



Superfolks

Robert Mayer , Grant Morrison (Foreword)

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Before there was *WATCHMEN*, there was SUPERFOLKS....

David Brinkley used to be a hero, the greatest the world had ever seen--until he retired, got married, moved to the suburbs, and packed on a few extra pounds. Now all the heroes are dead or missing, and his beloved New York is on the edge of chaos. It's up to Brinkley to come to the rescue, but he's in the midst of a serious mid-life crisis--his superpowers are failing him.

At long last this classic satire that inspired comic books like *Watchmen* and *Miracleman* is back in print. It's a hilarious thriller that digs deep into the American psyche.

Superfolks Details

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Author : Robert Mayer , Grant Morrison (Foreword)

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From Reader Review Superfolks for online ebook

Chip says

Characters: 3*

Plot: 3*

Universe: 3*

I know this is a cult favorite of many people and I did enjoy it, but just didn't fall in love with it.

John Kirk says

This novel was out of print for quite a long time, and it almost reached legendary status amongst comics readers: several respected writers named it as a major influence on their work, e.g. Kurt Busiek and Grant Morrison. I'm willing to take their word for it, i.e. I believe them when they say that it was groundbreaking at the time it was first published, and it may well have inspired several people to reinvent the genre. However, looking at it now it's a bit embarrassing, so if you just read the stories it inspired then you won't be missing much.

One of the odd aspects to this book is continuity. Right from the first page, it directly refers to DC characters like Batman and Superman; more specifically, it says that they're dead, so this is apparently set in an alternate version of the DC universe. At the same time, the lead character is clearly an analogue of Superman, so why not just come out with it? Similarly, it's blatantly obvious that "Captain Mantra" and his sister Mary are really Captain Marvel and Mary Marvel, so why separate them? It would have made more sense to go down the Squadron Supreme or Watchmen route, i.e. don't refer to the existing characters at all and just whistle innocently if anyone points out similarities between them and your brand new characters.

(view spoiler)

The reason he can't dash away is that Peggy doesn't know he's really a superhero. That being the case, there's no reason for her to think that he has to act like a role model to anyone. Also, it seems rather bizarre that using a condom would be seen as an intrinsically bad thing. Beyond that, even if Peggy did know his secret, the reference to comics is breaking the fourth wall, i.e. she would then have to be aware that they were both fictional characters. You can do interesting things with that concept (as Morrison did in *Animal Man*), but it has to be handled carefully, and in this case it's just a brief reference that is completely ignored for the rest of the novel. Even if she does know that they're "on camera", and doesn't want to use a condom, it's then odd to be so explicitly sexual with youngsters "watching"! (hide spoiler)]

It's described as a satire, but it was written in 1977, so I think a lot of the targets are a bit dated now. If you read it as a straight story, there is an interesting premise in there. As a historical artifact, it's noteworthy, but I

can't really recommend it.

Jack Haringa says

This novel is touted as being the precursor to the more realistic (or at least grittier) and less purely heroic portrayal of superheroes that swept through comics in the early- to mid-1980s. Out of print for over two decades, Mayer's book was reprinted in 2005 with a (slightly inaccurate) foreword by Grant Morrison and blurb from Stan Lee, Paul Dini, and Kurt Busiek to help draw in current comics readers. Clearly, all of this worked on me.

Superfolks is self-consciously gonzo and wacky in a very '70s fashion, and there are aspects of the novel that remind me of the silliness of Robert Anton Wilson and Robert Shea's *Illuminatus!* trilogy although without the same level of either excess or daring. Mayer posits a world where all the superheroes are dead or missing except one, a Superman analogue who is teasingly never named. Most of the other characters are named, however, and frequently with the names of celebrities and famous figures fictional and true. The protagonist's secret identity is David Brinkley, the stripper with a heart of chrome is Lorna Doone, a jailhouse guard is Bill Buckley. Sometimes it's funny, sometimes it's not.

The premise of the novel is that this lone remaining superhero is in the midst of a mid-life crisis, pining for his former glories that ended when he began experiencing patches of weakness. His powers are diminished, and Brinkley languishes in suburban self-pity. Until, of course, he's called to action by a new wave of turmoil in his beloved New York. Woven into this plotline are conspiracies, histories of other heroes, political commentary, and social satire.

