

The Phantom Unmasked

Kevin Patrick

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The origin and secrets of one of the world's longest-running comic-strip heroes are revealed in *The Phantom Unmasked*, an academic's look at the Phantom, in the United States and abroad.

Patrick's book began as a doctoral thesis examining the continued popularity of the Phantom around the globe, and it is fascinating to learn that, though the character is still known in America, he's got as much (if not more) of a fan following in Australia, India, and Sweden.

A large part of the book examines how and why this American comic-strip hero translates so well to so many different cultures; a variety of demographic, cultural, and corporate decisions seem to be responsible. Although Patrick's review of the survey results from his poll of worldwide Phantom fans and sometimes makes for dry reading, the conclusions drawn are interesting. Among the theories put forward regarding the source of the Phantom's appeal are creator Lee Falk's unique idea of a hero who passes on the mantle of his mask from generation to generation over centuries, and the strip's intentionally generic jungle setting.

Patrick also provides a thorough and enlightening background on *The Phantom's* creation and publication history. The book suffers somewhat by focusing exclusively on written description, lacking examples of the various Phantom comic strips and comic books, covers of novels, and still photos from films. These omissions, in an examination of a character so essentially visual, might prevent the book from being fully accessible to those unfamiliar with *The Phantom*.

Some may quibble with the book's title and Patrick's reckoning of the word "superhero"—the Phantom predated Superman by two years, but does not wield any powers beyond a normal human. Yet despite an uncertain future, mainly due to the demise of print newspapers, the legend of the man in purple continues, and fans will appreciate Patrick's scholarly approach.

PETER DABBENE (November/December 2017)

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