



SUPERHERO FICTION AND VIGILANTE REALITY: SELF-REFERENTIALITY AND QUIXOTISM IN MILLAR AND ROMITA JR.'S *KICK-ASS*

Lucía Bausela Bucciante

ABSTRACT

In Millar and Romita Jr.'s *Kick-Ass* comics series, Dave is an ordinary kid in New York who loves reading comics and discussing them with his friends. At home, his situation is not ideal: his mother has died due to a brain haemorrhage and his relationship with his father, James Lizewski, is strained due to unresolved mourning and poor communication. The situation in his immediate social context is, moreover, rather dire: Dave is a witness of daily injustice and crime, which often leads him to wonder why there are no costumed vigilantes in the real world. When Dave creates a double-identity as a masked vigilante and eventually ventures to the streets at night to fight crime, he relies on comic books such as Spider-Man as if they were instruction manuals on how to be a superhero, but reality immediately strikes back with brutal consequences. In a way, *Kick-Ass* is an ode to a comics genre, acknowledging its most salient plot features, its wacky characters and worlds, and its history as a medium. However, this complex web of self-referential elements also configures an interesting argument of why superhero stories are, precisely, stories, and why this kind of fictional narrative is incompatible with the real world. Therefore, the aim of this article is two-fold: first, the discussion focuses on analysing how *Kick-Ass* identifies, highlights and emulates elements from the superhero and vigilante archetypes, to then focus on theories of self-referentiality which allow for a study of the critical commentary that the work makes of its own medium and genre. Finally, the discussion will turn towards the ideological dimension of the work, focusing on the extent of *Kick-Ass*'s cynical take on real-life superheroes, its terms, warnings, and optimism.

Keywords: superhero, vigilante, self-referentiality, Comics Studies, comics, graphic narrative, Quixotism.

DOI: 10.37536/reden.2024.5.2355

Mark Millar and John Romita Jr.'s *Kick-Ass* is a comics series that has enjoyed great commercial success, to the point of becoming a franchise. *Kick-Ass* was first published in 2008, and the original series is now marketed as Book One of "The Dave Lizewski Years," which comprises four volumes in total: Book Two was originally published as *Hit-Girl* (2012); Book Three, *Kick-Ass 2: Balls to the Wall* (2012), and Book Four, *Kick-Ass 3* (2014).

Two years later, Mark Millar organised an open contest for the title *Millarworld Annual*, an anthology of one-shot specials which includes the winning entries “Kick-Ass: Blind-sided” (Mo and Orkiekwe 2016), “Hit-Girl: Mindy’s ABCs” (Abnett and Yildirim 2016), and “Kick-Ass: Trick or Cheat” (Sayle and Ziane 2017), whose plots were consequently welcomed in the canon of Millar’s original story. At the same time, two film adaptations had already been released: *Kick-Ass* (Vaugh 2010) and *Kick-Ass 2* (Wadlow 2013). The first one enjoyed a warm reception from fans and critics alike; not only did it earn over \$96 million worldwide, it was also adapted into a videogame (2010) for Apple, PlayStation and Facebook gaming platforms. The second film, despite earning mainly negative reviews by critics on *The New York Times*, *Variety*, *The Guardian*, and more of the like, and audiences on platforms such as Rotten Tomatoes, Metacritic, and Cinemascore, still went on to gain nominations at the EDA Awards, IGN Awards, MTV Movie Awards, and Taurus Awards. Moreover, the comics series continued on with several spin-offs centered on both new and well-known characters: “Kick-Ass: The New Girl” (2018–) features a new protagonist, Patience Lee, who takes the mantle after Dave Lizewski quits his double identity; “Hit-Girl” (2018–) serves as a sequel to the events in the original series and focuses on the eponymous co-protagonist, whose real name is Mindy McCready; “Kick-Ass vs. Hit-Girl” (2020–2021) depicts the original confrontation between Patience and Mindy; and, finally, “Crossover” (2020–) focuses on an adult Mindy who is drawn to an interdimensional convergence of Marvel, DC and Image characters. Whereas it would be presumptuous to claim that the success of a multimedia franchise such as this one is owed to one singular factor, it is possible to argue that, at least in part, the self-referential discussion on superhero comics in the original run of *Kick-Ass* enriches the story with funny nods to the genre, well-founded criticism of overused motifs, and shocking realisations that what often works in fiction cannot be applied to real life.

Book One, which compiles the first eight issues from “The Dave Lizewski Years,” spans over two years in the life of its teenage protagonist. Dave is an ordinary kid who lives in New York City and loves reading comics and discussing them with his friends. At home, his situation is not ideal: his mother died due to a brain haemorrhage and his relationship with his father, James Lizewski, is strained due to unresolved mourning and poor communication. The situation in his immediate social context is, moreover, rather dire: Dave is a witness of daily injustice and crime, which often leads him to wonder why there are no costumed vigilantes in the real world. This “perfect combination of loneliness and despair” (#1, n.p.) leads him to create a double-identity as a masked vigilante: Dave buys a wetsuit on the Internet, trains himself, and eventually ventures to the streets at night to actually fight crime. While he relies on comic books such as *Spider-Man* as if they were instruction manuals on how to be a superhero, reality immediately strikes back with brutal consequences: his first attempt at fighting a band of thugs ends up in hospitalization due to severe concussions, stab wounds and the injuries sustained after being

hit by a car. Still, after processing a crisis of faith in his beloved comics and undergoing surgery and physical rehabilitation, Kick-Ass goes back on patrol. What is more, Dave creates a social media account for Kick-Ass so that people can contact him to ask for help. During a particularly dangerous encounter, he is rescued by a couple of masked vigilantes, Big Daddy and Hit-Girl, who brutally but efficiently kill all the attackers. After the two completely disregard Dave, Hit-Girl ends up convincing them that they form a “super-team” (#1, n.p.) to bring down a very powerful mafia boss. When the high-risk heist that they had planned goes horribly wrong and Hit-Girl is apparently dead after receiving multiple gunshots, Big Daddy reveals that he is just an accountant frustrated with his marriage who trained his very young daughter in martial arts and left his empty life to create a new exciting one, financing himself through selling comic books. In the end, their great mission against the mafia boss was nothing but a casual choice, simply because they “needed a villain” for their own self-narrative.

This brief summary aims at proving how comic books—and more specifically, superhero comics—are essential to the plot: not only do they serve as a trigger for the action once Dave decides to reproduce their key genre elements in real life, but they also determine and sustain the goals and aspirations of supporting characters. In a way, *Kick-Ass* is an ode to a comics genre, acknowledging its most salient plot features, its wacky characters and worlds, and its history as a medium. However, this complex web of self-referential elements also configures an interesting argument of why superhero stories are, precisely, just stories, and why this kind of fictional narrative is incompatible with the real world. Therefore, the aim of this article is twofold: first, the discussion focuses on analysing how *Kick-Ass* identifies, highlights and emulates elements from the superhero and vigilante archetypes, in order to then focus on theories of self-referentiality which allow for a study of the critical commentary that the work makes of its own medium and genre. Finally, the discussion will turn towards the ideological dimension of the work, focusing on the extent of *Kick-Ass*'s cynical take on real-life superheroes, its terms, warnings, and optimism.

