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The Superheroes of Summer

David Sheward · Monday, August 11th, 2025

I haven't been to a superhero movie for the past few summers. The recent crop seemed pretty lackluster. But two of this year's cinematic comic-book efforts caught my attention and drove me back to the theater, in 3-D no less: *Superman* and *The Fantastic Four: First Steps*. Both feature the figureheads of their respective comic houses, DC for Superman and Marvel for the FF. Both have been adapted for film and TV numerous times before with varying success. The Man of Steel has flown into pop culture through multiple media since his birth in 1938. He remains one of the few characters to be the subject of a series of movies, at least one live-action TV show, and a Broadway musical (the others are Spider Man, Sherlock Holmes, Tarzan, The Addams Family, and Nick and Nora Charles.) In addition, Supes was immortalized on the radio (voiced by *To Tell the Truth* host Bud Collyer) and in several animated cartoon series. Though they are the first family of Marvel Comics, the FF have not fared as well in their transitions to the silver and video screens. They have had no less than four different cartoon series—I remember 1968's Hanna-Barbera iteration best since I used to watch it every Saturday morning—and four sets of actors have played them in live action, receiving mixed notices for the first three times. Now both franchises have been given new life in cinematic form.



David Corenswet in *Superman*.

Credit: Jessica Miglio/Warner Bros/DC

James Gunn's *Superman* has come under fire from conservatives for being too "woke," meaning Superman is portrayed as being too supportive of immigrants since he is one himself, arriving on Earth after his home world Krypton exploded. The parallels between our current political climate continue. The plot is set in motion as Superman interferes when a Russia-like country invades a Ukraine-like neighbor. In a story trope echoing a move the Man of Steel made with Adolph Hitler, the superhero flies the Putin-esque dictator to a remote location and sits him on a cactus, promising worse treatment if the invading leader doesn't behave himself. Also Superman's traditional arch enemy Lex Luthor is a sort of Elon Musk-Donald Trump type who imprisons anyone he doesn't like in a pocket universe resembling detention camps in El Salvador. The villain is in cahoots with the Putin-like despot and actually kills an immigrant food vendor in cold blood just because he was nice to Superman. Luthor also uses trolls (actual monkeys typing on keyboards) to smear Superman on social media.

Superman was always woke—meaning in favor of social justice and sticking up for the rights of minorities—so the right-wing whining feels petty and churlish. This Superman played with humor and humility by David Corenswet is a champion of the underdog and not a toady of the rich (Trump).

Putting politics aside, the action adventure aspects and special effects are first rate. Luthor's pocket universe threatens to destroy our own and Superman must save us. Gunn assumes we know the Superman origin and doesn't waste much time on the Clark Kent secret-identity angle. Lois Lane (a plucky Rachel Brosnahan) already knows Clark is really Superman and they're "dating." Gunn also stuffs in more exciting tidbits from the DC comics: Krypto the Super Dog (a disobedient pup who nearly steals the movie but saves the day), the Fortress of Solitude (a tribute to the 1978 movie), and three additional super-heroes, Green Lantern, Hawkgirl and Mr. Terrific (a delightfully dry Edi Gathegi). Supergirl and Peacemaker also make cameo appearances.



Ebon Moss-Bachrach, Pedro Pascal, Vanessa Kirby, and Joseph Quinn in *The Fantastic Four: First Steps*.

Credit: Marvel Studio

The Fantastic Four: First Steps also bypasses its origin story and jumps right into the action—the threat of planet-devouring Galactus and his herald the Silver Surfer (this time a woman played with icy cool by Julia Garner). In addition, what sets this reboot apart from its predecessors is the super-cool retro-futuristic production design by Kasra Farahani which is worthy of an Oscar nomination. As the pre-credit titles inform us we are in Earth 828, an alternate universe with Jetsons-esque flying cars, Alexander Calder mobiles, and '60s architecture.

Pedro Pascal as Reed Richards/Mr. Fantastic, Vanessa Kirby as Sue Richards/The Invisible Woman, Joseph Quinn as Johnny Storm/The Human Torch and Ebon Moss-Bachrach as Ben Grimm/The Thing all underplay their roles. The usually bombastic, rock-encrusted Thing is soft-spoken and refuses to utter the catch phrase “It’s Clobberin’ Time” claiming it was only invented for the quartet’s cartoon show. The quasi-sibling rivalry between the Thing and the boyish Human Torch is also subtle. Director Matt Shankman doesn’t hit us over the head with the humor. Even Herbie the Robot, a relic of the ridiculous 1978 animated FF series, is given a modicum of dignity.

Like James Gunn’s *Superman*, Shankman’s protagonists come across as human beings who happen to be in a position to save the world. Both movies offers realistic limning as well as spectacular world-shattering effects, particularly the FF’s trip to Galactus’ mammoth space ship. Give yourself a treat and head to the theater (preferably one that has 3-D and/or IMAX) for a comic-book double feature.

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