

Holy Burkas, Batman!

PROBING THE RISE OF MUSLIM COMIC BOOK SUPERHEROES

BY RICH BARLOW

IN 2009, IMAGE COMICS issued a comic book with a cover depicting Barack Obama landing a right cross on Osama bin Laden, priced at \$1. The presidential punch pales next to bin Laden's real-life end, but the al-Qaeda leader's demise made the Obama-Osama cover a collector's item that now sells for \$100.

For all their alien/underwater/superhuman evildoers, comics have on occasion borrowed villains from the real world, says comics expert A. David Lewis (GRS'11), who is studying for a doctorate in religion and literature. But Lewis sees a more surprising development than a bonanza for comic book collectors: the emergence of the Muslim superhero.

The year after 9/11, Marvel Comics introduced Dust, a Muslim "mutant," or superhuman member of the famed X-Men, only her eyes visible behind her niqab. Born in Afghanistan, she can change into a blinding, skin-shredding sandstorm.

Meanwhile, rival publisher DC Comics recently brought out Nightrunner, an Algerian Muslim immigrant recruited by Batman, drawing charges from some American readers that DC is PC. Batman, they groused, should have deputized a native Frenchman.

What's up with the new Islamic heroes? Religion, once taboo in comics, now

gives characters a foothold in readers' experience, says Lewis, who has written comics and graphic novels and edited *Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels*, a collection of scholarly essays. His doctoral dissertation details depictions of the afterlife in comics and other pop culture.

The comics are "already dealing with these incredibly fantastic characters: flying characters, alien characters, underwater characters," he says. "There's such a suspension of disbelief that they needed to ground them more in the readers' real world" with religious references. He points out that both the X-Men and Muslims are victimized minorities.

→ **RESCUE ME**
Comics expert A. David Lewis (GRS'11), a PhD candidate in religion and literature, studies Muslim superheroes like Dust (above). A member of the X-Men, Dust can change into a blinding sandstorm.



COURTESY OF MARVEL COMICS

For much of the Cold War, Lewis says, mainstream comics avoided religion and tended to use communists as real-life villains. Then the 1973 Arab oil embargo and the 1979–1981 Iranian hostage crisis turned the comics' gaze toward the Middle East, and the Incredible Hulk embarked on global adventures that included evil Arabs. But if that's your scenario, Lewis says, you "do also have to opt for at least...a token superhero," and in 1980, the Hulk series introduced the Arabian Knight, "our first headlining, Middle Eastern superhero," replete with a flying carpet and a scimitar that fired force beams and

could pierce anything. He lasted about five years. The comics' interest in Arab characters receded along with the price of oil in the '80s and the shift in national angst toward the rising economic sun of Japan. Then came 9/11. While American interest in Islam led to Muslim heroes, Muslim villains (fictional ones, anyway) have been rare, which Lewis attributes in part to publishers not wanting to muck with Islamophobia or to offend customers.

What's clear is that Muslims on the comics pages confront the conundrum of their human counterparts:

a community suspicious of them. "When Dust joins the X-Men, these persecuted American mutants don't really know if they can trust her," Lewis says. "The comic book creators can have it both ways. They can present an altruistic Muslim hero, but also reflect the Islamophobia." ■

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Watch a slideshow of comics images of Muslim superheroes at bu.edu/bostonia.



PHOTOGRAPH BY KALMAN ZABARSKY