1. SUPERHERO OR VIGILANTE?: A REVIEW OF ARCHETYPES

As it was previously stated, *Kick-Ass* is full of direct and explicit references to the essential elements that configure the superhero archetype, despite the fact that Dave, its protagonist, best fits the definition of a vigilante. Still, the fact that Dave tries to become a real-life superhero but only manages to become a sort of vigilante at most is part of the set of binary oppositions that the work evidences between fiction and reality, which is my focus in the third section of this study. For now, let the focus be on identifying the structural and thematic features of the superhero—and/or vigilante—genre which *Kick-Ass* foregrounds, and the effects or purposes they serve. Understanding that genres are configured following certain semantic (or thematic) and syntactic (or structural)

conventions, as a dialectical approach would allow, it is possible to interpret superhero narratives as a genre due to the similarities between characters, settings, and icons, as well as their narrative structure, themes, and effects. Still, as Jameson (1981) argues, it is impossible to separate all these formal features from the historical conditions which sustain them and assign specific meaning to them—ideologies, social paradigms, and historically-charged modes of expression (189). This classification proves useful to consider superhero narratives as a proper and established genre due to the repetition of thematic and formal devices in works from different periods—from the Golden Age (1938–1956) to the current so-called comics Renaissance—, different media (comics, film, or videogames, for example), and different artistic teams, not to mention the decisive impact that such stories have had in the popularization of the comics medium and the massification of the comics industry.

Dave Lizewski is the protagonist of *Kick-Ass*, but who is he, really? In many ways, he is a regular teenager from New York City who loves reading comics and discussing them with his friends—not that he is the class jock, but he is no geek either (#1, n.p.). He is savvy in all-things-comics and actively engages in fandom culture: he likes “*Scrubs*, Stereophonics, the Goo Goo Dolls and *Entourage*, Snow Patrol, *Heroes* and the movies of Ryan Reynolds” (#1, n.p.), and he stays updated with the latest published issues from his favourite comics series, as well as their film adaptations. Being male and a teen, he even meets the stereotypical demographic which was the key target audience of superhero comics for decades, and he suffers typical teenage problems: he is a victim of bullying in high-school, and he has an unrequited crush on a girl. Finally, his mother passed away not long ago, which has not only devastated him but also derailed his relationship with his father. Even before putting on a mask, Dave already shares key characteristics with well-known superheroes: Peter Parker (*Spider-Man*) and Clark Kent (*Superman*) are also perceived as ‘lame’ by their regular peers and have unrequited feelings for Mary Jane and Lois Lane, respectively; Barry Allen (*The Flash*) is a comics fan who also struggles with people who make him feel inferior; Bruce Wayne (*Batman*) is famously an orphan who has not allowed himself to cope with his parents’ deaths, and Matt Murdock (*Daredevil*) finds strong motivations to do vigilante work in New York after the unfair death of his father.

And yet, Dave fails to see the many parallels between his life and the origin stories of comics superheroes. In fact, he laments that “there was nothing in [his] history to suggest the typical hero’s journey. No radioactive spiders or refugee status from a doomed alien world,” and even though his mother died when he was younger, “she was killed by an aneurysm as opposed to a hitman” (#1, n.p.). Therefore, Dave perceives that his life holds no remarkable milestone or event which makes him feel closer to a protagonist, least of all a superhero; as figure 1 shows, Dave’s everyday consists of a numbing routine, emotional detachment from his father, and the solace of escapism through TV,

videogames and comics. What can be stated in Dave's favour is that the lack of fantastic elements or great evil organisations is, in fact, a key semantic element of superhero origin stories. However, the fact that he fits a demographic stereotype, his loneliness and sense of isolation both at home and school, and his strong moral calling to "follow his dreams and maybe do a little good at the same time" (#1, n.p.) can be directly connected with the origin stories of superheroes such as the ones mentioned above, albeit some slight displacements due to the realistic approach of Millar and Romita Jr.'s story.

