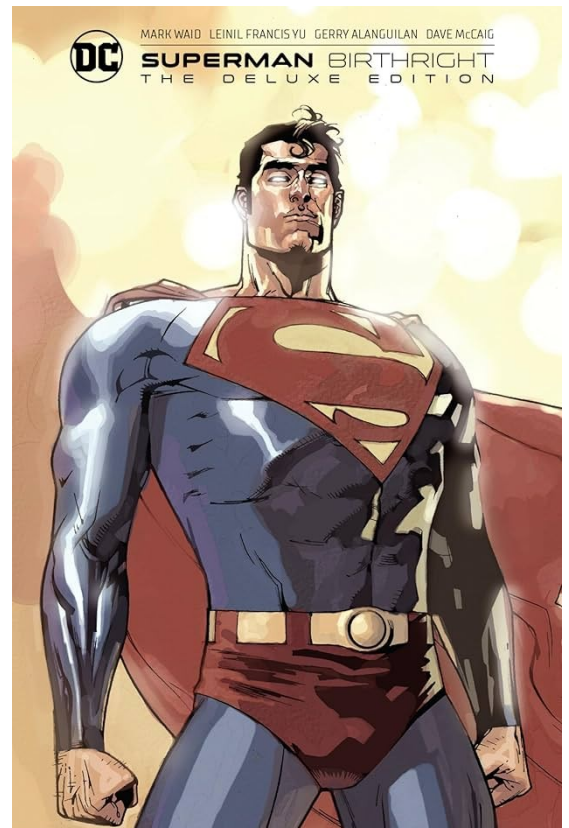
About the comic

Superman: Birthright is a modern retelling of Clark Kent's origin and journey to becoming Superman. The story opens with Jor-El and Lara desperately planning a future for their son on a new world, Earth, as they face the last hours of the doomed planet Krypton.

Fast forward 25 years, Kal-El (now known as Clark Kent) is a journalist who has traveled to West Africa following the story of an ethnic conflict between the fictional Ghuri and Turaaba clans. He follows the campaign of Kobe Asuru; but, after witnessing his assassination and writing up the story for *Ghana Dispatch*, "Clark" returns to Smallville to see his parents, to learn more of his history, and to determine how he will use his powers for the common good. While in Smallville, he reclaims elements of his Kryptonian heritage from the rocket which carried him to Earth and creates a secret identity for himself.

Superman then leaves for the big city, Metropolis, becoming a journalist at the *Daily Planet*. Here we meet the cast of characters we all know, including Lois Lane, Jimmy Olsen, Perry White, and, of course, Lex Luthor. Soon after Clark's arrival, a planned military demonstration goes wrong, leading Superman to set his sights on Lex Luthor, revealing a more insidious history that had been all but buried until now.

Superman navigates this new life and new threat in Metropolis determined to fight for hope in a climate of fear. The story captures what makes Superman the greatest superhero and why it is indeed his birthright.



Who are Mark Waid and Leinil Yu?

Mark Waid, a *New York Times* bestselling author, has written almost every major character in comics today and has held almost every job in comics, including editor-in-chief, comic shop owner, writer, and many others. He is best known for his award-winning work with artist Alex Ross, *Kingdom Come*, one of the best-selling graphic novels of all time. Secretly, though, he will share that he prefers, *Superman: Birthright*, and his *Irredeemable* stories as the favorite works that he has produced. With over thirty years of experience in his field, Waid happily mentors young writers and maintains a blog at markwaid.com that is full of advice for beginning writers and experienced authors both.

Leinil Francis Yu, the artist of *Superman: Birthright*, has illustrated many major comic series featuring some of the most recognizable characters, including Wolverine, Captain America, Darth Vader, and many more. He is perhaps best known for his work with Brian Michael Bendis on *New Avengers* and *Secret Invasion*. In 2019, Yu created the first Filipino superhero, Wave, who first appears in the Marvel Comics issue *War of the Realms: New Agents of Atlas* #1. He continues to draw countless covers and stories for the major comics publishers.

Themes

There are several themes throughout the book that can help frame your discussion.

