

ASK AN AUTHOR  
» KIM ECHLIN

**Lance Johnston from Kingston, Ont.:** I absolutely loved *The Disappeared*. I'm wondering if you've ever travelled to Cambodia or that part of the world, and what hope you hold out for Cambodia under Hun Sen's rule?

**Kim Echlin:** Well, I travelled in Cambodia for a short time with a medical research group working on inoculation programs for children. During my visit to Cambodia, I was moved by the various memorials to those lost during the Khmer Rouge time, almost 30 years before. From large museums such as Tuol Sleng in Phnom Penh to small, hand-written signs nailed to a tree out in the countryside, people expressed a powerful will to "not forget." Of course, *The Disappeared* is a work of fiction; every country has stories of injustice, and "disappeared," including Canada. The work to protect freedom is ongoing.

**Maxine F. from Canada writes:** I'm wondering why you chose to set the story in Montreal and Cambodia. Do the two places hold a special interest for you?

**K.E.:** I liked the idea of a setting in Montreal in the 1970s, where many languages and cultures were coming together, where the intersection of linguistic and political rights and responsibilities were being explored against a backdrop of rock music and the actions of the FLQ.

The lovers meet in Montreal, in relative peace. Their love is tested in the world they move into, one that includes familial dissent, war, great loss in Cambodia, death and ongoing injustice. Montreal and Cambodia could stand for a great many places.

**B.K. from Toronto:** Did you ever struggle with whether writing this book gave undue notice to the Pol Pot regime or do you feel that, ultimately, moving on is impossible without continued remembrance of this time in Cambodia's history?

**K.E.:** This is a very important reflection. So many people I talk to about *The Disappeared* have told me personal stories of their own, or their family's, struggles with oppressive regimes, and the question of when and how to remember comes up over and over again. After the Second World War, the philosopher and musicologist Theodor Adorno famously wrote, "To still write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric." Many years later, he softened this, saying, "Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as the tortured have to scream."

In no way do I think that witnessing to atrocity through art gives undue notice to perpetrators. But I can see that sometimes it takes years for people to be able to hear the stories.

There are some beautifully written and devastating memoirs of the Khmer Rouge years from Cambodia, as well as theatre, dance and music. We have stories from Mao's China that the Chinese call "Scar literature," and memoirs and literature from Argentina and Chile called *testimonio*.

Each group's story is particular. But a common thread that connects all of them is the belief that people affirm themselves through storytelling.

**Cassie Milton from Canada:** Your PhD thesis was on the translation of Ojibwa stories. How did your studies on native storytelling influence your own writing?  
**K.E.:** I began to study Ojibwa and Ojibwa stories out of sheer love of stories and language and the land I come from. As my study deepened, I became more aware of how stories reveal us to each other. The values that are expressed in Ojibwa stories are profound, and in many ways cannot be "explained" as well as they are shown in stories.

## ON THE WEB

An unedited version of this column can be viewed at [globeandmail.com/books](http://globeandmail.com/books).

## POPULAR CULTURE

## BECOMING BATMAN

*The Possibility of a Superhero*  
By E. Paul Zehr  
Johns Hopkins University Press, 300 pages, \$35.50

## ON TARZAN

By Alex Vernon  
University of Georgia Press, 226 pages, \$28.95

## THE SOPRANOS

By Dana Polan  
Duke University Press, 217 pages, \$21.95

REVIEWED BY ROSEMARY COUNTER

## Superheroes, supervillains

Journey always says it best: *Just a city boy, born and raised in south Detroit. He took the midnight train goin' anywhere.* Only the top-selling iTunes track of all time, Steve Perry's power ballad has even the hardest of rockers tearing up at the belief in possibilities.

And speaking of possibilities, "Who hasn't wanted to become a superhero?" University of British Columbia professor E. Paul Zehr asks in *Becoming Batman*. Truthfully, Paul, I've never really thought about it. But I realize that for a large percentage of the (male) population, this is a pressing and valid concern. There's just something about superheroes that men can't stop believing.

"It's my goal to use my extensive knowledge of science and martial arts to explore the scientific possibility of becoming Batman," says the neuroscientist, kinesiologist and – get ready for this – black belt martial artist. Merging all kinds of nerd-doms, Zehr has written the newest escapist fantasy for freaks and geeks everywhere.

Starting with regular guy Bruce Wayne (or even with you), Zehr calculates body mass indexes and body shape (bigger than Lance Armstrong but not as big as a certain California governor). Compared with the clever invention of Bob Wayne, Bruce's lazier, beer-drinking, office-dwelling twin, we learn genetic predisposition versus exercise performance and the effects of crime-fighting on the mind and body.

Sound hard? It is. Like *Magic School Bus's* Ms. Frizzle before him, Zehr uses balloons and bathtubs to make science fun in the manner of Grade 9 biology. But, like Grade 9 biology, it's all too easy for your eyes to glaze over between aerobic energy charts – even if they are about Batman's fight with Killer Croc – only to wake up and find yourself lost.