The novel has its moments, to be sure, but I suspect that if it hadn't been about superheroes--currently and strangely fashionable again in a second postmodern resurgence--it never would have been reprinted. It's better read as a document of its time than as some profound and lasting statement on any of the themes it glancingly treats.

Doug says

I saw this in a store once upon a time, flipped through it, thought it was good and I'd buy it when I had money, and then it was gone. But due to the Magic of the Internet, I eventually found it again and read it.

It hasn't aged well. Funny-name jokes rarely work on me. So calling "Kryptonite" "Cronkite" isn't that funny to me, even though I know who Cronkite was.

But it had some really good moments, particularly when it wasn't trying to be funny. And the ending actually was moving.

Michael says

This is a new printing of Mayer's 1977 novel about a middle-aged superhero who comes out of retirement due largely to plot to kill him. Fellows like Kurt Busiek and Grant Morrison are on record as being heavily influenced by it, and I found this copy at the CBLDF booth at NYCC, so it seemed a nice means to getting a

book that tempted me and giving to a cause I support.

It's a solidly written novel, with clear, easy to read paragraphs. I found myself wishing for a little more complexity in some of the phrases, but I can't really fault Mayer's choices - the story flows quickly and easily and pulls you in.

The hero, David Brinkley, is immensely likable, yet extremely flawed. His powers began to wane eight years ago (and wait 'til you find out why!), so he simply hung up the cape and devoted himself to his wife and daughters. Now, New York's police are laid off due to the city's bankruptcy, rioters are on the loose, and he is needed. Essentially, it's a story about a middle-aged guy who can no longer do the things that he was once able to do. It's extremely witty - for example, when Brinkley uses his supervision to peek through the clothes of attractive women, he constantly walks into things - thus, enhancing his image at a klutz and being karmically repaid for his lack of respect for privacy.

Mayer fills the book with pop culture references, sometimes to the point of distracting from the story. The plot against Brinkley makes sense and seems completely believable, and then the reveal of the mastermind just takes it to a whole other level of greatness. Alan Moore's definitely been inspired by this book too.

The weirdest thing about the book is how puerile much of it is. Mayer fills it with the most adolescent sex stuff, and I'm not sure if it is just designed to titillate the reader or if it is some deeper commentary on the inherent adolescence of superhero fiction.

Regardless, it's a very entertaining novel that reads quickly and comes recommended.

Daniel Brandon says

I had been looking for this book on and off for quite a long time, now. You see, once upon a time, when I was but a young lad of 13 or 14, I stumbled across a copy of it in my local library. It made *quite* an impression. Unfortunately, that particular edition of the text had been released under the title "Everyman," which meant that my subsequent efforts to find it were doomed to be fruitless, until I finally managed to Google the right combination of the few bits that I actually remembered correctly and turned up a reference to the rerelease under the new title.

It's beginning to show its age, but for a 35-year-old work it's held up remarkably well. It is a broad farce in the older tradition, so there's a lot more fourth-wall breaking, name-dropping (all of the city cabs are apparently driven by Bella Abzug), self-insertion (Mayer himself appears very briefly as a random staffer in the newspaper office) and references to other properties (DC comics, Snoopy, etc.) than you'd see in a more contemporary work. But for all of that, it still conveys the basic premise of a superhero who's grown older, settled down, and started wondering about his relevancy and usefulness in a way that many of its imitators never quite managed. For example, *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns* may edge it out in terms of grim realism and socio-political commentary, but in terms of actually getting inside the head of the protagonist, I'd still have to go with *Superfolks*. Admittedly, the prose format does allow for more development, but still. Definitely worth reading for a comics fan, but possibly not a permanent purchase.

B says

This is reminiscent of the Roger Rabbit novel. The author has found this then-untapped, rich field for parody.

He then sets out to develop the friction between the real world and the subject. But something about it feels unprofessional. I can't tell you what, but it does.

