Justice prevailed for man behind Superman

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The name of Superman's foster father may have changed from comic book to comic book, but the moral instruction he imparted remained the same. In his prime and on his deathbed, Eben (then Silas, then Jonathan) Kent told Clark: "There are men in this world who prey on decent folks — thieves, murderers, criminals of every sort. Fight such men, son! Pit your miraculous powers against them! With you on the side of law and order, crime and oppression and injustice must perish in the end."

As Tom De Haven, a professor of English at Virginia Commonwealth University and author of the novel "It's Superman," reminds us, for more than 70 years, Superman has fought for "truth, justice, and the American Way." Here, De Haven takes the measure of the Man of Steel and provides a smart and stylish meditation on his role in our culture.

Created in the midst of the Great Depression by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster — two Jewish boys from Cleveland who sold their rights for a pittance and spent much of their lives trying to get them back — Superman, De Haven writes, "was the product of a particular time and cultural tumult." As a New Deal Democrat, a World War II patriot, and then an Eisenhower Republican, his freelance, black-and-white approach resonated with millions of Americans. As did the depiction of him as a Holocaust survivor, an orphan, an alien, and an immigrant, growing up and working in the nation's heartland.

By the 1960s and '70s, however, Superman seemed to some a "vapid establishmentarian." Unlike Batman, he was neither alienated nor vengeful. He was rescued from irrelevance, De Haven claims, by comic book writer Dennis O'Neill and actor Christopher Reeve, who "de-cloyed" his personality, removing the white bread. Slender, sexy, and sincere, Reeve made Superman likable, injected into his courtship with Lois Lane (Margot Kidder) a spark and sparkle reminiscent of 1940s romances, and managed to say things like "We're all in this together" with the timing of a consummate straight man.

Although he notes that Chris Reeve had a riding accident in 1995 and was paralyzed from the neck down and George Reeves, the Man of Steel on the small screen in the 1950s, shot himself or was murdered, De Haven doesn't believe there's a Curse of Superman.

The only "verifiable Superman curse," De Haven declares, is the one Jerry Siegel swore against everyone in the entertainment industry who "killed my days, murdered my nights, choked my happiness, strangled my career." That curse was lifted in part in 1975, when Warner Communications listed Siegel and Shuster as creators on all Superman products except toys — and in 2008 when Judge Stephen Larson declared that Siegel's heirs "were entitled to claim a share of the United States copyright to the character."

Jonathan Kent would be pleased.

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Associate Images:
Christopher Reeve played Superman in the movies. The creators the character spent years in legal struggles over publishing rights for the "Man of Steel." Associated Press