

SDSU CENTER FOR COMICS STUDIES

Why This Comic for Social Justice?



The X-Men are a superhero team featured in a long-running comic book series originally created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in 1963 and published by Marvel Comics. The popularity of the “X-Men” has resulted in several spin-off series, graphic novels, cartoons, and feature films. The premise of the X-Men universe is that each character shares the experience of being a “mutant” born with an X-gene that gives them different abilities.

The “X-Men” comics have explored themes of prejudice against an “other,” or, a group of people who are feared by normative society and targeted for oppression. In the stories, the X-Men team, under the guidance of Professor X, band together to fight for acceptance in society. This acceptance is expected to come by shutting down mutants with nefarious plots, such as Magneto and his aptly named Brotherhood of Evil Mutants. Through this stand-off between the X-Men and the Brotherhood, the comics explore conflict over different strategies that oppressed groups adopt in the quest for civil and human rights. Are “mutants” [insert any oppressed group here] better served by assimilating into the norms of dominant culture? Should they build their own society? Or should they attempt to force dominant society to bend to the rule of homo superior? The “X-Men” comics grapple with the ways that there are not always clear villains or heroes in conflict. The heroes sometimes commit atrocities, and sometimes the villains save the day.



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Because the oppressed group in the text is fictional, many forms of oppression have been read into the text. Creators Lee and Kirby, as well as later writer Chris Claremont, are Jewish, and throughout the comics there are references to Jewish oppression including the Holocaust. Lee also suggested that he was influenced by the 1950s and 60s Civil Rights movement in the US. While the original X-Men in 1963 were all white characters, the “The Uncanny X-Men” were relaunched in 1975 with an international and interracial team, including continuing popular characters such as Storm (Kenya) and Colossus (USSR). Others who were added, including Thunderbird (Apache) and Sunfire (Japan), did not stick around, likely because their representations of Native Americans and Asian people were too stereotypical.

When writer Claremont joined the team in 1975, he incorporated many references to homophobia and the oppression of LGBTQ+ people. However, queer and trans content remained implicit until the 1990s, when the first character in any mainstream comic came out as gay: an associate of the X-Men named Northstar in “Alpha Flight” #106. The X-Men universe is a rich space to explore how LGBTQ+ readers have disidentified with, or read themselves into, texts that don’t explicitly include them. It is also a useful site for examining how comics have changed to reflect increasing social acceptance of LGBTQ+ people.



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About the Comic



“X-Men: God Loves, Man Kills” is a graphic novel based in the X-Men universe, first published in 1982. As a graphic novel, it was not subject to the restrictions of the Comics Code Authority and it existed as a stand alone story outside of the on-going plot of the comic series. However, the feature film “X2” released in 2003 drew heavily from the novel, bringing it to the attention of a new generation of fans.

In the graphic novel, a vigilante group called the Purifiers is shown hunting down and killing known mutants, as well as those suspected of having the mutant gene (the discovery of mutant powers sometimes does not occur until adolescence). The vigilantes are secretly being directed by Reverend William Stryker, a well-known televangelist, whose specific message is that mutants are abominations in the eyes of God. Stryker kidnaps Professor Charles Xavier (Professor X), a telepath, and hooks him up to a machine designed to find all mutants in the world and then to kill them by inducing cerebral hemorrhage. The X-Men reluctantly team up with their usual foe Magneto to rescue Professor X.

If the original “X-Men” was an allegory for civil rights, the graphic novel can be interpreted as an allegory for the social and political backlash that confronted the gay liberation movement of the 1970s. The 1982 release date coincides with the early days of the AIDS epidemic, originally associated with gay men (a theme that would be taken up more explicitly with the Legacy Virus storyline in “X-Force” #18). Popular discourse at the time (and continuing into the present) treated LGBTQ+ people as biologically different and therefore a threat to the

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health of the public. The character of Reverend Stryker embodies those that believe that LGBTQ+ people are not human and therefore not deserving of human rights. Meanwhile, the characters of Professor X and Magneto, who have most often been compared to the diverging political strategies of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, in this text represent those gay and lesbians groups who adopted assimilationist strategies (“We are just like you”) versus those who could not or would not ever be accepted by respectable normal society.

The 2003 movie “X2” was inspired by the plot of “God Loves, Man Kills,” replacing the televangelist William Stryker with a colonel of the same name. The move from religion to the military continued the queer subtext of the film, referencing policies such as “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” that were contemporarily relevant in the early 2000s.

