

The Hundred Greatest Superhero Films and TV Shows, by Zachary Ingle and David Sutera



Dan Brown

Zachary Ingle and David Sutera. *The 100 Greatest Superhero Films and TV Shows*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2022. Hardcover. 328 pg. \$45.00. ISBN 9781538114506.

With a title like *The 100 Greatest Superhero Films and TV Shows*, it's easy to imagine this new volume by Zachary Ingle and David M. Sutera is the kind of resource diehard comic fans would keep on hand to settle heated barroom squabbles.

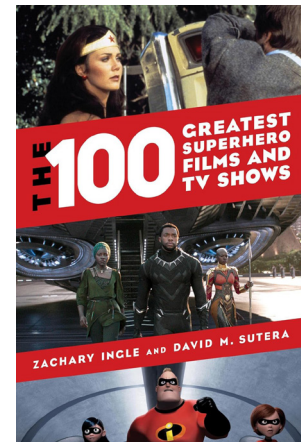
"Hey, what's the best superhero movie ever? I say it's 1989's *Batman* with Michael Keaton."

"No way! Obviously, *Superman* from 1978 is a superior film and Christopher Reeve is a hero for the ages."

"Let's see what Ingle and Sutera have to say. They'll know."

But this is not a Guinness Book of Superhero Movie World Records. Heck, the co-authors don't even present the motion pictures and TV shows they discuss in numerical order from best to worst, so those readers looking for a Comic Book Resources-type of extended listicle are bound to be disappointed. Instead, what the two experts provide is a perceptive account of the major superhero releases since the advent of talkies, plus a rationale for how each individual film fits within that larger history. Stated in a word, this book is foundational. It belongs on the bookshelf of every serious superhero scholar.

This 311-page tome goes way beyond rehashing superhero trivia, most of which is well-known by now anyway, and well into the realm of thoughtful cultural analysis. Ingle and Sutera explain at the outset their shared project is "to lay the foundation to encourage more critical discourse on the historical, social, aesthetic, cultural, technological and economic elements of the superhero film" (8). They endeavour to show how properties such as *Angel* (1999-2004), *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), and *Watchmen* (2009) have been shaped by, and have helped shape, global pop culture from the era of Hollywood serials to our current age of streaming. They succeed. And in doing so, this book ups the ante for all researchers following in their footsteps. This compendium is a masterwork for one simple reason: The co-authors take superhero culture, in all its manifestations, seriously.



It's true comic books were once read mainly by children, but those days have been gone a long time, even though when your local newspaper bothers to cover comics or fan conventions there are inevitably interjections like "Zap!" and "Pow!" in the headlines. Some may be reluctant to face the fact that, with new Marvel properties debuting seemingly every few weeks, superheroes have moved into the mainstream of our society (even as comics themselves have become the preserve of a niche, aging audience). Today's young superhero fans don't want to read about a character like Batman, they want to BE Batman, which they can do easily on their cell phones.

All of that said, there is certainly room to quibble with the works the writers deem worthy of discussion. For example, both the Bob Burden-derived *Mystery Men* (1999) and the Kurt Russell film *Sky High* (2005) are included here only as honourable mentions. Yet there's an argument to be made that every superhero adaptation being made in 2023 is a parody, so those little-seen efforts are crucial because they paved the way to the current widespread ironic posture regarding costumed do-gooders. Why the short shrift? Would Deadpool have even been possible on the big screen without those early experiments at squeezing laughs out of the genre's conventions? Ingle and Sutura also place special emphasis on the Fox X-Men series of movies. While it's true films such as *X-Men* (2000) and *X2* (2003) are historically important, some would argue they are objectively bad works of art—which isn't the only consideration for inclusion in *The 100 Greatest Superhero Films and TV Shows*, but surely how crappy they are as entertainments bears mentioning?

Perhaps a better title would have been *Why Superhero Films and TV Shows Matter*. As mentioned, the book doesn't include a numbered ranking (chapters are organized alphabetically by title), so it encourages the reader to do more than skim each entry, thus moving toward a fuller understanding of why certain adaptations landed the way they did. The authors also grapple with the... strangeness of some of these franchises. They look at superhero films and TV programs with fresh eyes by setting aside the conventional wisdom that has developed about each character in the intervening years or decades. It's also true that this volume, released in 2022, was destined to be out-of-date the moment it came out, given the breakneck pace of superhero releases. The DC filmic universe, for instance, was in a much different place 12 months ago than today, having effectively been brought to a conclusion with the Ezra Miller Flash movie last summer. Superheroes are important to our culture. There's a lot to be learned from this thought-provoking history, and with more superhero movies and shows on the way a second volume is not only warranted but would also be welcomed.

Dan Brown has covered pop culture as a journalist for more than 30 years for organizations like the CBC, the *Globe and Mail*, and *National Post*. He is a graduate of three Ontario universities and wrote his M.A. thesis on antidetection in the short fiction of Alice Munro. He teaches arts journalism at Western University and is the "mentor on staff" at the *Western Gazette*, the school's student-owned and -operated newspaper.