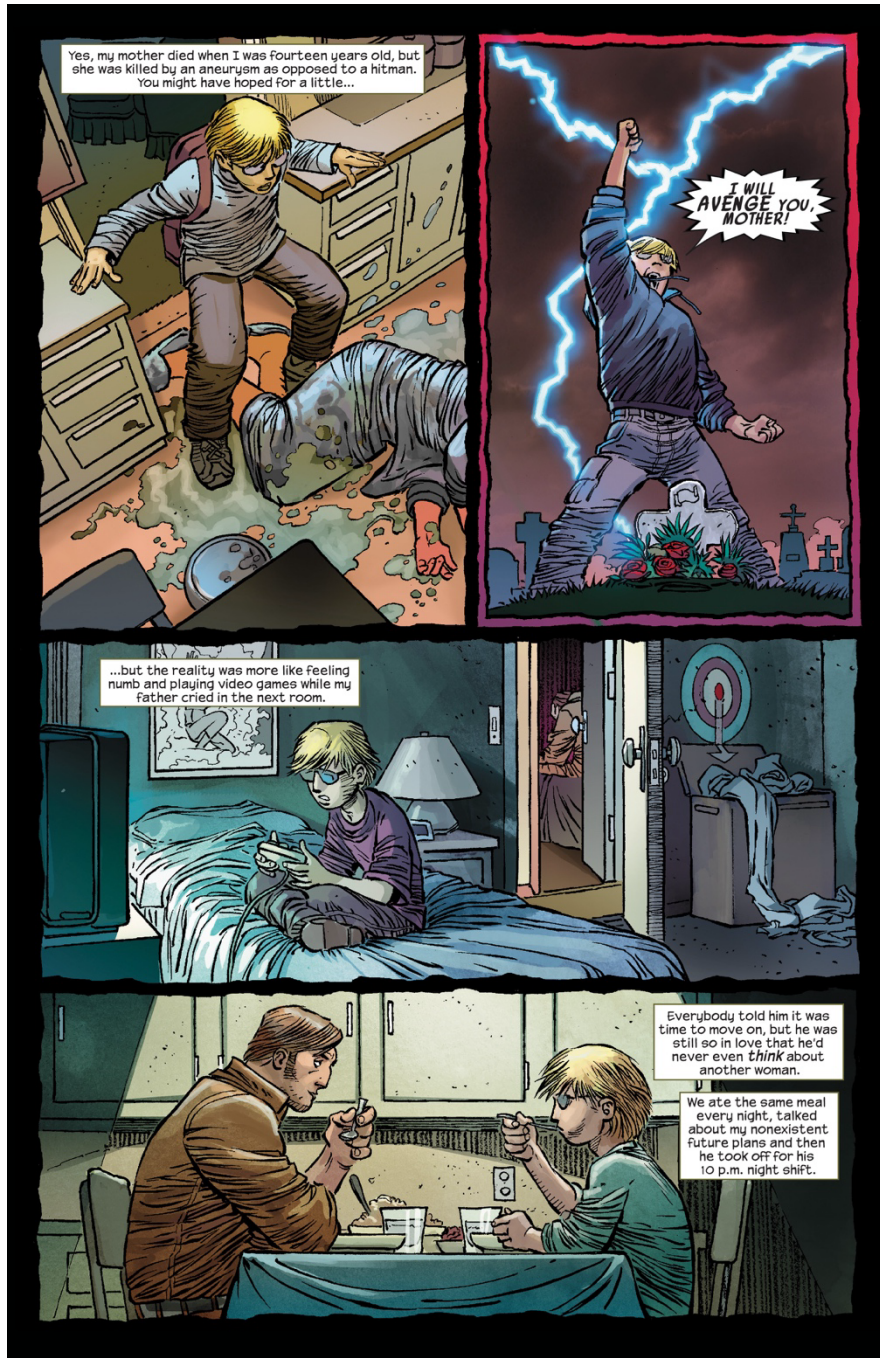


Fig. 1. Dave's daily life and his need to escape reality © Image Comics, 2018.

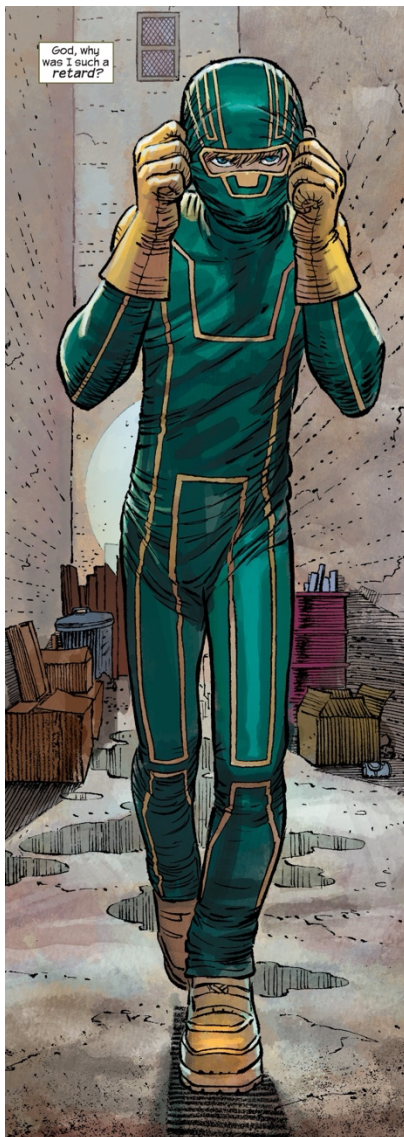
Then, when Dave tries on his rudimentary costume for the first time—following, once again, the steps of many heroes such as Spider-Man, Daredevil, Superman, and more recently Ms. Marvel, who also make their costumes by themselves—, he realises “how far off the mark the comic books had been. / It didn’t take a trauma to make you wear a mask. It didn’t take your parents getting shot... / ...or cosmic rays or a power ring... / Just the perfect combination of loneliness and despair” (#1, n.p.). Despite the fact that he is still unable to see the connection between his personal situation and superhero origin stories, he reaches an effective conclusion: there is an inner conflict to every superhero which they compensate for by creating a double-identity. Therefore, while, for instance, Peter Parker and Matt Murdock must learn to value the simple things in life instead of letting their ambition carry them away by the grandiose natures of Spider-Man and Daredevil, Dave’s struggle lies on the unresolved trauma left by his mother’s death, the lack of belonging in his social circle, and the anxious frustration of not knowing what career path he wants to follow in the future. In other words, Kick-Ass the hero is born out of Dave’s disconformity with the world and with himself.

Still, the greatest objection against Dave’s status as a superhero remains: he does not have superpowers.¹ And certainly, “[m]ythic tropes introduced by the superheroes of the late 1930s and 40s still exist, but since the groundbreaking revisions introduced by Frank Miller and Alan Moore in the late 1980s, they have also become increasingly inverted, questioned, and all out parodied” (Ndalianis 2009, 8), so it is possible that superhero characters do not necessarily meet all the archetypal requirements to be defined as such. For instance, neither Bruce Wayne (*Batman*), nor Tony Stark (*Iron Man*) or Hank Pym (*Ant-Man*), technically have superhuman powers, but there seems to be no contestation of their status as superheroes due to their grand heroic deeds. Therefore, perhaps supernatural powers make textbook superheroes, but a superhero’s mission and purpose is what makes them heroic. Above all, superheroes “promote themselves as divine figures of retribution, offering both the promise of transcendent justice in place of equality (enabled by their superpower) and physicality in place of rationality (accentuated by their formfitting costumes) as conduits to truth (beating, sometimes literally, the truth out of

¹ In the movie adaptation directed by Vaughn (2010), there are significant differences. The protagonist gains superpowers of a sort, since his spine suffers damage and he is unable to feel physical pain. What initially could be regarded as a disability, soon turns into an outstanding characteristic which makes Dave special and even superior to his peers, instead of being a common teen or a loser. Moreover, in the comics Dave’s romantic advances on the girl he likes are brushed off and she even cuts all connection with him after finding out that he had been pretending to be gay so as to get closer to her. In the film, Dave gets away with it and he ends up having sex with her. It is fair to state that the movie adaptation grants Dave with better fighting odds, more charismatic traits, and a happy ending fit for a manly Hollywood hero. The comics, however, depict a much direr reality for the protagonist.

the villain)” (Bainbridge 2009, 67). Therefore, despite the fact that superheroes fight in the name of justice, they still need, more often than not, to wear a mask, use a codename, and develop a double identity to avoid the actual legal and social consequences of their (heroic) actions as individuals.

On the one hand, these last two elements are precisely why this full justification of why Dave is a superhero is not necessary to comics readers, as he clearly fulfils the two most easily identifiable traits of a superhero’s double-identity: a code name and a costume. Whereas the code name—”Kick-Ass”—is not born out of particular features connected with Dave’s personal identity, his costume reveals the type of missions he wishes



to partake in, his (lack of) powers, his working-class origin, and maybe even his personality. As figure 2 shows, Kick-Ass’s costume is as simple and plain as Dave himself on the one hand, while also being functional enough for a New York City neighbourhood vigilante.² There are no magical items, no tactical armour, and no complex weapons: everything Kick-Ass relies on is his wish to be a superhero and do “superhero stuff,” patrolling the streets of his neighbourhood at night, or helping the people of New York City who request his intervention through his social media account.

