

AN AUSTRALIAN SUPERMAN

PHILOSOPHER DAMON YOUNG PONDERES THE QUESTION:
WHAT IF BABY SUPERMAN HAD LANDED IN THE AUSTRALIAN
OUTBACK INSTEAD OF MIDWEST AMERICA?

Man is certainly stark mad; he cannot make a worm, and yet he will be making gods by dozens.
– Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, 1580.

GODS AND GOLEMS

But first: who is Superman? A New World god, raised in a small country town. And if not a god, then a monster: like a golem, only his mud is from midwest cornfields, not the Vltava.

The Hebrew echoes are no coincidence. Invented by Jewish Americans in the thirties, Superman was himself a refugee. (And drawn after a Jewish model from New York, Stanley Weiss.) Nowadays he is seen as the quintessence of America, but only insofar as the modern United States is a country of immigrants. Like many of his fellow superheroes from both major studios – the X-Men, Spiderman, the Hulk, Batman – the Man of Steel was an outsider, first written by Jews who were never quite at home in the countries their heroes defended. As Michael Chabon makes clear in his novel, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (HarperPerennial, 2000), there's a double wish-fulfilment here. Alongside the pogrom fantasy of raw power comes a vision of nobility: conquering one's adopted nation with virtues.

With the early superheroes, it is important not to push the philosophical reflections too far. 'Superman', for example, had no suggestion of the Nietzschean *über-mensch*. 'Super' was slang, like 'awesome' is today – the language of pulp magazines, a market available to immigrants with little social and cultural capital. Joel Siegel, who first wrote Superman, was not Frank Miller or Alan Moore. The point is not that *Action Comics* had no dramatic virtues, but that these stories were chiefly for entertainment. They were righteous escapism. By April 1942, *Time* reported that Superman comics were 'among essential supplies' for American troops at Midway. A golem for the *goyim*.

RED SON

Like his fellow monsters and gods, Superman outlived his parents. In the last 80 years, the alien named Kal-El has been continually written and rewritten. As Ben Saunders points out in *Do the Gods Wear Capes?* (Continuum, 2011), Superman has been the voice of socialism, capitalism, solipsistic escapism and sophisticated doubt. He is the 'Good', however simply or sophisticatedly this is dreamt.

In some of the more thoughtful stories, the pissed-off golem and corn-fed naïf combine suggestively. In Mark Millar's *Superman: Red Son* (DC Comics, 2003), for example, the Man of Steel becomes the Man of Stalin ('Steel' in Russian), landing in a Soviet farm instead of America. After Stalin's death, Superman becomes the leader of the USSR, and much of the planet. (The United States opts out, preferring 'free' anarchy to oppressive peace.) 'Almost six billion citizens, and hardly anyone complained,' Superman remembers, before adding unsettlingly: 'Even in private.' Powerful, idealistic, and politically simplistic, Superman is a benign tyrant, and the United States, led by Luthor, is maniacal about stopping him.

It is a deft riff on Cold War morality, as well as a crude but crisp warning about power and the belief in one's simple righteousness. 'All I had to do,' reminisces Superman, 'was bide my time and the whole world would finally be as perfect as god had intended it to be.' *Red Son* also portrays how petty egotism and liberty can work together: Luthor is rightly against Superman's tyranny, but he is also jealous of the Soviet's genius and strength. The USSR and USA go to war, driven partly by their leaders' flaws: naive, noble Superman and worldly, cunning Luthor.

For all the narrative shenanigans, the message of *Red Son* is recognisably utopian. In the end, Luthor and Superman work together. Superman retires, Luthor takes over the world, and a new age of peace, technological progress and wealth develops. Aeons on, Earth's sun starts to die. The planet itself is collapsing into its star. Lex Luthor's great-grandson 'to the power of fifty' sends his only infant son back in time, to primitive Earth and its bright yellow sun. He lands in Soviet Russia, becoming Superman. And so on. Manifest destiny.