- **Coming of Age** — This is a story of the personal journey of Clark Kent/Superman. While, of course, unique, it resembles that of any person's coming of age and how the defining moments in our life determine the choices we make. One way to frame this story is to think about how, despite the superheroics, this remains a story about a young man finding himself.
- **Hope vs. Fear** — Superman is driven by hope; Lex Luthor is motivated by fear and insecurity. This story offers us a frame to think about what drives human behavior.
- **Journalism** — From his origins as Superman to the end, this story centralizes the role of journalism which was also integral to Siegel and Shuster's vision for the character. One way to understand this story is to think about the role of journalism within this story and today.
- **Power** — In the end, this is a story about how humans use their power. Both Superman and Luthor have nearly infinite power (originating from different sources). This story explores what makes someone use their power for good and what makes someone use their power for evil.

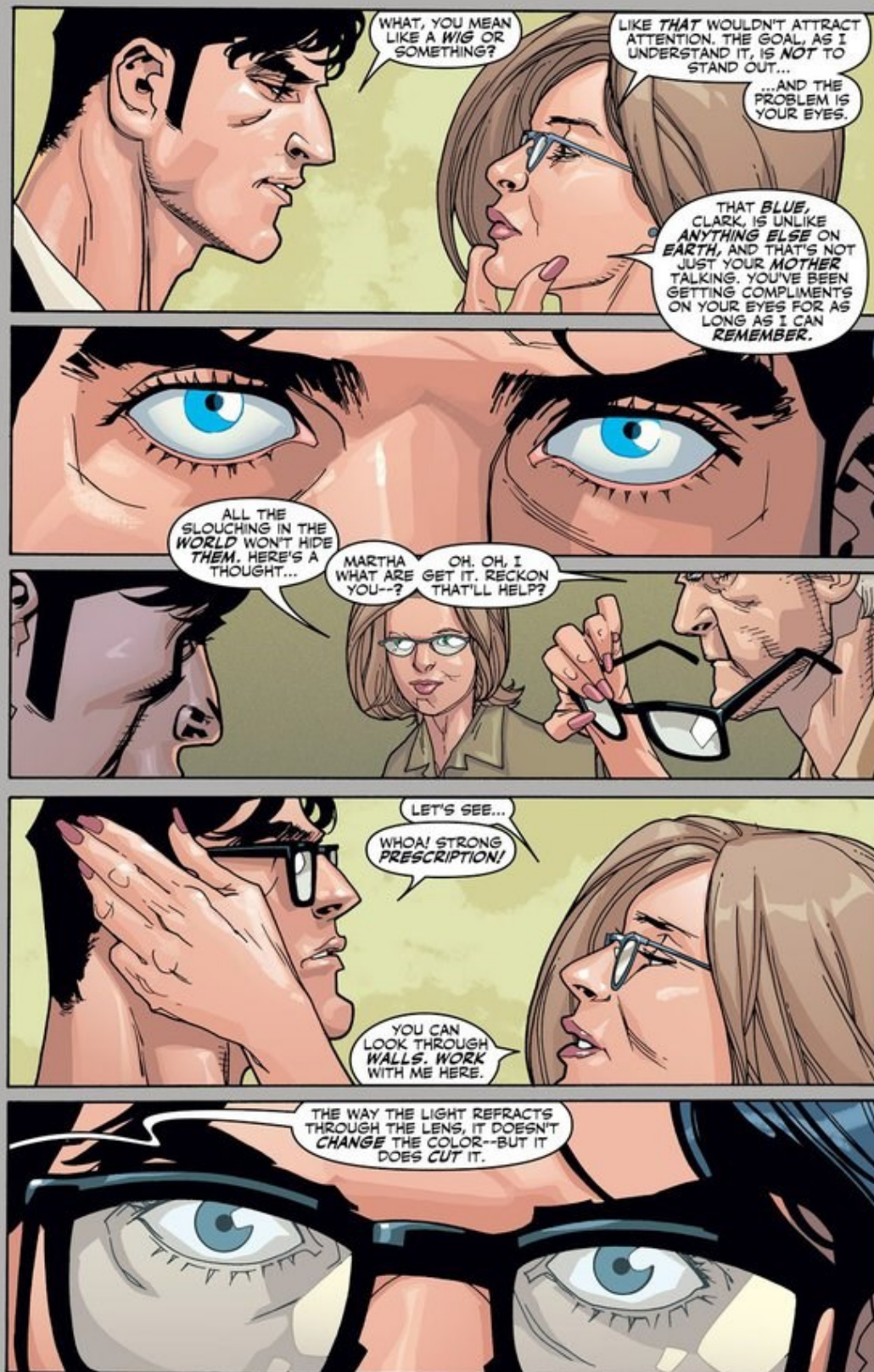


Figure 1. *Superman Birthright* #3 p. 20 by Mark Waid and Leinil Francis Yu. ©DC Comics

