

UNSUNG COMIC BOOK HEROES

An Exploration of
Superhero Representation



by S. T. Finn

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If you've always wanted to explore what makes a hero super, or wanted to learn more about comic book beginnings, diversity, and representation, you've come to the right place.

This 10-Part article provides a glimpse into pioneering trailblazers, important first appearances, and the evolution of under-representation in comics.

Part 1 lays the groundwork and sets up our Superhero Criteria.

Part 2 examines superhero beginnings (and their predecessors).

Part 3 delves into readership imbalances and the romance genre.

Part 4 honors first appearances of important female superheroes.

Part 5 appreciates trailblazing female BIPOC superheroes

Part 6 presents important first appearances of Black superheroes.

Part 7 explores Asian, Latino, and Indigenous superheroes.

Part 8 celebrates the first superheroes with disabilities.

Part 9 looks at the first LGBTQ+ and nonbinary superheroes.

Part 10 brings it all to a dramatic conclusion.

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And away we go!

Part 1: The Preamble

Comic books are and have always been snapshots or mini time-capsules that present cultural perceptions (and misconceptions). They offer a glimpse at prevailing issues and social politics of the time in which they were created.

Sometimes, comics have been a vehicle for social change—often right alongside the super-heroic fun. From a historical perspective, what is left out can be just as important as what remains.

But like so many forms of cultural art, there will always be deeper layers to uncover and enjoy in comic books ... if one chooses to look.

In our case, we're going to look at the first appearances of predominantly underrepresented superheroes in comic books, from the earliest days of comics up until much more recently.

Particularly, we'll explore superheroes who were female, people of color, disabled, or those who did not fit into accepted gender norms.

It should be stated upfront ... while the word "diversity" has become a somewhat loaded concept these days, in this article there will be no politics or judgments.

We're objectively looking at representation (or under-representation) in comic books from a historical

perspective. We're here to recognize and appreciate important trailblazers, those who were and will always be a part of comic book history.

However, before we shine a light on our under-represented heroes, we'll need some context—and a clear definition of what we'll be exploring in this series.

So, let's start at the beginning...

The First Comics

Comic books have had a long and interesting history. Beginning in the 1600s, the first sequential art on paper appeared in Europe. The First Prototype Comic Book (*Histoire de M. Vieux Bois*) was published in France (1837) and is considered the earliest precursor to the modern comic book.

Published in English as *The Adventures of Mr. Obadiah Oldbuck* (1842), it became the first prototype published in the United States, marking the first known American example.

It wasn't until 1897 that the term “comic book” was first used on the back cover of *The Yellow Kid in McFadden's Flats* (a collection of reprinted newspaper strips).



Thus began the **Platinum Age** of Comics (1897–1938), a historic period that includes the birth of early newspaper comic strips and the earliest bound collections of sequential art.

It wasn't until around 1933 that magazine-style, saddle-stitched, and staple-bound comic books as we know them were born.

Famous Funnies: A Carnival of Comics (1933) is widely regarded as the first mass-marketed American comic book.

But the first comic book to feature all-original material rather than newspaper reprints wasn't until 1935, with *New Fun #1* (published by National Allied Publications, which later became DC Comics).

The next big comic book milestone occurred in 1938, when *Action Comics #1* introduced the world to **Superman** (Clark Kent)—ushering in what is now known as the **Golden Age** of Comics (1938–1956).

Welcome to the Golden Age

In the Golden Age, superheroes as we know them were born, superhero titles became enormously popular, and the comic book industry experienced its first major boom.

However, superheroes didn't emerge in a vacuum. There were many unsung heroes who paved the way for

Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Captain America, and countless other comic book characters that are now household names.

Before we dive into who those first heroes were, we should ask: What exactly makes a superhero ... *super*?

The quickest answer might seem easy: Powers.

But **Batman** has no superpowers. Neither does **Iron-Man, Elektra, Blue Beetle** (Ted Kord), the **Falcon**, or countless other superheroes.

So, how do we determine which heroes are *superheroes*?

Ground Rules: A Superhero Criteria

There are many definitions of what a “hero” is (for starters, someone who *cares* enough to stand up, stand for, or stand against something or someone in the name of justice).

Likewise, there are many *kinds* of comic books (superhero, horror, romance, crime, western, humor, etc.). So, we should state upfront something that might seem obvious: **Not all heroes are super** ... and not all comic books feature superheroes.

Therefore, in this article, we’ll need a **Superhero Criteria**.

For our purposes, a **superhero** is defined as a crime-fighter who fights for justice, and MAY have a mask, cape, or costume, and/or a secret identity, but **MUST** possess at

least one of the following: 1) a special, peak-human, or unnatural skill or talent; 2) unique tech/gadgets used for crime-fighting; 3) a supernatural ability of some kind; **OR** 4) an actual super-power.

Just having a secret identity or wearing a mask doesn't qualify a hero as super (though they may still be a hero, a crime-fighter, and/or a vigilante). *Not* having a mask or cape doesn't disqualify someone either.

For example, **Superman** and **Wonder Woman** do not wear masks, but they do have costumes and, more importantly, they have special superhuman powers. Similarly, **Aquaman** and **Submariner** have costumes without masks, but they are from Atlantis and both possess peak-human (or superhuman) qualities.

Many non-powered superheroes (like **Batman**, **Black Widow**, **Green Arrow**, **Hawkeye**, etc.) also fit the Superhero Criteria because they possess special peak-human abilities—whether that means remarkable fighting ability, extraordinary intelligence, weapons-mastery, etc.

Same with **Iron-Man**, **Blue Beetle**, and the **Falcon**, who utilize tech/gadgets (including armored suits) to fight crime.

On the other hand, **Tarzan**, **Red Ryder**, and **Sheena** do *not* qualify as superheroes (although they can certainly be regarded as *heroes* in every other sense of the word).

While they don't possess a uniquely special or supernatural ability; a mask, cape, or costume; a secret identity; unique

tech/gadgets specifically used for crime-fighting; and/or an actual super-power, they often *do* fight for justice and they have peak-human qualities.

However, separating those kinds of heroes (as well as non-super masked crime-fighters and vigilantes) from superheroes can be a bit tricky—especially when it comes to heroes who possess expert fighting skills (like **Green Hornet** and **Mockingbird**), or remarkable sword-skills (like **Colleen Wing** and **Zorro**), or those who possess a mastery of other weapons (like **Green Arrow** or the anti-hero **Punisher**).

Some characters on that list might not technically classify as supers (**Zorro** and **Green Hornet**), but some clearly deserve to be considered superheroes. But ... why?

For our purposes, we'll add another important aspect to our **Superhero Criteria**: To be considered a *superhero* (rather than “just” a hero), other heroes or villains *WITH* super-powers or supernatural abilities *MUST* exist somewhere in the same fictional universe—even if the individual superheroes (like super-sleuth **Batman** or super-spy **Nick Fury**) have no powers.

Otherwise, we're dealing with very remarkable people ... not supers.

To illustrate that point further, **Zorro** is a masked, caped hero with remarkable, peak-human sword-fighting ability *and* a secret identity. Without the additional criterion above, we would have to consider Zorro a *superhero*, which

doesn't quite fit (although he is one of my favorite *heroes* of all time).

Zorro does *not* qualify as a superhero because NO ONE in his fictional world has supernatural abilities or superpowers. That means he can't be a superhero in this article.

(For more about Zorro, see **Part 7**.)

Similar with **Robin Hood**, **Sheena**, **Conan**, and many other heroes who exist in a world where they are primarily the only heroes around. The fact that NO superheroes exist in their fictional worlds automatically removes them from our consideration. They are "just" awesome heroes, not super.

The same goes for many pre-Superman vigilantes (some of whom we will look at next).

On the other hand, while Green Arrow, Hawkeye, Black Widow, Nick Fury, or Shang-Chi (without the Ten Rings) each possess no actual superpowers, they CAN stand toe-to-toe with super-powered people who exist in *their* comic book universes.

So, they *can* be considered superheroes according to our criteria.

The last point to mention about our Superhero Criteria is that, with a few exceptions, this series of articles primarily explores superhero representation in *mainstream* American comics.

(We may mention a few relevant or noteworthy characters who fall outside these parameters, but it will be to provide context or a better understanding of the comics and characters that followed.)

Now *that's* out of the way...

Part 2: Beginnings

Before getting to the first underrepresented superheroes, we need to take a look at some important precursors who debuted BEFORE the First Superhero even showed up in comics.

While **Superman** (Clark Kent) is universally recognized as the FIRST popular, costume-and-cape comic book superhero, many earlier characters paved the way.

Appearing in a Chicago Tribune comic strip way back in 1902, **Hugo Hercules** might be the *actual* First Superhero in comics.



Although comic books and superheroes as we know them didn't exist just yet, comic strips in newspapers were certainly a forerunner.

Good-natured and friendly, Hugo used his powers to help people with their everyday problems.

While Hugo didn't wear a mask or a costume (other than his hat, he possessed superhuman-strength (he was able to lift cars over his head and punt houses like footballs). That means he fits the Superhero Criteria.

The next character does not (although he still deserves a mention).

The Shadow (Lamont Cranston) debuted on radio and in pulp magazines in 1930. He later appeared in comic-book form in 1940 (with the release of *Shadow Comics #1*).