However, given Dave’s working-class background, the great emphasis on his status as just a normal teenager, and the fact that he mainly operates as Kick-Ass at night within the confines of his neighbourhood administering justice as he sees fit, he seems to be closer to a vigilante than an actual superhero. For instance, characters such as Rorschach from *The Watchmen* (Moore and Gibbons, 1986–1987), the Punisher (created by Gerry Conway, John Romita Sr. and Ross Andru in 1974), and many characters from *Sin City* (Miller, 1991–1992) fit this description, and not coincidentally, the gloomy tone and the explicitly violent panels of these series are also more similar to the brutal violence and realistic consequences of pretending to be a superhero in *Kick-Ass*. After all, Kick-Ass deals with the complexities of real-life heroism

Fig. 2. Kick-Ass takes to the streets
© Image Comics, 2018.

² The urban setting is, precisely, another semantic element that Kick-Ass shares with other superheroes: Spider-Man, Batman, or Daredevil, for instance, could potentially fight villains in natural settings or even outer space, but their character development and their powers are dependent on urban infrastructure.

like no other comic series in its genre: Dave is beaten up and tortured, he ends up with severe wounds and broken bones, he requires surgery and, not surprisingly, it takes him a long time to recover each time he gets hurt. However, once he trains and improves his fighting skills, he also becomes an agent of unrestrained violence. For example, he breaks a wooden stick against the face of a fellow vigilante who betrayed him, and then assists Hit-Girl in using a flamethrower against a band of thugs before she starts shooting indiscriminately until everyone in the bad guy's lair is dead.

Dave claims that he does not have too much in common with the superheroes in the comics he avidly reads while in fact he does, but then he acts and performs the role of Kick-Ass as if he was a superhero, when the term 'vigilante' seems to fit him best. Just like the Punisher, Rorschach, or Deadpool, Kick-Ass challenges both parts of the term 'superhero': he has no powers, so he is not "super," and he tiptoes the boundary between violence and morality, so he is not fully "heroic." According to Gavin Weston (2013), "[d]iscussions over the appropriate use of force, the use of fatal force, the morality of vigilantism, the relationship between the state and vigilantes, hero worship and other issues are common arcs in popular comic series," and readers assume a role akin to that of a voyeur as they watch "the traumatic event that justifies the [protagonist's] reaction. Witnessing the atrocity and hearing the thoughts of those engaged forces us to take a particular side, adopt a particular perspective. In this way, justice is fetishized" (228). Therefore, Dave's grey morality, as well as his own justifications for the inappropriate use of physical violence, fit the flawed logic of comic book vigilantes: sometimes, the greater good requires doing dark things.

Dave feels a moral calling to be a superhero, to actively fight for his community and try to prevent innocents from being harmed, thus fitting the archetype since superheroes, essentially, offer salvation to humanity on Earth while configuring utopian possibilities which connect morality, urban life, and technology and science (Ndalianis 2009, 6). However, Dave's methods stem from his frustration with the state of things and a general distrust of society, which lead him to take matters into his own hands and break the law. Following Weston (2013) again, most superheroes rely on and reinforce the existing judicial system, since they operate as police officers even though they do not exactly follow the law (225). However, they do not usually punish criminals: in general, the use of force serves the purpose of turning criminals over to the police, and superheroes do not install their own system or impose their own authority over judicial institutions. "Vigilantes on the other hand often disagree with aspects of the judicial system and enact punishment (often through killing offenders). The line between arrest and punishment is generally the line that divides the superhero from the vigilante" (Weston 2013, 225). Whereas the boundaries between superheroic deeds and vigilantism are sometimes blurry, for superheroes are also "dedicated to a program of justice that often (but not always) takes the form of vigilantism" (Saunders 2021, 200), Dave/Kick-Ass's disillusionment, the

questionable morality of his ways, and his unrestrained use of force against criminals are typical comic-book vigilante traits.

The comparisons drawn between *Kick-Ass* and other exemplars of superhero comics fit the archetypal categorisations of several scholars, who have provided different definitions and highlighted a variety of key elements to this type of characters. For instance, Reynolds (1992) devises a seven-part definition of superhero, which includes a separation from society, godlike powers, their devotion to justice greater than respect for the law, a contrast with mundane surroundings, a contrast with a mundane alter-ego, a devotion to the state, and mythical stories which use magic and science indiscriminately (16). Yet, a thorough review of all the semantic and syntactic components which establish *Kick-Ass* as part of the superhero/vigilante genre falls out of scope for an article such as this one. This quick review of the basic elements of the superhero and vigilante archetypes does not aim at claiming that Kick-Ass must not be considered as a superhero by readers and critics alike, since no one really doubts that. However, this step has been necessary in order to explain how and to what extent he has imitated or put into practice the features of the comic books he reads, not only for his flawed perception of himself, but because of the contrast between fiction and the real world.

2. SELF-REFERENTIALITY AND QUIXOTISM IN *KICK-ASS*

Although initially Dave mentions his fascination for comics in light terms, as an obvious refuge from the hollow routine and his lack of emotional connection with his father (see figure 1), the more pressure he feels at home or school, the more enraptured and captivated he becomes by the medium: “What’s interesting is how obsessive I got around exam time, downloading whatever I couldn’t afford to buy and spending every spare moment on the comic book message boards” (#1, n.p.). Dave’s unmeasured indulgence in escapism leads him to an epiphany: “Why do you think nobody’s ever tried to be a superhero before? ... Putting on a mask and helping people isn’t impossible. ... Why do people want to be Paris Hilton and nobody wants to be Spider-Man?” (#1, n.p.). In other words, Dave asks himself why is it that there are no real life superheroes when, in truth, comics portray real life issues: on a daily basis, people need help, and facing crime for a good cause does not seem like an impossible task. Moreover, the life of a superhero is extremely exciting, as opposed to that of some career paths that Dave has considered for his future, such as being a lawyer, a bank manager, or “a burger-flipper” (#1, n.p.). Dave’s obsession with comics has led him to believe that the plots and the outcomes of superhero/vigilante work are logical enough to be reproduced in the real world.