Questions for Discussion

1. Waid and Yu start Clark's journey in West Africa in this version of the story. How does their reimagining of Superman's origins ask us to think about Clark's journey in new ways as distinct from previous interpretations of this story?
2. Pa Kent struggles with Clark Kent becoming a superhero. Whereas, Ma Kent seems to embrace it (Fig. 1). What do their different responses tell us about their characters? How do you think this illuminates our understanding of Clark's upbringing?
3. Clark says of the Kryptonians in a letter to Ma Kent that they are "people not very — and at the same time, quite — different from us...from Earth people" (p. 38). Clark reckons with the fact that he is of two worlds. How does this story help us to think about the experience of Superman as an immigrant who sees our world as home and yet also as part of another world?
4. In the supplementary materials in the back of the book, the editors discuss how Waid was "faithful to the core concepts envisioned over sixty years ago." What elements of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's story are recognizable in this version? Are there elements of John Byrne and others that have revamped the character visible here? Where does Waid diverge?
5. Through Clark's memories, we learn about Lex Luthor's history. How does learning his story explain his motivations?
6. Reflecting on Luthor's journey toward villainy, Clark says of the people of Smallville, "I wish they'd been as concerned with his social and moral development as they were with his intellectual growth" (p.182). How does this comic frame the development of supervillains and superheroes?
7. Luthor fabricates the Kryptonian invasion and the people of Metropolis are quick to believe this story. How does *Birthright* help us to think about the power of fear? Why are so many afraid of Clark's power and those of the Kryptonians?
8. Lois Lane plays a central role in Superman's success in this story. How does this version of Lois Lane align with other iterations of her character? In what ways has her character evolved over time?
9. The final page is a beautiful ending to the story which gives both the reader and Clark's parents closure. How did you respond to this final scene?
10. Superman's story is one of hope. As he says to Lois during the invasion, he needs to prove that "it isn't fear that drives people." (Fig. 2) How does *Birthright*, as a story, explore this idea from the beginning in West Africa to the end with Superman's final triumph?
11. Waid and Yu's reimagining of Superman's origin was told in the early 2000s. The world has changed since then. In what ways might the story look different today?
12. Superman, like many superheroes, has had his origin story told and retold many times. Why do you think we return to retell a superhero's origin story again and again?

