

Teachers' Notes by Radhiah Chowdhury

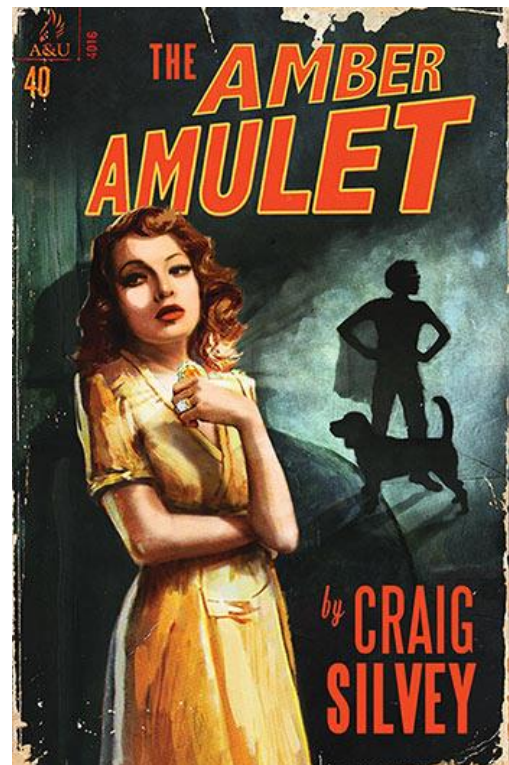
The Amber Amulet by Craig Silvey

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Recommended for ages 14 yrs and older

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INTRODUCTION

Dear Sir/Ma'am,

Please find enclosed this AMBER AMULET. That must sound unusual to a citizen, but you will have to trust me on this count because the science is too detailed for me to outline here. All you need to know is that the AMBER AMULET will eliminate your unhappiness by counteracting it with POSITIVE ENERGY. This should see you straight. Fear not, you're in safe hands now.

Take care,

The Masked Avenger

Meet twelve-year-old Liam McKenzie, who patrols his suburban neighbourhood as the Masked Avenger, a superhero with powers so potent that not even he can fully comprehend their extent. Along with his sidekick, Richie the Powerbeagle, he protects the people of Franklin Street from chaos, mayhem, evil and low tyre pressure—but can he save them from sadness?

By turns a superhero's manual, a homage to the pulp fiction novels of the 1930s and 1940s, and a sidelong glimpse into suburban life, *The Amber Amulet* is a stunning and hilarious coming-of-age story, filled with pathos and humour. The adventures of the Masked Avenger demonstrate that bravery can take on many different forms, from fixing a faulty sprinkler in a neighbour's yard, to protecting the mysterious woman across the street from deep unhappiness. Silvey's playful story and precocious protagonist cut to the heart of what living can—and should—really be about as the Masked Avenger learns that sometimes truth and honesty are the bravest, most important superpowers that anyone can possess.

The story is highly engaging, exploring the ways in which we connect with one another and the immense power that those connections have against the loneliness and isolation of everyday existence. There are myriad opportunities to discuss how our perceptions of the world shift as we age and the ways in which imagination and reality intersect, as well as investigating the intertextual references to the rich history of superhero stories and pulp fiction novels.

THEMES

- Coming-of-age
- Identity
- Heroism
- Truth and honesty
- Connection and communication vs isolation and loneliness
- The power of belief and the imagination

CURRICULUM ALIGNMENT

Probing the secrets of the human heart with pathos and humour, this is the story of the meeting of a young boy and an older woman whose sadness he seeks to cure. Themes of loneliness and self-deceit are balanced by the naïve goodness of Liam and the remarkable communication that these two neighbours achieve.

In terms of style and aesthetics, *The Amber Amulet* is a bildungsroman – in particular, the type that depends on an ironic gap between the older reader and the naïve consciousness of the young protagonist. Readers may be aware of impending tragedy while the protagonist sails

gaily on: the reader's interpretation of events may be in direct opposition to that of the protagonist. The title and cover are also ironic references to the pulp fiction genre and the plot revolves around a young boy's adoption of a superhero alter ego. It is thus an excellent text for genre and cross-media study of novels, graphic novels and comics, TV shows and films.

Being 'modern Australian literature with themes and issues involving levels of abstraction, higher order reasoning and intertextual references', *The Amber Amulet* is very suitable for English classroom study at Year 9 and higher levels. It will 'support and extend students as independent readers' and introduce them to 'themes of interpersonal relationships and dilemmas' conveyed by sophisticated use of genre and language.

