

Special Section

ADJACENT TO GENIUS



SOUTHWESTERN SUPERMAN JMS

Hugo, Emmy winning writer is a global science-fiction icon and beloved alumnus

BY NICOLETTE MONIQUE LUNA

J Michael Straczynski knows bullies. On the mean streets across America the rootless boy and teen took the worst from the worst. JMS also knows heroes. He has used his magical pen and boundless creativity to bring forth the Amazing Spider-man, the mighty Thor, Captain John Sheridan of "Babylon 5," and Gerry Lane of "World War Z." Straczynski's own hero's journey began at Chula Vista High School and Southwestern College. After graduating from SDSU he worked briefly as a journalist before a long, successful stretch as a television writer ("Jake and the Fat Man," "Murder She Wrote," "The Twilight Zone"). His breakout project was his brilliant sci-fi classic "Babylon 5," winner of two Emmy Awards and two Hugo Awards for best science fiction. "B5" ran for five years and spawned six motion pictures. He then became a comic book legend for his work on "Wonder Woman," "Superman" and "The Amazing Spider-man." Later he developed his own sold-out series, "Ten Grand." Nimble as a 6'-2" gymnast, Straczynski swung over to motion pictures as the screenwriter for "Changeling" with Ron Howard, Angelina Jolie and Clint Eastwood, and "Ninja Assassin" for the Wachowski sisters. He was the story writer for "Thor" (directed by Sir Kenneth Branagh) and "World War Z," starring Brad Pitt. Next he bounced back to TV as creator of the hit "Sense8." Elite actors elbow for parts in Straczynski projects because they love performing his edgy, poetic dialogue and unique characters. Pitt said he was excited to star in "World War Z" when he learned that Straczynski was adapting the difficult source material for the big screen. He imbued heroes who charged into action like John Wayne but spoke like Shakespeare.

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THE REAL STORY—Straczynski's soul-searching autobiography "Becoming Superman" is at turns poetic, sorrowful, mystifying, angry and joyous as he explores the cruelty of his early life and his towering success as a versatile American writing giant. Southwestern College chose "Becoming Superman" as its College Book of the Year and encourages students and staff to read it.

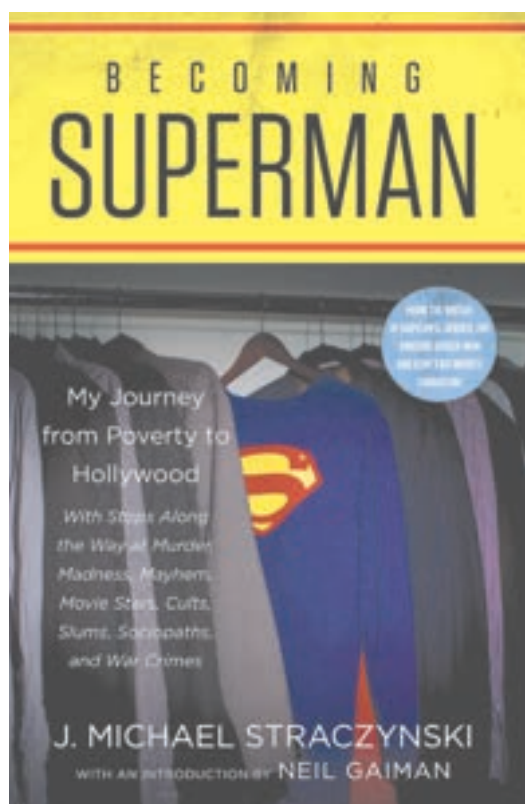


Image Courtesy of HarperVoyager / HarperCollins



Photo Courtesy of DC



DC COMICS

CHARACTER / TEAM TITLES INCLUDE:

- Teen Titans Spotlight
- Star Trek
- The Twilight Zone
- Babylon 5
- Babylon 5: In Valeri's Name
- The Brave and The Bold
- The Red Circle: The Shield
- The Red Circle: The Hangman
- The Red Circle: The Web
- Samaritan X
- Superman
- Superman: Earth One
- Wonder Woman
- Before Watchmen: Dr. Manhattan
- Before Watchmen: Nite Owl
- Before Watchmen: Moloch
- The Flash: Earth One.