An extremely popular masked vigilante, The Shadow utilized special abilities like “clouding men's minds” to become invisible.



He was a master of disguise, hypnotism, and marksmanship—*and* he used a device on his fingertips called "The Devil's Whisper" (a chemical compound that allowed him to create a flash of fire and an explosion when he snapped his fingers).

To his opponents, all these attributes created the *illusion* that The Shadow was a supernatural entity. (He wasn't.)

A few of his abilities even fit into our criteria. But is it enough?

Not quite. Because NO superpowers existed in the fictional world of The Shadow.

Therefore, according to our **Superhero Criteria**, The Shadow was a pulp hero, *not* a superhero. However, his influence on Golden Age superheroes that followed cannot be underestimated.

Almost a hundred years later, “Only The Shadow Knows” is a phrase most of us still remember today — for a reason.

Created to rival The Shadow, another 1930s pulp figure was **The Spider** (Richard Wentworth), who made his first appearance in *The Spider Strikes!* (October 1933—before The Shadow appeared in comics).

A rather brutal caped vigilante, The Spider used disguises and heavy firepower to fight crime in the streets. However, he does *not* fit our Superhero Criteria, even though he was highly influential (if not remembered as much as The Shadow).

Again, there were no superpowers in his world.

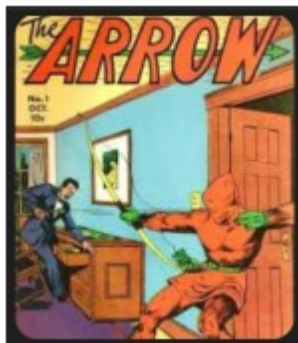
Another hero who remains fairly well-known today is **The Phantom** (Kit Walker).



Debuting in newspaper strips in 1936, the Phantom deserves credit as the *first* costumed and mask-wearing comic strip hero—fighting for justice two years before Superman appeared.

And yet, The Phantom also existed in a world with no superpowers.

Created by Centaur Publications, the non-superhero **Arrow** (Ralph Payne) first appeared in September 1938 as a secret intelligence agent who utilized his skills as an archer to fight crime (he also existed in a fictional universe with no powers).



The Arrow is relevant in this article because he used trick arrows to fight criminals—predating the much more famous Green Arrow (who debuted in November 1941).

Batman (Bruce Wayne) arrived on the scene packing a gun in *Detective Comics* #27 (March 1939). But seven comic book issues earlier, the **Crimson Avenger** (Lee Travis) made his debut in *Detective Comics* #20 (October 1938).

While the Crimson Avenger eventually gained powers in the comic books, initially he was a masked, gun-toting detective, very similar to the Shadow.

He was a highly skilled athlete, marksman, and hand-to-hand combatant who relied on his wits and training in Judo/Karate.

The Crimson Avenger utilized a signature gas-gun that emitted a scarlet smoke-cloud to disorient opponents, render them unconscious, or create dramatic, stealthy entries. He also drove a special armored car.

On top of that, the Crimson Avenger existed in a world of superpowers (DC Comics), so he fits our criteria as a superhero. (See more about Crimson Avenger's sidekick **Wing** in **Part 7**.)

The **Green Hornet** (Britt Reid) was a masked vigilante who fought crime using trick-gadgets, his wits, and his resourceful partner **Kato** (see **Part 7** for more on Kato).

Although the Green Hornet debuted on radio in January 1936, his first appearance in comics wasn't until December 1940—the same year that saw the debut of **The Flash**, **Green Lantern**, **Captain Marvel (Shazam)**, **Robin (Dick Grayson)**, **Fantomah**, **The Spectre**, **Doctor Fate**, **Hawkman**, **Catwoman**, **Blue Beetle (Dan Garrett)**, **Plastic Man**, the **Justice Society of America** (the world's first superhero team), and many other supers.

It was a monumental year for comics—and just getting started.

Some of the First Superheroes in the World

As we finally turn our focus toward underrepresented characters in comics, we should mention two top candidates for **First Superhero Ever** who are rarely mentioned ... because they weren't American.

One is Japanese and the other is a French woman.

Ōgon Bat (Golden Bat) was a popular caped character in Japan who first appeared in kamishibai (paper theater) in 1930.

A champion of justice, he was depicted with a skull-like face and super-strength. He wielded a special baton—and he could fly. If the Golden Bat had appeared in mainstream American comics, he definitely would have fit our Superhero Criteria.



Nevertheless, he is one of the world's *first* superheroes.

Then ... there's **L'Oiselle** (French for "The Bird"—or, more specifically, "Lady Bird" or "Bird-Girl").

Created by a woman (novelist Renée Gouraud d'Ablancourt), **L'Oiselle** (Vega de Ortega) might be the world's **first female superhero**—with a debut in **1909** (thirty years before Superman arrived). And she is the first superhero created *by* a woman. (For another, see **Miss Fury** in **Part 4**.)

However, Lady-Bird's exciting adventures were first published as a popular serialized novel rather than in comic books. And since she never appeared in mainstream American comics (or was even published in translation), for our purposes, L'Oiselle also does *not* fit the criteria for a comic book superhero.



And yet, she boldly chased thieves. She utilized special crime-fighting tech-gadgets (including night-vision and mechanical wings). She battled a secret organized-crime syndicate (who used advanced tech-gadgets). *And* she even rescued a man (in 1909)—all while wearing a form-fitting, **catsuit** costume (the first) that allowed her to fly ... about 50 years before Marvel's **Wasp**.

So, Lady-Bird definitely deserves to be recognized (at the very least) for being one of the *first* superheroes in the world, for being the first superhero created by a woman—and for contributing to future conceptions of comic book supers.

American Heroes

As mentioned above, the **Golden Age** of Comics (1938–1956) began with the revolutionary first appearance of **Superman** in *Action Comics #1*, released on April 18, 1938 (even though the cover-date was printed as June 1938). **Batman** appeared almost one year later. And **Wonder Woman** two and a half years after that.

Historically speaking, Superman is widely considered the *first* comic book hero to combine superpowers, a secret identity, *and* a distinctive costume (with a cape and a

symbol)—which established the modern superhero archetype we're all familiar with today. He's also the first and most famous alien from another planet to become a hero on Earth.

Incidentally, the Fawcett Comics superhero **Captain Marvel** (Shazam), debuted about two years *after* Superman, but he was once the most popular superhero of the 1940s, outselling even Superman.

Some reports claim that a single issue of *Captain Marvel Adventures* sold nearly a million-and-a-half copies (about a million more than the most popular comics today ... eighty years later).

Interested in learning more about best-selling comics, important romance comic books, changes in gender readership, and other industry info?

Read on...

Part 3: A Romantic Aside

The comic book industry has experienced many ups and downs throughout its long history (including a near implosion and the bankruptcy of Marvel in the 1990s). But comics were not *always* about the heroes.

Pre-1950, hundreds of science-fiction, humor, horror, sports, and romance titles existed—and many sold in the millions.

Before the 1950s, comic books were marketed to either boys OR girls. But contrary to popular belief, the most voracious consumers of comic books were girls and young women.

Primarily in the 1930s, and for much of the 1940s, girls typically read anthologies that repackaged popular comic strips from newspapers, as well as standalone adventures or humorous comic strips that featured female leads. These early comics often focused on themes of independence, fashion, domestic life, romance, or “career girls.”

In the 1940s and early 1950s, some comics were read equally by both genders—with females still outnumbering males in readership in one very lucrative area.

Romance comics exploded in popularity in the late 1940s as the post-war audience shifted away from the first wave of Golden Age superheroes into other genres.

The first big sensation was *Young Romance* #1 (September 1947) from the writer/artist team of Joe Simon and Jack Kirby (who had created **Captain America** and **Bucky Barnes** about seven years earlier).



Young Romance is generally credited as the title that launched the popular romance comic book genre—followed by *Young Love*, *Sweethearts*, *Heart Throbs*, etc.

These extremely popular romance comic books focused on tales of love and jealousy, and featured emotional struggles from more of an adult perspective. They quickly became a major, million-copy-a-month industry.

Boys began to read more comics than girls only after the **mid-1950s**, particularly after the implementation of the Comics Code in 1954 (which was created by the Comics Magazine Association of America as a way to avoid moral regulation by the American government—and to counter perceptions of homosexuality in comics; see **Part 9**).

After the Comic Code's crackdown (on horror and romance comics in particular), comic book publishers began to pivot even more toward superhero titles aimed at young males.

After this point, most superhero comics were written to and for boys.

Lacking in Diversity

It would be difficult to guess whether under-representation in comic books became a part of the industry preference or audience preference, as the industry seemed to assume that girls primarily wanted to read romance comic books.

But what comes first: Supply or demand?

Comics are created for those who buy them, after all.

Throughout the past century, there have been many unsuccessful attempts to create and provide more diversity, attempts that often failed because not enough people bought (or continued buying) the comics.

(So, it's always important to support creators and characters we believe in!)

Who Reads Comic Books Anyway?

After decades of leaning mostly male, comic book readership today is returning to a more equally balanced ratio. Recent studies indicate that women make up nearly 45% of the total comic book audience.