But even to a science dropout who has never even read a comic (more emphasis on the movies would have helped my understanding), *Becoming Batman* has its charms. Like with your zany prof who spouts the joys of physics while failing to notice he has stepped in the garbage can, or in this case worn his costume to school, Zehr's enthusiasm is infectious, albeit quirky – full of boo-worthy jokes ("Dorothy, we're not in the Batcave any more") and serious points to ponder ("Is Batman a ninja?").

If that last question actually enthralled you, *Becoming Batman* is your next step to super-cool. If not, Zehr's book makes a perfect gift that isn't a tie for your boyfriend or brother. I have three (brothers, not boy-friends), for whom Batman is as real as the looming zombie apocalypse, with this science superhero hybrid in their birthday futures.

Not all superheroes are doing so well, however; poor Tarzan has seen more popular days. In *On Tarzan*, English professor Alex Vernon charts the rise and fall of the – stop me if you've heard this one – vine-swinging aristocratic orphan raised by apes. Surprise, surprise: Like the works of Conrad and Kipling, Burroughs's original 1914 *Tarzan of the Apes* (and its, count 'em, 23 sequels) is all kinds of racist, sexist, imperialist, colonialist.

Vernon excels at historical context, weaving Tarzan's countless reincarnations into everything from the Nazis to Vietnam. He links Tarzan's literary birth, at the apex of the greatest immigrant influx in U.S. history, to the United States' "fantasy of the self-made man ... the narcissistic orphan fantasy of early adolescence, maybe even of the perpetually adolescent America."

Vernon is always quick to point to the flaws in his own arguments, reminding us that from *Oliver Twist* to Harry Potter to, uh, Batman, orphan stories have reigned supreme for much longer than the United States has. So while Tarzan is and is not a metaphor, he also "is a noble and a savage. He is

and isn't an immigrant. ... He is and isn't educated. ... He is and isn't a youth, is and isn't a mature adult."

So what is he? Vernon can't make up his mind. And with a vast wealth of material from which to pick and choose – from the n-word-happy original series and follow-up comic book to the hyper-censored 1950s films and the Disney kid-friendly cartoon (you might say the movie never ends, it just goes on and on and on and on) – Vernon can explore it all without any definitive results.

My favourite chapter to giggle through by far is a homoerotic analysis called *Monkey Business*, hurling gems such as: "Male readers watch with Jane, admiring and maybe even desiring the muscles on that great big penis of a man." Just imagine how Vernon feels about those bananas.

Some arguments are sexier than others, but Vernon proves one thing: Tarzan is what we make him. Each reincarnation is evidence of its time, but also of Tarzan's timelessness for believers everywhere. The ability to invent – and reinvent – yourself is an alluring fantasy fit for kings of the jungle and boys at home.

Though you might not find him in a loincloth, wise guy Tony Soprano has murdered his way into boy-crushes everywhere. Hailed as the "greatest work of American popular culture of the last quarter century" by *The New York Times*, HBO's second-favourite show



Christian Bale as Batman and Katie Holmes as Rachel Dawes in *Batman Begins*: Author Paul Zehr's enthusiasm is infectious, albeit quirky.

has, like *The Godfather* and *Goodfellas*, a special place in the heart of male worship.

Film and TV scholar Dana Polan examines the mass appeal of this modern antihero in his creatively titled analysis, *The Sopranos*. Polan starts at the end with the now-infamous 2007 non-ending, where you-know-what blaring on a blank screen left millions of boys feeling as if they had been dumped on prom night.

How could anyone be so cruel? Polan has a few theories: Is it a tribute to modernist European art cinema? Or, more skeptically, a set-up for sure commercial success on the big screen? Or has irony struck again?

Polan picks the latter, citing new media's metatextual interaction between writers, viewers and the Sopranos themselves. And, yes, there's plenty of semiotic jargon that Tony Soprano would scoff at. (When Tony's shrink, on Proust, says "that one bite unleashed a tide of memories of his childhood and ultimately his entire life," Tony retorts, "That sounds very gay.")

Between comparing *The Sopranos* with the good old days of *Leave it to Beaver* and turning his nose up at network TV, cable snob Polan somehow captures the show's smug 'tude – and its undermining – through dramatic plot retellings. Needless to say, a warn-

ing to readers who plan to watch the show: Polan reveals every twist and turn with enough glee and vigour that you might think he had penned the scripts himself.

Which is maybe the point: Polan loves Tony Soprano, Vernon enjoys a man in leopard print and Zehr wants to be Batman when he grows up. We may never understand the undying belief that surrounds superhero lore, but you gotta tip your hat to their enthusiasm. And who am I to judge? This small-town girl cried at *America's Next Top Model*.

» When fighting crime, Rosemary Counter writes a pop culture column on [www.shedoesthcity.com](http://www.shedoesthcity.com).

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*Chasing A Mirage: The Tragic Illusion of an Islamic State*

by TAREK FATAH (John Wiley & Sons Canada, Ltd.)

*Fixing the Future: How Canada's Usually Fractious Governments Worked Together to Rescue the Canada Pension Plan*

by BRUCE LITTLE (Rotman/University of Toronto Press Publishing)

*The Limits of Boundaries: Why City-regions Cannot be Self-governing*

by ANDREW SANCTON (McGill-Queen's University Press)

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