

Retro Savior

By [Jason Byassee](#) in the [August 8, 2006](#) issue

There are a priori reasons to dislike *Superman Returns*. Superman is always a little campy in his tights and red Underoos. And how can the film measure up to such cool and thoughtful superfare as *X-Men* or *Spider-Man*? Improved computer graphics and younger, handsomer heroes do not a great superhero film make.

Still, as the overture from the original film began to play, the jazzy retro letters swooped toward the screen and Supe burst forth from his Clark Kent shell, I almost cheered. Bryan Singer's film was made for 30-somethings who were kids when the 1978 blockbuster *Superman* introduced another generation to the story of how Kal-El landed on earth, took instruction from images of his father, Jor-El, and began saving the world from bad guys like Gene Hackman.

Supe (Brandon Routh) has been gone five years in Metropolis time, during which he has been searching for remnants of his destroyed home planet of Krypton. His erstwhile flame, Lois Lane (Kate Bosworth), has settled down with a new beau and her six-year-old son (the apparent result of Lois and Supe's failing to practice safe sex during their romp in *Superman II*). "Do you have your vitamins, your eyedrops, your albuterol?" Lois quizzes her son. This is definitely parenting in the '00s, to which the '80s generation of Superman fans can relate.

The Man of Steel's archenemy Lex Luthor is fresh out of jail and bent on the usual mayhem. The evil genius uses technology to terrify Metropolitans (New Yorkers), who helplessly gawk skyward. It's familiar stuff, as are the standard storyline bits: a scheming Luthor (the delightful Kevin Spacey has replaced Hackman), the limitless gullibility of those who know both Clark and Supe and are thrown off by Clark's crafty eyeglasses disguise, and the Man of Steel's touching vulnerability to Kryptonite.

Lois is still smitten with Superman. Though her cohabiting partner is handsome, rich, athletic, brave and sensitive, she has not married him. (Finally, a movie in which the male partner is the mindlessly loyal bombshell.) "So, where were you?" she pouts to Superman.

The computer effects do spruce things up. Superman doesn't just save Lois falling from a building but rescues an entire wingless plane, with Lois on board, hurtling in flames toward a packed baseball stadium (more echoes of 9/11). Later he easily takes a bullet to the eye in slow motion.

As in Pixar's children's movies, designed to appeal both to parents and their kids, there are some gratuitous double entendres. When Lois's editor at the *Daily Planet* asks her, "Didn't you do Superman?" she corrects him. "Cover—I covered him."

The Superman franchise has evolved a great deal since two Jewish kids from Cleveland, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, first dreamed him up: from *Action Comics* in the 1930s to TV shows in the '50s to cartoons in the '80s and now five films and counting. But he is still the made-to-order savior that two kids in an anti-Semitic world needed—Jewishness hidden away, Clark Kent-awkwardness masking their strength, with the ability to attract the prettiest gentile girl if they really tried (David Biale explores these themes in an essay in the *Cambridge Companion to American Judaism*).

Superman is still the sort of savior we would draw up if left to our own devices: a good, decent guy whose social awkwardness belies inner bravery and otherworldly skill. The world would adore him if only they knew him (do we still have heroes who embody goodness?). As he flies heavenward with Lois at one point, she says, "I can hear them all—crying for a savior." He answers their cries, instantly saving everyone in trouble, with no collateral damage.

One can't help thinking about the savior Christians get—indeed, a Jewish kid, but one without X-ray vision, superhearing or the power to fly, who hails from a town far more backwoods than Depression-era Cleveland, who was oppressed by gentiles with more grievous weapons than middle-class Americans had, and who healed some people but didn't save himself from being tortured to death. Cry out to this one and he normally won't swoop in to save.

But forget all that. *Superman* is at its best when its theological dimensions are put aside. Unfortunately, Singer's film, perhaps reflecting the Mel Gibson effect, amplifies those dimensions. It's better to just let the pleasures of wish fulfillment kick in and dream of a simpler time that never was.