In other words: the United States creates its own perfect, god-like enemy, who then reconciles with America and saves the world. (And, comrade: quite dialectically so.) The 'red son' is humble, but also supremely ambitious: he can save the United States from tyranny, invasion and – perhaps most characteristically – cynicism. Whether as a Moses, Christ or a messiah-to-come, Superman is a saviour: the virtuous midwest, universalised by extraordinary power.

THE AUSTRALIAN 'SUPERMAN', c.1901–41: A FICTIONAL BIOGRAPHY

Matthew Kelly was discovered as a baby in the gold-fields of northern Victoria, c. 1901. His Irish-born parents, John and Martha Kelly, raised him as their own.

Kelly learned the value of hard work early. But perseverance was mixed with bad luck: the promised great nugget or vein never arrived. Melbourne and the gold towns were rich, but Kelly was poor. His parents lacked the capital for a farm and general store. His father John became a shearer, his mother Martha a seamstress for pastoralists. Matthew too worked on the farm. Martha Kelly described the work in a letter to Moira McRus-sell, her sister in Waterford: 'hot, filthy, dull.' Kelly grew strong, but was remembered as a wary child.

Town gossips said Kelly spotted the 1911 fires before the other boys; got his family out before the station was razed, and saved several horses. Fingers were pointed but no charges were laid.

The Kellys were almost starving when a teenage nationalist ten thousand miles away shot an archduke. All the boys in northeast Victoria were soon carrying rifles and 'running headlong into lead', as one historian put it. Kelly enlisted in 1917, and was the only survivor of his 'ill-fated' platoon. Martha's diary described John at the quay, 'red-faced and stooped, weeping for the miracle of our boy so tall and strong and quiet'. Kelly started smoking at the front, but never developed the cough, so common to his peers.

For his service, the government gave Private Kelly what he described to Martha as 'a filthy hut on dead land'. He hunted rabbit and kangaroo with his hands but the corpses soon grew rancid in the flyblown meat-safe. Then the mice plague began. In 1919 he and his family walked off the land.

Penniless, the Kelly family looked for employment in Melbourne. John worked as a bookmaker, Martha again making and mending dresses, this time for bankers. John's drinking worsened.

At twenty, Kelly joined the police force. According to his diaries, his powers began to show themselves more frequently: he ran faster than any man or animal, took a blackjack to the jaw without harm. He could see, he wrote, 'the nice folds of pale skin and patches of fur' under the ladies' straight-up-and-down dresses. Kelly was directing traffic on the corner of Flinders and Swanston Sts when he first used his powers in public: he was hit by a Studebaker. The car was smashed in half. Kelly arrested the driver for drunkenness: he could 'see the alcohol in the bludger's blood'.

In court, the young driver's defence accused Kelly of prejudice, and asked: 'Were you, Mr Kelly, inebriated at the time of the accident? You say you were hit by Mr

Luthor, but you are unharmed, while my client's vehicle is destroyed.' Lex Luthor was freed.

Kelly continued to work in the force, but was never zealous: he spent his days arresting fellow Irish Catholics for petty crimes. His diaries reflect chronic resentment. 'The same class of bastards who ordered us over the trenches,' he wrote in 1921, 'now hold up my promotion'. He saved his money, and took care of his mother, widowed by alcohol earlier that year.

