

Article

Mutants, Motifs, and Meaning: Empathy and the X-Men

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Abstract

The X-Men are a superhero team published by Marvel Comics. Initially marketed as a team of teenage superheroes, the franchise eventually began emphasizing the “mutant metaphor” as a narrative device that differentiated it from other comic books. This pivot towards highlighting the empathy displayed by the X-Men towards others and the intolerance their foes have for anyone who is different became defining characteristics of the franchise that have carried forward for decades. As the X-Men moved from a somewhat generic franchise to one that framed its heroes as symbolic outsiders, a wider and deeper fanbase embraced the series. Through complex storylines, symbolic metaphors, and nuanced character development, the series implicitly and often explicitly encourages empathy. With a thematic focus on concepts such as marginalization and otherness, the X-Men franchise promotes tolerance as heroic and condemns prejudice as villainous. The message for readers is that empathy, not optic blasts or the ability to control the weather, is what makes the X-Men heroic.

Keywords: X-Men; Marvel; comic book; graphic novel; empathy; prejudice; Wolverine; superhero

1. Overview

The American entertainment landscape is littered with failed franchises and doomed projects. It is also home to franchises that were instant hits, arriving fully formed and quickly finding a large audience. The X-Men franchise is neither. The X-Men was a false-start publishing endeavor that, with time and creative innovation, developed a thematic identity and became one of the most successful comic book properties in American popular culture history. *The X-Men* comic book was cancelled after a mostly unremarkable seven-year run, but five years later, a relaunch made its mark on the comic book industry and eventually the larger entertainment world through adaptations in video games, television, and film. Success in popular culture can mean many things. It can mean finding a deeply engaged fandom, achieving financial profitability, executing a clear artistic vision or any other number of metrics that creators and fans apply to the loosely defined concept of “success.” In largely all of these metrics, the X-Men comic book franchise went from failure to success as the superhero team adopted the mantra that they were “feared and hated by the world they have sworn to protect” (Claremont et al. 1975, p. 87). Following that transformation, the X-Men media franchise became a sprawling media empire. While acknowledging that the more than sixty years of X-Men media provides ample material for examination and illuminating analysis, this piece will focus on the transformation that takes place between the Kirby and Lee launch of the series and the reimagining of the franchise that set a new course in the mid-1970s and how that new course was embraced by subsequent creators.

Early in the comic book Silver Age of the late 1950s and 1960s, publishers introduced many new heroes to readers. A distinctive element was needed to make the new offerings



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stand out on the crowded comic book spinner rack. While there are hints of a differentiating theme present in some early X-Men comic books, it took more than a decade before a core concept would separate the X-Men franchise from other popular offerings in the superhero genre. While it is impossible to prove a causation, there is a significant correlation between X-Men comic books increasing in popularity and the franchise establishing a consistent thematic thread by embracing the mutant metaphor and promoting empathy as a core value in stories. Through the idea of mutants standing in for a social “other” even as they are the beloved protagonists of a popular franchise, the X-Men comic book titles and media adaptations provide a narrative lesson about embracing empathy and eschewing hate. While layered through fantastic metaphor, otherworldly storytelling, and the tropes of the superhero genre, the lesson is still clearly present. Those who feel apart from the majority can be heroic. Also, as the enduring life lesson of the X-Men’s rogues gallery proves, true villains hate and fear those who are different from them. These ideas have become a hallmark of the X-Men franchise but were not clearly established in the early adventures. The first wave of X-Men comics eventually failed, even as there are some creative successes in the issues. The early, somewhat unfocused series would become a cultural icon in later iterations as creators used the mutant metaphor and stories of exploring otherness to highlight that empathy, not superpowers, is how prejudice can be defeated.