(Australian Curriculum, quotes from Yr 9/10 Level Description)

These notes focus on genre and themes. Chapter-by-chapter questions are designed to develop skills of close reading.

ACTIVITIES FOR THE CLASSROOM

BEFORE READING THE BOOK

What is pulp fiction? What are its main characteristics?

- Research the history of the dime novel and pulp fiction.
- Read short stories and novel extracts to help develop a bank of generic features and conventions.
- Compile an image library of pulp fiction artwork, particularly book and magazine covers. What common features can you identify in these covers? Is there a particular aesthetic for pulp fiction novels?
- What genres of fiction were brought into prominence with the proliferation of pulp fiction stories? Why were these genres particularly suitable to pulp fiction formats?
- **Extension:** How does the design of *The Amber Amulet* apply the aesthetics and conventions of pulp fiction novels? How have the cover and endpapers been designed to specifically look like an aged pulp fiction novel, and why? Consider, for example, the wearing on the edges and spine of the cover, and the faux rippling, bookplate and scribbled price on the endpapers. What does the design indicate about the story you are about to read?

What is superhero fiction? What are its main characteristics?

- Superhero fiction is a subgenre of speculative/science fiction. What are some of the generic features and conventions of superhero stories?
- Research and read articles about the history of superhero fiction. Some examples:
 - <http://www.vulture.com/2015/04/12-teams-that-defined-superhero-storytelling.html>
 - <https://www.gizmodo.com.au/2017/02/how-ancient-legends-gave-birth-to-modern-superheroes/>
 - https://www.desmet.org/uploaded/Academics/English/4_Coogan-Superhero.pdf
- What are some of the questions, fears and ethical dilemmas associated with superhero fiction?

- **Extension:** Discuss the role that pseudoscience plays in superhero narratives. For example, consider how gamma radiation has been co-opted into so many superhero origin stories.
- **Extension:** examine the historical context of the birth and emergence of superhero fiction. What contextual issues may have affected the work of early writers?

DURING READING

Chapter One—pages 1-14:

- Consider the opening line of the story: 'The Masked Avenger can make things happen.' What is the effect of this line? Why is it isolated in its own paragraph? What expectations does it establish for the rest of the story?
- Who is telling this story? Although the book is written in third person, is the narrator an impartial observer? Why/why not?
- Why is the story written in present tense? How does this affect the way in which you read the story?
- Could the narrator be an extension of the Masked Avenger's inner monologue? Explain your answer with examples from the text.
- Read the description of the Masked Avenger's powers on pp.1-2. What phenomena is the narrator actually describing here? How does viewing these prosaic phenomena through the lens of an imaginative child change them into superpowers?
- As a class, discuss the Law of the Conservation of Energy. In what way are the Masked Avenger's superpowers an interpretation of this law? Look at the diagram on p.3, paying particular attention to the collaged words—how has the Masked Avenger repurposed scientific findings and terminology to explain his superpowers?
- Research gemstone lore and the history and provenance of this pseudoscience. What role does the placebo effect have in the sporadic reported efficacy of gemstone lore? To what extent does the Masked Avenger's belief in the power of his 'geo-alchemy' mirror the placebo effect?
- Why are particular words capitalised in the narration?
- What does this opening chapter tell you about:
 - the setting of the story?
 - the way in which the Masked Avenger views the world?
 - the kind of person the Masked Avenger is?
 - the power of imagination and wonder to transform the everyday experience?

Chapter Two—pages 15-25:

- Look at the diagram of Richie the Powerbeagle. How does this image continue the theme of applying the imagination to the everyday?
- This chapter is the first proper glimpse we get of the Masked Avenger's daily heroism. Do his actions fit your idea of a superhero's deeds? Why/why not?
- How would you describe the relationship between the Masked Avenger and Richie the Powerbeagle?
- In what ways does the Masked Avenger make a real difference in the lives of his neighbours?

- Read the description of the events at the house at the end of the street on pp.22-23. How do you interpret them? What do they suggest about the occupants of the house?
- 'And as they go, neither he nor Richie the Powerbeagle notice the curtain in the bay window slowly fall back into place.' (p.25) How is this an example of an omniscient narrator? Up until this point, the narration has focussed specifically on the Masked Avenger and his experiences. What is the effect of shifting the focus at the end of this chapter to the unseen person behind the curtain?