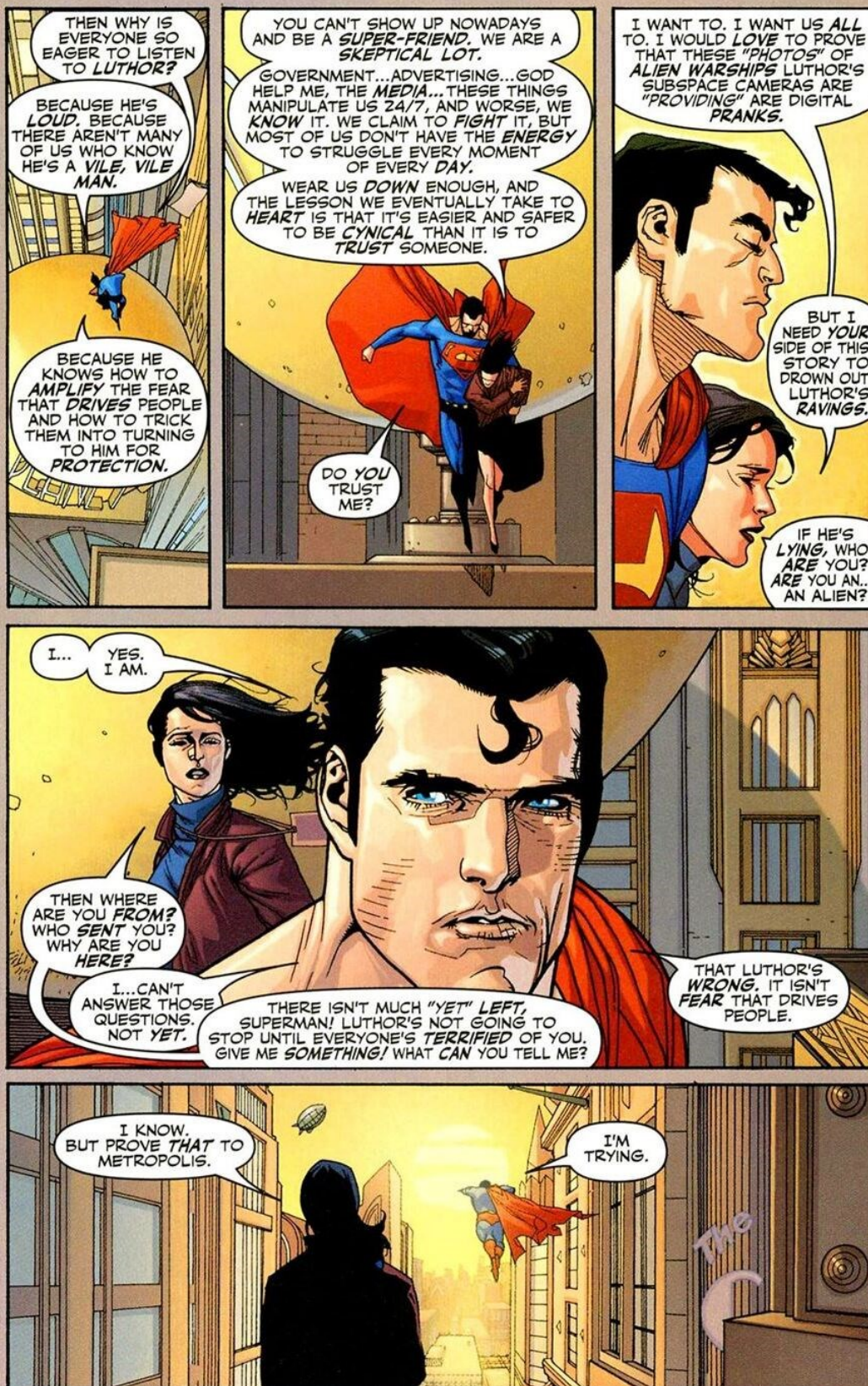


Figure 2. *Superman Birthright* #9 p. 7 by Mark Waid and Leinil Francis Yu. ©DC Comics

Further Supplemental Materials

Additional resources to supplement this toolkit:

- Anthony Desiato, *Digging for Kryptonite* podcast. “*Superman: Birthright* Interview with Mark Waid.” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wGLRATIFM0w>)
- Arune Sing, *Comic Book Resources*. “Gonna Party Like It's Yer Birfright (Part 1): Mark Waid talks 'Superman: Birthright'” (<https://www.cbr.com/gonna-party-like-its-yer-birfright-part-1-mark-waid-talks-superman-birthright/>)
- Alex Dueben, *The Comics Journal*. ““All that truly matters in a story is emotion” An Interview with Mark Waid.” (<https://www.tcj.com/all-that-truly-matters-in-a-story-is-emotion-an-interview-with-mark-waid/>)
- Cleveland Public Library. “Voices from Krypton: A Conversation with Mark Waid and Ed Gross.” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qEJBY6CjsMs>) (A *Superman's Cleveland* event)
- Cleveland Public Library. “Mark Waid in Conversation with Brad Ricca.” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKI0bVxsSJA>) (A *Superman's Cleveland* event)

Further Reading

If you are interested in other Superman origin stories and retellings:

- *Superman: Secret Origin* by Geoff Johns and Gary Frank (DC Comics)
- *Superman: Harvests of Youth* by Sina Grace (DC Comics)
- *All Star Superman* by Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely (DC Comics)

If you are interested in other comics featuring Superman (and Supergirl) by Mark Waid:

- *Batman/Superman: World's Finest* by Mark Waid and Dan Mora (DC Comics)
- *Kingdom Come* by Mark Waid and Alex Ross (DC Comics)
- *Legion of Superheroes: Supergirl* by Mark Waid and Barry Kitson

If you are interested in other superhero stories by Mark Waid

- *Fantastic Four* by Mark Waid and Mike Wieringo (Marvel Comics)
- *World's Finest: Teen Titans* by Mark Waid and Emanuela Lupacchino (DC Comics)
- *Irredeemable* by Mark Waid, Peter Krause, and Andrew Dalhouse (Boom! Comics)