There have been and will continue to be debates and disagreement about what constitutes the beginning of the Silver Age of Comics, but for Marvel Comics, 1961’s *Fantastic Four* #1 (Lee and Kirby 1961) is most often recognized as the beginning of the company’s shared superhero universe. Other superheroes were soon introduced, including the Incredible Hulk, Spider-Man, Iron Man, and Doctor Strange. Jack Kirby and Stan Lee’s *The X-Men* #1 has a cover date of September 1963, the same month that Kirby and Lee combined established characters as a new team in *Avengers* #1 (Lee and Kirby 1963b). The first issue of *The X-Men* arrived after Marvel Comics established a shared setting for the burgeoning narrative universe. Originally, the X-Men consisted of Cyclops, Angel, Beast, Iceman, and Marvel Girl, while the powerful telepath Charles Xavier leads the team from his wheelchair. The team of superheroes are all mutants, characters who were simply born with their powers rather than having an elaborate origin story. Importantly for the original presentation of the X-Men, they are also all teenage students. *The X-Men* title was published by Marvel for sixty-six issues before the company decided to reprint earlier adventures in the title, even as the issue numbers continued to advance. In 1975, the franchise relaunched with new original stories and a new group of characters as an “All-New, All-Different” team of X-Men in *Giant-Size X-Men* #1 (Wein and Cockrum 1975). Soon, as Douglas Wolk explains, the X-Men “sold, and sold, and sold. Other comics occasionally moved more units and often had greater artistic triumphs, but from 1978–1987, X-Men was the best-selling American comic book series, and its readership increased every year” (2021, p. 137). In that era, the creators, with Chris Claremont as one of the most important voices, explicitly embraced the themes of mutants, others, and empathy, which have continued to be a defining characteristic of the franchise in subsequent decades. This becomes a turning point for the X-Men franchise that has redefined the X-family of comics and continues to be foundational decades later. The transition from the 1960s era of X-Men to the 1970s is one of the most stunning transformations of a pop culture property that has occurred. Subsequent creators have continued to utilize this new focus for the core X-titles and also ancillary titles featuring mutant heroes in the Marvel universe.

Embracing the “mutant metaphor” created a unique tone for X-Men stories. However, highlighting the mutant metaphor was something of a departure from the 1960s original run of X-Men comics. Reading those X-Men issues, it appears that the creators knew a hook was needed to differentiate *The X-Men* from other titles, and rather than accentuating the

idea that the title featured a team of mutants, they attempted to do this by highlighting that they were a team of teenagers. Marvel's other team titles at this time were *The Fantastic Four*, who are mostly adults (Johnny Storm, the Human Torch, is implied to be a teenager in the early issues), and *The Avengers*, who are all adults. Knowing that a younger demographic made up a large part of their audience, Kirby and Lee appear to be attempting to create more audience identification by presenting a younger cast of characters. The covers of the first two issues include the blurb "The Strangest Super-Heroes of All!" (Lee and Kirby 1963c, pp. 8, 32), but issue #3's cover declares that the X-Men are "The Teen-Age Super-Heroes Who Have Taken America By Storm!" (Lee and Kirby 1963a, p. 55). And with the fourth issue, the original tagline is amended to "The Most Unusual Teen-Agers of All Time!" After appearing on the cover for the first several issues, the team's tagline is moved to the interior title page. The title pages of issues #3 through #14 all include the phrase "The Most Unusual Teen-Agers of All Time!" (Lee and Kirby 1963a, p. 55; Lee et al. 1965, p. 321). The reminder to readers is not that they are a team of social outsiders, but rather that they are a team of youngsters. An additional way of highlighting the team members' adolescence is through their presence in a school. Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters is the exclusive home for the original team of X-Men. Professor X is the headmaster and sole teacher at the school, and the X-Men are his first class of students. Training a young generation of mutants on how to use their powers is a core concept for the franchise after it experiences intra-industrial multiplication as the comic book franchise expands from one title to a family of titles. *New Mutants*, *X-Force*, *Generation X*, *New X-Men*, *Academy X* and other series have explored the adventures of adolescent mutant heroes in training.

Of course, the X-Men are not famous today for being teens, but rather they are iconic for being mutants. Mutants, in the Marvel universe, gain powers simply by being born different from the other humans that make up the majority of Earth's population. Mutant powers are not the result of a scientific accident or alien origin; they simply have a unique genetic makeup compared to other humans. Eventually, usually around puberty, this genetic difference manifests powers that set them apart from everyone else. This has been developed into a powerful, elastic metaphor for otherness.