Chapter Three—pages 27-30:

- Why do you think the author introduces us to the Masked Avenger's alter ego Liam at this point?
- What do the first two pages of this chapter reveal about Liam's life and his family situation? What insight does this give you into why he works as the Masked Avenger? Why might Liam find it 'harder to be a citizen than a Superhero' (p.28)?
- Does the Masked Avenger ask the woman in the house at the end of the street the right question? How does the simplicity of the question and its answer mask the deep complexity that lies behind both?

Chapter Four—pages 31-32:

- 'In replying to his Important Questionnaire, she has entrusted him with her care. She is now his civic responsibility. He has inherited her unhappiness. Overturning it has become his duty.' (p.31) Do you agree with Liam's assessment? Once he has learned the truth about his neighbour's state of mind, does the Masked Avenger have an obligation to do something about it? Why/why not?
- How can someone 'inherit' unhappiness or any other emotion? What does this suggest about the importance of communication in our lives? Think about this question in reference to the proverb, 'A trouble shared is a trouble halved.'
- The Masked Avenger owns a set of old encyclopedias that he rescued from a kerbside junk pile. Why might someone have thrown the set away? How does information become outdated? People once would have referred to a physical encyclopedia for information, but where would they look for information now? What does it suggest about Liam that he not only rescued the encyclopedias but also actually uses them?

Chapter Five—pages 33-37:

- Read the opening paragraph of this chapter. How does the Masked Avenger characterise the location of the Amber Amulet? Why does his mother become a 'sleeping giant' and her jewellery box become a 'barely penetrable chest'?
- What do we learn about Liam's relationship with his mother in this chapter?
- When Liam's mother speaks, it is the first time we hear from a character that is not Liam, who speaks in the common, everyday terms of reality. How does the prosaic reality of Liam's mother interplay with the heroic narration of Liam's experiences as the Masked Avenger?
- Why is it so important in the heroic narrative the Masked Avenger is creating for himself that he goes back to rescue Richie the Powerbeagle?

Chapter Six—pages 39-41:

- The Masked Avenger writes his letter using an old typewriter. Coupled with his earlier use of physical encyclopedias, what is his relationship with modern technology? How do you interpret Liam's character and actions in the context of his relationship with modern and retro technology?
- What does gemstone lore say about the power of amber?
- The Masked Avenger states that sadness gains strength especially when we are asleep. Why might this be the case?

Chapter Seven—pages 43-45:

- This is the first time in the story that the protagonist is referred to as 'Liam McKenzie', rather than 'the Masked Avenger'. Why do you think this is?
- Read through the whole chapter, paying close attention to the terms in which characters and events are narrated. Compared to those that have come before it, how 'real' is this chapter? Does the imaginative world of the Masked Avenger make an appearance at all?
- Liam's mother never wears the amber brooch, but she misses it very soon after it goes missing. Why is it so important to her, even if she does not use it?

Chapter Eight—pages 47-50

- 'In trying to enact one Right, he has invited a whole cluster of Wrongs.' (p.47) The Masked Avenger does not think of the ethics of taking the Amber Amulet until his mother becomes upset when it goes missing. What might this suggest about the way Liam views the world and his heroic destiny?
- How important is it to the Masked Avenger that he never betrays the trust that he believes citizens have placed in him? Is this the foundation to his civic service?

Chapter Nine—pages 51-77

- How does the narrator build tension in the first four pages of this chapter?
- After the building tension that begins the chapter, is the Masked Avenger's exposure anticlimactic? Explain your answer.
- Why does the Masked Avenger decide to stay and interact with Joan?
- '...her enthusiasm goads him on, the words bubble out of his mouth.' (p.61) What does this suggest about Liam's need to be heard?
- What is amber? Where does it come from? Why is it scientifically significant? How has it been used in jewellery and folklore throughout human history?
- Read the Masked Avenger's explanation of energy from pp.61-66 and closely examine the four pages of diagrams that accompany it. How does he blend science and pseudoscience in his understanding of energy? Can you decipher which portions are scientifically accurate and which are not?
- Throughout the interaction from pp.54-70, the scene is narrated from the Masked Avenger's perspective. He interprets Joan's verbal and facial cues as quizzical, impressed, enthusiastic, marvelling and in awe. Is this also how you interpret her words? Why/why not?
- Joan has a bruised eye. Coupled with what we already know about her home life, how do you initially interpret this information? Is her eventual explanation of the bruise what

you expected? What does this suggest about the limitations of observing the world through our own assumptions and the importance of communication?