This inability to distinguish between the real and fictional worlds, and the absolute idealisation of the latter, is by no means a contemporary concern: as a matter of fact, Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* (1605) laid the foundations for a set of character archetypes deeply connected to reflexivity, and this is the reason why many studies of this process

become inevitably linked to the seventeenth-century Spanish literary classic. Among the many reflexive devices which operate in *Don Quixote*, the fascination for reading and the impulse to recreate fictional stories in real life—even at the expense of facing harsh consequences—, seems the protagonist’s most remarkable trait, which he shares with Dave Lizewski. Despite the radical differences between them in terms of artistic medium, historical period—seventeenth century in Spain vs. the 2000s in the United States—, or their age—an elderly man vs. a teenager—, both characters are devoted to popular narratives from their respective socio-historical contexts who idealise the stories which allow them to escape from their mundane reality, and thus, self-referentiality operates by exploring the role that literature and comics have in people’s lives and the influence these works have on the way readers interpret reality.

Self-referentiality operates in works discussing their own medium in terms of modes, genres, conventions, agents, consumers, institutions, and more. Self-referentiality is, then, a process by which a fictional work connects itself with other works of the same medium in order to discuss relevant features, practices and conventions of the medium itself: it is literature about literature, films about film, and so on (Pardo 2015, 51–54). Therefore, self-referential works do not (necessarily or directly) draw attention to themselves as artifacts, representation, or fiction, but they do make reference to the tradition, the institution, the conventions of literature, theatre, cinema, etc. Instead of discussing the novel, play, or film itself, a self-referential work discusses literature, theatre, cinema, or comics, in a broader sense, and it establishes meaningful connections within its own medium through transtextuality. This is the reason why intertextuality is often confused with self-referentiality, and fairly enough, there is a degree of correspondence between this type of reflexivity and Gérard Genette’s theory of transtextuality. Starting from his definition of a transtextual relation as “all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts” (Genette 1982, 1), self-referentiality consists of the quality of a fictional work which connects it with other exemplars of the medium, mode, or genre; it is a reference to literature within literature, to film within film, or to comics within comics.

In the case of *Kick-Ass*, the fact that superhero comics are a source of escapism for Dave is explicitly established from the very beginning, since not only is he mourning his mother’s passing, he also has to endure a strained relationship with his dad and the bullying he is subjected to at school. The connection between comics and alienation works in both directions: on the one hand, Dave resorts to comics as a way of evading his difficult situation at home but, on the other hand, the fact that he is an avid comics reader is the reason why he is bullied at school. As it was stated in the previous section, Dave explicitly expresses the link between the dull, tragic and pessimistic mood at his home and his need to escape it by reading comics, so “[he is] sure [readers] can see the attraction that comic books held for [him]” (#1, n.p.). As figure 3 shows, not only does Dave express

how deeply obsessed he became with comics, buying as many as he could afford and reading even more online, he also begins to draw “a career plan” (n.p.). Out of his great enthusiasm for superhero comics and the desolation he feels due to his personal context, Dave begins thinking about superheroes as a logical and appealing solution for his own situation and the rest of society:

I always wondered why nobody did it before me. I mean, all those comic book movies and television shows, you’d think at least one eccentric loner would have stitched himself a costume. Is everyday life really so exciting? Are schools and offices really so thrilling that I’m the only one who ever fantasized about this? C’mon. Be honest with yourself. We all planned to be a superhero at some point in our lives. (#1, n.p.)

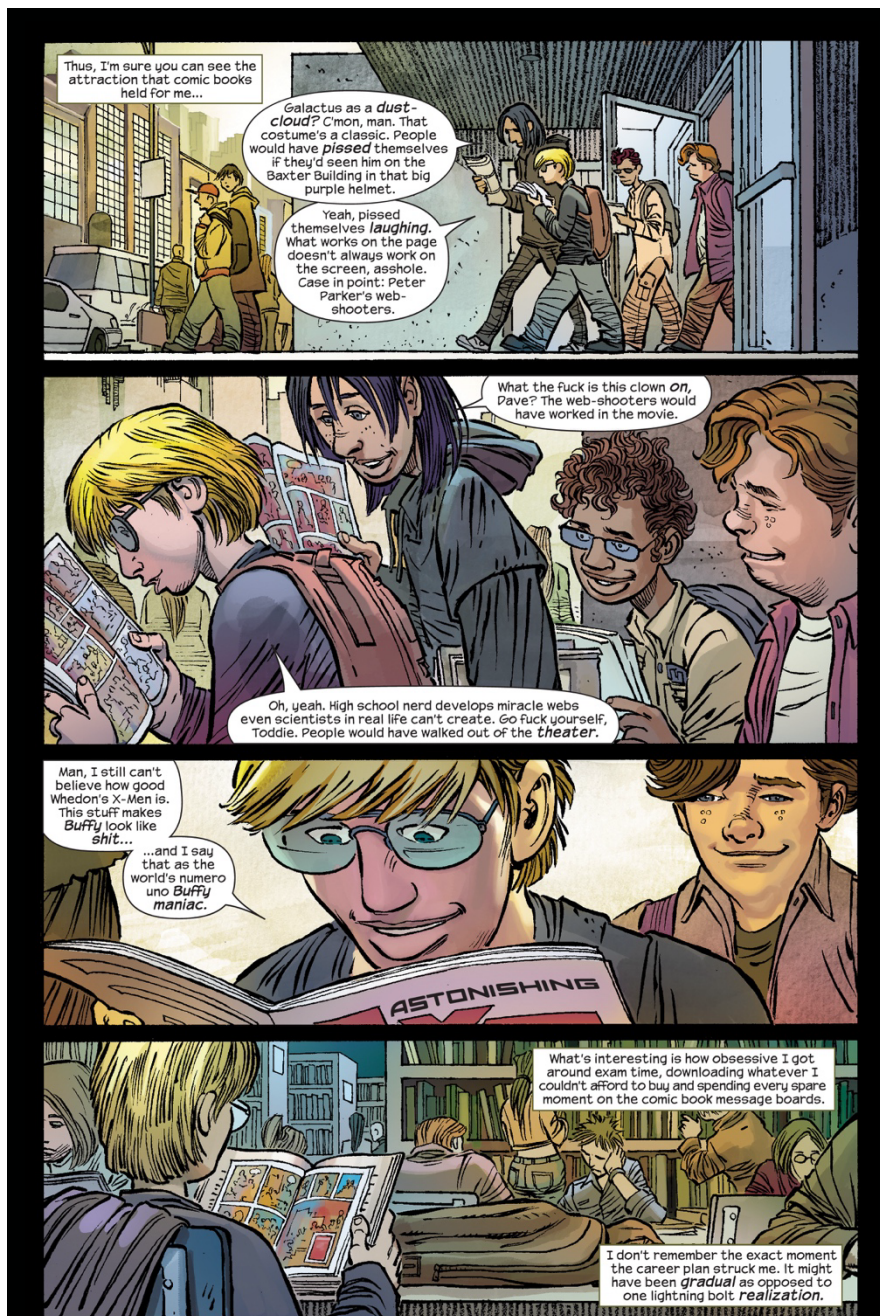


Fig. 3. Dave's fascination for comic books © Image Comics, 2018.

