

“What!? I’m an alien!?”

by Bill Jourdain

As Bryan Deemer and I were comparing podcasting notes at Heroes Con 2007, he told me about his grand adventure in launching Comics Now!. He mentioned that even though the new magazine would be focused on current comics, it would be great to have a feature exploring the roots of many of our modern characters. Being a fan of the Golden Age and producer of the “Golden Age of Comic Books” podcast, how could I resist? So, here I am, a fan of the current comics, but deeply rooted in the comics of our past. I hope you enjoy traveling back with me to learn about how many of these pop culture icons got their start in comics.

There’s really only one logical place to start exploring the comics of our past. While there are older comics and comics characters, the birth of the Golden Age

took place in the pages of Action Comics #1 (June, 1938) with the introduction of Superman. Baby Kal-El was rocketed into space by his parents while his home planet, Krypton, exploded into the ether. The rocket, with its precious, yet indestructible cargo made it safely to the outskirts of Smallville, Kansas, and was discovered by the kind and gentle Kents. They adopted the child, raised him into manhood, and the rest, as they say, is history, as Superman/Clark Kent burst onto the scene in all of his four-color glory. As Clark Kent, he was the mild-mannered reporter for Metropolis’ Daily Planet (the Daily Star in the early issues of Action Comics), and as Superman he became the champion of truth, justice and the American way.

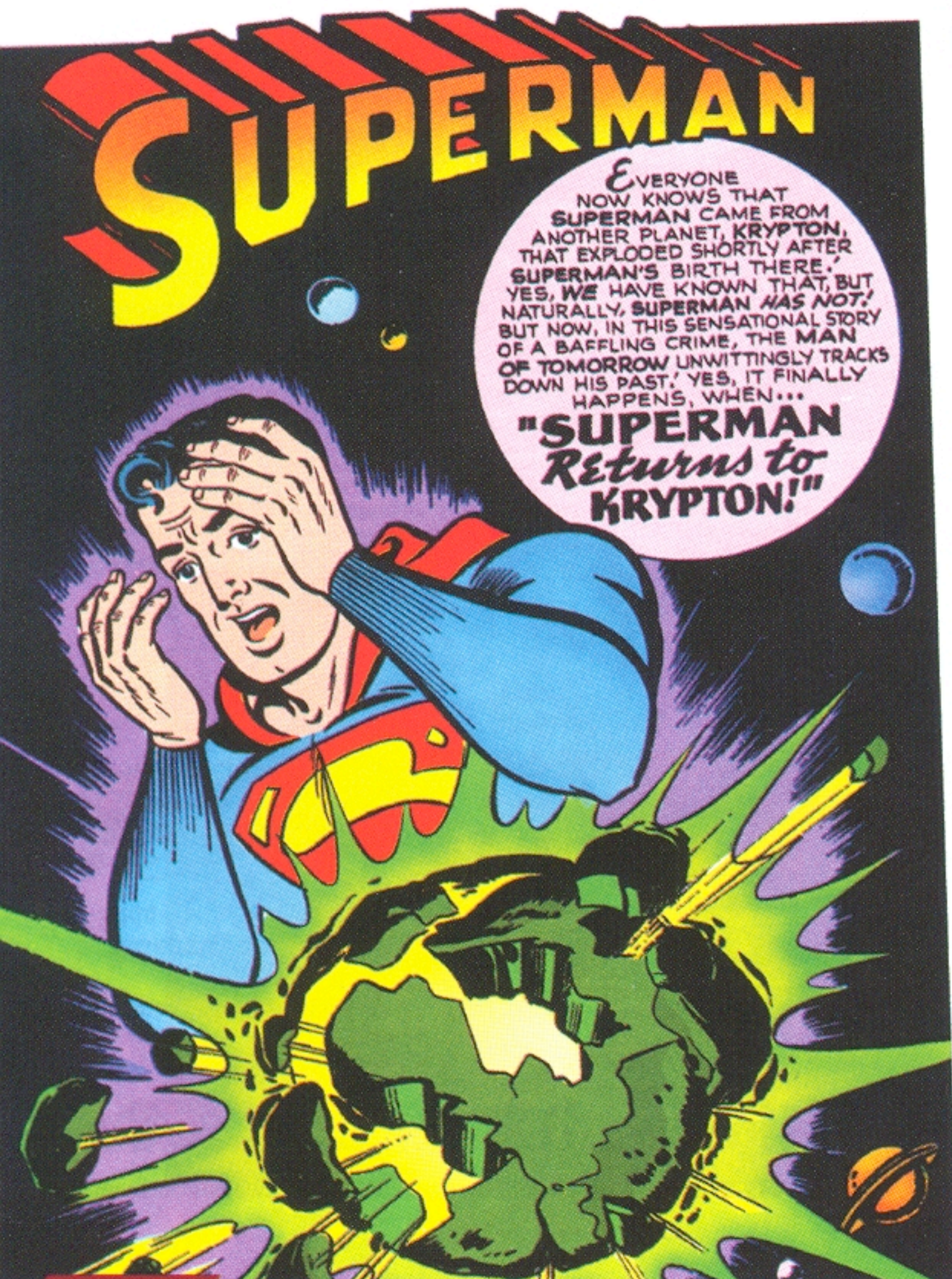
Volumes could be written exploring the origins of Superman and related characters, but to me, one of the most interesting aspects of Superman’s transition from Golden Age superhero into modern superstar is the story of how he learned of his own origins. Believe it or not, in his first decade in the pages of Action Comics, Superman, and World’s Finest Comics, he didn’t even know he came from another planet! That all changed in one landmark adventure in 1949 where Superman learned the truth of his past, and also

