

‘My dad was Superman’

As a boy, David Weiss believed he’d fly. After all, his father was the model for the comic-strip superhero. By **Tim Teeman**

David Weiss’s earliest imagining was: “I’m the son of Superman and I will grow up able to fly.” This was no infant fancy, but rooted in a delicious, real event. In 1945, four years before David was born, his father, Stanley, was walking in Green Mansions, a lake resort in upstate New York, when he was approached by Joe Shuster, with whom Jerry Siegel had created Superman seven years earlier. Shuster told him: “I’ve been drawing Superman from my mind’s eye but you look more like him than anyone I’ve ever seen. Can I draw you?”

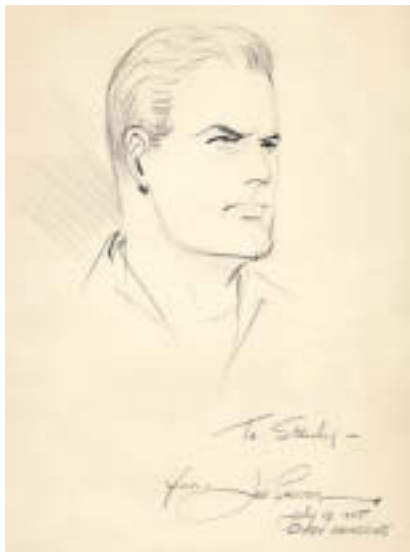
“Sure,” Weiss said. Shuster gave Weiss two sketches, one signed and dated, and the men went on their way. Through this meeting Stanley became the living, breathing incarnation of Superman. The rarely shown sketches were displayed yesterday, for one day only, at *Superman at 75: Celebrating America’s Most Enduring Hero* at the Centre for Jewish History in New York. The anniversary of Superman’s comic-strip birth, in April 1938 (with a dateline of June), will be bombastically marked by the release of *Man of Steel*, starring Henry Cavill as Superman, on June 14. While alive, Stanley made little fuss about the drawings. “He wasn’t flamboyant,” reveals David, 63, who lives in Boston. “I never saw him strike a Superman pose, he never wore the Superman T-shirt I gave him in my



teens. I think he said, ‘How much money did you waste on that?’ My father didn’t parade it.”

Stanley married David’s mother in 1947, and David remembers the sketches on the wall of his childhood home. “I’m certain that was my mother’s doing,” he previously told *The New York Times*. “It seemed a bigger deal to her, but that still doesn’t mean either of them considered it a big deal. The Jewish family culture I grew up in had a fundamental modesty.”