Dave's disillusion with life could not be clearer. The last remnants of possible counter-arguments to quit the ambition of becoming a real-life superhero are obliterated by means of the rhetorical questions quoted above. Putting on a homemade costume and a mask to become a superhero might seem idiotic in the real world, arguably just as idiotic as it is for Don Quixote to put on a whole knightly armour set in the sixteenth century, but Dave regards this as the one true existential purpose he has been waiting for his entire young life, while also firmly believing that everyone else has this same quixotic impulse in them. As opposed to Don Quixote, however, Dave is not delusional—at least not pathologically. Dave has an overcoming urge to become a superhero and he becomes obsessed with living the sort of (mis)adventures associated with fighting one-on-one against crime despite the danger, the beatings and the conflicts that these secret activities bring onto his real life as a normal teenager.

Moreover, once he crafts a costume and starts patrolling the city streets at night in a vigilante fashion, reality crashes down on him—quite literally. Dave is badly beaten up by a gang, gets run over by a car, and witnesses another 'superhero wannabe' plummet down to the ground from atop a building after jumping off completely convinced he would be able to fly. Despite a brief period of hesitation in which he questions his ambition, and even burns some of the comics which gave him the idea to become 'Kick-Ass,' his idealised view of superheroes encourages him to continue his dangerous patrolling. Consequently, Dave's insistence that reality can operate under the same rules as comics never ceases, for he perceives and interprets reality according to the narrative patterns of superhero comics mentioned in section 1.

In this sense, the self-referential dimension in *Kick-Ass* adds a new layer, as the protagonist purposefully recreates all the features in this definition, explicitly basing himself on superhero comics: Dave adopts the name of Kick-Ass; he crafts his own suit in secret, paying particular attention to the mask, as his identity shall remain hidden; his 'superheroic' activities are carried out at night in an urban environment (in this case, his neighbourhood), and he eventually earns a side-kick (a little girl named Mindy) as well as a mentor who trains them in combat and provides them with more efficient weapons and tools to fight crime. In other words, Dave fulfils all the basic requirements of the superhero archetype—including having a tragic backstory, and a disinterested moral mission which begins as a quest to help defenceless people but ends up forcing him to confront his own greatest weaknesses.

The migration of reflexive devices from literary tradition (in this case, *Don Quixote*) to new popular narrative media (*Kick-Ass*) can be traced in accordance with thematic and philosophical trends. Both works present an avid reader of fictional narratives of the same medium these works belong to, with a clear intention of parodying the conventions of said narratives. Whereas Don Quixote's fascination with chivalric literature becomes the basis of Cervantes's criticism, Dave's love for superhero comics serves Millar and

Romita Jr. to expose the conventions of these comics. However, as Pedro Javier Pardo argues about *Don Quixote*, the most successful aspect of exposing genres in such a way is that parody is realised through a reader figure who embodies this kind of books' language and worldview: these characters perceive and interpret reality according to literary models, and so, when reality evidences the character's inadequacy, they are discredited (2022, 115; my translation). Therefore, as a superhero comic, *Kick-Ass* not only exposes the basic elements of the genre, but it also performs a thorough examination of their validity in real life in the face of particular sets of moral principles and cultural contexts deeply connected with popular culture.

At the same time, just like *Don Quixote* establishes a dialogue with previous literature, with romance, and with chivalry books (Pardo, 2022, 117; my translation), *Kick-Ass* connects to the larger traditions and conventions of superhero comics, addressing characteristic traits of Marvel comics in different historical stages. Moreover, *Kick-Ass* provides relevant glimpses of the role which comics have in contemporary popular culture, particularly in connection with escapism and the idealisation of the fictional world as a mental strategy to face the hardships and dullness of normal life. Ultimately, what Pardo states concerning *Don Quixote* also holds true to *Kick-Ass*: Cervantes does not want us to be *Don Quixote* or share his confusion regarding chivalry books, which is why he makes us aware of the literary and fictional nature of the text in our hands (2022, 135; my translation). By the end of vol. 1, Dave is highly conscious of what he needs to sacrifice in order to keep on acting as a superhero, and he willingly embraces it in what seems to be a moment of great mental clarity, since he is able to evaluate the repercussion of his actions in a larger scale. As a conclusion to vol. 1, he states, "I'd started a trend and all across the country a whole gang of imitators were dressing up and fighting crime because I'd made it fashionable. I'd reshaped the world the way I'd always wanted it, and it doesn't get much better than that" (#8, n.p.).

In a way, this reads as the clichéd happy ending of superhero comics, where the villain is defeated and the protagonist's greatest achievement is, actually, that they have become a better version of themselves—in Dave's case, by understanding that life is not, actually, fiction. However, in order to believe this in connection with Dave's life, the facts that he is still getting bullied at school, that his romantic prospects have been completely shattered, and that his father has started a casual sexual relationship with a woman as a coping mechanism for the loss of his wife must be overlooked. Therefore, Dave's perceived success at becoming a comics character is grounded on his absolute delusion and abstraction from reality; even though Dave's adventures continue, the looming threat of reality is more present than ever, as life is not, in fact, a comic book.

3. REALITY CHECK: THE FEASIBILITY OF REAL-LIFE VIGILANTISM

Unlike Dave or Don Quixote, most real-life readers are aware that fictional stories have an internal logic and structure which leads to satisfactory conclusions within that fictional world. Despite the fact that readers often connect on a personal level to their favourite fictional characters, the boundary is seldom crossed—otherwise, perhaps news articles about superhero/vigilante copycats would show up more often. The personal correspondence that comics readers might make between characters and themselves does not usually consist on an overlapping of identities, but rather, on a means of reflection or meditation about the actual dynamics of the real world. According to Weston (2013), “[s]uperhero-genre stories are not cultural directives to be imitated, but instead tools for thinking about society. This being the case, we are as likely to avoid reprehensible qualities from the villains of comic books as we are to draw upon the admirable qualities of heroes” (229). However, is that actually the case? Should superhero comics serve as a moral compass?

To Dave Lizewski, they do—and that is precisely why the story systematically presents him with obstacles in which his comic-book ideals result maladaptive in the unpredictable, grim, and brutal real world. Firstly, if reality worked like comics, Dave’s sense of heroism would be praised by his peers or the general population, but in reality it only serves to make him look like an idiot. In fact, there is an explicit reference in the story to how superheroes are morally superior whereas real people are “assholes” (#5, n.p.); therefore, real-life superheroes could never be successful, since the real world does not play by the rules. Rather than being heroic, real-life superheroes must rely on their resourcefulness, which is precisely what Dave and Hit-Girl do by murdering all the thugs, since they are unable by all means to detain them or prevent them from continuing their illegal business.