MARVEL COMICS

CHARACTER / TEAM TITLES INCLUDE:

- The Amazing Spider-Man
- Marvel Knights Spider-Man
- Friendly Neighborhood Spider-Man
- The Sensational Spider-Man
- Squadron Supreme: Supreme Power
- Squadron Supreme: Powers and Principalities
- Squadron Supreme: High Command
- Squadron Supreme: Hyperion
- Squadron Supreme: Ultimate Power
- Squadron Supreme
- Strange
- Fantastic Four
- Civil War: Fantastic Four
- Dream Police
- The Book of Lost Souls
- Bullet Points
- Ultimate Civil War: Spider-Ham
- Silver Surfer: Requiem
- Thor
- The Twelve
- Captain America



Logos and Images Courtesy of DC, Marvel and Joe's Comics

In the late summer of 2010 Straczynski himself became a hero when he rescued the Southwestern College Sun from a cabal of corrupt administrators and governing board members. The student newspaper was about to publish stories about bribery and extortion related to college construction projects when the president and two vice presidents ordered the advisor not to publish until after the November election. Advisor Dr. Max Branscomb refused to comply and found a printer in Los Angeles willing to print The Sun after former college president Raj Chopra personally called San Diego County printers and told them not to print The Sun lest they lose college contracts.

Southwestern College became a national story and the attempt to block the publication of The Sun became a firestorm of controversy. When Straczynski read about the controversy in a Hollywood newspaper he wired \$5,000 to the printer and told journalism students and faculty to "go print your newspaper." He said he hated bullies and would not stand by while bullies targeted the newspaper at his beloved alma mater. The September 2010 issue of The Sun broke what would become known as the South Bay Corruption Scandal. Just after Christmas in 2011 the San Diego District Attorney raided the homes of nearly two dozen Southwestern College and Sweetwater Union High School District administrators and contractors. They were charged with 264 felonies. Southwestern's new governing board majority fired 22 administrators and directors and demoted about a dozen more. Coincidentally Branscomb, an SDSU classmate of Straczynski and a huge fan of "Babylon 5," had an inspiring line of dialogue written by JMS taped to the cabinet above his computer when he learned Straczynski was paying to print the newspaper. "May God stand between you and all dark places you must walk."

Branscomb nominated Straczynski for the Southwestern College Honorary Degree in 2013 and JMS delivered an inspiring commencement address encouraging students to take productive risks and embracing life's failures as opportunities to learn. College officials invited Straczynski to rejoin the Southwestern family. He has been a generous donor to the Southwestern College Foundation and SWC Cares, an umbrella of programs for low-income students like Straczynski himself was in the 1970s.

This year the library selected Straczynski's "Becoming Superman" as its College Book of the Year. The critically acclaimed autobiography tells the story of his rags to riches ascendency from bullying, family dysfunction and poverty to one of America's most successful and acclaimed writers. The Sun had the opportunity to catch up with Straczynski for an interview about his book, his life and his future. **THE SUN:** You are the first alumnus to author the College Book. How does that make you feel? **J. MICHAEL STRACZYNSKI:**



Image Courtesy of Marvel



Image Courtesy of Screen Gems / Lakeshore Entertainment / Sketch Films



Image Courtesy of LA Times

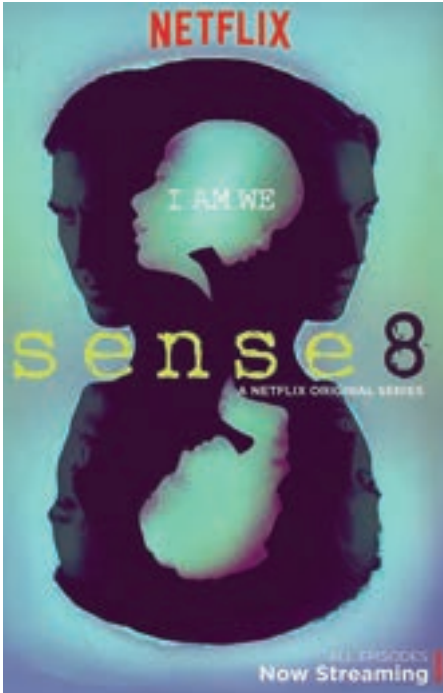


Image Courtesy of Anarchos Productions / Studio JMS / Netflix



Image Courtesy of Plan B Entertainment



Image Courtesy of Imagine Entertainment

When I first got the news, there were a lot of mixed feelings. My very first reaction was, why would you inflict my book on so many otherwise lovely people who have never done any harm to anybody to deserve such a penalty? Then, since SWC has always been like family to me, there was that moment when you discover that your parents have read your diary, and you're not sure what to do about having revealed so much. Once the various psychodramas had subsided, two things remained. First, obviously, was a sense of pride, for the same reason noted above:

