

# THE CRITICS



BOOKS

## FLAME ON

*We all live in Stan Lee's universe. How much of it did he create?*

BY STEPHANIE BURT

In the early nineteen-forties, decades before he was Stan the Man, the impresario of the Marvel Universe, Stanley Martin Lieber fetched coffee, took notes, and sat on desks playing the piccolo—or perhaps the ocarina—in the offices of his uncle’s comic-book company. There, before and after his Army service, and into the decade that followed, Stanley became one of many typists and scribblers providing copy for word balloons and prose for the books’ filler pages. He was as efficient as his older colleagues at churning out scripts, and already distinguished himself in one way: he put his pen name, Stan Lee, on all his work. He said that he was saving his birth name for a more respectable project, like a novel. Still, if he was going to make comics, he wanted credit.

That desire served him well. It also raised big questions about—to use two of Lee’s favorite nouns—power and responsibility, since Lee never created a comic alone. Novelists have editors and publishers. Live-action films require directors and actors. And company-owned superhero comics are plotted, drawn, scripted, and lettered by different people, with creative teams that change over time. To give a full account of Stan Lee, as Abraham Riesman sets out to do in a new biography, “True Believer” (Crown), is to contend not just with his presence in popular culture (the smiling oldster in sunglasses, with a cameo in each Marvel film) but with the fluid nature of artistic collaboration, and so with endless debates over which parts of the comics are his.

Why should we care? One answer is money—lots of it. Nine of the thirty top-grossing films in history use Marvel

characters. Though Lee gave up his stake in the intellectual property years before the Marvel Cinematic Universe began, money kept flowing his way. Another reason is honesty: audiences believe that Lee created those characters, and his life-long habit of taking credit has stoked fans’ and journalists’ wish to get at the truth.

And then there’s the cultural dominance that superheroes, especially Marvel ones, have attained. Figures that Lee co-created, or said he created, revived a genre that had been on its last legs, helping to launch them from drugstore spinner racks to the screen. Americans who can’t identify Achilles or Botswana know Wakanda as a high-tech nation in Africa, Loki as a Norse god who’s up to no good, and Peter Parker as the original Spider-Man. Even as they dominate popular culture, superheroes—the flawed kind, the weird kind, the kind Marvel pioneered—can stand for exclusion, for queerness, for disability, for all manner of real or perceived oppression, marshalling enough power to blast their enemies into the sun. For decades, the title page of every Marvel superhero comic said “Stan Lee Presents”—no wonder we want to know who he really was.

Named for one of Lee’s catchphrases, “True Believer” isn’t the first serious biography of Lee, though it is the first completed since his death, in 2018. It cannot settle every question about what, exactly, Lee did. What it does best is unfurl a *Künstlerroman*, a story about the growth of an art form and an artist who was also a director and a leading man, unable to admit that the show could go on without him.

Stanley Martin Lieber was born in 1922, the first child of Romanian Jewish immigrants in Manhattan; his father was a garment cutter and his mother was a department-store saleswoman. His younger brother, Larry, arrived nine years later. As unassuming as Stan was self-promoting, Larry worked with—or, really, worked for—Stan in comics, off and on, for most of the century. At DeWitt Clinton High School, in the Bronx (a few years ahead of James Baldwin), Stanley showed verbal skill and a performer’s ambition. When he noticed a classmate with a knack for extempore speaking, he was inspired. “I decided that I wanted to be able to speak that way, to be able to hold the attention of an audience,” he recalled years later.

Had he grown up elsewhere, Lee might have fled to Hollywood. Instead, as a teen-ager, he took an entry-level job at Timely, his uncle Martin Goodman’s firm, where Jack Kirby, Joe Simon, Bill Everett, and Carl Burgos were assembling stories about a cantankerous Prince of Atlantis named Namor; his android nemesis, the original Human Torch; and a blond, Nazi-punching guy called Captain America. Lee started out “erasing the pencils off the inked artwork,” as Simon recalled, but soon he was writing, too, not least because postal regulations made comics cheaper to mail if they contained prose, any prose. The 1941 story “Captain America Foils the Traitor’s Revenge” was the first to bear the name Stan Lee. Simon, who assigned the story, later remarked, “I made his life.”

