

Contact

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Here comes the Spider-Man - as American as apple pie

By DUANE DUDEK
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Look! Up on the screen!

It's a bird. It's a bat. It's an arachnid.

This would be a job for theater maintenance, if it was literally true.

But these familiar-looking yet clearly mutant, winged, caped and costumed movie and comic-book superheroes are all in your mind. And the story of how they got there is a journey as peculiarly American as that of the immigrants who passed through Ellis Island.

"Like rock 'n' roll, they could have only emerged from a culture that was diverse, free and commercially driven enough to imagine and market them," said Bradford W. Wright, author of "Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America" (\$34.95, Johns Hopkins University Press).

Superman was the ultimate immigrant, the brother from another planet. Batman was the brooding, flawed do-gooder. And Spider-Man's adolescence was problematic and radioactive.

Superheroes, born of the Depression as symbols of empowerment for the powerless, evolve and reflect the anxiety, artistry and adolescent fantasies of the generation that owns them.

Now these denizens of the social fringe are made into corporate icons by Hollywood.

The latest is "Spider-Man," opening today. It follows the previously successful Batman, Superman and X-Men films, has inspired a sequel of its own even before its release and precedes new films based on Daredevil and the Incredible Hulk.

Technicolor role models

This super-heroic journey from rags to respectability is a mean-streets-paved-with-gold metamorphosis that even the most visionary comic writer could not have imagined.

Todd McFarlane, whose updated Spider-Man in the late 1980s became the bestselling comic of all time, and who created the character Spawn in the early 1990s, grew up in Canada at a time when comic books were a reassuring rite of passage and part of a sacred childhood trinity.

"You bought a pop, you bought a chocolate bar and you bought a comic book," said

'Spider-Man'


★★★½





Photo/Sony

Boy meets girl. Spider-Man (Tobey Maguire) and Mary Jane (Kirsten Dunst) fall in love.

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Peter Parker