- There are some sombre details about Liam's home life on p.70. How are they presented? Is the reader given the opportunity to linger on these details? Why do you think this is? What is the effect of embedding these details in a longer conversation, rather than focussing on them specifically?
- '...this strange boy is so genuine and innocently direct that it pins her. And something about that mask and uniform makes it all right, gives this the air of a confessional.' (p.72) Why does Joan open up to the Masked Avenger? What does she mean by 'This is what you deserve' (p.72)?
- Do you think Liam actually understands the specifics of Joan's confessions? Or does he understand the spirit of them?
- The narrator shifts a few times into Joan's perspective in the latter half of this chapter. Why do you think this is? How does it shift the balance of the narrative to see the Masked Avenger briefly through her eyes?

Chapter Ten—pages 79-86

- '...Liam McKenzie walks to his own letterbox on behalf of the Masked Avenger.' (p.79) Why does Liam perform this task as his alter-ego?
- Is his confession the Masked Avenger's greatest act of sacrifice in the story? Why/why not?
- 'A strange thing about getting older is that you start telling yourself little lies to smooth over all the awkward things you'd rather not think about, or to cope with the things you can't change.' (p.84) Consider this in comparison to the vivid imagination that Liam applies to the world. How are Joan's 'little lies' as an adult a different way to understand or cope with the world than Liam's approach?
- The story opened with the Masked Avenger's thoughts on the difference between diamonds ('good') and coal ('evil') (see p.5). In Joan's letter, she describes her life thus far as being 'squeezed under pressure' (p.83). How does the gift of her diamond ring symbolically bring together the beginning and end of the story?

AFTER READING

STORY AND TEXT STRUCTURE

- Map out the chapters of *The Amber Amulet*, taking note of how long each one is. Which chapters are the longest, and why? What is the effect of shorter chapters in terms of the momentum of the story?
- Discuss the text design of the book. To what effect are the diagrams and scrapbook technique used throughout the story?
- The story is curiously devoid of any specific indicators of the time in which it is set. When do you think this story takes place? Why? What clues prompt you to think so?
- Compare *The Amber Amulet* with these two very different Australian ironic appropriations of the 'Caped Crusader' motif – both also describing boyhood.

A. Excerpt from *Unreliable Memoirs* by Clive James.

'Like Dracula, the Flash of Lightning made his appearance only after nightfall. In the hours between sunset and bedtime, an imposing figure could be seen outlined against the stars. In less time than it took to pronounce his name in an awed whisper, he was gone, running down one side of the street and up the other, darting along driveways, clambering over back fences and making his inexorable progress from back yard to back yard.

'You would not have known, when this sinister avatar caught and slipped your startled gaze, that his mask and cape had been made by his mother.'

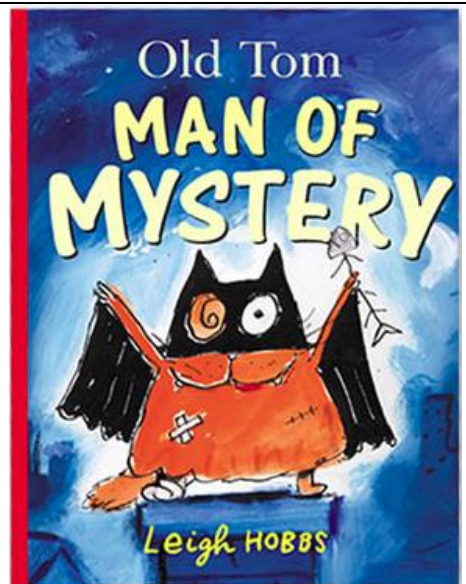
Opening of Chapter Five, p. 48, 1981 Picador edition

B. Children's picture book, *Old Tom: Man of Mystery* by Leigh Hobbs

Angela Throgmorton is exhausted; the time has come to make a few changes. Old Tom had been a beautiful baby but now he was surely big enough to help with the housework.

However, Old Tom has other ideas. While he lies in bed, seemingly too sick to help, a mysterious 'Man of Mystery' flees into the night, followed by Angela T. determined to unmask this caped creature...who reminds her of someone.