Attempting to assign any particular consistent marker of social otherness as the key to understanding this metaphor is futile, as it has been deployed to provide commentaries about racism, homophobia, religious intolerance (both intolerance towards those of particular religious faiths and those who feel excluded by particular religious faiths), adolescent angst, classism, xenophobia, and additional examples of social exclusion. As Claudia Buccifero explains, "The experience of being a mutant may be somewhat similar to being gay, black, or Jewish in a predominantly heterosexual, white, or Christian society, yet all these experiences cannot be easily equated." Rather, mutants in the Marvel universe embody "a more general concept of the Other" (Buccifero 2016, p. 209). What Buccifero calls the "general concept of the Other" allows the mutant metaphor to be astonishingly versatile in the hands of thoughtful creators, which is one reason why it has been so successful in establishing a brand for the X-Men franchise. Creators in the 1970s and 1980s, including Dave Cockrum, Len Wein, John Byrne, Paul Smith, John Romita Jr. and, most importantly, Chris Claremont, created a diverse team of characters who cared for and protected one another. This was very much rooted in the progressive politics of the time period. As Ramzi Fawaz argues, "By developing the capacious category of "mutation" as a biological marker and a category of otherness akin to race and gender, the X-Men deployed popular fantasy to describe the generative alliances across difference being forged by radical feminists, gay liberation activists, and the counterculture of the 1970s" (Fawaz 2011, p. 361). As later creators continued this tradition, issues such as the HIV/AIDS crisis and the expansion of LGBTQIA+ identity were addressed through the lens of superhero adventures.

None of this is what Stan Lee had in mind when he came up with the idea of mutants. Rather than a powerful symbol for narrative themes, he was looking for an easy way to explain superhero origins. “I had to figure, how did they get their powers? And they were all separate people that weren’t connected to each other, so I knew that would be a helluva job. And I took the cowardly way out, and I figured, hey, the easiest thing in the world: they were born that way. They were mutants” (Hiatt 2018). The concept of mutants served as a quick way to do away with an origin story that explains how and why a character has powers. The early Marvel universe is populated with characters who gained their powers from an eclectic array of scientific accidents and magical discoveries. Throw in the assorted origins for supervillains, and it is understandable why saying that characters were just born with powers was an appealing choice for comic book creators. The explanation for how a character can do what they can do is a vital part of an origin story, and being able to do away with that while still having any imaginable power set available eases the creative pressure of introducing new characters. While the idea of “mutants” standing in for “others” seems natural, the original X-Men were an all-white team who could hide their mutations to pass as “normal” whenever they wanted. This resulted in the core conceit of the series becoming what Fawaz calls “an empty placeholder for a variety of real-world differences” (p. 363). The potential power of the mutant metaphor was always present, and occasionally hinted at, in the 1960s issues. For a reader familiar with what the X-Men franchise becomes, revisiting those issues reveals an interesting concept that never fully develops.

Both Kirby and Lee had stepped away from *The X-Men* by issue #20, but in their collaboration, there are some hints that they saw potential for “mutants” to allow for some social commentary. For example, in the first issue, Kirby has drawn a somber close up of his Professor X’s face as the word balloon contains a contextual set up for the series: “When I was young, normal people feared me, distrusted me! I realized the human race is not yet ready to accept those with extra powers!” (Lee and Kirby 1963c, p. 18). And in the fourth issue, the villainous Quicksilver laments, “Why should we love homo sapiens?? They hate us—fear us because of our superior power!” (Lee and Kirby 1964a, p. 89). In this era, there are some instances of prejudice towards mutants from humans, for example, when they present a story about the government building mutant-hunting robot Sentinels (Lee et al. 1965). However, many of the pre-reprint era X-Men stories feel interchangeable in terms of tone and content with other Marvel titles of the day. The thematic seeds of mutants standing in for social others would finally take full root in the X-Men comics from the mid-1970s onward. The original team of white Americans is replaced with a diverse, international cast. Some of the new characters, like Nightcrawler, cannot easily pass as unpowered humans. Their mutation is a constant part of their identity. Thematic explorations of prejudice and belonging made the X-Men franchise one of the unique offerings on the comic book spinner rack. As readers embraced the storytelling around mutants, the family of titles grew larger. Since the first spin-off title, *Dazzler*, there have been dozens of mini-series, solo series, team series, and crossover titles featuring characters from the X-family. Among the most popular and longest running of these comic book series are *Wolverine*, *X-Factor*, *X-Force*, *Generation X*, *Deadpool*, and *Cable*, though this is far from an exhaustive list.