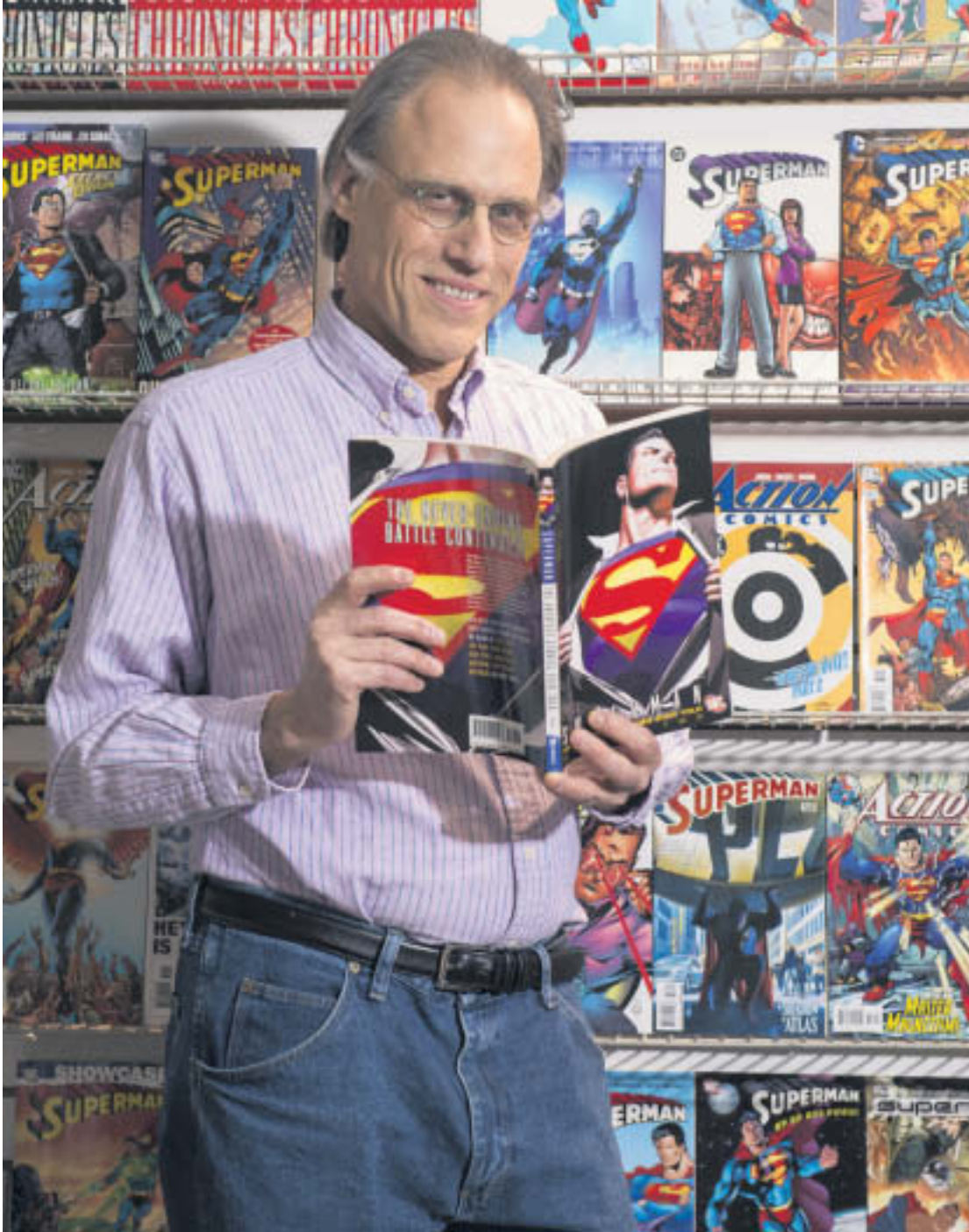
David tells me that it was only after checking out two *Superman* strips from the DC Comics archive, from before and after Shuster met Stanley, that he recently deduced “that meeting with



my father influenced Shuster to draw Superman to look like my father”. He once met Christopher Reeve, the *Superman* actor, who said: “You should hold on to those — they’re probably worth a lot.” David admits if the drawings are worth \$50,000 or more he may sell them. “If not, I’ll loan them to museums. There’s no value in holding on to them. My dad would have absolutely agreed with that.”

His father’s story and beliefs dovetail with those of Superman. “Never do that which, if everyone did it, would destroy society,” he once told his son. Photos taken of Stanley, two years before Shuster’s sketching, show a muscular, broad-chested 21-year-old in

RICK FRIEDMAN, POLARIS, TIMES PHOTOGRAPHY, AP



Above, David Weiss. Above left, the Shuster sketch of his father Stanley alongside the first Superman comic from 1939. Below right, David with his father in the 1950s

swimming trunks. In a suit, shirt and tie, he is a suitably dorky Clark Kent. When looking at the sketches, David laughs: “That’s definitely Superman, but is it my father?” Born of East European Jewish immigrants, “engaging and gregarious” Stanley grew up in Springfield,

Massachusetts. He was devastated when, after Pearl Harbour, he could not enlist because of a heart defect.

Stanley joined his father-in-law’s furniture business. And your dad was Superman, I remark. “I wasn’t blown away by it,” David says. “This was in my life before I was born. Growing up, there was my dad, the Superman in comics and the one on TV played by George Reeves. The difference was I knew Superman wasn’t real; my father was the real Superman.” The TV superhero “indoctrinated” the young David with the values of the era, alongside the cowboy influences of the Lone Ranger and Roy Rogers. His father worked all hours but didn’t change into a red cape and blue tights to save the world. “He was proud to help run a business that helped support other families,” David recalls.

Like Superman, he was a paragon. “Honesty was absolute. When I was 8 or 9 I took some coins . . . and got caught. So it was pants [trousers] down, then the belt. It was not done with malice: I had broken a basic rule of conduct. Among the things I learnt from my father were respect and honour. He taught me that treating people with disrespect says more about you than it does about them.”