discovered a mysterious element that could render him powerless.

“...in his first decade (Superman) didn’t even know he came from another planet!”

The story takes place in the pages of Superman #61 (November-December, 1949) written by Bill Finger with art by Al Plastino (A year earlier, in Superman #53, Finger had penned the first detailed origin of Superman). The introduction to the story sets the stage by reminding readers that, “Everyone knows that Superman came from another planet, Krypton, that exploded shortly after Superman’s birth there! Yes, WE have known that, but naturally, SUPERMAN HAS NOT! But now, in this sensational story of a baffling crime, the Man of Tomorrow unwittingly tracks down his past! Yes, it finally happens, when . . . ‘SUPERMAN RETURNS TO KRYPTON!’”

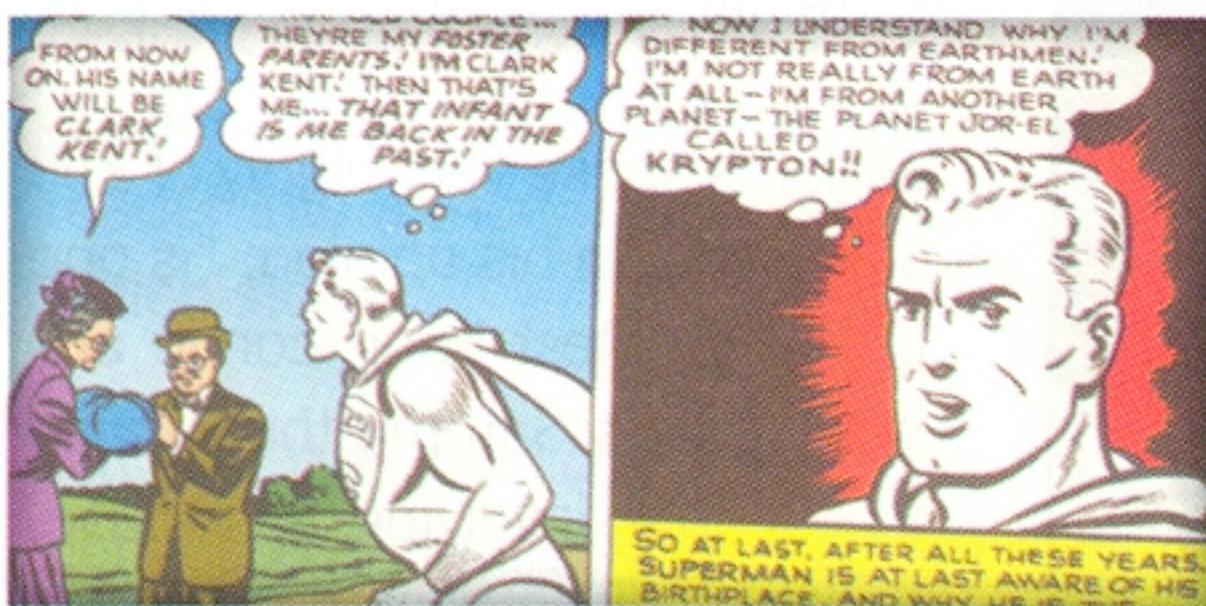
The story begins, like so many others, with Superman trailing Lois to make sure she stays out of trouble while attempting to expose a swami, Riva, as a fraud in the pages of the Planet. Riva is just another two-bit hood, but looks like a swami with his bejeweled turban perched proudly on his head. Riva discovers Lois is a reporter and is about to do her in when the Man of Tomorrow swoops into action through an open window. Out of desperation, Riva decides to put a fake “hex” on Superman to try to buy time to escape. That’s where the story gets interesting. As Riva attempts his hex, Super-



man becomes weak and feeble and an inadvertent blow landed by the swami knocks our hero out cold. While Lois tries to revive Superman, Riva gloats that he has the ultimate power and exits the room while vowing to make a fortune selling his abilities to the underworld to protect them from Superman.