By featuring protagonists who are social others in the Marvel Universe, the X-Men implicitly and explicitly presents empathy as a valuable trait. Offering a tidy definition of empathy is difficult, as the term has a complex linguistic history. Kalervo A. Sinervo and Ariela Freedman explain that the term “empathy” was introduced into English in the early twentieth century (borrowing from a German concept), and within a few decades had become “a popular term for an all-purpose ethical value” that promised intercultural understanding, an interpretation “that still largely dominates popular discourse on empathy”

(Sinervo and Freedman 2021, p. 556). Because the X-Men exist in the fictional superhero genre, the empathy that is promoted is not “the popular, ‘common sense’ conception of empathy as ‘the capacity to stand in another’s shoes’” (Nelems and Theo 2018, p. vii) that many are familiar with (but is debated by philosophers, psychologists, linguists, and scholars). Claiming the X-Men promote empathy is not to suggest that readers imagine what it would be like to have claws spring forth from between their knuckles or contemplate what it would be like to phase through solid walls—though undoubtedly many readers have done that. Rather, because mutants are a symbolic other, the franchise uses its narrative metaphor to promote the idea that we should care for and protect those who are not part of our social in-group. Heroes protect everyone, villains attack and dehumanize those who they view as different from themselves. This is evidenced consistently in X-Men stories from hundreds of different writers and artists. That message is present, but whether it is received and embraced by readers is another matter entirely. In an ideal world, fans who read stories that condemn prejudice would instantly set aside their xenophobia, their bigotry, their intolerance. While that may happen for some, it is impossible for creators to control how their work is received. X-Men writer Scott Lobdel has shared that “one of the most astounding things” that happened to him was when he was told about a group of white supremacist skinheads who identified with the X-Men because of the team’s “outsider status” (qtd. in Darowski 2014, p. 9). While that was contrary to Lobdel’s own interpretation of the stories he wrote, once the stories are published, readers may respond with what resonates with them individually. The idea of white supremacists identifying with the X-Men is undeniably contrary to the intended message of the series. It would seem to require a willful misreading of authorial intent. Those readers who understand the plainly intended textual themes will come away seeing a message celebrating empathy and the protection of those who are not like themselves.

2. Heroic Journey

The X-Men comic book franchise is part of the sprawling shared universe of Marvel Comics, and through the mutant metaphor, it has developed a thematic throughline that is quite distinct from other superhero franchises. While the X-Men face the expected comic book threats of alien invaders, mad scientists, and would-be world conquerors, the most iconic threats the X-Men have battled are against those who lack empathy for those they perceive as others. Whether it is humans who fear mutants or mutants who would subjugate humans, the X-Men franchise has most frequently been oriented around threats instigated by those who lack empathy. Simultaneously, by featuring one of the most diverse rosters of characters who are presented as heroes, the series have also naturally celebrated those who are different from the average comic book reader.

In Marvel’s narrative world, many figures with superpowers like Captain America are beloved. For some, it may seem illogical that mutants stand out as a fear-inducing subgroup simply because they were born with superpowers; after all, the entire milieu of the Marvel Universe is littered with powerful beings. Sarah Briest explains that despite this, “In the comic book world of the X-Men—constituted by multiple universes of heroes and villains, time travel, space travel, aliens, cyborgs and all things fantastical and bizarre—mutant status has indeed always signified otherness” (Briest 2021). This is generally true, though in a never-ending, ever-expanding fictional world with the input of thousands of creators, there are naturally some stories that may be exceptions. On the whole, however, the X-Men franchise has become associated with the flexible mutant metaphor, where the “otherness” that differentiates the X-Men from other Marvel superheroes has stood in for many attributes that humans have used to divide one from another.