By contrast, a 1995 survey showed female readership had dropped to 13 percent (right before Marvel declared bankruptcy). A significant surge in female readership occurred by 2013–2014, when research indicated roughly 30%–45% of consumers were female.

Note that this is right after the release of major blockbuster movies from the X-Men, Batman, and Spider-Man franchises, along with the MCU's *Iron-Man*, *Captain America*, *Avengers*, and *Guardians of the Galaxy*, as well as the TV show *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* — all of which helped to usher in rising interest in superheroes *and* brought more diversity into the comic book world.

In general, this impressive rise in female readership coincides directly with a growing demand for diverse characters and stories (and growing representation in movies/TV shows).

The audience demanded and the industry provided (and profited —big time).

And that leads us to our next segment...

Part 4: Super Women

For much of comic book history (like many things in “history”), strong female characters have far too often been under-represented as superheroes.

But there *were* important, pioneering, unsung heroes who deserve recognition and appreciation (like **L'Oiselle**, previously mentioned in **Part 2**).

Below is a glimpse at some of those who paved the way for other beloved characters to follow.

Girl-Power Begins

It would be difficult to begin any discussion about female superheroes without starting with **Wonder Woman** (Diana Prince).

As soon as she appeared in *All Star Comics* #8 (October 1941 — with a cover date of December), Wonder Woman became an immediate, best-selling sensation.

One of the most powerful superheroes in the entire DCU, Wonder Woman possesses superhuman strength, speed, and durability inherited from her Amazonian heritage and divine blessings from the Greek gods. That’s definitely super.

Often portrayed as a demigoddess (the daughter of Zeus and Hippolyta), Wonder Woman is considered a fearless defender of peace, ranking close to Superman in power.

Incidentally, when William Moulton Marston was creating **Wonder Woman** (pre-1941), he received major input and inspiration from his wife, Elizabeth, and from Olive Byrne (who was their live-in partner in a lifelong polyamorous relationship). Olive also wore the bronze bracelets that inspired those worn by Wonder Woman.

Historically, Wonder Woman was one of the first and most successful female superheroes, often appearing in multiple publications simultaneously. In July 1943, it was reported that sales for *Wonder Woman* #3 had reached 500,000 copies.

(To put that into context: The highest-printed single-issue comic books on sale today rarely exceed 500,000 copies for major, heavily promoted #1 issues. For more info on highest-selling comics, see the **End-Note** below.)

Wonder Woman was consistently a top-five bestseller in the 1940s, often competing directly with Superman and Batman. But she wasn't the *only* female superhero in town.

Nor was she the first.

Original Trailblazers



Many people claim that **Fantomah** (the "Mystery Woman of the Jungle") should be considered the First female comic-book superhero.

Fighting against ivory hunters and mad scientists, protecting the jungle with supernatural powers like flight and transmutation, Fantomah debuted in February 1940 (more than a year before Wonder Woman).

Her face also transformed into a blue skull when she summoned her powers. So ... there's that.

(Some people also claim a TV series is in the works for this forgotten hero, but I could find no confirmation.)

However, the **Magician From Mars** (Jane Q-X3), from *Amazing-Man Comics* (November 1939), predates Fantomah by almost three months.

The Magician From Mars was a half-human, half-Martian hero who possessed psionic, telekinetic, and reality-warping powers. She *also* had super-strength, super-agility, and the power to create objects out of nothing—using willpower alone.



Initially, the Magician From Mars wore a distinctive (sometimes scantily clad) costume. But she fought crime and defended both Earth and Mars, so she certainly fits our criteria for a superhero.

Although never a widely popular character like Wonder Woman (or Sheena), the Magician From Mars still deserves credit for being the **First Female Superhero** in comics.

Woman in Red



Mention should also be given to **The Woman in Red** (Peggy Allen), a police officer by day who fought crime by night in a red mask, gloves, and hooded cloak. She first appeared in *Thrilling Comics* #2 (March 1940).

A vigilante *without* superpowers, she was an expert with firearms, skilled in judo/jujitsu, and she possessed high deductive intelligence.

While The Woman in Red was not a superhero according to our criteria, she deserves recognition as the **first masked, costumed female crime-fighter** in comics.

The Power of The Cat

Introduced simply as "The Cat" in *Batman* #1 (April 1940), **Catwoman** (Selina Kyle) is considered more of a "morally grey" anti-heroine (or a reformed villain) rather than a traditional superhero.

While Catwoman often drifts between being an ally or an adversary of Batman, she is a skilled jewel-thief and cat-burglar driven primarily by self-interest and usually

operating outside the law. But she's also known for following a strict personal / moral code.

Initially, she didn't wear her now-iconic skintight black "catsuit" (coined after the Catwoman character famously portrayed by Julie Newmar and then Eartha Kitt in the 1966 Batman TV show).

(Side-Note: the first use of the famous leather catsuit was worn by Emma Peel, debuting in the British *Avengers* TV show (1965), see **Miss Fury** below for the *first* appearance of a catsuit in comics—or perhaps anywhere (1941).

When Catwoman first debuted, she wore a simple green ball-gown and often wore a cat-mask or various disguises (sometimes as an old woman). She wore a prototype form-fitting suit was in *Batman* #35 (1946), although it was more like a purple dress.

Inspired by depictions in the popular Batman TV show, Catwoman's iconic catsuit didn't appear in comic books until 1967 (though it was green and scaled at first).

Afterward, Catwoman continued changing her costumes (see left) for decades before the movies finally cemented the Miss Fury / Emma Peel-inspired catsuit as Catwoman's distinctive look.

A strong and popular presence in more than eighty years in comics, Catwoman has long been recognized as a powerful symbol of female independence and agency—an intelligent, skilled, and self-reliant woman who thrives in a dangerous world, while living by her own rules.

Although she has no superpowers (aside from having nine lives), Catwoman is a peak-human acrobat, thief, and martial artist—often comparable to Batman in her agility and prowess in combat. *And* she lives in a world populated by super-powered individuals.

On this list, Catwoman deserves major credit for being able to stand her ground as an equal powerhouse in the midst of either superheroes *or* supervillains.

Female Vigilantes



Lady Luck (Brenda Banks) was a Golden Age comic book superheroine and crime-fighter who made her debut in newspaper comic strips on June 2, 1940.

Debuting in December 1940, the popular super-soldier **Captain America** (Steve Rogers) is often considered the first and *most prominent* comic book superhero of Irish descent (he was born to Irish immigrant parents in New York City). But **Lady Luck** is the first Irish-American *female* superhero.

Appearing in newspapers months before Captain America appeared in comic books, Lady Luck didn't appear in comic books until April 1943 (in *Smash Comics* #42). By 1949, she gained her own title, *Lady Luck*.

As a socialite bored with high society (a common theme in Golden Age comics), Lady Luck adopted the persona of a "modern lady Robin Hood." Typically wearing a distinct kelly-green dress, a large hat, and a green veil instead of a mask, she became a vigilante to fight crime.

While Lady Luck possessed *no* supernatural powers, she was a skilled detective and expert in jujutsu. She is also one of the earliest female crime-fighters in comics history.



Debuting in newspapers on June 3, 1940 (one day after Lady Luck), **Invisible Scarlet O'Neil** (also Irish-American) was a pioneering, non-costumed female character in the early days of comic book heroes.

She was also one of the First Female Superheroes *with* superpowers.

Her father was a scientist, developing "a ray" for the US government. When Scarlet stuck her finger into the experimental ray, she (and her clothing) instantly became invisible.

Afterward, Scarlet could become invisible at will (by pinching a specific nerve in her wrist).

More of a plainclothes adventurer than a traditional costumed superhero, Invisible Scarlet O'Neil used her powers to fight criminals, Nazi spies, and saboteurs—although her early stories often focused on helping children.



Another important pre-Wonder Woman superheroine was **Black Widow** (Claire Voyant)—no relation to the much more famous Marvel super-spy **Natasha Romanoff**.

The Golden Age Black Widow first appeared in *Mystic Comics* #4 (August 1940), which was published by Timely Comics (the predecessor of Marvel).

Unlike her non-powered modern counterpart (Natasha Romanoff), the Golden Age Black Widow was an undead agent of Satan with supernatural powers (including superhuman strength, flight, and a lethal "death touch" to kill evildoers. No messing around there.

But she is often cited as one of the first costumed, super-powered female heroes in comics.

The Power of Fury



Another notable female superhero first appeared in April 1941 (six months before Wonder Woman): **Miss Fury** aka Marla Drake.

Much like L'Oiselle in 1909, Miss Fury was one of the few early female superheroes created,

written, and drawn *by* a woman (**June Tarpé Mills**).

Originally called Black Fury, Marla Drake possessed a keen intellect, expert skills in hand-to-hand combat, and she was proficient in firearms. On top of all that, the resourceful Miss Fury frequently used everyday objects, such as ice buckets, pots and pans, or telephones to clobber her opponents.

She was known to outsmart more than outfight villains, always thinking on her feet, though she could easily fight when she had to. She was an independent woman *and* a hopeless romantic, with a series of single men who pined after her.

Perhaps because she was created by a woman, Marla Drake was a working fashion designer, while many other female heroes, created by men, were presented as secretaries or bored socialites.

Mills used herself as the primarily model for Drake—in more ways than one (see the photo of Mills with her cat below).