Secondly, in superhero comics the protagonist is subjected to a test of character in which they must prove that they are deserving of their power. A true superhero’s strength does not come from their powers, but their heart. And initially, it seems like Dave is going to follow the path of righteousness: “No way. I’m not going to kill anybody. I’m supposed to be a fucking superhero” (#6, n.p.). This initial intention to abide by the superhero code of conduct is completely abandoned by issue #8, when his life and Hit-Girl’s depend on their dexterity and strength. It seems that, in the real world, there is no room for the soft-hearted.

Some other key features of the superhero genre are also inverted. For instance, the role of the side-kick is usually given to a person younger than the protagonist whose role is to support them—e.g., Batman and Robin, Flash and Kid Flash, Captain Marvel and Ms. Marvel, Green Arrow and Speedy, and more of the like. In this case, however, Hit-Girl is the one who has the best skills and the initiative, and Kick-Ass ends up helping her and learning from her. Moreover, in superhero comics, the protagonist’s hidden identity is a

means to protect themselves, but in *Kick-Ass* the fact that Dave hides his identity is the trigger for very dangerous situations in which either thugs do not know he is just a kid pretending to be a hero, or one of his acquaintances does not recognise him and sells him out to the bad guys. The main traits of the superhero's archenemy are also noteworthy, since in comics these characters are mighty and respectable, but in *Kick-Ass* he is just a geek like us" (#8, n.p.).

Finally, perhaps the biggest contrast between the way superhero comics work as opposed to the real world is the nature of the hero's mission. Characters such as Superman, Batman, Iron Man, Captain America, or Captain Marvel are usually tasked with the great mission of saving the city, the country, the world, or even the universe. Dave, however, gets involved in the business of a criminal organisation but ultimately his fight turns out to be about the preservation of a stack of comics. On the one hand, this apparently insubstantial goal might not be enough to validate Dave's hero's journey. On the other hand, this moment does weave a beautiful metaphor on the role and the value that these narratives hold for their readers and fans. After all, Dave's mission was not simply about safe-guarding a bunch of comics issues, but to him the fight is for the worlds they contain, and the communities they bring together. What these characters are protecting is one of the greatest things which provide meaning to their lives.

For all its grim depictions of the real world and the brutal situations that the protagonist goes through, *Kick-Ass* ends in a rather optimistic tone: Dave and Mindy complete their mission, and they continue their vigilante patrols, earning a positive reputation. It seems that the work has its cake, and eats it, too: for all its denouncing of maldaptive imitations of fictional tropes and motifs, the final message is that dreams do come true—albeit not in the way one might have originally imagined. However, in a social analysis of vigilantism, Weston (2013) questions, like in *Kick-Ass*, why there are almost no cases of vigilantism, and he argues that “[t]o become reality, what is needed is a trigger: a social reality that motivates us to act and search for fitting cultural models as we endeavour to right perceived social wrongs” (232–33). Therefore, in a society of relative comfort and safety, these activities result unappealing to the majority, particularly to a working-class whose dissatisfaction with the status quo, politics, or similar systemic issues, does not necessarily evoke an anti-state sentiment (229). Additionally, the key demographic of comics readers does not consist of people undergoing such extreme poverty that they are motivated into vigilantism: “[c]omic books perhaps then satisfy what little need there is for heroism in many readers' lives” (229).

According to Weston (2013), the ever-present discussion on the nature and the foundations of heroism in superhero comics allow readers to question “the rightness and pitfalls of social bandits and vigilantes” to the point in which “we are shown the complexity of the moral decisions encountered by protagonists. Such awareness does not necessarily lend itself to copycats. It lends itself to the appraisal of the rightness of such actions”

(229). Countries such as the United States, Japan and those in Western Europe, which are the ones which register the largest sale numbers, have strong judicial systems which are trusted by the majority of the population. This, to Weston, undermines the need for vigilantism, as these individuals would be, on the one hand, severely penalised, and on the other, judged as morally dubious or downright wrong (232). What is more, apparently the limited number of people who dress as superheroes in public do so not with the intention of fighting crime, but doing good in other ways, except perhaps for Phoenix Jones.

Despite the low probability that Dave's quixotic tendencies become an actual trend in the real world, it has been proven that superhero vigilantism is not inexistent in the real world. When Phoenix Jones fought crime in Seattle between 2011 and 2014, he did so in a superhero costume and he seemed to operate in a way quite similar to Dave Lizewski's, patrolling the streets and occasionally engaging in hand-to-hand combat (Ronson 2011). However, far from becoming involved with large mafia organisations, Phoenix Jones still operated within US laws: "for example, in order to follow due process, he either has to have the victim of a crime ask for assistance or a suspected criminal has to use violence against him first in order for him to be able to use force" (Weston 2019, 96). What is more, Phoenix Jones inspired other individuals, such as the Red Dragon, and soon enough the first real-world superhero ensemble patrolled the streets of Seattle, the Rain City Superhero Movement (Real Life Superheroes 2011). Similarly, South London's Bromley Batman also gained media attention for putting on a costume consisting of a mask, black clothes, and a bandana to stop muggings and assaults in his area (Glanfield 2015). Despite being short-lived attempts at vigilantism, and despite not having superpowers or dismantling international criminal operations, all of these people arise from "a desire or need to provide protection or justice," and "the most abundant source of vigilante blueprints is through the media" (Weston 2019, 97). Perhaps Millar's playful approach at the power of comics and the stubbornness and sense of self-worth of copycats was not too far-fetched, after all; still, as Weston proves, the behaviours of these few individuals are by no means unbound from the law, and their actual access to resources is considerably restricted.

As a final note, it is worth mentioning that there are many examples of how fictional works have inspired technological advances, and at the same time, real life is a constant source of inspiration for fictional works, and *Kick-Ass* is no exception. In an interview, Mark Millar explains how he drew inspiration from personal experiences to create Dave: Millar, an avid comics reader himself, also struggled with unrequited love during his adolescence, his own mother died when he was precisely fourteen years old, and the economic situation at home was really rough for him and his brother (Clowes 2010). As it turns out, *Kick-Ass* is more autobiographical than it seems; when he was fifteen years old, Millar and his friends often skipped studying for school in order to keep on reading *Batman* comics: "[w]e wanted to become superheroes like Batman. It was pathetic. We

were five years too old really to be doing this. [*Kick-Ass*] was really about what would have happened if we hadn't come to our senses and actually gone out and done this" (Childress 2010).

