# DiPaolo, Marc, ed. (2018) *Working-Class Comic Book Heroes: Class Conflict and Populist Politics in Comics,* University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, MS.

**Review by Pamela Fox**

I confess that until quite recently, I have not been remotely attracted to superhero comics. Perhaps I'm one of the audience 'skeptics' referenced by Marc DiPaolo early on in this volume's introduction, disdaining stories set in 'a heavily mythologized, escapist America free of social-class divisions, or in fantastical environments' (4). And in my case, they also seemed to exploit the most retrograde versions of gender difference. But my late discovery of 'working-class comic book heroes' Jessica Jones and Luke Cage, via their striking Netflix series, lured me into the Marvel universe and showed me the error of my flawed assumptions. I am thus delighted to review this groundbreaking and accessible essay collection, which reflects the diverse training, methodologies, and locales of its writers hailing from academia, the public humanities, and journalism but all representing the field of working-class studies. Their varying styles and voices prove to be a refreshing mix.

DiPaolo's lengthy opening essay serves as an instructive primer on the comic book as a genre, providing a historical context as well as some helpful analysis of its adaptation by film, television, and streaming media. He argues that the Marvel film versions of *Captain America*, *Daredevil*, and *Luke Cage* have proven successful at 'crystalizing the working-class themes found in the comic books instead of eliding them' (4). But while welcoming the much broader audience created by these media adaptations, the collection clearly foregrounds the original comic book form as later versions' source material (5). Indeed, many of the essays shift back and forth between the print source and the film variant, which can be rather confusing at times for a novice reader unfamiliar with the backstories of relationships between, and transformations of, Marvel or DC characters. But as someone who enjoys and teaches graphic novels, I appreciate the collection's attention to the comic form itself: how its panels and 'gutters' (lines that divide the panels) involve the reader more organically than in the passive role as media spectator.

DiPaolo conducts a brief review of superhero scholarship to highlight the volume's contribution as 'the first … to explore issues of socioeconomic class, cultural capital, and economics in comic book 'heroic fiction'' (5). And it does so by making a key choice in terminology: 'comic book heroes,' not 'superheroes.' As he quips, 'once a working-class superhero gains access to a superpower … do they cease being working class?' (36) Although superhero characters such as Batman are typically wealthy and must adopt aliases or masks in order to protect their class status, others, such as Cage, Jones, and Peter Parker (Spider-Man) blur their 'real' and 'super power' selves: Cage, for instance—a 1970s African American man with super abilities—is the first of his kind to charge money for his crime-fighting services (a 'Hero for Hire'). The book thus addresses

not only the traditional comics genre but also ‘the most culturally significant cowboy and gangster heroes of mixed-genres heroic narratives, including … [those] found in comic book dystopian, post-apocalyptic, and steam-punk universes’ (5) in order to include those characters who can more readily function as ‘analogues of real-life working-class figures’ (7). Ultimately, DiPaolo writes, *Working-Class Comic Book Heroes* aims to promote ‘greater empathy’ within ‘the very contemporary context of Trump’s America’ (7).

Part I covers a fascinating array of comics that on the surface would seem to have next to nil in common. Michele Fazio’s essay on *The Walking Dead* redirects ‘zombie studies’ in her deft working-class reading of both the comic book and television series. While noting that prior scholars have linked zombie narratives to the recent economic recession, Fazio focuses on labor as the texts’ ‘continuous narrative thread’ both in the past and the survivalist present. She teases out characters’ embedded work histories to reveal comradery around shared discontent but also pride in useful skills; in an apocalyptic world, manual work emerges as an almost privileged training promoting cross-class alliances. But she is also careful to note continuing gender oppression in this new social system.

Other essays continue this engagement with form. Kelly Kanayama approaches the comic book *Preacher* as a revisionist Western that also revamps horror and southern fiction genres to promote a feminist working-class outlook. Its gun-toting female protagonist, Tulip O’Hare, manages to reject most gender normative expectations yet also remains tethered to feminized care work that meets men’s needs. In ‘Alan Moore and Anarchist Praxis in Form,’ James Gifford and Orion Ussner Kidder mount perhaps this volume’s most challenging examination of the political relationship between content and form as they chart the shifting presence of anarchist thought in two of Moore’s most significant works, *V for Vendetta* and *Black Dossier.* Closing out this unit, Phil Bevin’s chapter on Superman revisits Clark Kent’s status as working-class ‘everyman’ by focusing on one particular writer’s updating of this beloved comics hero: from ‘drudge’ reporter in a dingy walkup to socialist champion of the oppressed to a more global human rights activist (141).

