



Bending Steel: Modernity and the American Superhero

Aldo J. Regalado

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“Faster than a speeding bullet. More powerful than a locomotive. Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound . . . It’s Superman!” *Bending Steel* examines the historical origins and cultural significance of Superman and his fellow American crusaders. Cultural historian Aldo J. Regalado asserts that the superhero seems a direct response to modernity, often fighting the interrelated processes of industrialization, urbanization, immigration, and capitalism that transformed the United States from the early nineteenth century to the present. Reeling from these exciting but rapid and destabilizing forces, Americans turned to heroic fiction as a means of explaining national and personal identities to themselves and to the world. In so doing, they created characters and stories that sometimes affirmed, but other times subverted conventional notions of race, class, gender, and nationalism.

The cultural conversation articulated through the nation’s early heroic fiction eventually led to a new heroic type—the brightly clad, super-powered, pro-social action heroes that first appeared in American comic books starting in the late 1930s. Although indelibly shaped by the Great Depression and World War II sensibilities of the second-generation immigrants most responsible for their creation, comic book superheroes remain a mainstay of American popular culture.

Tracing superhero fiction all the way back to the nineteenth century, Regalado firmly bases his analysis of dime novels, pulp fiction, and comics in historical, biographical, and reader response sources. He explores the roles played by creators, producers, and consumers in crafting superhero fiction, ultimately concluding that these narratives are essential for understanding vital trajectories in American culture.

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