4. CONCLUSIONS

Dave Lizewski's relationship with superhero comics is, in many ways, not unlike that of other fans: comics are a source of entertainment, inspiration, and a cultural meeting point. At its most optimistic and socially adaptive pole, comics also serve as a tool to reflect about real life and the real world despite the fantastical elements in this type of narratives. Superhero comics fulfil a social role, highlighting cultural identities and values: this has been proved, for instance, by means of sales numbers in the face of difficult situations such as the Great Depression, given the immense popularity of superhero comics during the Golden Age in the times of WWII (Smith 2018, 131). Some key features, such as the superhero's righteous mission and their double identity, are meant to show the heroes' most human side and reveal inner struggles which readers can empathise with. Dual identities, more specifically, are a point of audience identification: Bruce Wayne is an apathetic man who turns into a tragic hero of sorts as Batman; Matt Murdock is a calm and patient man who then turns into a ruthless vigilante as Daredevil. Most superheroes have a mild-mannered alter ego that fans can relate to and use to examine their own flaws. As Fingerroth (2004) states, the secret identity functions as an empowering statement: "Don't underestimate me. I may not be who you think I am" (60). Therefore, the self-referential discussion of the social role of comics in *Kick-Ass* not only shows certain aspects of fandom culture, but also explores the critical connection readers establish between the real world and the fantastic or science-fictional reality of comic book characters to still find themselves in those panels.

On the other hand, and in a less cheerful tone, self-referentiality also operates in *Kick-Ass* to show the consequences of making the quixotic mistake of applying the rules of fiction to real life. The danger Dave puts himself into and the horrific pain he undergoes prove systematically that putting on a mask and patrolling the streets at night in the real world will not turn him into a superhero. At best, this course of action makes Dave a vigilante; at worst, it leaves him in hospital. Despite the fact that the story is ultimately optimistic, *Kick-Ass* does not adopt a moralistic tone: since this is not a story aimed at teens necessarily, blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality serves to portray a decaying, nasty, and vulgar world where those who have the biggest weapons and the most ammunition win.

However, unlike Don Quixote, who does not get a knightly happy ending, Dave manages to succeed in his first mission as Kick-Ass and grow as a person: by the end of vol. 1, he has found his true-calling, has made peace with the fact that the girl he likes does not like him back, and even his father seems to be moving on and starting a

relationship with a new woman. The self-referential contrast in *Kick-Ass* argues that real life will never be like comic books because it is not ideal, but it still allows its main character to achieve his dream in his own way. As Saunders states, perhaps a cynic would understand that superpowers such as flying are just as unlikely as the heroes' ethical perfection, but the dream of a superhero is not simply about wielding the powers of the gods and being all-righteous: “[i]t’s also a dream about men and women who never give up the struggle to be good (2011, 143). Therefore, Kick-Ass might never be more than a vigilante, and his desire to do the right thing might involve criminal activity and the use of brute force, but perhaps that the most a real-life ‘superhero’ can ever do.

WORKS CITED

- Bainbridge, Jason. 2009. “Worlds within Worlds: The Role of Superheroes in the Marvel and DC Universes.” In *The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero*, edited by Angela Ndaliansi, 64–85. New York: Routledge.
- Childress, Ahmad T. 2010. “Writer Mark Millar on ‘Kick Ass.’” *CraveOnline*, April 5, 2010. <https://web.archive.org/web/20100610091134/http://www.craveonline.com/entertainment/comics/article/writer-mark-millar-on-kick-ass-99655>.
- Clowes, Daniel. 2010. “Kick-Ass—An Interview with its Creator.” *The Guardian*, March 24, 2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/mar/24/mark-millar-kick-ass-comics>.
- Fingerroth, Danny. 2004. *Superman on the Couch*. New York: Continuum.
- Genette, Gérard. 1982. *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. Translated by Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Gill. 2011. “Tea with Gill: An Interview with Seattle Crimefighter Red Dragon.” *The Back Row*, January 23, 2011. <https://www.the-back-row.com/blog/2011/01/23/tea-with-gill-an-interview-with-seattle-crimefighter-red-dragon/>
- Glanfield, Emma. 2015. “Even Superheroes Go on Holiday! Masked ‘Bromley Batman’ Swoops in to Save Tourist Couple from Gang of Muggers in Cornish Resort.” *The Daily Mail*, August 13, 2015. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3196196/The-Bromley-Batman-strikes-time-holiday-Cornwall-Vigilante-crimefighter-sees-knife-wielding-muggers-attacked-businessman-wife.html>
- Jameson, Fredric. 2000. “Magical Narratives: On the Dialectical Use of Genre Criticism” (1981). In *Modern Genre Theory*, edited by David Duff, 167–92. Harlow, Essex: Pearson Education Ltd.
- Millar, Mark, and John Romita Jr. 2018. *Kick-Ass: The Dave Lizewski Years*. Vol. 1. 4 vols. Portland, OR: Image Comics.
- Miller, Frank. 1991. *Sin City*. Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Comics.

- Ndalianis, Angela. 2009. "Comic Book Superheroes: An Introduction." In *The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero*, edited by Angela Ndalianis, 3–15. New York: Routledge.
- Pardo, Pedro Javier. 2015. "Hacia una teoría de la reflexividad fílmica: La autoconciencia de la literatura al cine." In *Transescrituras audiovisuales*, edited by Pedro Javier Pardo and José Antonio Pérez Bowie, 47–94. Madrid: Sial.
- Pardo, Pedro Javier. 2022. "El Quijote posmoderno. Un acercamiento transnacional y transmedial." In *Au-delà du pied de la lettre: Estudios en homenaje a Montserrat Cots*, 149–82. Barcelona: Kadmos.
- Real Life Superheroes. "About." *RealLifeSuperheroes.org*. 2011. <https://web.archive.org/web/20111017222141/http://www.reallifesuperheroes.org/about/>
- Reynolds, Richard. 1992. *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*. London: B.T. Batsford.
- Ronson, Jon. 2011. "It's a Bird! It's a Plane! It's... Some Dude?!" *GQ*, August 4, 2011. <https://www.gq.com/story/real-life-superheroes-phoenix-jones>
- Saunders, Ben. 2011. *Do the Gods Wear Capes? Spirituality, Fantasy, and Superheroes*. New York: Continuum.
- Saunders, Benjamin. 2021. "Superhero." In *Keywords for Comics Studies*, edited by Ramzi Fawaz, Shelley Streeby, and Deborah Whaley, 200–204. New York: NYU Press.
- Smith, Matthew J. 2018. "Superhero Comics." In *The Routledge Companion to Comics*, edited by Frank Bramlett, Roy T. Cook, and Aaron Meskin, 128–36. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Matthew Vaughn, dir. 2010. *Kick-Ass*. United States: Lionsgate.
- Weston, Gavin. 2013. "Superheroes and Comic-Book Vigilantes versus Real-Life Vigilantes: An Anthropological Answer to the Kick-Ass Paradox." *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 4, no. 2 (August): 223–234. 10.1080/21504857.2012.682624.
- Weston, Gavin. 2019. *Guatemalan Vigilantism and the Global (Re)Production of Collective Violence: A Tale of Two Lynchings*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.