I think part of it might be the author's decision to place the characters in the world of DC Comics without authorization which lends itself to a weird feeling that the important name-brand heroes are too important to show up. This is heightened by the fact that the main character is a trope-for-trope double for Superman.

A couple of the twists are inventive. Once in a while a joke hits the mark.

The author obviously tried to overcome his naming problems by relying on names from other media, but it freights all of his characters with unrelated baggage and confuses the story.

Braden A. says

A funny little spoof of the superhero world which occasionally abandons its humor for more serious matter, and that's when it falls apart.

The ending is totally convoluted and incomprehensible.

Still, the good stuff is really good.

Michael Battaglia says

If someone described to you a book that was an influence on the superhero deconstruction stories of Alan Moore and Grant Morrison (among others) in a satirical style that was not unlike Kurt Vonnegut, what kind of book would you imagine? A funnier "Watchmen"? A sort of proto-"Marvelman"? An "anything goes" style of absurdity that leaves a distinct roadmap for later projects like "Doom Patrol"? A work that skewers superheroes and all that cliches that come along with 1970s genre stories, from the point of view of someone who didn't spend their life in comic books? All of those things sound kind of awesome in their own way and I'm sure anyone reading that description that can probably envision their own equally fascinating variants on those themes.

I just don't feel like this is the book that people would come up with.

Its interesting because this book has been trumpeted by people whose writing and sometimes opinions I respect, people like Grant Morrison and Kurt Busiek (Stan Lee gets a blurb too but since he's nonstop Captain Positive his testaments are the kinds of things I chuckle indulgently over with a "oh, bless . . .") so its clear that even in a world where people like to hold up obscure things as awesome simply because they're obscure, a number of people who later found careers in writing comic books have read this and found it to be worth talking about. And from a historical standpoint it is, because it is probably one of the earliest attempts at deconstructing the superhero genre.

But beyond the historical aspect, I don't think there's too much else to recommend here. Maybe I've been spoiled over the years by more sophisticated deconstructions like the aforementioned Moore's, maybe my taste runs more toward the grittier tone that he and the writers who followed him often took . . . but I went into this knowing it wouldn't be on par with something like "Watchmen", if for nothing else writing a book about superheroes without the benefit of the madcap visual madness the best comics are capable of is like

trying to take in an art museum where the colors have been removed from all the paintings. Most of the elements are there but its not quite the same.

So I expected an embryonic effort in that regard and in fact didn't even expect to be blown away, especially as its clear that its not a serious deconstruction. What I didn't expect was an embryonic take on writing a novel entirely, like someone had mailed out a first draft that was written to give their friends giggles and somehow got published by accident. There are moments but its just . . . not professional.

I can see where comic professionals have responded to this over the years. The ideas are there. The basic premise, of a retired superhero dealing with the aging process and no longer being a superhero has to come back and fight a menace from his past one last time, is something that hadn't been done before in the comic book world, not when characters like Superman and Batman had been going for nigh on forty plus years by the time this book was published, still as ageless as ever except for the occasional meaningless "imaginary story". Its vision of a world where all the other superheroes are dead or retired is something new and sprinkled throughout are moments of real invention, where its clear the author is clearly thinking through the implications of what he's started and taking to conclusions that veer between logical and satirical but at least have some weight to them.

So yes, the core of the ideas are worthy. Its a shame the presentation is so gosh darn amateurish.

Right from the start its clear we're in for a bit of a lark. Mayer lists a number of superheroes that have died over the years, most of them famous names, Batman, Superman, the Lone Ranger that clearly were real in this world. Even the mention of Snoopy being shot down could be taken as the author having some fun with the concept and setting the scene (don't fret too much about the lovable beagle's demise, he shows up at least twice later) so there's no any huge red flags.