While fearlessly battling Nazis, Miss Fury also wore her iconic skintight “black panther” (or leopard) fur suit with a cat-eared mask. She inherited from her uncle, who claimed it had been used “by an African witch-doctor” in mystical ceremonies.

As mentioned above, Miss Fury was the **first** superhero to wear a skintight black catsuit (two decades or more before

Emma Peel, Catwoman, and Black Panther wore their almost-identical costumes in the late 1960s).

While Miss Fury herself lacked inherent superhuman abilities, her supernatural panther-suit imbued her with good luck, as well as increased strength and speed. The suit also was equipped with razor-sharp claws on the hands and feet (and she often used the tail as a whip to disarm her opponents).

Unlike some of the earlier characters we mentioned above, Miss Fury was *extremely* popular, particularly during World War II.

She was so popular with US troops that her name and/or image was painted on the nose of at least three American B17 and B24 bombers.

Miss Fury's cat Perri-Purr also became an unofficial mascot of many American troops.



(Writer/artist and creator June Tarpe Mills with her cat Perri-Purr (left); Marla Drake with her cat (right).

At its peak of success, the *Miss Fury* comic strip was featured in more than 100 newspapers.

When Timely Comics (the predecessor of Marvel) collected and reprinted the Sunday strips from 1942 to 1946, they sold over a million copies per issue. In the entire history of comics, those are top-tier numbers.

In part, Miss Fury's popularity may have been driven by her rather "risque" image. Marla and her nemesis (Baroness Erica Von Kampf) were frequently shown changing clothes, taking baths, or walking around in lingerie.

But in 1947, when the character was depicted in a bikini, 37 newspapers removed her comic strip from their line-up in protest.

However, *Miss Fury* often featured rather complex and progressive storylines for the times, even showing Marla Drake navigating her life as a single mother (after she adopted her arch-enemy's toddler)—a role that had never been represented in comics before.

While the popularity of Miss Fury eventually declined after the war, and the comic strip officially ended with Mills' retirement by 1952, Miss Fury is still recognized as a significant figure in Golden Age comics and a trailblazing female superhero.

Like many of the heroes in this article, she is now in the public domain.

(Instead of rolling out *more* remakes and endlessly familiar heroes, where is *Miss Fury's* movie or TV show?)

Another Popular Invisible Superhero

Phantom Lady (Sandra Knight) debuted in *Police Comics* #1 (August 1941). After an attempt on her father's life (he was a US senator), she became a vigilante to fight crime—and Nazis.



While not possessing actual superpowers, Phantom Lady utilized advanced technology, such as a “black-light” projector (a “black lantern”) to create darkness and become invisible to her opponents.

Fighting Nazi agents and criminals (who often *did* possess supernatural qualities—including a robotic villain), Phantom Lady is considered one of the earliest *prominent* female superheroes, debuting alongside characters like **Plastic Man**.

(She was later acquired by DC Comics).

Jill Trent



One last Golden Age female hero to mention here is **Jill Trent** (the Science Sleuth).

Debuting in 1943, Trent was a pioneering *scholarly* female superhero who solved mysteries and battled crime with STEM approaches and cool tech-gadgets.

She blinded them with science.

Although Trent possessed no superpowers (or skin-tight suits), she apprehended criminals through the use of her keen intelligence, adaptive skills, and scientific prowess.

She also was capable of using a gun, if necessary.

While solving crime, Jill Trent also invented many technological wonders—including an “Infra-Red lamp” and glasses that could see through objects.

Not a superhero, according to our criteria, she still deserves credit for being a pioneering comic book trailblazer.

(Recently, Jill Trent even got her own TV series, after being nearly forgotten for decades.)

There are many other important female superheroes who once graced the pages of comic books long ago—including the heroes featured in the next section.

COMIC BOOK INDUSTRY NOTE:

Only about a dozen comic book issues in history have EVER sold more than 2 million copies. The highest-printed single-issue comic books on sale today rarely exceed 500,000 copies for major, heavily promoted #1 issues.

What was the best-selling single-issue comic of all time?

X-Men #1 (1991) sold over 8.1 million copies (with at least five variant covers). *X-Force #1* (also in 1991) was reported to have sold approximately 5 million copies.

At the time, Marvel released multiple variant covers of *X-Men #1*, contributing to the massive sales numbers. It was also released during the "speculator boom" that began in the late 1980s, peaked in the early 1990s, and nearly tanked the comic book industry.

At the time, speculating collectors bought high volumes of certain comic books (particularly #1s), hoping to strike it rich (rather than wanting to actually read or enjoy the comics).

As speculators continued to hoard the multiple copies they purchased, they created a false sense of value. When they eventually tried to unload their bounty, they over-saturated the market.

The speculator bubble nearly toppled the entire comic book industry. And the damage was monumental.

In December 1996, Marvel filed for bankruptcy—five years after those two “best-sellers” mentioned above were released.

In the end, the company managed to survive only by merging with ToyBiz. In 1998, they reemerged from bankruptcy as Marvel Enterprises.

During their financial crisis, however, Marvel was forced to sell off the film rights to many of their most popular

characters (**X-Men** to 20th Century Fox and **Spider-Man** to Sony).

That move left them with what (at the time) were considered closer to "B-list" characters like **Iron Man**, a character they ended up using as the foundation of their entire cinematic universe.

They released the first *Iron-Man* movie ten years after they emerged from bankruptcy. And the rest is His-Story.

Clearly, Marvel is no longer having financial issues.

Part 5: The Power of Diversity

Although female superheroes had been around for some time (as seen in **Part 4**), it took decades for women of color to be featured as superheroes in the pages of comic books—with one notable exception.

The first **Native American female superhero** to appear in comics also holds the distinction of being one of the *first* Canadian superheroes, one of the *first* non-white superheroes (ever), and the *first* Native American comic book superhero.

After a 1940 ban on importing American comics into Canada, the demi-god and guardian of Canada's Arctic, **Nelvana of the Northern Lights** debuted in *Triumph Adventure Comics #1* (August 1941—three months before Wonder Woman).



A popular mainstream comic book character in Canada, fighting Axis powers during World War II, Nelvana possessed the power of flight, invisibility, and the ability to travel through light-rays.

However, she did not appear in American comics.

Even if she does not fit our Superhero Criteria, Nelvana certainly deserves our appreciation.

It took a few more decades before a Native American female superhero appeared in mainstream American comics.

Dawnstar first arrived in the DCU in 1977, so she would be considered the **first female Native American Superhero** to appear in mainstream American comics.

Born on the planet Starhaven, Dawnstar was a winged superhuman whose powers included faster-than-light flight, the ability to survive in the vacuum of space without oxygen, and the capability to track any person or object through interstellar space, across many light-years.

(For another female Native American superhero, see **Echo** below.)

Another iconic trailblazer, and the **first Black female superhero**, was **Nubia**.

She debuted in 1973 as Wonder Woman's sister (they both were formed out of clay by their mother).

A formidable Amazonian warrior (raised by the War-God Ares/Mars), Nubia often appeared as Wonder Woman's rival and sometimes as her ally. But Nubia was an extremely powerful female character and one of the first Black superheroes to appear in mainstream comics.

Two years later (in 1975), another major mainstream example of a Black female superhero arrived in comics: the very popular superhero **Storm** (Ororo Munroe) from the Uncanny X-Men.

It is somewhat trickier to pinpoint the first **female Asian character** in mainstream American comics, as there were a few contenders from comics in the 1940s that don't quite fit our criteria—or the ethnicity was never explicitly stated (see **Green Turtle** in **Part 6**).

However, one female hero who appeared *as* Asian was **Mei Ling**, who debuted in *Speed Comics* (October 1942) from Harvey Comics.



Mei Ling is notable as a rare Chinese heroine from the Golden Age. She also was an active member of the first all-female team of non-powered heroes: the Girl Commandos, who fought against Axis forces during World War II.

The most widely accepted **First Asian superheroine** to appear in mainstream comics is **Colleen Wing**,

The daughter of a Chinese-American professor and a Japanese mother, the remarkable swordmaster Colleen Wing had extensive samurai training. She also was one of Marvel's early Kung Fu-inspired heroes (along with **Shang-Chi** and **Iron Fist**).

While not super-powered, Colleen Wing made her first appearance in *Marvel Premiere* #19 in November 1974. She

fits our criteria due to her peak-human abilities and fighting skills.

The **First Latina Superhero** didn't appear in comics until much, much later.

Debuting in *Batman* #475 (1992) as a Gotham police officer, **Renée Montoya** later became a major crime-fighter known as **The Question** (2006). She also was one of the first prominent (and well-developed) **lesbian** characters in mainstream comics.

Montoya used a pseudoderm mask and gas to disguise herself as The Question. She also could control her nervous system to manage pain, emotions, and bleeding.

Much later, in 2013, the new **Ms. Marvel** (Kamala Khan) became the first Pakistani *and* the first Muslim superhero to have her own comic. She also headlined her own Marvel TV show.

(The first Muslim superhero in American comics was **Simon Baz**, a Green Lantern, who appeared one year before Kamala Khan.)

In 2014, **Silk** (Cindy Moon) appeared in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #1 (Vol 3). Bitten by the same radioactive spider that gave Peter Parker his remarkable superpowers, Silk was similarly powered (in some cases, more so).

