

**The secret identity of Alvin Schwartz: The meek and mild man behind the Man of Steel reveals powers that make leaping over tall buildings child's play Sun Mar 1 1998 Page: D6 πIllustrations: Black & White Photo: John Major, The Ottawa Citizen / Alvin Schwartz**

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By Shelley Page

It is a long way from Metropolis to this snowbound bungalow in rural Ontario. And the man sitting in its cozy centre, he is no superhero, assuming we know what superheroes really look like. He is the tiniest of men: monk-like, small-chested, grey-haired, weak on one side of his body. And he is long past the age where he can leap even a fence. Still, if most of us weren't closed to the mysteries of this world, if we weren't hemmed in by preconceived notions about the way life works, we very well might look at this man (his name is Alvin Schwartz and he is 81) and notice a shadowy presence leaning over his shoulder -- an aura, if you will -- that looks very much like Superman. That's right. The Man of Steel. The alter ego of Alvin Schwartz.

The alter ego of us all.

This is the strangest of stories.

On the simplest level, Alvin Schwartz used to write comics back in the '40s and '50s, the Golden Age of Comics. He wrote Flash, the Green Lantern, Wonderwoman, Aquaman, mostly Batman, especially Superman. One day, after 18 years in the business, he stomped out of the Detective Comics offices because an editor ordered him to transfer Superman's powers to Lois Lane, which was something Mr. Schwartz felt Superman would never do. Mr. Schwartz turned his back on the funny business, and except for a few comics fans hunting anecdotes about X-ray vision and red kryptonite -- two of his inventions -- he was left alone.

But this is also a tale about Tibetan monks, expressionist painters, Hawaiian kahunas, quantum physicists, superheroes, and one especially insistent admirer, who sought Mr. Schwartz out a few years ago and encouraged him to explore his own special relationship with The Man of Steel. The stranger forced Mr. Schwartz to consider the power of the human imagination, and the possibility that our world is inhabited by ideas come alive: imaginary beings like Superman who take on a life of their own.

The experience led Mr. Schwartz to write a book, *An Unlikely Prophet, Revelations on the Path Without Form*, which is the story of a personal journey -- from heartfelt skepticism of things unseen, through the strange coincidences of his life, to accident and magic. The story is meant to

help us remember those moments in our lives that have touched the unknown and the unexplainable. To accept Mr. Schwartz's story is to suspend traditional western thinking.

The oldest living writer of Superman lives about an hour outside of Ottawa. As I drive in a snowstorm over bad roads and yawning stretches of white, I think of Mr. Schwartz's book and try to mine the strange coincidences of my own life: a chance meeting that changed my future, a person who seemed to be from another time, or moments when my imagination took flight and I became someone else. I can uncover none. My head is empty of magic, my imagination restricted to what would happen if I slid off the icy road into a ditch.

Still, Alvin Schwartz awaits.

He lives with his second wife, Kay, on a lonely road near Chesterville, a small town that exists mostly to supply workers to the big Nestle plant at its centre. Mr. Schwartz's bungalow is on the farthest edge of the factory and to get there, you must follow the chain-link fence to its end. It's an unlikely place for a house, as though set down by accident, a dare to collectors to just try to find him.

Mr. Schwartz is hospitable and welcoming, relishing a chance to talk about his life, his book. It has become popular among collectors, who gather at comic book conventions, but they aren't his intended audience. He wants his book read by people who are interested in taking a different path.

Inside, his home has the feel of a hip New York loft apartment. The walls are covered with expressionist works painted by himself and his first wife. As a young couple in New York in the '40s and '50s, they were friends with painters Jackson Pollack and Willem de Kooning. There are no traces of the superheroes with whom he was once so intimate, save one caricature of an elderly Mr. Schwartz in a Superman suit, with a superhero chest.

The bookshelves are lined with his favourites, including *Varieties of Religious Experience* by William James. In the book, James contends that most mystical or religious experience is genuine, but a scientific world -- with its objective, mechanical viewpoint -- hasn't left room for significant human experiences such as feeling, insight, intuition and love. Mr. Schwartz has turned to this book again and again to provide weight for his own mystical experiences.

Mr. Schwartz wants to immediately dive in at the deep end, and talk about unreal personalities, and the human imagination. It takes some serious pressure to force him back to the beginning, so a novice might have a chance at understanding.

