

# 'Iconic' comic book superhero to come out as gay

Is Batman gay? Superman? Aquaman? The internet is bursting with rumours. The cause: an announcement by DC Comics that one of its main characters will soon come out of the closet.



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ENGLISH & MEDIA



The first superhero gay marriage, in the latest issue of X-Men © Reuters handout images

Sadistic clowns, a gentleman gangster, an evil alter-ego, a crazed botanist: Batman's enemies come in all sorts of wacky guises. But of all the villains who have tried to wipe him from comic book pages, the one who came closest to success may well have been a psychologist named Frederic Wertham.

Wertham's attack was unleashed in the real world in 1954, in a book entitled *Seduction of the Innocent*. Violent superhero comics, he claimed, were leading impressionable young Americans into a life of delinquency. But what caused the most hysteria was another accusation altogether: Batman and Robin, hinted Wertham, were more than just friends.

Parents were horrified by the idea that their children's favourite heroes were secretly homosexual. In the rash of book burnings that followed, beloved comics became bonfire fuel.

Thankfully for his many fans, Batman survived. So too did speculation over his

sexuality. Now, his creators DC Comics have set the rumour mill spinning all over again. In their next issue, DC have announced, an important character 'previously assumed to be straight' will reveal that they are gay.

With their flamboyant costumes and butch physique, superheroes have always had a camp aesthetic. But only recently have any come out of the closet.

Perhaps the most high profile of these is Catwoman. She was first created as a love interest for Batman, to convince readers that he was straight. But in 2006 a Jewish lesbian inherited the mask – a striking sign of changing attitudes.

Now, the landmarks are suddenly rushing by thick and fast. Last week Marvel's Northstar, who has been openly gay since 1992, finally proposed to his longterm partner. In the next issue they will be married. Next month, DC Comics promise to create the 'most high-profile gay superhero yet.'

Gay marriage is a topical issue in the real world as well: last month Barack Obama became the first US president to publicly declare his support for it. Marvel and DC are simply moving with the times.

## A PARALLEL UNIVERSE

Well they should stop moving, say traditionalist fans. Introducing a new gay character is fine; but characters like Superman and Robin are popular icons with established pasts and personalities. Nobody has a right to suddenly change a key part of their identities.

But others say superheroes must change, if they are not to get stuck in the past. Superhero fantasy is so powerful because it holds a mirror up to the world we all live in. Batman's Gotham City is well known to be a dark version of New York. X-Men is about otherness and racism as well as laser-eyed mutants. Homosexuality is part of the real world. It should be part of the superhero world too.

## Q & A

**Q Who cares whether a made-up character is gay?**

**A** Plenty of people. J.K. Rowling, author of the *Harry Potter* books, caused much controversy in 2007 when she announced that Harry's head teacher Albus Dumbledore was gay. There have also been

controversies surrounding children's books that portray homosexuality more openly – *Heather Has Two Mommies*, receives more complaints in America than almost any other book.

**Q But isn't that just a fuss over nothing?**

**A** Perhaps – but it is a fact that fictional characters can change attitudes. A psychological study in 2010, for instance, showed

that prolonged exposure to gay characters on television makes people more accepting of homosexuality in real life.

## SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'Making Batman gay would be like making Donald Duck a chicken.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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### WORD WATCH

**Botanist** – A botanist is a scientist who studies plants. Batman's botanical enemy is the eco-terrorist Poison Ivy, transformed by an evil professor into a supervillain.

**Delinquency** – In law, a delinquent is simply someone who commits a crime or misdemeanour. But the word is often used to describe a person – especially a young

person, or 'juvenile delinquent' – who generally ignores authority.

**Book burnings** – Book burning (also known as biblioclasm or libricide) has been around as long as books. The medieval Spanish Inquisition burned books it saw as heretical, for instance; and ceremonial book bonfires were common in Nazi Germany. It has famously been written that 'where they burn books, they will soon burn people.' But everybody is at it: as recently as the

1950s, the American government burned the works of a famous psychiatrist.

**Come out of the closet** – Actually a mixture of two old metaphors to do with homosexuality. 'Coming out' was originally used of young women announcing themselves to society as marriageable; 'the closet' is simply somewhere that things are hidden from public view. Both phrases are probably quite old; but they were not usually used together until the 1930s.

### YOU DECIDE

1. Is a person's sexuality a defining part of their identity?
2. True or false: 'superhero stories are the myths and legends of today.'

### ACTIVITIES

1. Draw a short comic strip in which a well-known character reveals something previously unknown about themselves.
2. Pick a superhero and write a paragraph discussing what they can tell us about modern culture.

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 **NOTES**