She also became the first Korean-American superhero.

Although this article has not mentioned much in the way of non-comic book media (other than Golden Age radio), Simu Liu became the first Asian to headline in a Marvel movie when he played **Shang-Chi** in the 2021 blockbuster.

However, he was not the “first Asian superhero” to appear in the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Chloe Bennet (who played **Skylar/Daisy/Quake** in the AGENTS OF S.H.I.E.L.D. TV show that premiered in 2013) deserves full honors as the *first* Asian superhero to appear in the MCU.

Mention must also be given to **Echo**—the Cheyenne/Choctaw character Maya Lopez.

Echo holds the distinction of being the **First Hearing Impaired Superhero**. She made her first comic book appearance in *Daredevil* (Vol. 2) #9 (December 1999).

She also headlined her own TV series. Kudos for that, Marvel.

Deaf-from-birth, she possessed photographic reflexes and could mimic any action she sees.

(For more about **Superheroes with Disabilities**., see **Part 8**.)

Part 6: BIPOC Supers

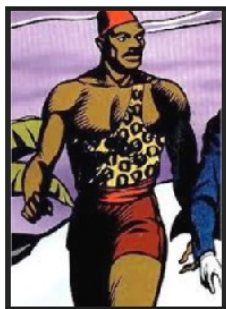
As we mentioned earlier, comic books have always been a reflection of the way social perspectives exist and evolve in our society. Comics have often been progressive vehicles for social change.

Although Black, Asian, Hispanic/Latino, Native American, female, LGBTQ+, and other minority superheroes often *did* exist in comics (including superheroes with disabilities), far too often they were relegated to the sidelines, were presented as sidekicks, or their characters were racially stereotyped.

And yet, there *were* some very important appearances too, each one remarkable in their own way.

Below is a glimpse at a those who boldly forged the way for others to follow.

Black Power Rises



The first Black crime-fighter to appear in comics was **Lothar**, who debuted in the newspaper comic strip, *Mandrake the Magician*, on June 14, 1934.

A central character in the Mandrake comics, Lothar was the Magician's best friend, confidant, and valued crime-

fighting partner. He also was known as "the strongest man in the world" (able to lift an elephant with one hand).

In modern terms, Lothar can be seen as a somewhat complex (or even controversial) figure in comic book history. He represents an unusual mix of groundbreaking, respectful, racial representation in the mid-1930s ... right alongside deeply ingrained and problematic racial tropes.

Originally portrayed as an African prince who chose to leave his kingdom to travel the world with Mandrake, early depictions of Lothar reflected stereotypical and racial stereotypes of colonialism, often presenting Lothar with exaggerated features, wearing a fez and leopard skins, and speaking in broken English.

Lothar was sometimes presented as Mandrake's "manservant" and at other times as Mandrake's most loyal best friend and crime-fighting equal. It seems sad to mention something like this as a compelling point in our current era, but Lothar was often treated with more respect by fellow cast members than many other contemporaneous depictions of Black characters in comics.

However, reflecting the evolving social attitudes regarding race in America (from the 1930s to the Civil Rights era), Lothar was finally modernized in the 1960s and transformed into an intellectual equal to Mandrake without broken English.

In many ways, Lothar remains a somewhat underrated and underappreciated character who represents an early (or the first) example of an interracial crime-fighting team.

Despite the initial racialized, stereotypical elements, Lothar is often cited as one of the first serious Black heroes in comics, and one of the first heroic Black crime-fighters in comic book history—if not *the* first.

Because Lothar was nearly invulnerable to conventional weapons, impervious to extreme heat and cold, *and* he possessed extraordinary stamina and strength, Lothar would have to a top candidate for the position of **First Black Superhero** (even if he was essentially a sidekick).

However, while starting out in newspaper comic strips in 1934, Lothar didn't make his first appearance in a comic book until June 1938, shortly after the debut of Superman (April 1938).

The First Non-Sidekick Black Superhero

The first Black superhero to appear in comics (not as a sidekick) exists in a single comic book, published in June 1947, with a small print run and limited distribution.

Although he never appeared in mainstream comics, this comic book hero deserves special mention.

Lion Man was an African-born scientist with superhuman strength and intelligence who protected a "magic mountain" of uranium on the African Gold Coast.



Lion Man debuted as a superhero in *All-Negro Comics #1*, which was a pioneering achievement in its time: the comic book was owned, written, and drawn entirely by Black artists.

(Incidentally, widely regarded as the first Black detective featured in a comic book, **Ace Harlem** also appeared in *All-Negro Comics #1*. For another groundbreaking comic book company owned and operated by Black artists, see **Milestone Comics** below.)

Although Lion-Man was a remarkable trailblazer, it wasn't until decades later that the first Black superhero appeared in mainstream American comics.

By then, we had entered the **Silver Age** (1956–1970), ushering in a resurgence of superheroes, sci-fi themes, and the rise of Marvel Comics (with **Spider-Man**, **Fantastic Four**, **X-Men**, **Avengers**, etc.).

Enter the Black Panther

The world of comics would never be the same after Marvel presented the **First Black Superhero** in mainstream comics: **T'Challa** of Wakanda.

Created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, **Black Panther** debuted in *Fantastic Four* #52 (July 1966).

T'Challa was a pivotal, pioneering figure because he wasn't a sidekick. He was a super-powered king of an African nation.

(Note: Black Panther debuted in comics just a few months before the unrelated Black Panther Party formed in California.)

Black Panther's superpowers arise from the mystical Heart-Shaped Herb (a vibranium-mutated plant) and advanced Wakandan technology, granting him superhuman strength, speed, stamina, agility, and enhanced senses. He also possessed superhuman healing and immunity to toxins.

On top of all that, Black Panther possessed genius-level intellect, expert fighting-skills, advanced vibranium-infused suits, and weapons that absorbed kinetic energy.

All of which makes him an amazing superhero in every sense of the word.

Other Important Supers

The Falcon (Sam Wilson) appeared in *Captain America* #117 (September 1969), making him the **First Black American Superhero** in mainstream comics.

While not super-powered, the Falcon utilized a special suit with mechanical wings to fight villains (much like Iron-Man with his armored suit). The Falcon was Captain America's crime-fighting partner and closest friend for decades.

It wasn't until 1972 that a Black comic-book superhero headlined his *own* comic-book title: **Luke Cage**, *Hero For Hire*.

Also known as **Power Man**, Luke possessed superhuman strength, unbreakable skin, and enhanced stamina. A pioneering comic book hero, he was also able to recover quickly from injuries. (He also headlined his own Marvel TV show.)

(Incidentally, when Nicholas (Coppola) Cage went into acting, he took Luke's last name as a homage to the hero he loved so much in the *Hero For Hire* comics he read as a kid.)

In **Part 5**, we already discussed the trailblazing first Black female superhero **Nubia**, who debuted in 1973—as well as **Storm** (Ororo Munroe) of the Uncanny X-Men (May 1975).

Almost a month before Storm appeared, **Bronze Tiger** (Benjamin Turner) debuted in comics (April-May 1975).

One of the earliest, prominent Black martial arts superheroes in mainstream DC Comics, the Bronze Tiger was a top-tier martial-artist (who even defeated Batman).

The Bronze Tiger also was a foundational member (and the ethical anchor) of the **Suicide Squad**.

With no relation to the Bronze Tiger, by this point, we entered the **Bronze Age** (1970–1985), marked by a shift toward darker, more socially conscious, and realistic storylines—as well as improved diversity.

The Bronze Age is often defined by the end of the strict Comics Code restrictions (beginning in the 1970s and culminating in 2011), as well as the rise of "anti-heroes" like **Wolverine** (a Canadian, by the way).

An Important Milestone

Similar to *All-Negro Comics* mentioned above, **Milestone Comics** also deserves special mention for their diverse, pioneering comics.

Launched in 1993 (with distribution from DC Comics), Milestone Comics was created as an independent, Black-owned and Black-operated company that aimed to correct the lack of representation in the comic book industry by featuring Black and minority characters in their storylines.

While Milestone comics were pioneering and critically acclaimed, some industry peers and retailers believed their comics were meant "for Black audiences" only, which limited their reach and their recognition.

Because of this, their pioneering venture lasted only four years.

However, at least one of Milestone's groundbreaking characters lives on: **Static** (Virgil Hawkins).

One of the first African-American *teenage* superheroes to headline his own popular comic book, Static transitioned from a Milestone / DC comic book character to the star of

the Emmy Award-winning *Static Shock* animated series
(2000–2004).

That really is a Milestone.

Part 7: Super-Individuals

Similar to Black, female, and LGBTQ superheroes, Asian, Hispanic/Latino, and Indigenous superheroes (or those from other cultures and with disabilities) have frequently been left out of American comic books—aside from stereotypical or outright racist representations.

They've also been presented as villains throughout much of comic book history (we're looking to you, Dr. Fu Manchu).

Although many under-represented superheroes *did* exist, far too often they were relegated to the sidelines, created as sidekicks, or horribly stereotyped.

In this segment, we'll meet more trailblazers in the comic book world.

The Power of Asian Superheroes



As mentioned in **Part 2**, **Ōgon Bat** (Golden Bat) was a caped Japanese character who first appeared in kamishibai (paper theater) in 1930. He was presented with a skull-like face, the ability to fly, and super-strength.