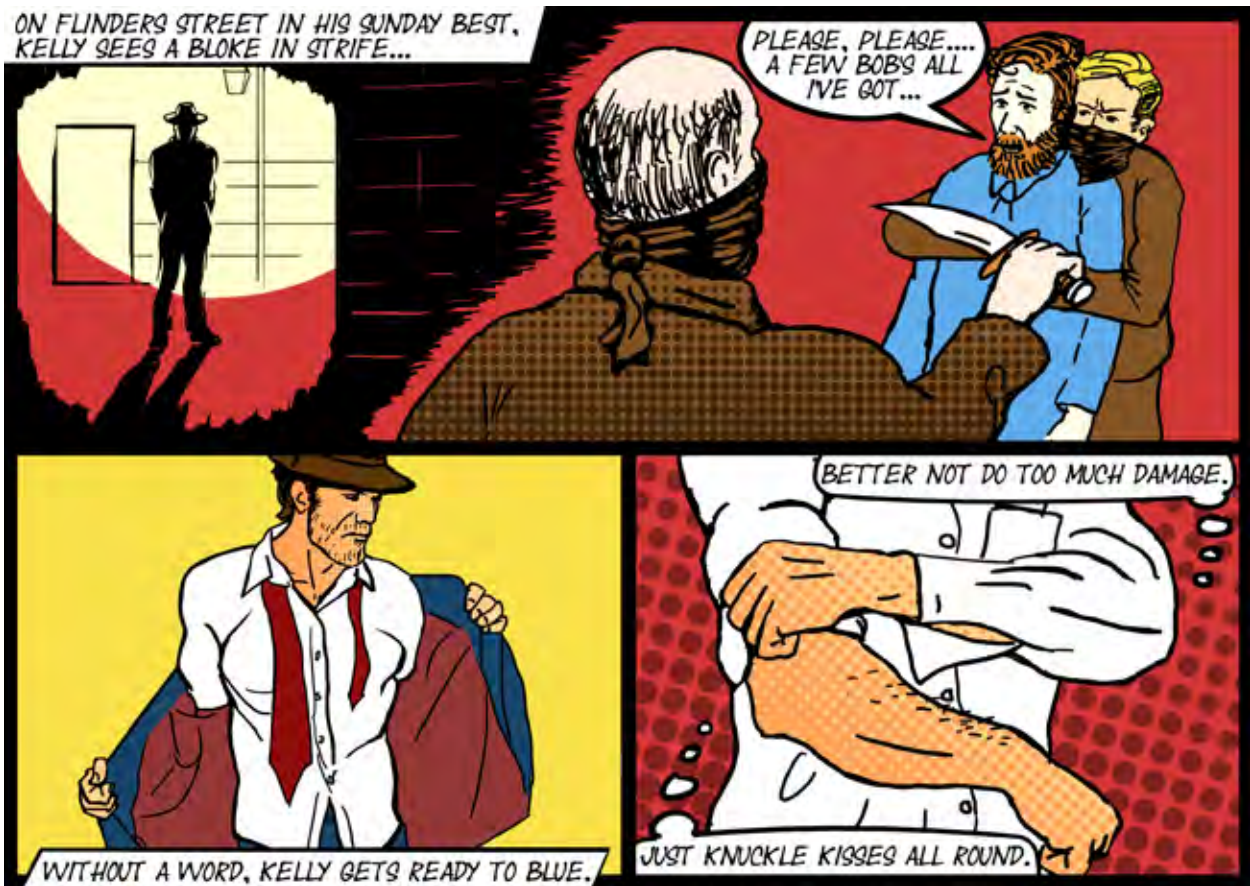
In 1922 Kelly began punishing criminals at night. He ignored petty theft but was severe with violence. Firearms melted in criminals' hands. Rapists were frozen where they stood. He left tips for detectives: anonymous phone calls about opium, bookmaking, insider trading – often involving Melbourne's Protestant elite. A judge was found tied up in an illegal brothel. A politician was photographed, from *above*, in a dry area buying crates of cheap whisky in Camberwell. (No charges were laid, but his career as a 'temperance' leader was over.)

In the thirties Kelly's surviving army comrades began dying of lung cancer and emphysema: partly smoking, partly mustard gas. He wrote in his diary that he could 'now see the tar and tumours in the lungs of the cop shop secretaries'. He stopped smoking soon after.

Kelly developed a reputation as a 'fair, tough copper'. He met returned diggers who tried to recruit him into their nationalist paramilitary, who, as he wrote, 'sing the praises of hardworking white men, without Europe's decedance [sic]'. A handful of unionists invited him to their communist meetings. Kelly derided their talk of 'the brotherhood of all men in socialist Australia'. He rejected both as hopelessly utopian. While he was not given to philosophical speculation, Kelly believed men were too corruptible, too weak, too stupid for *any* political solution. 'Hope,' he told Archbishop Mannix after his mother's funeral, 'is the enemy of a good life.'