So this is the beginning. "Writing comics is about the last thing I wanted to do," he says, with the faintest of New York accents.

In high school in New York, Mr. Schwartz started a literary magazine called *Mosaic* which published work by such literary figures as Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. When he was 18, he finished his first novel but during the Depression he had learned that a fledgling writer couldn't make money writing. And he was hungry. In 1940, a friend told

him of an opening at Detective Comics. He began writing Batman, and after his third strip, he was judged a natural. Soon, at 23, he was writing for all the big strips – The Flash, Aquaman, and Wonderwoman, churning out 10-week stretches of syndicated newspaper strips (\$65 for six dailies, \$35 per Sunday) as well as intricately plotted comic book stories (\$125).

As writing goes, it was surprisingly difficult, requiring serious semantic acrobatics. At the end of every three panels, there had to be a cliff-hanger that couldn't interrupt the story line. The dialogue had to remain natural, but still recap the story for those who had missed a day. The dialogue also had to be tight, so it didn't crowd out the pictures.

In the autumn of 1944, Mr. Schwartz was called into the boss's office and asked to take on Superman, the only major superhero Mr. Schwartz hadn't tackled. He bristled.

"I always said Superman was the only comic strip I never read. I found it boring," he recalls. Each story would end the same: Superman's superpowers would solve every problem. Mr. Schwartz preferred to write stories about more realistic people and focus on plot and character. Besides, if he thought Superman dull, Clark Kent was pure sleeping potion.

Mr. Schwartz left the DC office on Lexington Avenue, and crossed the street to the little Chock Full o' Nuts sandwich shop. For an hour he mulled over the Superman question. As he sat there, he noticed "one of the most ordinary-looking people I had ever seen." In *An Unlikely Prophet*, Mr. Schwartz describes the man as "vapid as the thin cheese-and-nut sandwich he was almost daintily munching on." The man seemed so relaxed in his anonymity. He reminded Mr. Schwartz of Clark Kent, and he wondered if there might be something "necessary about Clark's blandness." Maybe in the "ordinariness of each of us there was a place of rest, of relief," an escape from everyday pressures. If each of us had a Clark Kent component, he wondered, could we also each have a part that was pure Superman? He knew of many outwardly ordinary people who had inexplicable gifts and capacities: A post office worker who infallibly predicted the weather several days in advance; a woman who experienced Mozartian flashes of music in her head; a mother who knew when any member of her family was in trouble.

"I thought that if my boss let me do the stories my way and explore the obvious divide between the ordinary and extraordinary in Superman, I could make the comic strip really special," Mr. Schwartz recalls. "It would be more than just a monster punch 'em up."

He also felt that a "super man" should be used to educate lesser men. Was that too lofty a goal for a comic?

Mr. Schwartz wrote Superman for 14 years. Back then, writers didn't receive a credit for their work, but a recent analysis of style and content of all the major comics has determined who wrote what. Rich Morrissey, an American comics expert, credits Mr. Schwartz with inventing red kryptonite, introducing Bizarro, Superman's imperfect double, with teaming Superman and Batman to launch the pair in a series, creating Superman's heat vision, and extending Superman's ability to leap tall buildings in a single bound to flying.

"In recent years, people have looked more and more for humanity in comic book characters," says Mr. Morrissey, who has interviewed Mr. Schwartz extensively for a book. "Superman/Clark Kent had a great deal of genuine humanity from the beginning." He credits Mr. Schwartz.

To make the strip challenging, Mr. Schwartz researched advances in physics and ideas in metaphysics and wove them through the plots. For a strip in 1945, involving Professor Duste, Mr. Schwartz described how a cyclotron might be used to create a big bang. Mr. Morrissey confirms that DC was investigated by the FBI which thought the instructions might have been a leak from the Manhattan Project.

Mr. Schwartz rode the subway with another writer, Bill Finger, and watched the people who read the comics. Most were poor. Many were immigrants, or children. One time, he was plotting a storyline with Mr. Finger, who wrote mostly Batman, in Washington Square Park. The two writers were discussing a Batman scenario and were overheard by some children playing nearby. Soon, all the children in the playground were gathered round, listening breathlessly.

In the years after the Depression and before the Second World War, humanism seemed to be supplanting religion and fewer people seemed to believe in God. But "without God, who were people going to believe in, dream about, fantasize about?" Mr. Schwartz wondered.