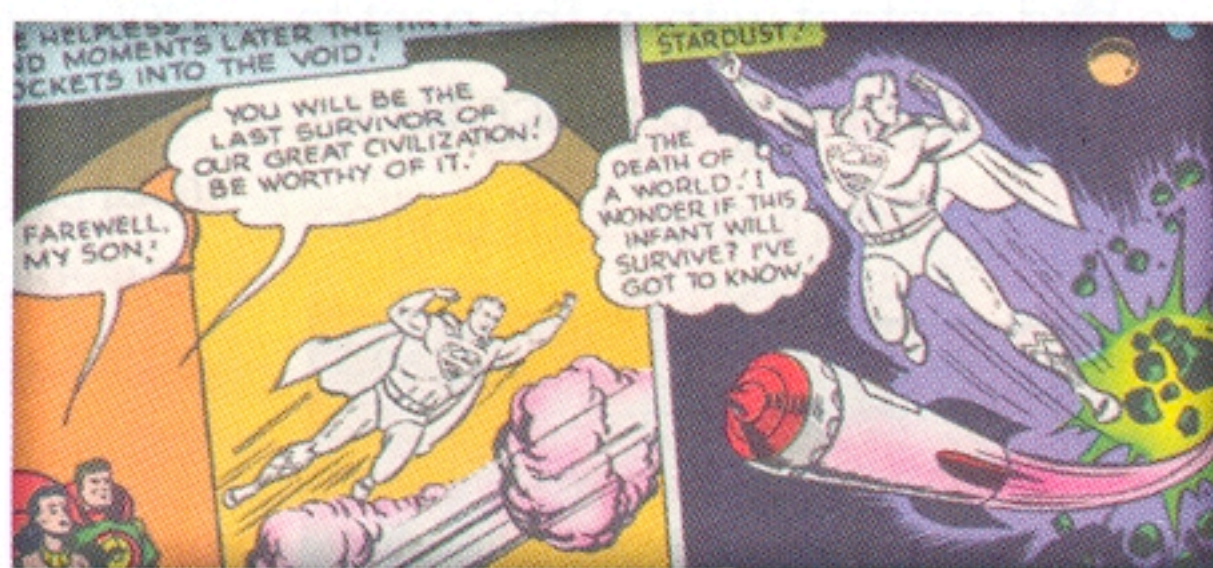
After a second encounter with Riva and his gang weakens Superman in a similar fashion to the first, the Man of Steel reasons that there must be something more to this than “just superstition.” He begins tracking Riva’s recent activities and learns that Riva has visited a jewelry store to purchase the cheap stone that



is the centerpiece of his turban. Not wanting to leave any “stone” unturned, Superman interviews the jeweler who shows Superman a much smaller specimen of the stone purchased by Riva.

As soon as our hero gets close to the small rock, he begins to weaken and almost passes out. Superman realizes that this stone, and Riva’s larger version, must be the key, and tracks the rocks to the mountains where he is told by the geologist who originally found the stones that based upon their properties, they must be meteorites.

Meteorites! Superman decides that the only way to solve this mystery is to follow the path of these space rocks back in time to their origin to learn why they have strange power over him. After traveling back faster than the speed of light, our hero arrives as a ghostly image of himself on an alien planet he has



never seen before. The planet is populated by an enlightened and

superior race of scientists. As Superman spies a man who “looks more like me than I do myself”, he discovers his name is Jor-El, and witnesses this man and his wife, Lara place their infant son in a rocket to launch him to safety as the planet begins to ex-

plode. Superman decides to follow the rocket to see if the infant within survives and soon watches it land on Earth in the path of a car being driven by none other than the Kents. In a moment of

“Super-Enlightenment”, Superman exclaims, “Now I understand why I’m different from Earthmen! I’m not really from Earth at all – I’m from another planet – the Planet Jor-El called KRYPTON!!” Our hero then reasons that the swami’s jewel must be made of fused atomic pieces of Krypton and therefore only harmful to him. Knowledge being power, he devises a plan, defeats Riva and sends both small pieces of his home world to the bottom of the river. Our story concludes with Superman wondering if other pieces of Krypton will ever again fall to Earth.

Whether or not you consider this one of the best Superman stories to come out of the Golden Age of comic books, it is certainly one of the most significant. Not only is it the first appearance of Kryptonite in the comic book adventures of Superman (it had been introduced in the Superman radio show several years earlier), but for the first time Superman learned exactly why he was “super”. This new self-awareness served as a milestone and forever changed the direction of Superman stories. Just think how it might have been if he had never learned of his Kryptonian heritage! But for this one story, over 50 years of Superman history and lore might have been drastically different, and the Superman stories we are reading now might never have been.

Thanks for traveling back with me to comics, then. **CN**

Bill Jourdain has been a comics fan and collector for over 30 years and loves the Golden Age of Comics. He produces the Golden Age of Comic Books Podcast that can be found on iTunes and at his web site, <http://www.goldenagecomics.org>.