If Golden Bat had appeared in mainstream American comics, he would have been our pick for First Asian Superhero. Nevertheless, this Japanese hero certainly deserves credit for potentially being the first Asian superhero in the world.

Another Choice

A top candidate for **First Asian Superhero** in America would have to be **Kato**—a mysterious masked crime-fighter who first appeared on the *Green Hornet* radio series in 1936 (about two years before Superman's debut).

Initially, Kato was portrayed as Japanese (which was changed after the start of World War II—first to Korean and then to Filipino).

He was considered a brilliant scientist, a skilled driver and mechanic, and a jujitsu expert. Kato was also famously portrayed by Bruce Lee in the short-lived *Green Hornet* television series (1966–1967).

Kato's first appearance in comics wasn't until December 1940 (almost a year before Wonder Woman).

Generally speaking, Kato is considered more of a sidekick, rather than a superhero. But to be fair, so was **Robin**—and Dick Grayson has always been considered a superhero, fighting right alongside Batman.

However, although Kato wore a mask, had a secret identity, possessed peak-human fighting abilities, *and* utilized

unique crime-fighting gadgets (many of which he personally created), no superhuman abilities exist anywhere in The Green Hornet universe.

So, unfortunately, as awesome as Kato was, he does not fit our Superhero Criteria.

The First Asian Superheroes

Another character who is often considered the first Asian superhero in a mainstream American superhero comic ... **Wing How** battled crime alongside the **Crimson Avenger** (see **Part 2**).

First appearing in *Detective Comics* #20 (October 1938), Wing was a Chinese immigrant who moved to America to escape Japanese persecution right before World War II.

Wing first donned his yellow costume in *Detective Comics* #59 (Jan 1942)—though some sources say *World's Finest* #4 (1941).

While often portrayed as a racially stereotyped sidekick who spoke in broken English and had exaggerated facial features, Wing also helped instill a social conscience in the Crimson Avenger.

Although Wing possessed no superpowers, he was a skilled fighter and powers *did* exist in his world (DC Comics). But he doesn't quite fit our criteria.

Wing didn't use tech/gadgets. He wasn't a peak-human. He possessed no unnatural skill or talent (although he certainly was a brave and proficient fighter). And he had no supernatural ability or superpower.

However, Wing is historically significant for being the **First Superhero Sidekick Ever**, predating **Robin** by nearly two years.

Another important candidate for one of the First (non-sidekick) Asian Superheroes is the **Green Turtle**.

Debuting in *Blazing Comics #1* (in June 1944) and disappearing after only five issues, **Green Turtle** is a great example of how comics often had to use subversive tactics to be progressive.



In the case of Green Turtle, the Asian identity of the hero had to be hidden from readers when he first appeared. The publisher wouldn't allow the Green Turtle to be *openly* Asian in 1944.

(A lot of people still don't realize that Chinese Americans weren't even allowed to vote in the US until 1943.)

To keep his Chinese identity hidden from readers, Green Turtle's real name was never revealed and his face always partially hidden in shadows or turned away.

However, the **Green Turtle** was the First Asian American Superhero to be created *by* an Asian.

Born into a Chinese family on the Hawaiian island of Kauai, Chu F. Hing created the Green Turtle during World War II to promote US-Chinese solidarity.

Green Turtle is also the first Asian superhero to headline in his *own* comic book, decades before the next Asian headliner.

Nevertheless, the Green Turtle never appeared in *mainstream* comics, so he too does not fit our criteria.

The FIRST Asian Superhero in Mainstream Comics

It wasn't until decades later (in January 1970) that the **First Asian Comic Book Superhero** was openly presented in a mainstream comic *as* Asian.

Sunfire (Shiro Yoshida) was a super-powered mutant from Japan who debuted in *X-Men #64*.

He possessed the power to absorb solar radiation and convert it into super-heated plasma (which he could use as intense fire-blasts).

Sunfire was able to generate temperatures up to a million degrees Fahrenheit. He could also fly by creating super-heated air currents, and protect himself with a psionic aura.

According to the criteria we outlined at the beginning, Sunfire is the **First Asian Non-Sidekick Superhero** in mainstream American comics.

Another key Asian superhero (who recently headlined his own Marvel movie starring Simu Liu): **Shang-Chi, Master of Kung Fu**.

Shang-Chi was at the forefront of the "kung fu craze" of the 1970s. Initially, he was a trope-heavy character, created to capitalize on the popularity of Bruce Lee and martial arts cinema, but he was one of the first prominent Asian protagonists to be featured in American superhero comics (and the first headliner).

Introduced in *Special Marvel Edition* #15 (1973), Shang-Chi became a sensation, proving that an Asian-led title could survive in the Marvel Universe. His groundbreaking *Master of Kung Fu* comic book series ran for over 100 issues until 1983).

Originally presented as biracial in the comics, Shang-Chi was the son of **Fu Manchu** (a character deeply rooted in "Yellow Peril" stereotypes) and an unnamed white woman, who had been specifically chosen by Manchu for her genetic potential to give birth to the ultimate assassin.

(When the 2021 movie changed his parentage to fully Chinese, Shang-Chi's comic book character was retconned as well.)

After he rebelled against his father, Shang-Chi became an important Marvel hero—an Asian who was presented as a heroic lead protagonist rather than as a villain, sorcerer, or sidekick.

As mentioned in **Part 5**, the most widely accepted **first Asian Super-Heroine** was the sword-master **Colleen Wing** (who first appeared in November 1974). In 2014, **Silk** (Cindy Moon) became the first Korean-American superhero.

A year earlier, the new **Ms. Marvel** (Kamala Khan) became the first Pakistani and the first Muslim female superhero to have her own comic.

(The first Muslim superhero to appear in American comics was **Simon Baz**, a Green Lantern.)

Super Hispanic / Latino Heroes

No discussion of Hispanic / Latino heroes in American comics can begin without first mentioning one of my personal all-time favorite heroes: **Zorro**.

A foppish Los Angeles nobleman who dons a mask and cloak to fight injustice with his rapier, Don Diego Vega made his first appearance in the pulp magazine *All-Story Weekly* on August 9, 1919.

A bit over a year later, Zorro made his exciting debut in movies: *The Mark of Zorro* silent film, starring Douglas Fairbanks (November 1920).

Zorro's first official appearance in *comic books* wasn't until Dell's *Four Color* #228 (1949). Nevertheless, ever since his first appearance in the movies, Zorro has widely recognized as the primary archetype for all masked vigilantes.

Wearing a mask, having a secret identity, fighting for justice, *and* possessing impressive sword-skills *almost* qualifies him as a superhero under our criteria. But not quite.

No super-powered individuals exist in the fictional world of Zorro. So, as awesome as he is as a *hero*, Zorro does not qualify as a *superhero*.

There was another Southwestern hero, clearly modeled after Zorro, who debuted in *Flash Comics* #1 (1940).

The **Whip** (Rodrigo / Rodney Gaynor) was a crime-fighting hero who wielded a whip (instead of a sword) as he fought for the poor and powerless throughout the American Southwest.

The **First Half-Mexican Hero** in comics, The Whip had a secret identity, a mask, and a specialized, peak-human skill with his whip.

But, like Zorro, there were no superpowers in his fictional world, so the Whip also doesn't qualify as a *superhero*.

But he does win points for early inclusion in comics.

The First Hispanic / Latino Superhero

Decades after those Golden Age heroes, we reach our next important hero on this particular list.

Appearing in *Deadly Hands of Kung-Fu* #19 (December 1975), **White Tiger** (Hector Ayala) is generally considered the **First Hispanic / Latino Superhero** in mainstream American comic books.

Initially a Puerto Rican college student in New York City, Ayala gained superhuman strength and martial-arts skills from a pair of mystical tiger amulets. (He recently appeared in the *Daredevil Reborn* TV series—briefly.)

Native American Power

Although there had been a number of early, non-costumed Indigenous characters in American comics (and **Nelvana** in Canada), some people believe the first Native American superhero in comic books was **Tonto**.

First appearing on a radio show in February 1933, Tonto debuted in comic books along with the **Lone Ranger** in 1948 (and gained his own series in 1951).

As much as I love Tonto, he does not fit our Superhero Criteria because super-powered people did not exist in

Tonto's Wild West universe. Not even the Lone Ranger counts as a superhero in that regard.

Besides, another Native American superhero did appear before Tonto.

In **Part 5**, we already discussed the **first Native American female superhero: Nelvana of the Northern Lights**—one of the *first* Canadian superheroes, one of the *first* non-white superheroes *ever*, and technically the *first* Native American comic book superhero.

She first appeared in August 1941.

However, since Nelvana did not appear in American or mainstream comics, the top contender for **First Indigenous Superhero** would have to be ... **Super-Chief**.

Also known as Flying Stag, Super-Chief first appeared in DC's *All-Star Western* #117 (1961).

Flying Stag was a 15th-century Iroquois warrior with supernatural powers. Using a mystical amulet formed from a meteorite, Super-Chief gained super-strength and speed that he used to protect his people. So, he definitely qualifies in our Superhero Criteria.