Superheroes flourished, he says, because they represented a kind of "degraded religious symbol - an avatar for the underprivileged and the dispossessed."

While many of the superheroes had special powers, (Aquaman's ability to stay under water, for example), Superman was the first all-powerful character. His omnipotence extended far beyond the stamp-sized boxes where his image appeared each day.

When the war started, the circulation of Superman comics skyrocketed. Millions of copies of each Superman comic were printed every month, and half went to soldiers overseas. "No one was more lacking in choice than a conscript soldier in the midst of a war, no one needed a god more," says Mr. Schwartz.

While Mr. Schwartz was writing Superman, he spent long hours worrying over the superhero's actions. "We would say things like 'Superman would never do that,'" he said. "We could never make him act out of character. We all knew how he would react in every situation."

It was as if Superman had become a real person. And for Mr. Schwartz, this was his first encounter with an idea come alive, although he didn't think of it this way until years later.

Mr. Schwartz was endlessly fascinated about the relationship between Clark Kent and Superman. He laughs now at how far the writers would go to protect Clark's secret identity. In Superman's Search for Clark Kent, for example, Superman suffers from amnesia, doesn't know Clark is his other identity, and when Clark is reported missing, Superman sets out to try to find him. All trails lead mysteriously back to himself.

Throughout these years, Mr. Schwartz pursued his literary dreams. His first novel titled *The Blowtop*, came out in 1948, and was described by *The New York Times* as the "the first conscious existentialist novel in America." A reporter from *The New Yorker* wanted to know how Mr. Schwartz managed to write both Superman and philosophical novels, keeping the two apart.

"I told him I had two different coloured workrooms separated by a phone booth. I just passed through the phone booth and switched suits." The flippant response didn't make the magazine and Mr. Schwartz lost needed publicity. Years later, he came to believe that if he had taken the question seriously, he might have understood much more quickly that the character he had helped create had somehow taken on a life of its own.

In 1958, a new editor at DC Comics, with whom he had clashed, ordered Mr. Schwartz to write a story in which Superman loses his powers and Lois Lane gets them.

"I argued strongly against it. I argued that Superman would never do that, he would never give his power to Lois, who did not know how to handle it. It was stupid."

The editor insisted.

"I wrote the story, turned it in and walked out." Mr. Schwartz never wrote a comic again.

Mr. Schwartz pauses in the telling of his story, retops his coffee, and graciously accepts a plate of cheese and crackers from his wife. He cups his bearded chin, and asks earnestly, "Can I get on to the strange things now?" He's been talking for more than two hours. It must be time.

After leaving DC Comics, Mr. Schwartz, despite being 40 and having no business experience, immediately landed a job as research director at the Reuben H. Donnelley Corporation, a contest manager and direct mailer of price-off coupons. Over the next several decades, Mr. Schwartz easily made five major career changes, from advertising to direct mail to writing documentaries. His second wife, Kay, was Canadian and in 1969, he came to Canada with her (along with their five kids) where he researched and wrote 30 docu-dramas for the National Film Board.

But from the moment he left Superman behind -- or at least he thought he had -- he began to encounter, or recall people he'd met, who seemed to be from another dimension.

In those first scary days of unemployment, he had gone to an employment agency, and was directed by a 30-something, former school teacher-turned-placement officer to the Donnelley Corporation. A couple of years later, when Mr. Schwartz was job hunting again, he returned to the building where the agency had been, only to find it gone. He made some inquiries, and found out it had never existed. Who sent him for the job?

Once, in Hawaii, he had a strange encounter with an old man in a funny cap and a flashy shirt who did odd jobs around the hotel. The man, who called himself Harry, claimed that Superman had saved the islands 2,000 years earlier. He wouldn't budge from his story, despite Mr. Schwartz's skepticism and a lengthy debate. On parting, he said to Mr. Schwartz: "One day,

you'll find out for yourself what thinking can do. The power of thought is sometimes more than the thinker." As an example, Harry told Mr. Schwartz that many angels were constantly being created on Earth by lost and needy people creating in their minds.

As Harry walked away, Mr. Schwartz thought: "When strange and wondrous things happen, and they do happen to each of us, we suppose that we'll never forget them. But we do indeed forget. Because the dust gathers every night. If we wish to hold on to those wondrous experiences, we have to make an effort to do so."