The Timely business model emphasized quantity over quality, trend chasing over trend creating, and Lee quickly

ABOVE: TAMARA SHOPSIN



*Like Cyclops fighting Magneto, or the Thing taking on Galactus, Lee needed a team: he couldn't do much by himself.*

ILLUSTRATION BY ZOHAR LAZAR

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proved that he could serve the model. He displayed a spectacular ability to meet deadlines, scripting comics for Timely artists—Kirby among them—to draw. Goodman soon named him editor of the comics operation. The Second World War might have derailed him, except that when Lee enlisted he was assigned to the so-called playwriting division at Fort Monmouth, in New Jersey, where he wrote training films for soldiers and kept writing comics for Timely. After the war, he returned to the company, and to self-promotion. In 1947, he self-published a short, hype-filled book called “Secrets Behind the Comics.” That year, he met the English model Joan Boocock, who divorced her husband to marry Stan. The pair—by all accounts happy and well matched—settled cozily in Long Island suburbia, where they had a daughter, Joan Celia, known as J.C. Local newspaper accounts of their swank pool parties do not mention Stan’s comics at all.

Comic books like the ones Goodman published didn’t amount to much in nineteen-fifties America. Some newspaper comic strips, such as Walt Kelly’s “Pogo,” enjoyed highbrow followings, but staple-bound serials were for children, or those clinging to childhood. (In Phyllis McGinley’s perfect 1952 poem, “Portrait of Girl with Comic Book,” the comic book becomes a talisman of that painful age, thirteen.) When more ambitious but sometimes violent stories entered the market, a moral panic—spurred, in part, by the psychiatrist Fredric Wertham’s jeremiad “Seduction of the Innocent”—prompted congressional hearings, and the comic-book industry turned to self-policing. At Timely, Lee cranked out scripts for the genres allowed under the 1954 Comics Code: romances and Westerns and, especially, science fiction. Lee did not, in those years, write superheroes: much reduced from their wartime prime, they earned little money for anyone except DC Comics, the home of Superman. By the end of the decade, DC had found success in rebooting old heroes, like the Flash, and combining them into new teams, like the Justice League of America.

Lee became the editor-in-chief of a company—now called Atlas—that was going nowhere fast. In a humiliating deal in 1957, DC, the company’s rival, had be-

come its de-facto distributor, and Goodman and Lee were confined to eight newsstand titles a month. Flooding the zone would no longer work. Instead, they cut expenses and experimented with new stories that might hook readers. The answer turned out to be superheroes with, as Lee liked to say later, “feet of clay”: squabbling families, like the Fantastic Four (1961); teens animated by angst, regret, and rotten luck, like Spider-Man (1962); delightfully pretentious renovations of ancient myth, like the mighty Thor (1962). Before long, Lee and Goodman branded the comics line with a new name: Marvel.

In what became known as the Marvel Method—not because Lee invented it (he did not) but because he preferred it—he and an artist would start out by chatting, perhaps making notes. The artist would draw the story and flesh out the plot, and Lee would add captions and dialogue. The method suited artists like the energetic veteran Kirby, known for his dynamic action and far-out costumes, and the moody Steve Ditko, who cooked up sullen characters and mysterious semi-Expressionist backgrounds. Kirby originated the Fantastic Four, the Hulk, Thor, and the X-Men. Ditko drew Spider-Man and Dr. Strange. Other early pencillers were asked to imitate Kirby’s style, while Kirby himself worked at a Stakhanovite pace: almost twelve hundred pages in one year. (As Kirby’s biographer put it, Kirby was “very, very good at creating comic book art and very, very bad at getting paid for it.”)

Lee’s dialogue revealed his need for attention, which some of his superheroes shared. In one sequence, Captain America, after a long absence, is discovered by a teary police officer: “All these years—all of us—your fans—all your admirers—we thought you were dead! But you’ve come back—just when the world has need of such a man—just like fate planned it this way! Forgive me, Cap, willya? I—I seem to have something in my eye!” Tearjerkers, love triangles, and money troubles sustained one Marvel plot after another, in between all the clobberings. In *Fantastic Four* No. 45 (“Among Us Hide . . . the Inhumans!”), Sue Storm pulls a blanket tenderly over an unconscious humanoid whose huge gray head resembles a dinosaur’s. “Despite his great strength,” Sue tells her husband, “he seems to need kindness and

protection!” Ben Grimm, a pilot turned by cosmic radiation into the Thing, sees the tableau and frowns: “That’s the way Alicia”—his girlfriend—“must feel about me, too! It can’t be love! It’s just pity! The pity of beauty . . . for a beast!” The monstrous visages were Kirby’s doing.