Kirby and Lee's original X-Men issues do feature some stories that acknowledge the potential for this metaphor to add thematic depth to the costumed adventures of their superhero protagonists. In *The X-Men* #8, an angry crowd turns on Beast after he reveals his powers while saving a boy who was in danger. After someone in the crowd voices their suspicion that this must be one of the mutants they have heard about, Kirby depicts a close up of a closed fist in the foreground, partially obscuring an angry man. The word balloon from the man with the clenched fist reads, "He probably saved that kid just to throw us off guard. . . To make us think mutants aren't dangerous" and the second angry man in the panel screams, "But he can't fool us! Come on. . . Let's get him before he loses himself in the crowd!" (Lee and Kirby 1964b, p. 184). Despite a few cherry-picked examples from the 1960's era of X-Men comics, the foundational centering of the mutant metaphor primarily occurs in the later run of X-Men stories written by Chris Claremont with artistic collaborators including Dave Cockrum, John Byrne, John Romita Jr., Marc Silvestri, and Jim Lee. As Douglas Wolk notes, "Claremont and Byrne figured out how to use the protean metaphor for oppression and marginalization that was embedded in the X-Men's premise, and turn it into rocket fuel for their stories" (Wolk 2021, p. 136). Embracing the metaphor sparked an era that is still recognized as one of the strongest runs in American comic book history, and this resulted in incredible sales success for the X-Men franchise. That popularity continues to this day, with more than a dozen X-Men-related comics being published by Marvel each month. Readers who made the X-Men one of the best-selling series in history would find stories that constantly taught that villains are motivated by hate and choose to fear those who are not like them, while heroes protect anyone regardless of their identity.

One of the first storylines of the relaunch era sees the mutant-hunting Sentinels reintroduced (Claremont and Cockrum 1976). The idea that the government is so trepidatious of a group of citizens that are perceived as "other" in some way and implements a plan to round them up has frightening historical and contemporary parallels. Claremont and John Byrne would later tell a story, "Days of Future Past," involving time travel that reveals how the government's efforts to control mutants leads to a dystopian future with concentration camps and genocide (Claremont and Byrne 1981). The explicit villains in these stories are the humans who are so fearful of mutants that they have designed massive machines to combat this perceived threat. Whether it is the political group the Friends of Humanity who try to create laws to restrict mutant rights, a government like Genosha's who subjugate mutants, or the organization Orchis that is dedicated to using technology to attack mutants, humans who fear mutants are a consistent threat in X-Men comics. But fear and prejudice are not the sole purview of humans. The X-Men's first foes in issue #1 and recurring very frequently throughout the series are evil mutants who attack humans.

Even more frequently than battling hateful humans, the X-Men must stop the machinations of evil mutants. There are times that the reader is invited to have sympathy for the evil mutants. For example, in *Uncanny X-Men* #150, Claremont and Cockrum added a backstory to Magneto that the character was a Holocaust survivor who was motivated by protecting mutants from potential human oppressors (Claremont and Cockrum 1981). This, of course, does not align with every appearance the character previously had or has had since, such is the nature of a multigenerational narrative that spans decades and thousands of appearances. In his analysis of Magneto, Nicholas Pumphrey explains that Claremont took a character who had often been presented as a "terrorist bent on the destruction of a people" and shifted him to "a Jew and a mutant using his power to fight against genocide" (Pumphrey 2014, p. 91). This is a radical transformation; Magneto was originally a supervillain who had to be stopped because his end goals and methods were evil—after all, his original team was called The Brotherhood of Evil Mutants. In the

Claremont era, he becomes an anti-hero whose motivations are understandable even as the X-Men often fight against his methods because his zealousness to protect mutants can become a threat to humans. Even a character like Magneto, who is sometimes depicted with a noble sense of purpose, is undeniably a villain when he or his followers are the aggressors and attack humans.

