

created scrappy anti-heroes in the 1960s, just as the youth culture emerged.

Kelley J. Hall, who teaches a course called Comic Books and American Society at DePauw University in Greencastle, Ind., said Marvel introduced "behind the mask" stories.

Marvel, Hall said, "put comic books on the path of stories that were applicable to everyday lives." The "heroes happened to be heroes in their spare time," she said.

Chief among those heroes was Spider-Man, a vulnerable adolescent whose superpowers were juxtaposed with garden-variety teenage anxieties.

Spider-Man "was like some young punk," Ross said. He "was the feet-of-clay kind of superhero," and perhaps "the most human" and "most sympathetic" of all superheroes.

Wright, whose book traces the social, cultural and historical evolution of superheroes, said Spider-Man dealt with "heartbreak, tragedy, financial difficulties, loneliness and existential confusion."

The character's temper would flare, and he "had bouts of depression and self-pity," "shed tears of grief" - and may have been the very first male superhero to do so. But, added Wright, "he had an inner strength and innate goodness that led him to triumph over despair."

Teaching old spider new tricks

But since success inevitably breeds stasis, Spidey over the years fell into an iconic rut. He became, McFarlane said, "such a successful character nobody wanted to mess with him.

"So when I came along, I said, 'I think he needs a little dusting off.' "

If in the past Spidey was too human, McFarlane focused "on the spider. The man was less of a concern."

McFarlane reinvented the costume "with big eyes and lots of webbing." The result, he said, "looked like a little bug guy. It was unrealistic anatomy, but it conveyed the insect part of what we were doing."

They were talking about a movie version of Spider-Man way back then, McFarlane said. But the project was kept earthbound during years of legal and creative wrangling. One advantage of this, he said, is that computer technology now exists to create a credible web-slinger.

But it is more than technology that made "X-Men," about a group of misunderstood mutants, one of the most popular superhero films, said Ralph Winter, one of that film's producers.

Last week, Winter moved to Vancouver, British Columbia, for seven months to film the sequel, which he said would "have more effects, go deeper into the characters and be more fun" than the first. That the sequel will also star Oscar winner Halle Berry and Oscar nominee Ian McKellen suggests that the certainly profitable superhero genre is now also respectable.

Since "X-Men" director Bryan Singer, who will direct the sequel, was not a superhero fan, he was "a good barometer of and filter for (comic conventions) that might have seemed stupid," Winter said.

Singer's objectivity about and distance from the genre let him focus on "making a good dramatic film and story, that along the way happened to be a science-fiction film," Winter said.

At the other extreme, Ross said, were the Batman films, "which mocked the entire medium."

Director Joel Schumacher had "a very crude understanding of what makes a comic work," and the two that he



Photo/Sony

Willem Dafoe is the Green Goblin in "Spider-Man."