In his previous book, *Authors of the Impossible*, Jeffrey Kripal explored the work of nineteenth and twentieth-century theorists who attempted to account for the paranormal—a form of religious experience that has been largely ignored by scholars. *Authors of the Impossible* was actually a product of Kripal’s preparation to write *Mutants and Mystics*, which considers the relationship between superhero comics, paranormal experiences, and the sacred.

Perhaps it should first be noted that this book is an artistic endeavor as well as an intellectual one. A recurring theme is the ability of the comic-book genre to appeal to both the left and right sides of the brain by combining text with art. Kripal has attempted to replicate this formula in *Mystic and Messiahs*. It contains lavish full color illustrations, many of which are comic covers from the author’s own collection. Block quotes are presented in a font reminiscent of the hand-written text of comic books. The front and back covers contain a pattern of dots known as “Kirby crackle.” Named after artist Jack Kirby, this distinctive pattern is frequently used in comic books to represent both the vastness of deep space and various forms of fantastic energy—an appropriate image for this book.

Kripal is not the first religion scholar to study superheroes. However, his work is groundbreaking in both its method and its conclusions. It may have been Mircea Eliade who first noticed the connection between classic mythology and the popularity of modern superheroes. Analysis of religion and popular culture has relied heavily on “archetypes” identified by comparing symbols and tropes across genres. To some extent, Kripal continues this project. In fact, his writing frequently is reminiscent of Jung, particularly when discussing synchronicity and the inspiration for this book (finding a mysterious gold ‘X’ discarded by his minivan as he exited the theater from an *X-Men* film). However, Kripal’s method is primarily historical and uses an archival rigor that makes
similar studies of religion and superheroes seem lazy by comparison. It turns out that many of the artists and writers behind comic books and science fiction have had paranormal experiences as well as an interest in esotericism that have strongly shaped their work.

*Mutants and Mystics* also advances a growing body of literature on “the sacralization of popular culture” or so-called “hyper-real religions,” which hold nominally fictional stories as sacred. Kripal turns this problem on its head, arguing that popular culture can actually emerge from the sacred—defined here by paranormal experiences and a milieu of esoteric beliefs. He writes, “If all religions are fictions, why not use fiction to express one’s mystical experiences? Indeed, what else *could* one do?” (48). Thus, the sacred manifests in popular culture and visa-versa.

By examining the numerous historical connections between superheroes and the paranormal, Kripal proposes what he calls a “super-story” or “a modern living mythology” that underlies the superhero genre and perhaps explains some of its appeal. Essentially, there is something profoundly meaningful, sacred and—at least for some people—true behind science fiction and comic books. Kripal writes, “Just because something is encountered *through* the imagery of bad movies or sappy religious art does not mean that what is being encountered *is* a bad movie or a pious painting” (81).

The structure of the book outlines this super-story as seven “mythemes” that recur in both comic books and paranormal literature. Although the mythemes are treated separately, they frequently blend into one another. “Divinization/Demonization” refers simply to belief in otherworldly intelligences or “superbeings,” with which humanity has sought contact. “Orientation” concerns identifying the source of these beings and their power, whether it is in Far East, under the earth, on another planet, or in alternate dimensions. Modern science changed this mythology of the sacred, adding three new mythemes. “Alienation” involves shifting the sacred from exotic reaches of our known world to the depths of outer space. “Radiation” follows from the realization that matter and energy are ultimately one. This theme also concerns various forms of energy
(scientific as well as mystical) with the power to destroy, save, or transform us. “Mutation” refers to the idea that human beings are continuing to evolve and, in fact, are becoming more like divinized/demonized beings themselves. The last two themes are derived from the writers of science fiction themselves and their production of stories using the first five mythemes. Here, Kripal looks particularly at the work of Philip K. Dick and Whitley Strieber, fiction writers whose lives were profoundly shaped by their experiences of confronting paranormal forces. “Realization” refers to the idea that our lives are being “written” by paranormal forces. “Authorization” refers to the project of taking some sort of agency in this process: writing the paranormal as it writes us.

Kripal begins this book by describing his own paranormal experience in Calcutta in 1989 and his conclusions can be read as a mystical insight as much as a scholarly assessment. As in his previous book, Kripal invites his readers to become “artists and authors of the impossible” (334), to find new ways of thinking about so-called paranormal experiences rather than simply bracketing them out as anecdotal or unscientific. This, he argues, is a kind of liberatory act, related to his mythemes of realization and authorization. He writes, “You can’t think yourself out of the story you are caught in with the rules and elements of the very story in which you are caught. You can’t free yourself with the tools that the master provides you. You need a new story and new cognitive tools. You need an intervention from the outside [even if this outside turns out be a deep inside]” (263).

Even for readers who are not interested in the rather cosmic implications of Kripal’s thesis, *Mutants and Mystics* remains an impressive body of historical research on the numerous connections between the writers of comic books and science fiction and the paranormal and esoteric traditions that inspired them. If nothing else, *Mutants and Mystics* seeks to increase our appreciation for science fiction and the paranormal, two sources of immense meaning for many modern people that have been largely neglected by scholars of religion. This thoroughly fascinating book reminds us that the goal of humanities scholarship is not merely to win an argument but to raise the sort of deep questions that lead to self-reflection and an enriched life.
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