Art should be challenging. It should interrogate and inform, uplift, enlighten and ennobel. Showing humanity at its worst or its most dystopian is easy; it's the low-hanging fruit of storytelling.

SWC is family, and that this family has elected to collectively read something of mine is a tremendous compliment. Second, and maybe more important, a sense of fulfilled purpose. I wrote the book to say that it doesn't matter where you come from, or if you have an odd last name, or if you don't have any friends or family or resources, you have the potential to achieve your dreams. The arc of my dreams ran straight through Southwestern College, and I think that makes the message even more personal and relatable. It can happen, it did happen, and it happened right here. **THE SUN:** You have become such an important part of Southwestern College heritage. You are an Honorary Degree recipient. You have been very generous to the institution. Why is Southwestern College important to you? **JMS:** In a way, that's kind of like asking why is air important? My experience at Southwestern was absolutely essential to my success as a writer. I found the right instructors and the support they gave at exactly the right moment. It was Bill Virchis, head of the theater department at the time, who produced my very first one-act plays there on campus (and later commissioned a full-length play for summer stock). Mark Twain said you learn things picking up a cat by the tail. You can learn no other way. The same applies to seeing your work produced in front of an audience; you see the flaws, the weaknesses, the bits that don't work...and what does. But even more to the point: I attended four colleges: three community colleges (including SWC) and one university (SDSU). My experiences with the staff, students and teachers at SWC was nonpareil, totally unmatched by the other three. There was an individualism to their approach to teaching, a personal touch that was lacking in every other college I attended. You got the sense the staff and faculty were genuinely interested in you, and in seeing to it that you succeeded, rather than just being a degree factory that stamped your diploma and sent you on your



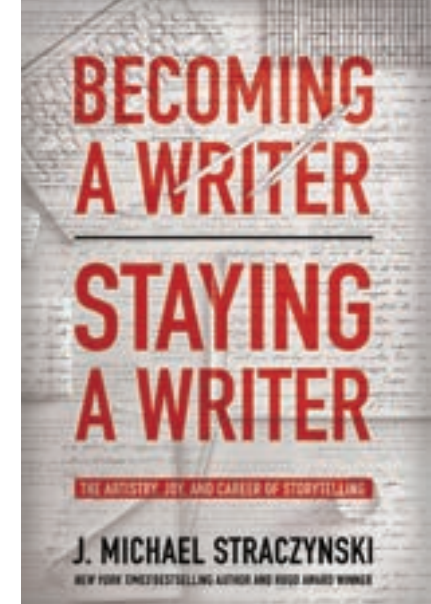
JOE'S COMICS

CHARACTER / TEAM TITLES INCLUDE:

- Rising Stars: Born As Fire
- Rising Stars: Power
- Rising Stars: Fire and Ash
- Rising Stars: Voices of the Dead/Bright
- Rising Stars: Visitations/Untouchable
- Midnight Nation
- Delicate Creatures
- Ten Grand
- Sidekick
- Protectors Inc
- The Adventures of Apocalypse AI
- Dream Police
- Alone
- The Book of Lost Souls.

TELEVISION

- Sense 8 (2015-18)
- Jeremiah (2002-04)
- Babylon 5 (1993-98)
- Walker, Texas Ranger (1993)
- Murder, She Wrote (1991-93)
- Jake and the Fatman (1990)
- Nightmare Classics (1989)
- Captain Power and the Soldiers of the Future (1987-88)
- Spiral Zone (1987)
- The Real Ghostbusters (1986-90)
- The Twilight Zone (1986-90)
- Jayce and the Wheeled Warriors (1985)
- She-Ra: Princess of Power (1985)
- He-Man and the Masters of the Universe (1984-85)



NON-FICTION

- Becoming a Writer, Staying a Writer: The Artistry, Joy, and Career of Storytelling (2021)
- Becoming Superman: My Journey from Poverty to Hollywood (2019)
- The Complete Book of Scriptwriting (1982)



way. More simply still: they cared. And that is unspeakably rare in the world of academia.