After centering the mutant metaphor, which helped the franchise become one of the most popular in the American comic book industry, this concept has become inseparable from X-comics to the present day. Later, creators continued to make the idea of mutants as other both subtext and text in their stories. For example, in the 1993 storyline *Fatal Attractions*, a group of mutants inspired by Magneto—who is believed to be dead at this point—call themselves the Acolytes and seek to “purify” Earth by killing all humans. They create a clear divide between mutants who hunt humans, mutants who protect humans, and humans. While doing this, they use language meant to label and divide the groups, first calling the X-Men who are protecting their potential victims “human lovers” (Lobdell and Peterson 1993, p. 19) and referring to their victims as “human kindling” (p. 22). The Acolytes also begin to call humans “flatscans” (Lobdell et al. 1993, p. 415). In the world of X-Men comics, there are many devices that can scan for mutants, usually offering a visual spike as an indicator when the x-gene is detected. Non-powered humans do not register on these scanning devices and thus are pejoratively called Flatscans by the Acolytes. This creation of a fictional slur is an echo of an earlier move in X-Men comics introduced by Chris Claremont and John Romita Jr. to equate “Mutie” with racial slurs. This was infamously and controversially done in *Uncanny X-Men* #196 when a black anti-mutant protester asks Kitty Pryde if she is a “Mutie” and she replies by asking if he identified with a slur used against African Americans (Claremont and Romita 1985, p.14). The intended parallel about the negative impact of slurs is clear, but the use of a real racial slur in comparison with a fictional group of superpowered beings is awkwardly executed at best. Digital versions of this issue now censor Kitty Pryde’s use of the n-word, which was plainly printed in the original. Slurs from a group in power against a group they are oppressing have a long history, and creating a fictional stand-in for that practice makes thematic sense in X-Men comics. Mutie is a human-to-mutant slur. Magneto’s Acolytes are attempting to assert a new social hierarchy and, as part of that process, create a slang slur that dehumanizes the humans they are attacking. Obviously “dehumanize” is a bit of an awkward phrase in this context due to the mutant versus human in-group/out-group dynamic being discussed, but the intended effect of creating a sense of inferiority and otherness is clear. For both the humans using “Mutie” and the mutants using “Flatscan”, a linguistic label is intended to separate and divide one group from another, with a clear social scale of who is acceptable and unacceptable.

The heroic X-Men resist all such labeling. As the clear protagonists the reader is meant to side with, this condemnation of othering is an implicit life lesson communicated to readers of all ages. As the X-Men battle the Acolytes, Archangel makes this subtext into plain text as he argues with the Acolytes, “And this is how you honor the memory of Magneto?! His entire family was wiped out by people who felt like you do. Supremacists who believed they had a right to decide who lived and died! [...] There is] nothing “new” about ignorance... intolerance... hating what you don’t understand. So long as there are people like you, there’ll be people like us who’ll be there to stop you” (Lobdell and Peterson 1993, pp. 22–23). Archangel compares the type of violence being enacted by the Acolytes against humans with the Nazi atrocities committed against the Jewish population of Europe. Similarly, the earlier “Days of Future Past” story compared human prejudice against mutants to the Nazis as well. The villains are those who oppress and the heroes are those who protect, no matter if they are human or mutant. In the superhero genre, both heroes and villains have

powers, so it is what is done with those powers that divides the characters into those camps. For readers who will never have superpowers, what can be learned from *The X-Men* is not how to turn your flesh into organic steel but that protecting those who are unlike you is a heroic choice.

This emphasis on empathy can be seen in the larger narratives told in X-Men comic books and is also found in individual characterizations. Perhaps no member of the X-Men has become as associated with anger, violence, and aggression as Wolverine. These traits do not feel like they align with empathy, but in the hands of skilled creators, complex characters successfully contain seeming contradictions.

The first major break-out star of the X-Men franchise, Wolverine has been able to sustain more solo series, mini-series, and guest appearances in other titles than any other mutant hero. When not in costume, he is primarily known as Logan (for years, it was unclear if that was even a first or a last name). Wolverine is a mutant born with a healing factor that allows him to recover from wounds, enhanced senses that allow him to track others and sense threats, and sets of claws that burst from between the knuckles on his hands. After experiments bonded adamantium—one of several fictional metals with astonishing properties in the Marvel universe—to his skeleton, those claws became razor-sharp and his skeleton indestructible. Prone to berserker rages during battle, Wolverine may be the scrappiest character in the X-Men comics. When not wearing his team uniform, Wolverine often dons cowboy boots and a hat, as well as a large belt buckle and will ride his motorcycle off into the sunset. On a team that very much embraces the concept of a found family, Wolverine is the outsider of outsiders, a loner who does not like following orders, the first and last one to throw a punch. And in what may be surprising to some, Wolverine is one of the most empathetic characters in the Marvel universe.