It took another decade or more before Marvel's pioneering character **Red Wolf** (William Talltrees) appeared in *The Avengers* #80 (September 1970).

Red Wolf was not merely a skilled warrior. He also was empowered by the Cheyenne wolf-god Owayodata, which

gave him super-strength, enhanced senses, and an immunity to telepathy.

Five years later (1975), **Thunderbird** (John Proudstar) appeared in *Giant-Size X-Men #1*. Although the character did not last long, his younger brother **Warpath** (James “Jimmy” Proudstar) first appeared in *New Mutants #16* about a decade later (June 1984). They both possessed superhuman strength, speed, stamina, heightened senses, and the ability to withstand immense physical impact.

And that brings us into the **Modern Age** (1985–Present), which began with the publication of *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns*.

With a relaxing of the Comics Code (and its eventual demise), the Modern Age was characterized by complex and gritty storylines. What will the Next Age in Comics be?

In many ways, it’s up to us.

As the great Stan Lee used to say ... Nuff said.

Part 8: Super Challenges to Overcome

Throughout comic book history, people with disabilities have appeared, although rarely as superheroes. But those rare appearances have existed and have been remarkable nonetheless.

Many Golden Age characters with disabilities were noteworthy for being represented as heroes who adapted to their conditions rather than being sidelined by them. Often, these early characters used their disabilities as a source of (or inspiration for) their superpowers

In **Part 5**, we mentioned how the Native American superhero **Echo** was the **First Hearing Impaired Superhero** in comics history when she debuted in *Daredevil* (Vol. 2) #9 (1999).

Many people also believe that **Daredevil** (Matt Murdock) was the first blind superhero. But the mantle of **First Visually Impaired Superhero** actually belongs to DC's **Doctor Mid-Nite**.

After losing his eyesight to a mob-related grenade, Dr. Charles McNider discovers that, even though he is fully blind in daylight, he can see in total darkness. To fight crime, he develops "blackout bombs" that blind his opponents, while he wears special "infrared" glasses to navigate and battle disoriented villains.

Appearing in *All-American Comics* #25 (April 1941), Doctor Mid-Nite became the **First Superhero With a Disability** in comic book history.

Debuting earlier than Dr. Mid-Nite (in 1940), the Golden Age **Daredevil** (Bart Hill) had no relation to the later Marvel character (**Matt Murdock**).

Due to the trauma of witnessing his parents' murder (and then experiencing torture), Bart Hill was rendered mute for years. However, he adapted to his disability by extensive training with Australian Aborigines (in the use of a boomerang) and communicated with notes and gestures before his speech returned much later.

While the Golden Age Daredevil had no superhuman powers, he was considered a peak-human athlete, master acrobat, and expert hand-to-hand combatant who mainly battled super-powered villains with boomerangs he could throw with deadly accuracy.

Nightro (Jeff King) debuted in *Daredevil Comics* #2 (1940). Although he was a short-lived character, he was blinded in a snowstorm and later wore specialized "polaroid glass" goggles to partially regain his sight for crime-fighting.

In *Whiz Comics* #25 (December 1941), **Captain Marvel Jr.** (Freddy Freeman) entered the comic book world of Fawcett's **Captain Marvel**. After a brutal attack by the villain Captain Nazi, Freeman's back was broken and his left leg was paralyzed, forcing him to walk with a crutch.

While Freeman has a major, permanent disability, his injuries disappear whenever he transforms into Captain Marvel Jr.

Appearing two decades later, one of the most renowned Marvel superheroes with a disability was the Silver Age **Daredevil** (Matt Murdock), who debuted in *Daredevil #1* (April 1964).

Blinded in childhood during a chemical accident that enhanced his other senses, Daredevil became a top-tier superhero, despite his damaged eyesight.

Daredevil had enhanced, superhuman senses—hearing, smell, touch, and taste—and he developed something like a "radar sense" for 360-degree environmental mapping, allowing him to fight and navigate as an expert martial-artist and acrobat.

His senses also serve as a "lie detector" and grant him peak-human reflexes, agility, and immense pain endurance.

Some claim Daredevil doesn't possess a "true" superpower (suggesting he "just" has heightened senses and is peak-human). While that is debatable, he meets our Superhero Criteria due to his exceptional peak-human qualities alone.

In Marvel's *X-Men #1* (1963) **Professor X** (Charles Xavier) became the **first major, long-term paraplegic superhero** in a wheelchair to be featured in mainstream American comic books.

Suffering spinal injuries, Professor X was unable to walk—and yet he was also one of the most powerful mutant telepaths in the world (as well as a scientific genius and leader of the X-Men).

The former **Batgirl** (Barbara Gordon) is generally considered the first major, long-term paraplegic superhero to appear in DC Comics.

After being shot by the **Joker** in the 1988 graphic novel *Batman: The Killing Joke*, Barbara Gordon was paralyzed from the waist down, ending her career as Batgirl.

But rather than hang up her cape, Gordon reinvented herself as the IT data-broker **Oracle**.

First appearing in *Suicide Squad* #23 (1989), Oracle became one of the most prominent, high-visibility superheroes with a disability in mainstream comics (until Barbara Gordon's mobility was restored in 2011).

While other characters such as **The Chief** (Niles Caulder) of *Doom Patrol* (June 1963) were paraplegic in DC comics earlier, Barbara Gordon's tenure as Oracle is one of the most significant, high-profile, and enduring portrayals of a paraplegic superhero in DC history.

When it comes to superheroes with learning disabilities, **Cassandra Cain** (Batgirl II) was depicted as having severe difficulties with speaking and functional illiteracy.

This was due to her severe training as an assassin by her supervillain father, David Cain (who raised her in isolation

to be a silent, deadly weapon), along with the League of Assassins and her mother (the lethal supervillain Lady Shiva).

Raised to read body language as a first language rather than speaking, Cassandra Cain experienced some developmental issues with regard to language. However, she was later shown learning to read while operating as a hero.

Cassandra Cain's first appearance was in *Batman* #567 (July 1999) and the next year she became the first Batgirl to be featured in an ongoing eponymous comic book series.

In Marvel Comics, the X-Men mutant **Jubilee** (Jubilation Lee) was presented as having dyscalculia—a learning disability that makes math-related tasks very challenging.

A Japanese-American mutant genius, **Wiz-Kid** (Takeshi "Taki" Matsuya) used a wheelchair due to paralysis from a childhood accident. He also possessed the power of technokinesis, allowing him to psionically rearrange machinery (including his wheelchair) into vehicles or weapons.

He also had severe dyslexia.

In DC Comics, **Impulse/Flash** (Bart Allen) has been frequently depicted as dealing with ADHD.

Symbolically, it should be mentioned that some creators have framed all **X-Men** (and mutants in general) as a metaphor for neurodiversity and hidden disabilities—

where “being different” was often misinterpreted as being “lesser.”

As with so many people, the X-Men and other mutants continually show that we all can be underestimated — and, collectively, there’s nothing we can’t achieve.

Part 9: LGBTQ+ Power

Although superhero females, people of color, and people with disabilities have often been excluded from mainstream comics since the beginning, at least some characters *have* appeared in comics throughout the Golden Age, Silver Age, and Bronze Age.

Not so with LGBTQ+ characters.

Mostly, this was because any overt mention of homosexuality in mainstream American comics was strictly forbidden by the Comics Code Authority (CCA) between 1954 and 1989.

(See more about the Comics Code in **Part 3**.)

To get around these outdated rules, some later mainstream comics contained subtle hints or they used subtext to convey an LGBTQ character's sexual orientation or gender identity.

The comic book industry was terrified of any controversy or perception of homosexuality, mostly due to a major backlash regarding **Batman and Robin** in the mid-1950s...

What Exactly WAS the Comics Code?

In his book, *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), psychiatrist Fredric Wertham alleged that the Batman and Robin's "relationship" represented a "homosexual fantasy,"

promoted a “gay lifestyle,” and “morally corrupted” young readers.

This opinionated claim led to widespread backlash, plummeting sales, and the speedy introduction of important female characters as love interests (see **Batwoman** and **Bat-Girl** below).

Combined with concerns about violence and a glorification of villains in comic books, the backlash nearly destroyed the comic book industry altogether—and it led to the creation of the **Comics Code Authority** (as a way to assuage the fears of anxious parents and avoid “moral regulation” by the American government).

To counter these “alarming” claims about Batman and Robin, DC Comics introduced **Batwoman** (Kathy Kane) in July 1956 and **Bat-Girl/Batgirl** (Betty/Bette Kane) in 1961 to promote romantic *female* love interests for Batman and Robin.

In 2006 (as a statement to how much times had changed), Batwoman was reintroduced as **Kate Kane**—the first prominent superhero to be openly lesbian (see below).

Now that The Code is out of the way, it’s time to explore some of the primary first appearances, milestones, and important LGBTQ comic book superheroes.

LGBTQ+ Representation in Comics

Appearing in the late Bronze Age, the character widely recognized as the **First Gay Superhero** in mainstream comics was Marvel's **Northstar** (Jean-Paul Beaubier).

Northstar debuted in *The Uncanny X-Men* #120 in 1979—but not as openly gay.

While intentionally creating Northstar to be a gay superhero, John Byrne wasn't allowed to reveal the character as *openly* gay, due to Marvel's editorial restrictions of the time (and the **Comics Code**, as mentioned above).