The comics became hits—with kids, and then with older teens and college students, too. They had no highbrow baggage, no Great Tradition that a counterculture would feel any need to repudiate. They tried, if awkwardly, to reflect generational conflict, giving power to young people (like Spider-Man and the X-Men) and “ugly” outsiders (like Ben Grimm). They were cheap and easy to share, but without the square everywhere ness of TV and radio: you could flaunt your devotion to comic books, or conceal it. And they didn’t take long to read.

Comics of the Silver Age—as collectors call this era—could never be described as realistic, but they did take place in a world more like ours than the universe of older cape comics. Ben Grimm hated his rocklike body. Bruce Banner feared the Hulk’s rage. Spider-Man could not have come to such vivid life without the iconic buildings of New York to climb. The original X-Men, advertised as “the most unusual teenagers of all time,” may not have been fashion forward, but they did bring youth culture to their punch-ups. Before they’re attacked by the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants in issue No. 6, they hang “at a Greenwich Village coffee shop,” where the unsophisticated Iceman says to the intellectual Beast, “How about that jazz combo, Hank? It’s so far out that they’ll be fired if anyone can understand the melody?”

To live in the world of the X-Men, moreover, was to live in the larger Marvel Universe: footnotes in *Uncanny X-Men* No. 6, “Sub-Mariner Joins the Evil Mutants!” directed readers to *Fantastic Four* No. 27 and *Avengers* No. 3. Lee and Kirby and their co-workers devised what Riesman calls “a massive latice-work of stories,” in which any character could meet any other; fans could project themselves into it, too.

In 1965, the *Village Voice* published a rapturous piece about Marvel. “College students interpret Marvel Comics. . . . Beatniks read them,” Sally Kempton wrote. “I myself was deeply in love with

a Marvel hero-villain for two whole weeks. The fact is that Marvel Comics are the first comic books in history in which a post-adolescent escapist can get personally involved." As more coverage followed Kempton's swoon, Lee became the face of the company. No one could stop him: he had some say over who got credit and who got paid. Most creators in the industry—including Kirby and Ditko—were freelancers, doing what the law calls "work for hire." It's clear that Kirby drew the pictures and Lee wrote the words. What they later disputed, in decades of interviews and litigation, was who came up with characters and plot. Cognoscenti give Kirby more kudos than casual fans do, and more than they give Lee, especially after a vitriolic custody fight, in the nineteen-eighties, between Marvel and Kirby over his original art. As the sixties wore on, Riesman summarizes, "Stan went out of his way to praise Kirby," but not to raise his rates. Kirby later concocted, for his DC series *Mister Miracle*, a harshly satirical picture of Lee as the ever-smiling, sleazy entrepreneur Funky Flashman, prone to grandiloquent pronouncements ("I know my words drive people into a *frenzy* of adoration!").

There is no single word for the role that Lee played in building Marvel's "massive latticework," nor is there, even now, consensus about how he played it. Chris Claremont started working at Marvel as a teen-ager, in the late sixties, then wrote *Uncanny X-Men* continuously from 1975 to 1991. He recalls a figure "good as an editor, equally good as a manager, equally good as inspiration." Artists and writers whom Lee would have regarded as his juniors generally paint him in the sixties as bombastic but kind, reliable, fun to work with.

Auteur models of artistic creation—Emily Dickinson alone at her desk—have little room for such an encourager and organizer. Perhaps above all, Lee was a grand self-mythologizer. As Riesman writes, one of his canniest bursts of creativity was inventing "a character to play named Stan Lee." His ability to impress strangers, and to believe his own tall tales, suggests comparisons to Ronald Reagan. He claimed to have won public debates with Fredric Wertham back when Lee was too obscure to have merited Wertham's attention; Riesman concludes that they never happened.