The allegory of the story is clear to those used to reading for queer subtext, and the “X-Men” have been what Brian Johnson calls “an imaginative resource for a wide range of queer fans” (p. 105). However, it is important to note the psychological distress that generations of readers faced when they did not have any explicit LGBTQ+ role models. In a world where there are now many “out” LGBTQ+ characters for readers to follow, it is worth revisiting comics created under the Comics Code Authority to understand the impact of this specific form of censorship on the representation of sexual and gender diversity.

CONTENT WARNING

The graphic novel depicts two children hanging from nooses and also uses the “n” word. In both cases the intent is to depict extreme hate using the visual lexicon and language that audiences will understand. However, this is problematic on a number of levels, including equating homophobia with racial terror, and should be discussed with readers.



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About the Creator



Chris Claremont

Chris Claremont is a comic book writer best known for his work developing the X-Men universe from 1975-1991, although he continues to write into the present. In his initial stint at Marvel, he created many new characters for the series, including powerful women characters and characters that were implied to be LGBTQ+ (and who later “came out” in the series after the end of the Comics Code Authority). He is also well known for introducing complex themes taken from his study of political theory in college that helped to make the “X-Men” into one of Marvel Comics most popular comic series.



Brent Anderson

Brent Anderson is a comic artist and penciller who is perhaps the most well-known for his work in “X-Men: God Loves, Man Kills.”



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Discussion Questions



1. Which aspects of the plight of the X-Men are relatable to you and why? Which character in the novel is the most relatable to you and why?
2. Discuss any similarities you observe between the world of the X-Men in this story line and the experiences of LGBTQ+ people in the 1970s and 1980s. Then discuss any similarities and differences between the world of the X-Men in this story line and experiences of LGBTQ+ people in the present. Do you think the story was intentionally written as an allegory for LGBTQ+ experience? Does it matter to you if it was written intentionally or not?
3. Describe the features of the style of the art in this graphic novel. Is it realistic, fantastical, playful, or grotesque? In what ways does the artistic style relate to the queer subtext? Does it support a queer interpretation or make a queer reading more difficult?
4. Is the use of allegory in this story an effective way to introduce audiences to queer themes? How much background knowledge do you have to have to read this as a “queer” story? Will some audiences miss this queer subtext in the story? If so, does that matter?



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5. Assuming that the writer of this graphic novel was encoding messages about the treatment of LGBTQ+ people and conflicts within the LGBTQ+ community, what did he get right and what did he get wrong? Do you think it makes a difference that this comic was made by people who don't identify publicly as LGBTQ+?
6. What is the effect of writing this story as an allegory? How would the novel change if Reverend Stryker had been targeting LGBTQ+ people instead of mutants and the X-Men included LGBTQ+ superheroes? How would it change the story if it was explicitly about homophobia and homophobic violence?
7. Why should we read this story, or any story that uses allegory, now that we have many examples of explicit LGBTQ+ representation in comics?
8. Early in the graphic novel, the graphic novel depicts two children hanging from nooses and also uses the "n" word. What do you think the writer and artist intended to convey with these choices? Is this effective? What are the problems with these choices?



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Activities and Assignments



- ❖ Read the 1971 revision of the Comics Code, which was in place at the time of the publication of this graphic novel. In groups, discuss whether this graphic novel, were it a comic book, would have been able to gain approval, or would have been denied the CCA stamp. Identify specific standards of the code that you think would apply.
- ❖ Conduct brief internet research from reliable sources on one of the following topics related to 1970s LGBTQ+ history. Identify any influences of this historical context on this graphic novel. Does knowing this history change how you interpret the novel? Possible topics include: the Mattachine Society; the Gay Liberation Front; the early discovery of AIDS (as “GRID”); President Ronald Reagan’s early response to AIDS; the Gay Men’s Health Crisis; Focus on the Family; and/or the Moral Majority (and Jerry Falwell, Sr.).
 - For students who are familiar with this history, a different activity could be to identify 1970s LGBTQ+ history that is missing from the graphic novel. Students could imagine how the graphic novel could be revised to include this missing history.



