A fabulous cartoon character exerts a powerful influence over millions of America's children



Here Comes Superman!

by MORT WEISINGER

SUPERMAN, that flashing figure in red and blue, has been known to smack his way barehanded through the Siegfried Line, balance the Empire State Building on one palm, girdle the globe in nothing flat. But the toughest assignment in his fabulous cartoon career occurred last year in real life, when he was given the job of persuading a million youngsters to visit the dentist.

It started when a group of dental hygienists, intent upon making America's teen-agers tooth-conscious, began hunting a modern Pied Piper for the dentist's chair. Promptly they decided upon Superman, the mighty Man of Steel. Then followed a session with Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, creators of the comic-strip hero. Within a few weeks they had plotted and illustrated a special eight-page thriller designed to make youngsters go happily to the nearest dentist.

The thriller began with Superman dropping in on Tommy, a freckle-faced lad who would rather play with model planes than brush his teeth. Tucking the boy under one sinewy arm, Superman streaked off to China skies where Bill, a fighter pilot, had suddenly fallen victim to a throbbing toothache in the midst of a dog-fight. Just as Bill was about to be shot down, up hurtled Superman, to the rescue.

Mission accomplished, Superman brought Tommy home and gave this fatherly advice: "That's all for tonight, Tommy . . . except for this tip. Smart fellows take good care of their teeth and visit the dentist regularly. Remember the jam Bill got into . . ."

Not long after this episode was printed in booklet form and a million copies circulated, the youth brigade began knocking on dentists' doors. Yet this was not Superman's first successful attempt to win friends and influence small fry. He has been doing it ever since he rocketed here from his native planet, Krypton.

Superman is the by-product of the frustrated boyhoods of two undersized Cleveland youths, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. While high-school students, the duo absorbed beatings from neighborhood

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toughs. Both sons of poor parents, they found escape in the wish-fulfillment world of dime-novels, vicariously living the exploits of unbeatable heroes.

When Jerry, who could write a little, discovered that Joe had a talent for drawing, he dreamed up a super-hero whose exploits could be depicted in comic-strips. "The idea came to me in bed one night," recollects Jerry. "A combination Samson, Hercules and Atlas plus the morals of Sir Galahad whose mission in life was to smack down the bullies of the world."

For six years the two youths collaborated on miles of sample Superman adventures, only to garner rejection slips. Then one day in 1938, publisher Harry Donenfeld picked up the first Superman story for $130 and tried it out in a comic-strip magazine called *Action Comics*. It was a hit. Since then, Superman has grossed millions. And the 30-year-old authors—though they sold all rights with the original sale—continue to share in the profits.

Today, Superman is big business. Some 3,000,000 readers buy *Action Comics*, *Superman* and *World's Finest Comics* regularly. Superman appears in all three publications. He is syndicated in more than 200 newspapers with a circulation of about 20,000,000. In South America he is known as *El Hombre Supre;* his trade-mark appears on scores of commercial items. Besides all this there is a Superman radio program, sponsored coast-to-coast by a breakfast cereal.

Naturally, Superman's greatest effect has been on children. Mothers, realizing the power of this third parent, have gotten into the habit of asking Superman to drop a line to Junior, urging him to eat his egg yolk and stop biting his nails. Boys themselves write in, asking how to beat bullies. Superman—through a corps of secretaries in the New York offices of his publishers—advises ten hours' sleep, lots of vegetables, and asserts that all bullies have yellow streaks.



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SUPERMAN wages incessant war against injustice, intolerance, bigotry and other down-to-earth villains of modern society. A few years ago the villain happened to be bad grammar, and Superman tackled this menace with the same zeal he used in cracking down on Superbum Luthor, his perennial enemy in the comic strips.

Harold Downes, former English instructor in a Lynn, Massachusetts, high school, made the not-too-surprising discovery that his pupils didn't want to learn grammar. But Downes noticed their pockets were stuffed with comic books, particularly *Superman*. So off he went to Superman, Inc., in New York.

What about preparing a Superman workbook with questions on grammar, punctuation and word-meaning to accompany the comic-strip story? Could he have a hundred copies for experimental purposes? Whitney Ellsworth, editorial director, promptly agreed, and before you could yell "Up, up and away!" Superman was a grammarian.

When Downes tried the workbooks on his classes, homework became easier. Youngsters who had been struggling over grammar for years found themselves answering such questions as, "What punctuation mark ends Superman's speech?" and "What kind of sentence does Lois Lane use?" A sugar coating had been found for the pill.