Wolverine was created by Len Wein and John Romita Sr. and first appeared in 1974's *The Incredible Hulk* #180 (Wein and Trimpe 1974). The character was a Canadian government agent and served as an antagonist to the Hulk for a couple of issues. In 1975, Marvel was relaunching the X-Men franchise, and as an existing character with very little backstory or development, Wolverine was an easy character to add to the new team. Len Wein, Dave Cockrum, and, in particular, Chris Claremont and John Byrne were the creators who developed Wolverine's personality, motivations, and characterization. J. Andrew Deman points out that Wolverine, so often associated with rages and violence, embodies empathy. "One of the early elements that Claremont used to first communicate Logan/Wolverine's resistance to hegemonic masculinity is Logan's underlying sensitivity. Though characterized as savage and asocial in some iterations, Claremont's Wolverine consistently demonstrates an emotional intelligence and sense of empathy beyond that of any X-Man (with the possible exception of Nightcrawler, his best friend)" (Deman 2023, p. 99). Claremont explored unexpected seeming contradictions in his characters very frequently. Nightcrawler looked like a demon but was deeply religious. Colossus was the strongest physical member of the team but also a deeply sensitive artist. Wolverine was savagely brutal but profoundly empathetic. One expression of that empathy is Wolverine's mentorship to many young mutants, including Kitty Pryde, Jubilee, Armor, and X-23, often trying to ensure they are trained and capable but avoid the trauma he has experienced. Other writers besides Claremont have also highlighted his empathy. In a Larry Hama-penned issue, when Wolverine pauses an intense conversation with his old friend Heather Hudson to ask, "Are you happy?", she replies, "I know you asked that because you really care. Logan, you are the least self-involved mutant I have ever met!" (Hama and Nadeau 1994, p. 284). It is an illuminating insight into Wolverine's character that the most popular X-Man, so often a loner, is often presented as one of the most empathetic characters in the Marvel Universe.

This is one specific example of a larger narrative strategy to promote the power of empathy for both fictional characters and the real-world readers of the series.

3. Super Takeaway

The overarching theme that has developed in the X-Men franchise is that the villains are those who hate and attack others for being different, and the heroes love and protect those who are different. It sounds elementary, yet it is a sadly urgent message that everyone would be better off if we could look past our differences and abandon prejudice. In some ways, it is a simplistic moral, and in others, it is a powerful, evergreen call to action. P. Andrew Miller argues that one of the reasons for the X-Men's enduring popularity is "the reaffirmation of one of our greatest American myths, that of the melting pot," a concept that is "overly idealistic and certainly mythic, but has been a part of American culture since the beginning, and the X-Men will probably be a part of that culture for years to come" (Miller 2003, p. 290). Due to the constraints and expectations of the never-ending narrative presented in American superhero comic books—particularly those published by Marvel and DC—there are of course exceptions, deviations, and evolutions to these ideas that have appeared in print. Additionally, because the American comic book narrative structure must continue indefinitely, the X-Men's goal of a culture that achieves harmony between humans and mutants can never be achieved. American superhero comic books present the illusion of change without ever fully achieving that change. If, for a time, the X-Men achieve any sort of balance between humans and mutants, that will inevitably be undone for narrative exigencies.

The fact that the X-Men have been fighting this battle for decades and have never achieved this dream means that an additional theme has become implicit: those with power must continuously protect those without. Now, in the fictional pages of comic books, power may be optic blasts, the ability to control the weather, or a mutant healing factor. But for the readers of these adventures, power can take the form of privileged economic status, belonging to a social majority in a particular cultural context, speaking the same language as the arbiters of soft and hard power, or benefitting from a particular gender, ethnicity or race that operates with preferential status in specific situations. The X-Men teaches that the good guys have empathy, the bad guys have prejudice, and the good guys must use that empathy to protect the potential victims of prejudice. Amidst the fantastic imaginary superpowers that make up the Marvel Universe, the message of the X-Men is that empathy is a superpower that can be used in our real world. The series entertains readers with epic battles, soap opera relationships, and larger-than-life art. The reader holding the comics with action-packed panels can see a reminder that protecting, uplifting, and welcoming those around us is a very real choice that can make our world a better place. X-Men comic books provide an invitation for its fans to choose empathy over fear and understanding over division.

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