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Activities and Assignments



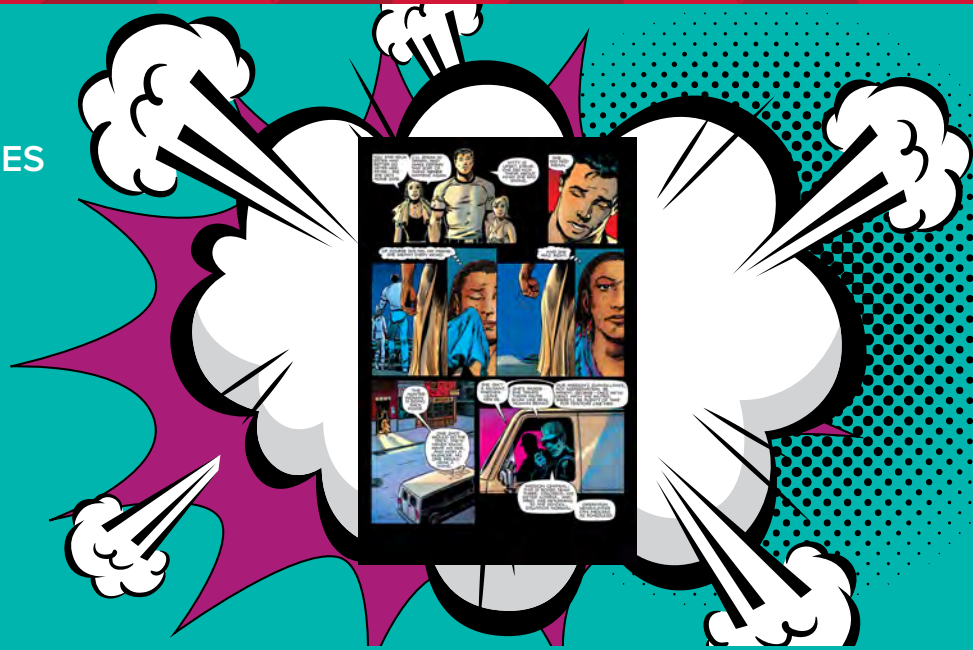
❖ Compare the 1982 graphic novel with more recent “X-Men” comics. How has the representation of queerness changed in the X-Men? If the X-Men are now out as LGBTQ+, what meaning does their struggle as oppressed “mutants” take on? How does having explicitly LGBTQ+ characters change the X-Men? Possible comics to compare include:

- “New Mutants vol. 2 #4” (2003) (Karma comes out)
- “All-New X-Men” #40 (2015) (Bobby comes out)
- “Uncanny X-Men” #600 (2015) (Bobby comes out again?)
- “X-Factor #45” (2009) (First superhero kiss between Shatterstar and Rictor)
- “Immortal X-Men #3” (2022) (Irene/Destiny remembers falling in love with Mystique)
- “Marvel Voices: Pride” (Vol. 2) #1 (2022) (Trans character Escapade is introduced)
- “Marauders” #12 (2023) (Kate Pryde comes out)



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Further Reading

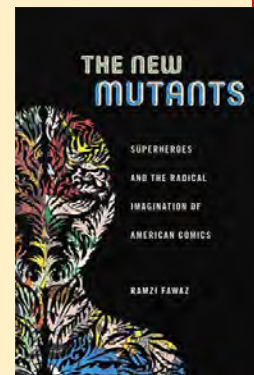
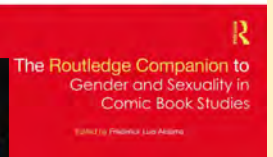


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Further Reading

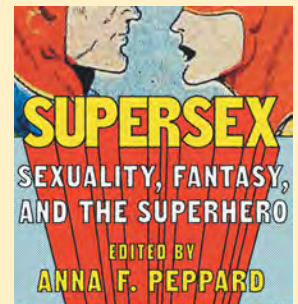


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About the Educator



Jess Whatcott (they/them)

Jess Whatcott is an educator, writer, and organizer on occupied Kumeyaay land, also known as San Diego-Tijuana. They are an assistant professor of women's, gender, and sexuality studies at San Diego State University, and are affiliated with the LGBTQ+ studies program. They teach classes on U.S. history, disability studies, and prison abolition. Whatcott is also affiliated with the SDSU Center for Comics Studies, and created the "Queering Comics" class.

Their research on eugenics, prisons, and disability institutions has nothing to do with comics, but can be found at Duke University Press ("Menace to the Future: A Disability and Queer History of Carceral Eugenics") and in "Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society;" "Feminist Formations;" "Politics, Groups & Identities;" "Lateral;" and edited book collections.

Whatcott has been a fan of the "X-Men" for almost 30 years, but now mostly reads queer graphic novels and science fiction.