More generous observers might compare Lee to an orchestra conductor, coaxing talent from others. Toward the end of the so-called Silver Age, Lee was less writer than coördinator and door-opener, allowing an artist like Jim Steranko, whose panels recalled psychedelic rock posters and Op art, to conquer the once boxy visual medium. Like Cyclops fighting Magneto, or the Thing taking on Galactus, Lee needed a team: he couldn't do much by himself.

The team, of course, wasn't the same without him. In 1972, Lee left the day-to-day supervision of Marvel Comics, facilitating his own promotion to "president and publisher." As Sean Howe showed in "Marvel Comics: The Untold Story" (2012), the company in the early seventies was delightful, idiosyncratic, creatively fertile, but internally disorganized and economically shaky, running through five editors-in-chief in the five years after Lee left. Only lucky breaks from licensed properties (the rock band Kiss, and "Star Wars") kept Marvel afloat until another editor-in-chief, the widely despised Jim Shooter, stabilized the ship.

The industry that Lee had left behind was always changing. In the eighties and nineties, comic books were moving from drugstores to specialty shops, a shift that encouraged creators to write for what the comics critic Douglas Wolk calls "super-readers," devoted fans who knew the decades-long backstories. Fans like that could impede change, seeking

out only what they already knew they loved; as collectors, they could also generate boom-and-bust cycles, like the one that almost crushed Marvel again, in the mid-nineties. On the other hand, creators working in these later years could count on long-term emotional investment in changing characters, rounding out figures in what once seemed the flattest of media. These characters, such as Ben Grimm and Sue Storm, lasted beyond the generation of artists who produced them and readers who consumed them: they had room and time to grow.

**F**ew will read Riesman's biography principally for its account of Lee's last decades, but no responsible narrative could skim over them. After 1972, Lee spent the rest of his life as the ebullient face of a medium to which he had nearly stopped contributing. He tried repeatedly to succeed in Hollywood, with Marvel properties or with his own new ideas. Producers took meetings—who wouldn't meet Stan Lee?—but few live-action films, and no hits, got made. The TV show "The Incredible Hulk," with Lou Ferrigno, ran from 1977 to 1982, and there were several bursts of Saturday-morning cartoons (lucrative, though unsatisfying to Lee), but that was as good as it got. In 1998, at seventy-five, Lee gave up his remaining rights in Marvel properties in exchange for a high-six-figure retainer and a cut of film and TV profits. But he might have felt that he missed out. In 2000, "X-Men" became



*"I can never tell if I'm allowing independent play or just ignoring her."*

the first global hit film from a Marvel franchise (though the X-characters had been licensed to Fox to raise cash in Marvel's lean years). The Marvel Cinematic Universe took off with "Iron Man" (2008), spawning a succession of blockbusters. Lee's own later pitches were less Peter Parker and more cut-rate Hugh Hefner: a superheroine called the Femizon, and one named Stripperella; "A One Hour Erotic Action Series" for TV.

The twenty-first-century Lee could have simply retired. Instead, he seems to have wanted to stay relevant, even though he no longer had the team or the skills. Stan and Joan Lee grew close to a serial con man named Peter Paul, who orchestrated an Internet-boom-era fraud around a new venture, Stan Lee Media, fronted by Lee. It launched a few clunky Web series—one starred the Backstreet Boys—and then effectively morphed into a multimillion-dollar self-dealing and check-kiting scheme before folding. In 2001, Interpol arrested Paul in Brazil. And then Lee did it again, or let it be done to him. As Riesman recounts, the successor to Stan Lee Media, POW! Entertainment, was "a largely criminal enterprise," promising Lee-based works that never appeared. Stan the Man was never charged with a crime.

To justify his get-rich-quick efforts, Lee cited Joan's luxurious tastes and J.C.'s needs. Riesman describes a volatile relationship between father and daughter, with ugly fights recurring in Lee's final years. A knot of new caretakers and hangers-on formed around him, including the collectibles entrepreneur Keya Morgan. After Lee died, at ninety-five, the disputes continued: over the estate, which J.C. inherited; over alleged elder abuse by Morgan (he pleaded not guilty); and, less credibly, over alleged sexual abuse by Lee. No one comes off well, and J.C. and Morgan worst of all. "He knew that people depended on him for a living," one late-life associate said of Lee. "He was a generous, trusting man." Even in his last months, he could be the center of attention, a well-meaning spider in his unlucky web.