After decades on the force, some of Kelly's colleagues began to be suspicious. He was single. Lived alone. Never went to six o'clock swill with the boys. And he never aged. His diary recorded their gossip, which he overheard from miles away, while alone in the station. They called him 'Oscar', after Oscar Wilde: 'a lonely queer Mick'. Kelly quit the force in 1937 and worked at the *Age* as a journalist. He solved crimes at night, then wrote them up for the newspaper the next morning.

By the late thirties Kelly was respected by newspapermen and readers. Crime was lowered significantly. Melbourne's standard of living rose. His diary began to record evidence on the various illicit dealings of Lex Luthor, Australia's wealthiest banker, and prime ministerial candidate.



In 1939, when Menzies declared war on Germany, Kelly was reportedly paralysed with nerves. *Age* journalists said he was ‘unusually quiet, even for Kelly’. Biographers speculate that he wanted to fight, but was wary of revealing his powers. Kelly’s diary on the morning he left to enlist is telling: ‘Maybe it’s time to go public? The Japs and Krauts are just men; just skin and bone. I now know I’m bloody bulletproof. I can end this war in a few days. Maybe I can save a few boys from the dirt this time.’

Not long before Kelly left for the war in 1941, Lex Luthor invited him for a private meeting. It’s likely that Kelly, aware of Luthor’s criminality, warned the millionaire not to run for office. There is no written record of the conversation, but, according to maid Kitty McGuinness, Luthor reportedly gave his guest a green stone in a lead box. ‘Open this later,’ he allegedly said. ‘It will explain why I deserve to be prime minister.’ Servicemen, interviewed years later, wrote that Kelly opened the box aboard a troop carrier, grew pale and fell overboard before the ship reached North Africa.

Matthew Kelly was never heard from again. His death was ruled an accident by the military authorities. He had no living relatives to request an investigation. Lex Luthor was elected prime minister of Australia, but vanished one afternoon while swimming.

RED EARTH SON

So, then, does an Australian Superman sound plausible? Australian superheroes certainly thrived during and just after the Second World War, when foreign titles were restricted. My father followed local characters like Captain Atom and the Lone Avenger. (He read these at friends’ homes. My English grandmother was not having that Australian ‘tripe’ in the house. For the record, my mother’s Australian-born family ate tripe.) The local comics industry then receded in the fifties as television began, censorship heightened (along with moral panic), and import restrictions were lifted. Still, for many years *Captain Atom* reportedly outsold *Superman* in the antipodes.

For all the ubiquity of American fantasies, Australia was not messianic. Moments of aspiration, yes: dreams of overcoming the English class system and ‘degeneracy’ of old Europe, for example. The image of tough, simple, hard-working diggers – immortalised with some ambivalence in D. H. Lawrence’s *Kangaroo* (1923) – remains popular. It is the Anzac legend of stoic mateship and silent sacrifice.

But this ‘battler’ Australia was also highly conservative: cautious of outsiders, wary of change. It celebrated



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egalitarianism, but was often very comfortable with hierarchies: of sex, religion and race, if not of socio-economic class. This Australia still floats in a snow cone called the 'Anglosphere'. There is also a strong tradition of fatalism if not cynicism: a refusal to hope for anything better, because of 'the way things are'. It is a philosophy of deference: to the given, and its psychological security.

This was not (and is not) the whole of Australia, of course – just as white-bread Kansas is not *challah* New York, just like comic book fantasy is not midwest reality. There is, in Australia, a strong working-class and middle-class legacy of social justice: the eight-hour day, free medical care, and suffrage for women. There is political liberalism, which dovetails with cultural cosmopolitanism, and an ongoing interest in multiculturalism and Indigenous welfare.

But an Australian superman, landing in outback Australia at the turn of the century, is more likely to become a cautious provincial survivor than a messianic hero. He might be powerful and decent, but he will also be slowed by regret and grief, and shrunk by 'getting by'. He will be more concerned with law and order than with the White Australia Policy or refugees from Europe. He is also likely to be, along with Australia's golden age of comics, forgotten – the kind of humility Superman never learned.

He would have been much better off landing in rural USA. ▼

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