In 1991, at a summit conference to plot story lines for the next 12 months of Superman comics, veteran writer Jerry Ordway had an idea: "Why don't we just kill him?"


But, of course, there was a catch. "Never say we wouldn't kill Superman," editor-in-chief Mike Carlin observed. "Never say we wouldn't bring him back."

Created in the 1930s by Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster, two high school kids from Cleveland, Ohio, Superman - as journalist Larry Tye, the biographer of baseball great Satchel Paige, reminds us - remains as popular as ever.

In "Superman," Tye tells the stories of the men and women who invented - and re-invented - the visitor from Krypton, his alter ego, Clark Kent, and the cast of characters from The Daily Planet for comic strips, comic books, television and the movies.

Although he has changed with the times, Tye points out, Superman still appeals to the 10-year-old in each of us - and to adults who want to get the girl, leap tall buildings in a single bound and fight for "Truth, Justice and The American Way."

The book is chock-full of interesting information about this red-caped hero. The first time Clark Kent raced into a telephone booth to change into his shirt, tights, cape and boots, Tye tells us, was in an animated cartoon, produced by Max and Dave Fleischer in 1941.

Preparing for what became his iconic film persona more than three decades later, Christopher Reeve put on more than 30 pounds, adding two inches to his chest, learned to slump his shoulders and compress his spine so that Clark Kent was three inches shorter than Superman, and gave the reporter a nasal and Midwestern twang that differentiated him from the man with the S on his chest.

Tye is less successful illuminating the ways in which Superman has reflected American values. An asexual, less violent Superman, who didn't disobey parents or destroy property, he claims, superficially and hyperbolically, "was exactly what post-Depression, prewar America needed."

During World War II, he suggests Superman reminded soldiers "of the lives back home that they were fighting to protect. No gift could matter more."

At times, Tye wants to have it both ways. He tracks changes in plots and personae, ebbs and flows in popularity (as measured in comic book sales and at the box office) - and insists that Superman "was the hero he had always been": the handsomest, mightiest being in the universe, who acted on his instinctive sense of what was right.

You are left to wonder whether the formula for success is, indeed, the same one Siegel and Schuster used almost 75 years ago. Will kids, who these days certainly do need a champion, take their Superman straight - or are camp and kitsch the kryptonite that will keep their Superman from taking flight?
‘SUPERMAN: THE HIGH-FLYING HISTORY OF AMERICA’S MOST ENDURING HERO’
By Larry Tye
Random House, $27
Original Print Headline: Superman: Evolution of a hero for all time

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.

Associated Images:
Actor Christopher Reeve is shown in the 1981 movie "Superman II." Associated Press file
Superman and his alter ego, Clark Kent, were created in the 1930s and still fight for “Truth, Justice and The American Way.”
Review: 'Superman: The High-Flying History of America's Most Enduring Hero' by Larry Tye
Brandon Routh starred in the 2006 film "Superman Returns." Associated Press file