If Lee's life deteriorated into fraud and feud, his legacy has come to seem only more enduring. The cast of characters that Lee and a clique of almost entirely white guys created has

gained cultural and commercial superpower, animating stories and authors and fans in ways that they could never have foreseen.

In Lee's X-Men, Jean Grey was The Girl, the fairer sex, the weakest link (many of the women in Lee's books were, alas, The Girl); but in Chris Claremont's X-books she became the cosmic center of the Dark Phoenix saga, burning down a patriarchal world. Kirby and Lee introduced Black Panther in *Fantastic Four*, in 1966, but he could not come close to the T'Challa of Chadwick Boseman's screen portrayal until others (especially Ta-Nehisi Coates and Brian Stelfreeze, beginning in 2016) wrote and drew him. Peter Parker's teen angst laid the groundwork for the internal divisions of such later young heroes as Kamala Khan, the current Ms. Marvel, defender of Jersey City, committed both to her Muslim faith and to the role models that older heroes provide (she writes fan fiction about the Avengers). Notably, neither the Black Panther nor the Ms. Marvel character was reinvented by white men. The writer G. Willow Wilson, the artist Adrian Alphona, and the editor Sana Amanat modelled Kamala partly on Amanat's immigrant childhood.

These figures, too, live in the lattice-work that Lee and Kirby and the rest began, seesawing between personal dramas and cosmic dilemmas. Something big and scary is always on the horizon in a well-made Marvel comic, new or old. If the power fantasies, the high stakes, and the uncertainty about what comes next brand superhero plots as quintessentially adolescent, perhaps—with our tenuous futures, our need for new forms of community, our day-to-day fears about climate and justice and medicine—we are all adolescent now.

Today, new comic books featuring Marvel (and DC) superheroes make up a niche market. It's unlikely that any staple-bound comic will ever approach the eight million-plus copies that an X-Men relaunch sold in 1991. But as modern superheroes—not just at Marvel, but in part thanks to Marvel—have become more complicated, and sometimes more profound, the culture around them has, too. Newsletters and fan clubs of the Silver Age have grown into spe-

cialized venues for critics, from Gary Groth's *The Comics Journal* to sites like WWAC and ComicsXF (for which I write). Academic attention has followed. The pioneering monograph about superhero comics, Richard Reynolds's "Superheroes: A Modern Mythology," appeared in 1992. Now there are several each year.

The popular podcast "Jay & Miles X-Plain the X-Men," whose existence testifies to the scope of the fandom that Lee helped inspire, calls X-Men "comics' greatest superhero soap opera." That soap-operatic aura—not one hero's journey but the arc of a whole universe—might be credited to Lee and Kirby or, better yet, to their entire sixties stable of writers, pencillers, inkers, and colorists, and to their fans, who wrote in to letter columns, praising or denouncing the latest plot twists. It's an effect that the Marvel Universe, more than any other modern intellectual property, embodies. Like Troy or Rome, every new Marvel story exists on layers of foundations laid by various hands. Incredibly, Douglas Wolk has chosen to excavate them all: this year, Penguin Press will publish his book about reading every Marvel comic issued between 1961 and 2017, a kind of peak for the highbrow attention that Marvel comics can now attract—not just cultural commentary but appreciative archeology.

Today's X-Men, chronicled in ongoing comics, are citizens of a sentient island nation, Krakoa, with its own ecosystem, its own foreign policy, its own space colony, diplomats, and privateers. Mutants move there for safety and community, find long-lost friends and same-sex lovers, and resurrect the dead. It's a far cry from the original X-men roster, five white-bread teens at a Westchester County school. And it's a lot more like Marvel fandom—a found family, an imagined community, no longer all white, and frequently disabled, devoted to unlikely stories about people who may look odd, or lack social graces, but who can read minds, or teleport, or fly. That mutant nation could never have been created—or even anticipated—by the fast-talking, smug, sometimes generous, and surprisingly conventional Lee. But it could never have happened without him. ♦