At college David took drugs, which upset his father. While there were complexities to their relationship, “he was a good guy; he loved me, I loved him. There were years that the relationship was strained. He worked hard to provide for his family. He was a product of his generation.”

In his mid-20s David and his father went ‘toe to toe, like elephants bellowing at each other’ when Stanley asked his son why he hadn’t graduated yet. However, Stanley didn’t begrudge his son receiving a medical deferment to prevent him serving in Vietnam. The true Superman was also a gentle patriot. “After Nixon was elected he said he hadn’t voted for him, but this was his country, this was his President and we all needed him to succeed.”

In 1978, the year of the first *Superman* movie starring Reeve, Stanley, aged 57, was dying of heart disease. As his condition worsened, David graduated; he asked a nurse to tell his father, who, wittily, gasped: “When?”

For Larry Tye, author of *Superman: The High-Flying History of America’s Most Enduring Hero*, the drawings of Stanley underline Superman’s status as a consciously drawn Jewish hero. Superman made his debut during the dark ascendancy of Nazi persecution in the 1930s. His Kryptonian name, Kal-El, resembles the Hebrew for “voice/vessel of God”. His physique echoes the Jewish strongman Siegmund Breitbart and figures such as Samson and the golem. “Then, by chance,” Tye says, “Shuster sees a Jew, Stanley, who is the Superman he has been drawing from his mind.”

Does David still wish he could fly? “Life is full of disappointments,” he says drily. “I outgrew that one.” It’s “kinda cool Superman’s being claimed for us [Jews],” he says. “I grew up with the reverberations of the Holocaust. We were in a land of privilege [but] I remember my mother driving past a golf or country club saying we couldn’t go in because they wouldn’t admit Jews . . .” David smiles, shrugs. “But I grew up thinking we were superior because my dad was Superman.”



“I knew Superman wasn’t real; my father was the real Superman”



The Plankton

One divorcée describes life at the bottom of the sexual food chain

Well, it lasted all of a matter of weeks and it is now over with the Slightly Younger Twinkle, who turned into Something of a Firework, but who, like a firework, didn’t hang about for long. The ending came about for reasons beyond his control (an opportunity for a career change), so I probably shouldn’t take it entirely personally, though it still felt like a rejection.

Short but sweet. Of course, it was a slightly dotty venture on my part because it was always bound to come to a swift-ish end. I had hoped perhaps not quite as swift, but I went in with my eyes wide open so the fallout has not been as bad as it might have been. I feel sad but not a wreck. I don’t think I have even cried.

In my new spirit of trying to think 2013 is going to be better than were 2012, 2011, 2010, 2009, 2008 — I could go on — I am concentrating on what was to be gained by the whole affair as opposed to what was lost by its untimely ending. On balance, I have decided it was a force for good more than something that was irredeemably bleak. A gorgeous, pouting, kind, intelligent person is never to be sniffed at, and certainly not one who was manifestly interested in me (a rare commodity indeed). We got to know and like each other before the affair started (or is an affair only with a married person? In which case — neither of us is married — let’s call it a fling, though I prefer affair as it sounds more fun and illicit). And we had good times; and are managing to do so still, by some miracle, although on a more chaste basis.

It’s in the bank, as several friends have said, and they are right. No one can take the memory away from me, especially of that cinematic split second when, after some weeks of mystery, speculation and anticipation, SYT and I drunkenly, gloriously, crossed the line from friends to lovers. From all my promiscuous younger days, I don’t remember that turn being quite so astonishingly unexpected and exciting. I will picture it in my mind when I am properly old, tartan rug over my arthritic knees, and think, I had my movie moments.

Today, wistfulness that it’s over is the prevailing feeling. I wish fate hadn’t intervened quite so soon and it could have gone on a tad longer. My friend Dave doesn’t think it’s over. He reckons it’s sure-fire that SYT will have made another pass at me within three months. I say Dave’s got to be kidding. We have shaken on it. Come April, I expect to be £10 richer.

Ask Professor Tanya Byron

My feuding in-laws can’t get along for the sake of their granddaughter



Q My in-laws have been divorced for 30 years. Since the arrival of our daughter, now 4, they have been impossible to deal with because they are insistent on seeing her separately every weekend, at times that suit them.