And the thing is, they still do. That sense of care and investment with every student on an individual basis is as much in evidence right now as it was when I attended SWC. Which is why I've donated to – and urge my fans to also donate to – the JAG Kitchen, which is yet another way for the staff to demonstrate their interest in the well-being of the students.

(It should be noted that in addition to attending four colleges, I also attended four high schools, and only found that same positive, individualized attitude toward students at Chula Vista High School. That there's a cycle of connection between CVHS and SWC reinforces my sense that there's something kinda magical going on.)

THE SUN: When did you realize you wanted to make a living as a writer?

JMS: I always had that knowledge, even if only on a cellular level, for as long as I can remember. It concretized into a full-blown decision when I was a kid in school and realized the impact that stories could have, to make something that wasn't real feel that it was. It's a little like sorcery. But I think there's a difference between that initial desire to be a writer, and the notion of making a living as a writer. The latter possibility never even occurred to me until much later.

THE SUN: You started out as a journalist at San Diego State and you wrote for many local papers. How did journalism prepare you for your career as a fiction writer?

JMS: Being a reporter gave me my first experiences with seeing my work in print, and there's something about having your name on a published byline that suddenly makes the idea of being a writer (or reporter) very real. Probably the most important part of that experience was that it taught me to hit deadlines, and how to shut down the world and just write. When you walk in the door and the editor says they need 18 column inches of material by lunchtime, there's no time for self-doubt or waiting around endlessly for the elusive Muse to show up: you get behind the keyboard, make the world go away, and write whatever it is until it's done. I suppose it's a kind of muscle-memory that persists to this day.

THE SUN: Why do you love science fiction?

JMS: Writers write what gets caught in our filter. As a kid living in demonstrably horrific circumstances (as described in *Becoming Superman*), comic books and science fiction stories took me out of that situation into something far away. It was a form of escape. And to a degree, it still is. But that said, I also like to work in other genres, from mainstream (the movie *Changeling*) to police procedurals, historical drama and the like.

THE SUN: Your writing can be very philosophical. In our age of superficiality and voyeurism is it important to you to make people consider our better selves?

JMS: Very often you'll hear someone say they just want to go out to see a movie or watch a TV show and "I just want to be entertained." And that's fair. By the same token, to be entertained is the absolute baseline requirement



Image Courtesy of DC

“At every stage of my life, there has been someone to point the way to something better. A writer I admired. A teacher. Other students who befriended and supported me. Superman.”

J MICHAEL STRACZINYSKI

we can and should expect, or you're being boring and didactic. The question becomes, what more can a story or a piece of art offer than simple entertainment? Art should be challenging, it should interrogate and inform, uplift, enlighten and ennoble. Showing humanity at its worst or its most dystopian is easy; it's the low-hanging fruit of storytelling. It's much harder – and hence less often done – to show humanity at its best without seeming corny or self-indulgent. But it's absolutely necessary to remind people that the human race has value, that we are made stronger by our differences, and that our stubborn nobility, the common coin of our shared humanity, is what will ultimately call us into the future. That is the proper role of art: to celebrate the human condition without looking

away from our faults and flaws, to summon us to become something better and nobler.

THE SUN: Please talk for a moment about your favorite all-time writer.

JMS: That's a very hard question to answer because the reply changes depending on what kind of writing we're talking about. I will confess that I'm a Shakespeare nut. There's a reason those plays are still being produced, analyzed and dissected hundreds of years after his birth. But that's the popular, easy answer. Growing up, for me, that would probably be Rod Serling, creator and chief writer for the original *Twilight Zone*. His stories were solidly based on character, logic and relentless structure, and leaned into the ideas expressed in my prior answer. He wrote about prejudice and bigotry and violence and the threat of fascism, bringing those themes into the world of usually very sanitized television science fiction. But he also celebrated kindness, compassion, charity and strength. Rod could do things with language and form that I'm still trying to figure out.

THE SUN: Who is your favorite contemporary writer?