Another time, Mr. Schwartz and a friend held a meeting, similar to a seance, where they summoned a dead relative, who wrote out commands through a pencil the two of them held. While this mystical event began to convince Mr. Schwartz that the world was not how it appeared on the surface, he pushed this and the other experiences from his mind. Still, he sometimes returned to Superman, trying to answer the question posed by The New Yorker reporter years earlier. What was his own special relationship with Superman?

Mr. Schwartz studied what the German philosopher Hegel had written about Jesus Christ, the original superhero. In *The Spirit of Christianity*, Hegel wrote that Jesus's miracles were a product of his anger -- that Jesus had been in such an elevated state that he burned up the countryside with them, not just in the destruction of the fig tree but even in the cures he wrought. Hegel argued it had been impossible for Jesus to remain in that state for long without burning up his earthly shell.

As Mr. Schwartz saw it, this must be the same for most people who perform great acts. They must return to their Clark Kent self. Hegel's writings also explained Batman, who Mr. Schwartz came to see as the manifestation of Bruce Wayne's anger, the anger of a boy who had seen his parents murdered and was driven to avenge them. Wayne realized he would destroy himself if he remained in perpetual anger, so he created a secret self, a vessel for his anger.

Mr Schwartz contemplated the meaning of Superman in the modern era, but mostly he kept his ideas to himself, a forgotten relic of the Golden Age.

In 1989, he was unexpectedly asked to speak to a class in children's literature at Concordia University. The professor regularly invited such icons as Big Bird to her class, so when one of her students mentioned that his father once wrote Superman comics, she issued the invitation. That was the first time Mr. Schwartz spoke publicly of how Superman, the imaginary creation of a group of writers, had evolved into an archetype or icon. '

'We all thought we were directing Superman. But we were all just his pawns," he said. Superman became an archetype because he was godlike, an otherworldly character caught between the Great Depression and the Second World War. People came to see something of themselves in the superhero. Superman appeared in a crisis, in the same way that people gain superhuman strength when freeing someone from a car wreck or racing into a burning building to save a baby. Clark Kent, on the other hand, symbolized a single higher function of Superman -- the rational mind. Kent was the "conforming, self-conscious mass man, completely anonymous, the split-off rational portion" of the superman.

We all have a Superman part to ourselves, but according to Mr. Schwartz this "Superman self" is not something we can live in all the time. "It's a far too heightened level of the personality. Sustaining it for too long could burn one out very quickly, and possibly do the same to those around you."

After Mr. Schwartz spoke to his son's class, he wrote *The Real Secret of Superman's Identity*, a paper that was published in the journal *Children's Literature*. Suddenly, Mr. Schwartz was back.

He was like a superhero sketched back into a strip after a premature death. Comic book aficionados began calling. He was invited to conventions, where he saw nostalgic baby boomers clutching dog-eared copies of Superman for him to autograph.

One day in 1994, a man who had seen the article in *Children's Literature* telephoned. "Are you the Superman writer?" the voice asked.

Mr. Schwartz was ready to dismiss the caller as just another comics fan until the questions took a strange turn, which he records in the opening passages of *An Unlikely Prophet*. '

'In that lecture you treated Superman in a very special way, did you not? ... As though he were alive and not merely a creature of the imagination ... That he had a life of his own. A most striking insight.'

"I didn't mean it literally," replied Mr. Schwartz, who then tried to get off the phone. "No -- no-- don't dismiss me like that. You're my best hope. Since I happen to be in a similar state."

"What similar state?"

"Like Superman ... I am an idea become real. And you are the only one I have encountered in years who seems capable of grasping such a possibility."

Mr. Schwartz pretty much hung up on the strange caller. But two days later, a lanky man in a beat-up raincoat with a bicycle appeared at Mr. Schwartz's summer home in Westchester, N.Y., claiming to have pedalled the 60 kilometres from New York City.

The visit was the start of the strangest experience of Mr. Schwartz's life. The man introduced himself as Thongden, a monk.

He also described himself as a tulpa, or a living human created by pure thought. Thongden was a split-off part of the imagination of an British academic named Everett Nelson, who spent many years in Tibet. It was Nelson who "thought up" Thongden and eventually Thongden broke free into an autonomous being.