Little Hare Books, 2009 & 2017



THEMATIC STUDY

Coming-of-age

- What drives Liam? Why does he patrol the streets as an unseen superhero, communicating only through notes, yet respond so openly to an audience once Joan directly interacts with him?
- Joan's husband is presumably as unhappy as she is, but he does not feature in the Masked Avenger's story. Why do you think Liam fixates specifically on Joan and her plight? How might his own family situation be reflected in his urge to protect Joan?
- What does *The Amber Amulet* suggest about how we navigate the increasing complexity of the world as we grow up? Does age necessarily better-equip us to cope with change and adversity? Why/why not?

Identity

- 'He is the Masked Avenger. Liam McKenzie is his act.' (p.28) How is it significant that the protagonist thinks of himself in these terms?
- Do you think of the protagonist as Liam McKenzie or as the Masked Avenger? Why do you think this is? Does the book prompt you particularly in one direction or the other? How so? How do you think the other characters in the story view the protagonist? What are the implications of thinking of the protagonist as the Masked Avenger, rather than as Liam, a regular child—both for yourself as the reader, and for the other characters in the story?
- As a class, discuss the difference between self-identity (i.e. how we see ourselves) versus the identity that others project upon us. What happens when the two identities contradict each other? Is one more powerful than the other? Is there pressure to bring both these identities together into one single identity? Why?
- Why is the protagonist the 'Masked' Avenger? Why is the concealment of his civilian alter ego so important (think, for example, of his hesitation to reveal himself to Joan in chapter nine, until she reminds him that he is masked)? What might it signify about the protagonist that he feels truly his genuine authentic self when he is physically concealed by a costume and mask? How does anonymity, or the illusion of anonymity empower him?

Heroism

- What makes a hero? Do you think of the Masked Avenger as a hero? Explain your answer.
- 'Somewhere along the line we just stopped being kind to each other.' (p.73) How is Joan's statement indicative of the real heroism of the Masked Avenger? To what extent is his real superpower his empathy?

Truth and honesty

- What does *The Amber Amulet* suggest about the importance of truth and honesty with the people in our lives—and with ourselves?
- 'Sometimes all it takes is somebody to make you look at what you've been avoiding. And even though you know the truth already, it can be a real shock. It can feel as though you're looking at it for the very first time.' (p.84) Is there a difference between knowing the truth and accepting it? Think about this in relation to Joan's realisations in the story, but also in terms of Liam's interactions with his mother. He knows that taking the amber brooch is theft, but does he accept this before his mother is upset about the theft?
- 'It wasn't amber she needed, it was amethyst all along!' (p.86) How is this realisation a microcosm of the whole story?

Connection and communication vs isolation and loneliness

- To what extent can *The Amber Amulet* be read as a tale of two lonely people connecting with one another? How is the Masked Avenger's inherent empathy counterbalanced with what we learn of Liam's own inherent loneliness?
- How might we address sadness in our lives? Liam gives the Amber Amulet to Joan because it will counteract her sadness with 'POSITIVE ENERGY' (p.40). What role does it actually play in the changes she enacts in her life to address her sadness?

- 'A little over a month ago, he carefully placed magnets near the doorways of every house on the street because magnets possess the powers of Connectivity and Communication.' (pp.10-14). How does this act in the first chapter foreshadow a major theme of the story? Is it significant that Joan takes Liam's magnetometer with her when she leaves the neighbourhood? How so?
- The last diagram in the book shows that Liam will continue his exploits as the Masked Avenger. But how might he have been changed by his experience with Joan?
- If we read *The Amber Amulet* as a contemporary story, what do you make of Liam's fondness for retro technology and aesthetics? What sort of a life might other children his age in his community be leading, and how does his own compare? What might this suggest about the isolation that often comes with modern contemporary life?

The power of belief and the imagination

- Read the Masked Avenger's tale of the provenance of the Amber Amulet from pp.57-61. Do you agree that it is 'kind of miraculous' (p.60)? Why/why not? Can you consider this tale as broadly indicative of the way that Liam views the world as miraculous and filled with untold stories and untapped potential?
- 'I think you are a truly remarkable hero. And somewhere along the line I lost all those wonderful things you have in spades. I hope you keep them close to your chest and guard them fiercely.' (p.86) How much of the Masked Avenger's superpowers come from his unwavering belief in them?
- What does *The Amber Amulet* suggest about the importance of wonder and imagination in our lives, not only as children, but also as adults?