Part II pivots to Marvel comics’ most recent celebrated superheroes, thanks to their star turns in massively popular media adaptations. While focusing on different figures and preoccupations, the essays address the complexities of class, race, gender, and power within specific historical moments and locales. Blair Davis’ essay on Luke Cage and Man-Thing, for instance, spotlights the 1970s as a key turning point in comic book class and racial representation. A survey circulated by Marvel’s rival, DC comics, queried readers about their preference for different storylines concerning racial and urban issues, and in response, Marvel created a Black hero whose backstory includes being a former gang member as well as prisoner who ‘acquired super-strength and an impenetrable body’ (149) during a botched medical procedure. While eschewing the Panthers and other radical politics of the era, he literally embodies a working-class ‘black power.’ Writing on *Daredevil*, Kevin Michael Scott offers a fascinating review of the blind superhero’s class origins and politics. Debuting in 1964, ‘no other comic … placed its hero so squarely in the realm of the poor and working classes’ (169)—namely, Hell’s Kitchen. Scott tracks three chronological periods of *Daredevil*, associated respectively with acclaimed writers Stan Lee, Frank Miller, and Brian Michael Bendis, to explore the comic’s changing approach to combatting what Scott terms ‘BIG POWER’: ‘the corrupting bargain made between government, crime, and wealth … to profit

from the working classes' (171). Andrew Alan Smith's essay on the Fantastic Four's 'The Thing' (aka Ben Grimm) serves as a thumbnail bio of this superhero's co-creator Jack Kirby. A Jewish working-class artist from New York city's lower East side, Kirby clearly enjoyed mapping his own blue-collar vernacular and pleasures (wrestling, poker) onto his 'alter ego' character.

The collection's final two chapters shift our attention to the rare *female* superhero: one a lesser light, the other—thanks to Netflix—now a bona fide star. Christina Knopf's essay on Shamrock, an intermittent Northern Irish member of the Guardians of the Galaxy franchise, walks us through this unlikely heroine's complex history featuring her Irish Republican father's travails and her own post-superhero work history as a 'schoolteacher,' bartender, and Dublin hairdresser. While developing a thought-provoking feminist reading of this character, Knopf lost me when she argued that Shamrock's *non*-sexy costuming registered 'women's subordinate, overlooked, and forgotten place in Irish history and society' (209). Finally, 'The Working Class PI (AKA Jessica Jones)' builds a multi-layered reading of the title character's transformation from the comic book *Alias* to the television series *Jessica Jones*. Terrence Wandtke posits that the comic's non-glamorous, no-nonsense young woman who works as an 'ordinary' private investigator (with super abilities) is the new avatar of the American working class. He rightly notes that she resists the long standing conventions for women's representation in detective narratives – the 'femme fatale,' the 'good girl' (233). Alas, the essay ends with a disappointing yet convincing critique of the Netflix series. Jones remains a compelling female working-class figure, Wandtke suggests, but her prior radical nature has been somewhat 'co-opted by conventional expectations' (241-42). Happily, this volume does not succumb to such a fate.

## Reviewer Bio

**Pamela Fox** is a feminist scholar of working-class and women's literature/culture at Georgetown University (USA) and the author of numerous articles, two books, and one co-edited critical volume: *Class Fictions: Shame and Resistance in the British Working-Class Novel, 1890-1945* (Duke UP); *Natural Acts: Gender, Race, and Rusticity in Country Music* (Univ. of Michigan Press); and *Old Roots, New Routes: The Cultural Politics of Alt.Country Music*, co-edited with Barbara Ching (Univ. of Michigan Press). She teaches classes for both the English Dept. and the Women's and Gender Studies Program on British and American working-class literature and popular culture, and cultural constructions of motherhood.