Tulpas are said to be very common in Tibet, but as Thongden explained to Mr. Schwartz, tulpas can exist anywhere the powers of the imaginations are exercised. It's safe to say they're not

created very often in North America, where imagination is often restricted by a diet of sitcoms and talk shows.

Mr. Schwartz wanted to know why Thongden had sought him out.

"You cannot spend 15 years of your life concentrating on an archetypal figure like Superman and then walk away from it, leaving your relationship unresolved."

When Thongden left, Mr. Schwartz sat at his kitchen table utterly confused. "Superman's lingering influence on my life was just on the verge of revealing itself to me."

Thongden told Mr. Schwartz that he had his own personal Superman. "The very first time I walked into your kitchen, I saw a faint image of Superman standing over your shoulder, watching you."

Thongden offered a totally new interpretation of Mr. Schwartz's life: each time Mr. Schwartz had landed a job for which he was underqualified, he had drawn on his personal Superman; Mr. Schwartz had quit DC Comics because he had refused to "trivialize" the superhero he had created in his imagination. "Everyone is surrounded by remnants of old thoughts and the partial materializations that result from them." Mr. Schwartz just needed some help fully experiencing his creation.

What Thongden said seemed "right. He recalled all the strange events and coincidences of his life: the employment agency that wasn't really there; the ghost writer in his pencil; Harry, the Hawaiian. Could these be tulpas of some sort?

Mr. Schwartz said to his wife, Kay: "I find myself remembering all sorts of odd stories I've heard over the years that just have no explanation. We gloss over them. We don't want to focus on all that stuff. The world just gets too bizarre." She suggested that he was hallucinating, that maybe Thongden came to him because of stress.

After that first meeting Mr. Schwartz tracked down Thongden in New York, where they talked for hours. Mr. Schwartz started to let his imagination go, and take what Thongden called the "path without form."

Longing to fly like Superman, Mr. Schwartz's mind left his body and entered a fly, which buzzed around a diner. Then he became an ostrich, and then an entire flock of exotic birds. What he thought of as "I" became incredibly plastic. Years fell away and he found himself running down the street after a beautiful young woman, as if he inhabited a Superman strip. He found himself at a carnival on a spinning airplane ride with the beautiful brunette. As the speed of the ride picked up, he felt the ride jam, and he knew there was going to be a horrible crash. To save himself and the others on the ride, he knew he had to summon his own superman, but to do so required great powers of imagination.

So he let himself go.

"I felt the fall of our plane being cushioned, then eased slowly down, while at the same time I felt myself bracing the collapsing shaft, all 50 tons of buckling steel, and lowering it gently to the ground. Then I found myself standing on the outside of a small crowd that had gathered around," he writes in his book.

He finally understood what Superman was in each of us. "Everything that had to do with my being alive was concentrated on the need of that moment," he adds. "The highest point of individual consciousness. He's totally fixed on a single point. His one defining act -- his rescue mission."

After Mr. Schwartz finally experienced his own Superman, he retreated to his everyday self, elated. Like all writers, he saw this personal experience as a book. It wouldn't be a self-help book for those looking for their own personal tulpa, but a story with a message.

"My experience has taught me that you don't have to look for things, if you are simply attentive, if you watch the world around you, things will happen," he says, drawing back from his tale.

He repeats a line from his book: "In the face of unbending rationality we need to be reminded to wipe away the dust that so quickly obscures our second vision."

The book is a challenge to skeptics to see the world in a different way. As Thongden said to him once: "On the path without form, you don't have to carry your prejudices with you."

Prejudices. How does one escape from them?

I contemplate this monkish man, whose hands are clasped in pseudo-prayer. I can only think of one question and it is a skeptic's. "Did Thongden really come to visit you?"

"Of course." His eyes are twinkling.

When I pack up, he wishes me good luck in the writing. Good luck in my own journey.

Driving home in the snow, I try to recall people who were created by the strength of my imagination, coincidences that led me to good fortune. My recently deceased grandmother in my room with me at night telling me a joke? Or someone like Santa Claus? Is he a tulpa, or just advertising?

I turn the car around and head back to Chesterville, to put this question to Mr. Schwartz. I follow first the icy road, and then the chain link fence along the Nestle plant. When I get to its end, I look for the his driveway, but it isn't there. Neither is his house.

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