But Byrne often included hints to readers who were paying attention.

It wasn't until years later, in *Alpha Flight* #106 (1992), that Northstar officially came out—a landmark moment in comic book history. This “reveal” was widely recognized as the first time a *major* mainstream Marvel superhero openly declared their homosexuality (in very straightforward language).

At the time, this comic book issue generated significant publicity (and controversy). Because it received so much mainstream media attention, the issue sold out in a week (despite *Alpha Flight* not being a particularly popular title).

Although they were villains, **Cannon** and **Saber** were introduced in *Vigilante* #5 as the first openly gay couple in DC Comics (1984).

That means the superhero magician **Extraño** (Spanish for Strange), debuting in *Millennium #2*, was DC's first openly gay superhero (1988).

Another supervillain, DC's **Pied Piper** (Hartley Rathaway), became one of the first previously established characters to be *revealed* as gay (in the pages of *The Flash* in 1991).

In 1993, DC Vertigo launched **Enigma**, featuring the first gay lead in a comic series and also included the first same-sex kiss to appear in comic books.

Much later (in 2002), Wildstorm's **Apollo** and **Midnighter** tied the knot in *The Authority #29*, marking the first same-sex wedding in a mainstream superhero comic.

Three years after that (2005), **Wiccan** and **Hulking** appeared in *Young Avengers*, becoming one of Marvel's most prominent gay couples.

When **Northstar** married his partner (Kyle Jinadu) in 2012, he made history once again in *Astonishing X-Men #51*. This issue presented the first depiction of a same-sex wedding between two superheroes in *Marvel* comics.

(While Northstar's wedding in 2012 received much more mainstream media attention, and is frequently cited as the first gay wedding in Marvel history, DC Comics presented Apollo and Midnighter's wedding a decade earlier.)

Although Metropolis police captain **Maggie Sawyer** (DC Comics, 1987) and Marvel's **Victoria Montesi** (Marvel Comics, 1992) were the first openly lesbian characters to

appear in mainstream comics, **Batwoman** (Kate Kane) became the first prominent lesbian superhero to headline a monthly DC comic when she was reintroduced in 2006.

(Kate Kane's former partner, **Renee Montoya / The Question** was also the **first Latina superhero**— see **Part 5**.)

In *All-New X-Men #40* (2015), **Iceman** was revealed as gay, establishing one of Marvel's highest-profile LGBTQ+ characters in comics.

The same year, **Catwoman** (Selina Kyle) was established as bisexual in DC continuity.

The First Trans-Supers

Created by transgender writer Rachel Pollack, **Coagula** (Kate Godwin) debuted in *Doom Patrol #70* (1993) as DC's first transgender superhero.

Also in 1993, **Masquerade** was introduced in Milestone Comics' *Blood Syndicate*, one of the first trans male characters to appear in mainstream superhero comics.

(See **Part 5** for more about the groundbreaking company **Milestone Comics**.)

The First Nongender / Nonbinary Superhero

In 2020, Marvel Comics introduced a super who could control ice—**Snowflake**, who is considered one of the first explicitly non-binary / non-gender superheroes.

Characterized as a "burly character" with a blue-and-pink aesthetic, Marvel flipped typical gender color-coding to make their point.

At the time, Snowflake's name and concept received significant backlash and was considered both insensitive and cliché. However, some people viewed the move as a well-intentioned (if heavy-handed) step toward greater inclusivity in comic books.

Cross-Dressing Heroes

With absolutely no segue whatsoever, I wanted to mention two other mostly forgotten characters from the Golden Age...

Madam Fatal is notable for being a male hero who dressed as an elderly woman to fight crime. Debuting in May 1940, he is the **first cross-dressing hero** in comics (though he possessed no superpowers).

Later that same year (in November 1940), the original **Red Tornado** (Ma Hunkel) became the **first cross-dressing heroine**. Considered a comedic, non-powered character, she fought crime wearing long johns and a cooking pot on her head.

A middle-aged housewife in New York City, Ma Hunkel was one of the first superhero parodies and a pioneering crime-fighting female character pretending to be a man.

However, like Madam Fatal, that version of Red Tornado did *not* have superpowers.

NOTE: By necessity, this examination of representation in comics had to leave out countless other worthy and notable contributions — characters, cultures, and communities that I would have loved to include, if there was time and space. Perhaps someone else can pick up the mantle and take on that mighty task...

Part 10: A Super Conclusion

Lacking in representation throughout the Golden Age, comics slowly became more representative and diverse with each passing decade, through the Silver, Bronze, and Modern Ages.

These days, there are certainly more comics, TV shows, and movies that feature strong, developed, complex superheroes from all walks of life, characters who redefine or even challenge outdated notions and cultural misconceptions of race and gender—all while also honoring the positive traits of all races, cultures, genders, etc.

Like all art-forms, comic books have always been societal mirrors that reflect our personal and cultural viewpoints, a way to re-direct the reader's perspective toward a better understanding of the world (or toward "others")—perhaps even inspiring us to create a better, more heroic world.

Sometimes, comics have stood as beacons, or as warnings, as reflections of biases, or as encouragement for us all to seek our better natures.

Readers are always given a choice in comics ... to believe in heroes who fight for justice in an unjust world ... or to side with villains, who are almost always out for themselves, always trying to destroy, and to usher in a world of chaos and cruelty.

Every society should welcome anyone who believes in justice, no matter what they look like, or where they come from—as long as they want to make the world a better place ... for all of us.

Epilogue

In the early decades of superheroes, comics that featured **Superman, Fantastic Four, Batman, Spider-Man**, etc., were attempting to recaptured boys' attention by having strong heroes battle equally powerful villains, mostly with fisticuffs and brute force.

But without strength of character, without the power of intelligence and compassion behind that strength, how "heroic" is brute force? Isn't that just brutality?

Captain America, Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman, and most superheroes would wholeheartedly agree with Stan Lee, who famously wrote in **Spider-Man's** origin story (1961): "With great power there must also come—great responsibility."

In today's chaotic, divided, violently obsessed world, isn't the power of compassion, collaboration, and community-building the greatest, most super-heroic strength?

After all, to be effective (or even defined) as a superhero, the hero has to *care*. Or they would never be heroes.

Spider-Man and Captain Marvel, Iron-Man and Black Widow, Black Panther and Miss Fury *always* looked after

the underdogs, the helpless, those in need, those who needed protection.

Isn't that what being a true Hero is all about?

Shouldn't acceptance and inclusion *always* be an essential part in the fight for justice? Don't True Heroes *want* to make the world a better place for us all?

Let's hope so.

Be Heroic, True Believers.

About the Author

*A lifelong collector of comic books, **S. T. Finn** is an author and artist who lives in a cabin in the Catskill Mountains. His stories and artwork can be found at ***ShadowfaxBooks.com***.*



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But if they can't be saved by someone else, they'll just have to save themselves — and each other.

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A YA Fantasy Adventure at Sea by Ty Rowan

Trevor is a young paleontologist who loves dinosaurs and dreams of making the next great scientific discovery in the chalk-fields of Kansas. Instead, he ends up trapped on a mysterious steamship, crossing the ocean, hunting a sea-monster in pirate-infested waters.

This was not Trevor's idea of grand adventure.

FAR AWAY PLACE

A Contemporary YA Story About Never Giving Up

by S. T. Finn

After their mother leaves home and disappears, three kids in a rundown trailer struggle to find food, money, and hope. Hiding their secret gets harder each day.

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But will he survive?

AQUANS: CAPTIVES OF THE SEA

A YA Dark Fantasy Beneath the Waves

by Ty Rowan

An international group of kids trapped in a deep-sea habitat discover they have one thing in common: Every one of them has had a mysterious encounter at some point in their lives with merpeople. And one of the kids might even be one.

LIKE BIRDS COME WINTER

A Contemporary Coming-of-Age Story

by S. T. Finn

Tyler Maclean is a sensitive boy who can't escape the poverty and bullying in his trailer-park life. To avoid the intolerant "real" world, he loses himself in the worlds of his imagination.

But when a new girl with a heartbreaking secret shows up at his bus stop, everything starts to change.

MONSTER CLUB:
MINIONS OF THE UNDEAD KING
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STRANGE & MAGICAL WORLD
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All his life, 12-year-old Mikey has seen the world as a magical place, inhabited by imaginary friends and mystical creatures ... including terrible monsters that sometimes threatened the people he loves.

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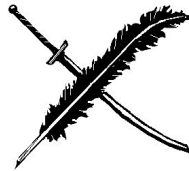
A LIFE UNRAVELED: THE EARLY POEMS 2

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1—LEAVES IN THE RAIN

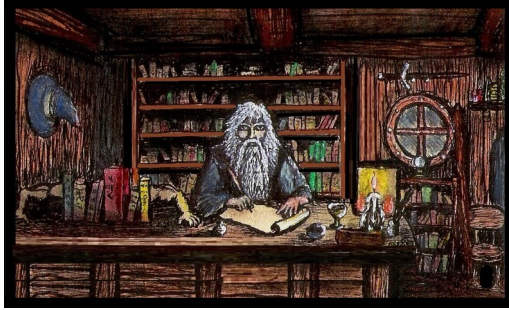
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