JMS: Up until his passing a few years ago, it would be Harlan Ellison, who was also a friend and long-distance mentor in the years before we actually met. His stories were excellent, but it was the person behind the stories that inspired me most. He would write essays that accompanied his stories talking about the necessity of courage in the life of an artist, the willingness,

and the necessity, of confronting venality, stupidity, cupidity and corruption in government, but also in the arts themselves, in particular the ways in which people with money and power could control or censor that art. Harlan taught me to fight for the primacy of the work and for that I owe him greatly.

THE SUN: What is your all-time favorite television show?

JMS: The *Twilight Zone*, for all the reasons noted above.

THE SUN: What is your all-time favorite film?

JMS: I don't know how or if this fits in with the definition of a film – though it was indeed filmed, and exhibited – but I have watched *Hamilton*, first on stage then via Disney+, more times than I care to admit. I think it's about as perfect a work of art as I've ever seen. Flawless storytelling, performances and music. Just freaking stunning.

THE SUN: Do you have an all-time favorite JMS project? If so, please tell me about it and why you are fond of it.

JMS: It would have to be the TV series I created, wrote and produced, *Babylon 5*. It's the first show I ever created, and I was able to write nearly all of it without studio interference. It allowed me the freedom to talk about some of the issues that I care about while at the same time letting me show the process of going from a state of peace, to war, and the aftermath. It dealt with a pliant media, political cowardice and corruption, diversity, and a ton of other issues. It's a tad dated visually, but overall, yeah, that's it.

THE SUN: In "*Becoming Superman*" you describe a nomadic existence as a child and teenager. For those who have not yet read your book, would you share with us why Chula Vista is so special to you?

JMS: As someone who was always the new kid every time I moved (21 times in my first 17 years) I was a prime target for bullies because I didn't have a posse to back me up. I was always the loner. The only kids who ever noticed me were the bullies, everybody else either looked away, because you don't want to associate with the kid getting beat up because you might be next or were simply unaware of my existence. I was to all intents and purposes invisible...until I came to Chula Vista, when I was noticed – in

a good way for a change – by some of the students and teachers. For the first time I had friends and adults who believed in me. I can't begin to express what a transformational moment that was. For the first time I was also being asked to write stories and little, short plays that were produced at CVHS and, later, Southwestern. Chula Vista is where I started to become the writer that I am now, and the person I like to think that I am, and I will never be able to fully repay that debt.

THE SUN: Dr. Branscomb tells all his journalism students the story of the time in 2010 when you paid for the issue of *The Sun* that broke the story of the South Bay Corruption Scandal. Senior employees at Southwestern say that publication may have saved the college because it exposed so much criminal behavior and cleaned out the corrupt leadership that had so damaged the college. Did you know so much was at stake when you paid for that issue?

JMS: No, I was only aware of a fraction of what was going on. All I knew was that the issue was being repressed and suppressed by the Powers at SWC for reasons of their own, to cover up their conduct and shut down the newspaper, and that was really all I needed to know. As hinted at above, I don't like bullies of any stripe, whether they were other schoolkids, or adults in suits and ties who think they're immune to scrutiny or penalty and were using every trick in the book to maintain that status. Watching the fireworks launched after the issue came out was one of my proudest moments.

THE SUN: Comic books inspired me to learn how to read and write in English when I was a little girl. In your biography you talk about how important comics were to you. Would you please tell me about the role comic books played in your life?

JMS: More than anything else they were an escape from a fairly brutal existence. I could go someplace far, far away from my life, into a place where the good guys and gals won (most of the time), and the characters operated from a moral center that my family lacked. When I got beat up, at home or at school, I'd force myself to believe that I was invulnerable, that nothing could hurt me. As I got older, comics (*Superman* in particular), taught me the importance of hope, and kindness, and fighting for a just cause even when the odds were against you. I still try to honor those lessons as an adult.

At every stage of my life, there has been someone to point the way to something better. A writer I admired. A teacher. Other students who befriended and supported me. *Superman*. Through these and others, I was able to learn, almost too late, that I wasn't alone. A casual kind word or gesture, an expression of interest or belief in someone, and just this much charity can have outsized, profound effects on people in need, and I would tell one group reading this to remember that as dark as things can get at times, you are not alone...and I would tell the other group reading this to make sure the people in your life know this. You can do more than help create their careers. You can put on the cape and save their lives.

And really, how often in life does that opportunity present itself?