When school publications reported this new method of instruction, some 3,000 teachers paged Superman. Since then, several educators have prepared adaptations for use in teaching civics, geography and other subjects.

Not all the workbook fans were teachers, however. Truant officers rejoiced when children stopped squandering lunch money on slot machines. Superman's workbook had shown that the machines were fixed by manufacturers as crafty as the Prankster, another of the Man of Steel's adversaries.

Recognizing Superman as a wartime public relations expert, the War Department drafted him to spur drives to salvage fats, scrap iron and wastepaper. Superman fulfilled these assignments through the "Secret Superman Code," published in every issue of *Superman*



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and *Action Comics* and available to 1,300,000 youthful members of the Superman of America Club. On one occasion Superman made an eloquent radio appeal, asking boys and girls to buy war stamps. Some 250,000 mailed in pledges.

When Maj. Gen. Walter R. Weaver of the Air Forces Training Command found that thousands of enlisted men were contemptuous of grease-monkey jobs, he appealed to Superman. The next issue of *Superman* on the PX counters proved that the job of keeping 'em flying was just as exciting as the duties of the glamorous pilot with wings.

When the Navy initiated a special training program, designed to convert illiterates into useful personnel, they turned to the visual appeal of Superman's books. A Navy representative worked out a plan whereby the captions and dialogue in each issue were rewritten into words of one or two syllables. Soon 15,000 copies a month were rolling off the presses, with sailors effortlessly expanding their vocabularies.

Throughout the war, hundreds of jeeps, trucks, tanks, landing craft and planes bore the Superman insignia. On D-Day an infantry major, worried about morale, told war correspondents: "When I saw one of the boys in our landing craft nonchalantly reading a copy of *Superman*, I knew everything would be all right."

IN THE YEARS they have been writing and illustrating Superman, Siegel and Shuster have assumed an obligation to instill faith, whenever possible, in the physical reality of Superman. This they have done in the same spirit in which old-fashioned parents encouraged belief in Santa Claus. A similar sense of responsibility to parents and teachers has guided the publishers. As a result they have secured the active assistance of professional men and women in the fields of child psychology, education and welfare.

This editorial advisory board includes Dr. W. W. Sones, professor of education at the University of Pittsburgh; Dr. Robert Thorndyke of the Department of Educational Psychology, Columbia; and Lt. Col. C. Bowie Millican, chief reviewer of publicity for the Army. Correct English, psychologically sound action and moral purity are watched by these experts, who check each Superman story.

Recently Dr. Thorndyke analyzed an average issue of *Superman*. "The magazine contained more than 10,000 words of reading matter. This is an educational resource which introduces the child to a wide range of vocabulary, including many useful words which stand in need of additional practice by children in grades four to eight."

Is Superman a good influence on children? Psychologists have rushed to his defense. Dr. Lauretta Bender

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of Bellevue's psychiatric staff and Miss Josette Frank of the Child Study Association believe that Superman has a definitely good influence.

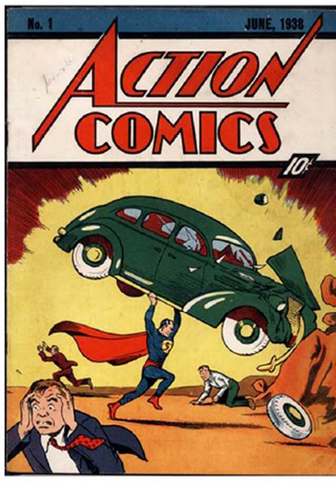
"Children can enjoy the thrill of danger," says Miss Frank, "knowing that right will prevail, that good will triumph over evil."

To prove her point, she cites the story of the small boy warning his girl playmate: "Look out! I'm Superman and I'll hurt you."

"You can't frighten me," said his little girl adversary. "Superman never hurts *good* people."

Today, with Superman appearing in three of the 175 comic magazines which reach 30,000,000 buyers, chiefly youngsters, parents should be heartened by the fact that other writers and artists, seeking to duplicate the Superman formula, have taken a tip from Siegel and Shuster, aiming their material at improving children's minds as well as providing entertainment.

Superman has proved that thrills can be combined with education—which is, in a sense, the same technique that Horatio Alger once used to instill into youngsters an appealing concept of the American way of life.



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