My husband appears resigned to this pattern of behaviour, which was established when they split up during his childhood. It is acutely stressful, but he can’t see a solution. They both phone him to complain if they feel slighted in any way. Last weekend, my daughter had a party to go to so she couldn’t see them and we were both subject to manipulative phone calls to try to circumvent this.

On occasions such as my daughter’s birthday or holidays, where there are inevitable joint meet-ups, they generate a stressful and unhappy atmosphere by vying for my daughter’s attention and scoring points off each other. Neither has a settled, long-term partner and they focus their emotional fulfilment (if you can call it that) on their interactions with my daughter.

I have suggested that they take it in turns to see her alternate weekends — although even this would be difficult to manage, given our other commitments. However, my husband simply ends up capitulating on every plan, as they both take it out on him. **Della**

A Some of the most complicated and difficult situations for a family to face are those where the problems are an extension of

entrenched difficulties. It is clear that your in-laws have not moved on from their bitterness towards each other and expressing it through their son.

It is not uncommon for separated couples to continue their conflict through their children. Point-scoring, as you describe it, becomes part of the way they want to punish each other by manipulating their children and trying to get them on their side.

It appears that this situation is now being enacted by your in-laws through their relationship with your daughter. They compete for her affections and try to establish dominance in her life by securing the most time with her. This is their pathology and it clearly leads to tension and unhappiness, thereby working against what everybody is trying to achieve.

The biggest problem here is that your husband seems to be still caught in the same helplessness that he felt as a child. The behaviour of his parents leaves him stressed and unable to stand up to their demands. The cycle of family conflict and parental oneupmanship continues even though he is now an adult with a family of his own. For this situation to be managed, your husband needs first

to address his longstanding issues relating to his parents’ behaviour and their dislike for each other. He needs to find a way of understanding that is objective and that enables him to take a stronger and more assertive stance. If this situation leads you to become frustrated and upset with your husband, then in effect he remains trapped within a system of recrimination and blame, believing he is not a loyal son nor a good enough husband. This will only increase his helplessness and inability to manage these difficulties.

Your in-laws’ behaviour is totally unreasonable and reflects their inability to consider the needs of anyone but themselves. Although it is important for them to have a strong bond with their grandchild, they also have to accept that this cannot come at the expense of how her immediate family functions.

Indeed, their focus on when and how often they see her, and their perceived sense of entitlement over any other activities she has, reflects how they have not moved on with their lives. Fundamentally, you and your husband have a right to set the boundaries concerning when your daughter sees her grandparents and for how long. You should also feel able to speak about any tensions that exist when they are with her together because these could affect her in a negative way.

It is quite appropriate for your daughter to enjoy a friend’s party at the expense of spending time with her grandparents and they should be able to understand and respect that. Given their manipulative ways to try to alter your daughter’s schedule in their favour, you have no option but to set out the rules clearly and find ways to ignore their complaints. This is where your husband will need support from you to see that, until he finds a way to do this, he is continuing the tensions and unpleasantness that existed around him when he was a child. Given the clear negative impact on him, it is imperative that he protects his daughter from such tensions and conflicts. I suggest that you both work out the boundaries you think fair, then write to both grandparents, clearly setting out an offer to meet and discuss as a necessary step. Your husband will also need your support to be able to weather the manipulation that he may receive from his parents in the wake of writing to them.

A family functions best when relationships are open, honest and flexible, and the needs of the child are paramount in everyone’s mind. However, until your in-laws can behave in ways that indicate this, you and your husband will need to be in charge of when they see your daughter and ignore any negative fallout. If you have a family problem, e-mail proftanya Byron@thetimes.co.uk

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Hitchcock

Free preview screening

Hitchcock is a love story about one of the most influential filmmakers of the last century, Alfred Hitchcock and his wife and partner Alma Reville.

This fascinating film takes place during the making of Hitchcock’s seminal movie *Psycho* and features an outstanding cast which includes Sir Anthony Hopkins,

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Times+ members can see *Hitchcock* (Cert 12a) first and free at a preview screening at one of 18 cinemas on Tuesday, February 5 before it goes on general release on Friday, February 8.

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