RELATED TEXTS

NOVELS

- *Jasper Jones*, Craig Silvey. Allen & Unwin 2009
- *The World According to Warren*, Craig Silvey. Fremantle Press, 2007
- *Highly Illogical Behavior*, John Corey Whaley. Faber & Faber 2016
- *The Universe Versus Alex Woods*, Gavin Extence. Redhook 2013
- *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Sherman Alexie. Paperback edition: Little, Brown Books for Young Readers 2009
- *Spies*, Michael Frayne. Faber & Faber 2002

FILMS

- *Big Hero Six*, Don Hall & Chris Williams. Walt Disney Pictures 2014
- *Griff the Invisible*, Leon Ford. Green Park Pictures, dist. Paramount, 2010
- *Kick-Ass*, Matthew Vaughn. Marv Films/Plan B Entertainment, dist. Universal Pictures, 2010

SECONDARY RESOURCES

- *The Dime Novel Companion: A Source Book*, J Randolph Cox. Greenwood 2000
- *Storytelling in the Pulps, Comics, and Radio*, Tim DeForest. McFarland & Company 2004
- *The Pulp Magazine Project* (<https://www.pulpmags.org/>)

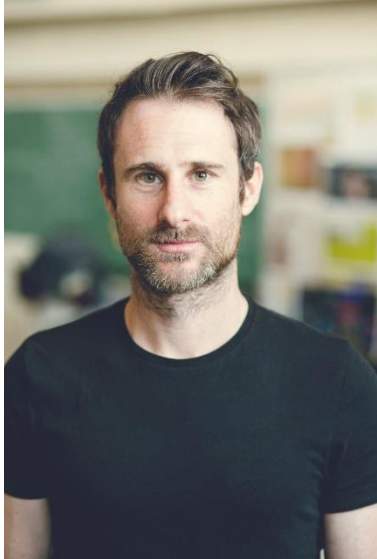
ABOUT THE WRITER

CRAIG SILVEY

Craig Silvey grew up on an orchard in Western Australia. He currently resides in Fremantle, where he wrote his first novel, *Rhubarb*, before he turned twenty. *Rhubarb* was published by Fremantle Press in 2004 and garnered strong reviews. In 2005, *Rhubarb* was chosen as the One Book for the Perth International Arts Festival, a successful state-wide reading initiative. Later that year, Craig received a Sydney Morning Herald Best Young Novelist Award. In 2006, *Rhubarb* was featured as one of the titles in the national Books Alive campaign. The following year, Craig released *The World According to Warren*, a picture book affectionately starring the guide-dog from *Rhubarb*.

In early 2008, Craig completed his second novel *Jasper Jones* with the aid of an Australia Council New Work Grant. *Jasper Jones* was published in 2009 by Allen & Unwin and went on to be published in the United States, the United Kingdom, Spain, Italy and Germany. It won the 2009 Indie Book of the Year Award, the 2009 WA Premier's Literary Award for Fiction and the 2010 ABIA Book of the Year. It was also shortlisted for the 2010 Miles Franklin Literary Award, 2010 NSW Premier's Literary Award, 2010 Victorian Premier's Literary Awards, the Vance Palmer Prize for Fiction and the 2011 International IMPAC DUBLIN Literary Award, and was named the 2012 Printz Honor book from Young Adult Library Services Association, a division of the American Library Association. *Jasper Jones* was adapted into a stage play in 2014 and made into a feature film in 2017.

Outside of literature, Craig is the singer/songwriter for the band 'The Nancy Sikes!'.



Asked about the inspiration for *The Amber Amulet*, Craig says:

'Curiously enough, for a story that boasts an astonishing amount of pseudo-science, featuring, as it does, a boy-hero named The Masked Avenger who believes he can absorb and adopt the dormant energy embedded in geological items, and that this in turn imbues him with specialised powers (for instance, the constituent nickel in coins affords him Strength and Endurance, the bronze in his grandfather's service medal offers him amplified levels of Bravery and Valour, and coating his loyal sidekick—who happens to be a beagle—with aluminium foil will ward away Dark Energy), at its inception, this story was sparked by my listening to a Nobel prize winning physicist discussing the carbon cycle. Go figure.'