Then you find out that the hero's name is David Brinkley. Yes, like the broadcaster. And he comes from the planet Cronk, the substance of which that can hurt him is called Cronkite. It goes on and on like this throughout the entire rest of the book, with characters either being actual pop culture figures from that time (his neighbor is Kojak, and not just someone named Kojak but the actual Telly Savalas character) or taking their names from pop culture figures (his parents on Cronk were Archie and Edith, while his Earth parents who adopted him were Franklin and Eleanor). There seems to be no satirical reason for this or a kind of commentary about the world that Mayer is making, time after time he just seems to find it funny, unless its some meta attempt to force people to make connections that aren't quite there. And while its not uncommon for real world figures to appear in superhero stories of this type (let's not forget that Richard Nixon was still President in "Watchmen") this barrage of names seems to have no thought process or rhyme or reason to it, he just does it because it can. But it makes the story read at times (and by that I mean "often") like bad fan-fiction, something posted online without having been seen by an editor or heck, anyone who might have said "maybe this isn't as clever as you seem to think it is". It does come across as something that my peers in high school would have read, full of smirking references to in-jokes that would make people in the know giggle while confusing everyone else.

But even I could overlook that kind of thing (as difficult as that is since he does it on nearly every page) if the book wasn't so tonally all over the place. The overall plot has a skeleton of a thriller around it, with a crime crisis on NYC forcing Brinkley to consider going back into action despite his cozy domestic existence and gradually withering powers. There's a conspiracy afoot to bring him about in the open so he can be killed and its possible the whole thing is being orchestrated by an old enemy who's pulling the strings. There's flashbacks to old memories, a brief and memorable visit with a hero in an asylum, some nice scenes of Brinkley learning how to do things again like fly.

Unfortunately for every time when you start getting sucked into the world of the novel Mayer goes and proves that he has the same plotting skills of a five year old telling you what they want for Christmas and the

coherency of someone who hasn't slept for a week and is being forced to recount the thematic intricacies of a Dostoevsky novel. Scenes whiplash from giggly punny humor to serious superhero contemplation to a teenage level of smuttiness, often within the same page. But instead of being delirious and giving the reader a sense of anything goes, it feels like Mayer is simply making things up as he goes along without any regard to whether logic should apply. Brinkley blunders through the novel without any regard for how the dots might connect, with plot twists appearing and being discarded with wild abandon, and left field circumstances arriving so often that the whole book might as well be titled "Left Field".

Maybe its supposed to replicate the craziness of Golden Age comics but for a new era. I could understand that to some extent. But a book where Snoopy literally appears twice (as well as Charlie Brown to reprise his "ducky and horsey" punchline from an old strip), where a fairy godmother comes out of nowhere just because, where a character is orally pleased by a famous literary character in the next to last chapter for no apparent reason, where a brother and sister in a deathtrap decide incest is the best escape route, on top of all the other stuff I've mentioned causes the novel to veer from what it thinks is "crazy fun wackiness all the times" to utter incoherence.

And the frustrating part is that the serious stuff is decent enough that you wish he had either gone that route or jettisoned the more dramatic moments and gone full gonzo with the over the top stuff. As I said, the entire concept is fascinating, and he's got a variety of really inventive moments peppering the book. The revelation of the ultimate foe and the conversation they have at the climax is worthy. The relationship between the hero and his family is touching in its sincerity. The explanation for how Brinkley might be losing his powers is clever. For someone writing in pure prose Mayer has a good grasp of superhero fight dynamics, with a battle between Brinkley and a Plastic Man stand-in harnessing the nutty logic of the book to good effect finally, with Brinkley discovering a solution that makes sense with the world he's dumped into. Even his ultimate decision is handled sensitively, with a seriousness the rest of the book merely flirts with.

It makes for a weird, weird experience that thankfully will probably only last for a short while (I managed to read it in less than two hours) but its not even weird in a mind-bending or endearingly goofy way. Its just uncomfortably weird, like a person you meet on a train who insists on telling you this rambling and embarrassing tale and expecting you to respond the whole time like its a work of utter genius. Even its fans probably don't apply the "genius" tag to this book but after reading it I wonder if they're responding more to the novelty of the kernel of the novel's concept and by what the novel has spawned, directly or indirectly. As a superhero book its awkward, as satire its clumsy, as humor its often the exact opposite and while the overall effect may be of someone who is writing purely for their own pleasure Mayer was unable to convey even a fraction of that pleasure to the reader. If not for the famous comic writers who keep mentioning it every so often I think it would justly fall through the cracks as a minor curiosity of its era, which is about what it deserves. If any of the stories I've read and liked over the years in this vein were influenced or inspired by this book, I can only imagine it came from one of those writers reading this novel and after finishing, sitting back and thinking, "Gee, I'm pretty sure I can do better than this."

David says

It was okay. Probably better in the 70s when all the references were current. Now it reads as a very dated novel. Liked the basic concept though.

Chris Gwinn says

Sometimes there are books that shift entire genres enough that they feel strip mined when you read them late. Superfolks was like that for me - all that was left was the strange use of celebrity names.

Chris says

A satirical look at the life of a retired superhero. The book was written in 1977, so some of the humor is dated, but I got a chuckle out of much of it, especially him running into flying doghouses with a french-speaking dog.

I think if you go into it looking more for the humor in it than the overall plot, you might have a better time. Things seem to just sort of wrap up quicker than I expected.

Barry Wynn says

This book forever twisted my brain for fiction. Probably set me up for HST, Alan Moore, and Warren Ellis to come later.

Trin says

Considered to be the original "retired superhero" tale, the inspiration for more well-known works like *Watchmen* and *The Incredibles*. Too bad it sucks. Mayer's sense of humor seems to be based almost entirely around bad puns, and on naming his main characters after famous people. (Our protagonist: David Brinkley.) Not only is this not funny, it's confusing: when someone like Richard Nixon is mentioned, who are we then supposed to assume he means?

There's also just something...unpleasant about this book. Little nuggets of sexism and racism that I'm sure Mayer would say are part of the "satire," but which just made me feel icky. So while this book may be groundbreaking, personally, I'd rather break in the opposite direction.

Alex Sarll says

So, obviously I'd heard mutterings of this before, but it was when it became the latest front in the Grant Morrison/Alan Moore DUEL OF WIZARDS that I got motivated to pop it on the old wishlist. Morrison's contention, as I recall, being that Moore had not sufficiently acknowledged his borrowings from Mayer in his major early works. Well...no. The Moore works of which I was reminded here were not *Watchmen* and *Miracleman*, they were the charming minor pieces 'Pictopia' and 'Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?' - both lovely, but hardly the stuff on which Moore's legacy rests.

First off - yes, this brings a dose of 'realism' to superheroics, but given there's no such thing as an objective take on reality, 'realism' describes an awful lot of styles. This is the 'realism' of the postwar American novel - it's worth noting that as well as comic book superheroes grown old and giving up, the cast here also includes Holden Caulfield and Portnoy in respectable middle age. Plus Snoopy, plus Ronald McDonald, plus various figures from seventies American politics whose relevance I'd never have grasped if I'd read this pre-Google. The tone is larger than life, satirical - closer in many ways to *Mad* magazine superhero parodies than

Watchmen-style realism. I should note, though, that while I don't generally buy into the British literary establishment's love affair with that particular school of novelists, it worked here: perhaps because of the subject matter, I could go along for the ride with *Superfolks* in a way I couldn't with, say, *Herzog*.

Second - just as Morrison argues, with some justification, that Moore overstates Moore's own status as a unique forerunner, so Morrison himself in turn exaggerates the unique prescience of *Superfolks*. I have a paperback anthology called simply *Superheroes* which came out the next year, collecting many stories - some new, some recent, some dating back to the forties - which likewise bring a dose of realism to the heroes (the most famous is Larry Niven's essay *Man of Steel, Woman of Kleenex*). Marvel's early comics, in their own clumsy way, had tried to do something similar in the early sixties, and DC had got in on the act in the early seventies when Green Arrow's kid sidekick became a junkie. I'm sure the jokes and Tijuana bibles go back to the first years of comics' so-called Golden Age. Humans can't help but dream of something better - hence superheroes. Then when they see something better, they equally can't help making jokes about that superman's knob.

Still, even if I read this book for the worst of reasons - drawn into a feud between two of my favourite comics writers - that's another sale for a book which definitely deserves them. About which I realise I've said very little directly, but then just as I came into it broadly ignorant of the plot, of anything bar the most basic premise, so in my turn I wouldn't want to give too much away.
