

LEVELED Book • X

Comic Cons



Written by Keith and Sarah Kortemartin

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Focus Question

Why are comic cons popular in modern-day culture?

Words to Know

| | |
|-------------|--------------|
| autographs | exhibit hall |
| censorship | memoirs |
| controversy | merchandise |
| conventions | panel |
| critics | pop culture |
| diversity | themes |

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Correlation

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Ticket holders make their way through the line to enter Comic-Con International: San Diego.

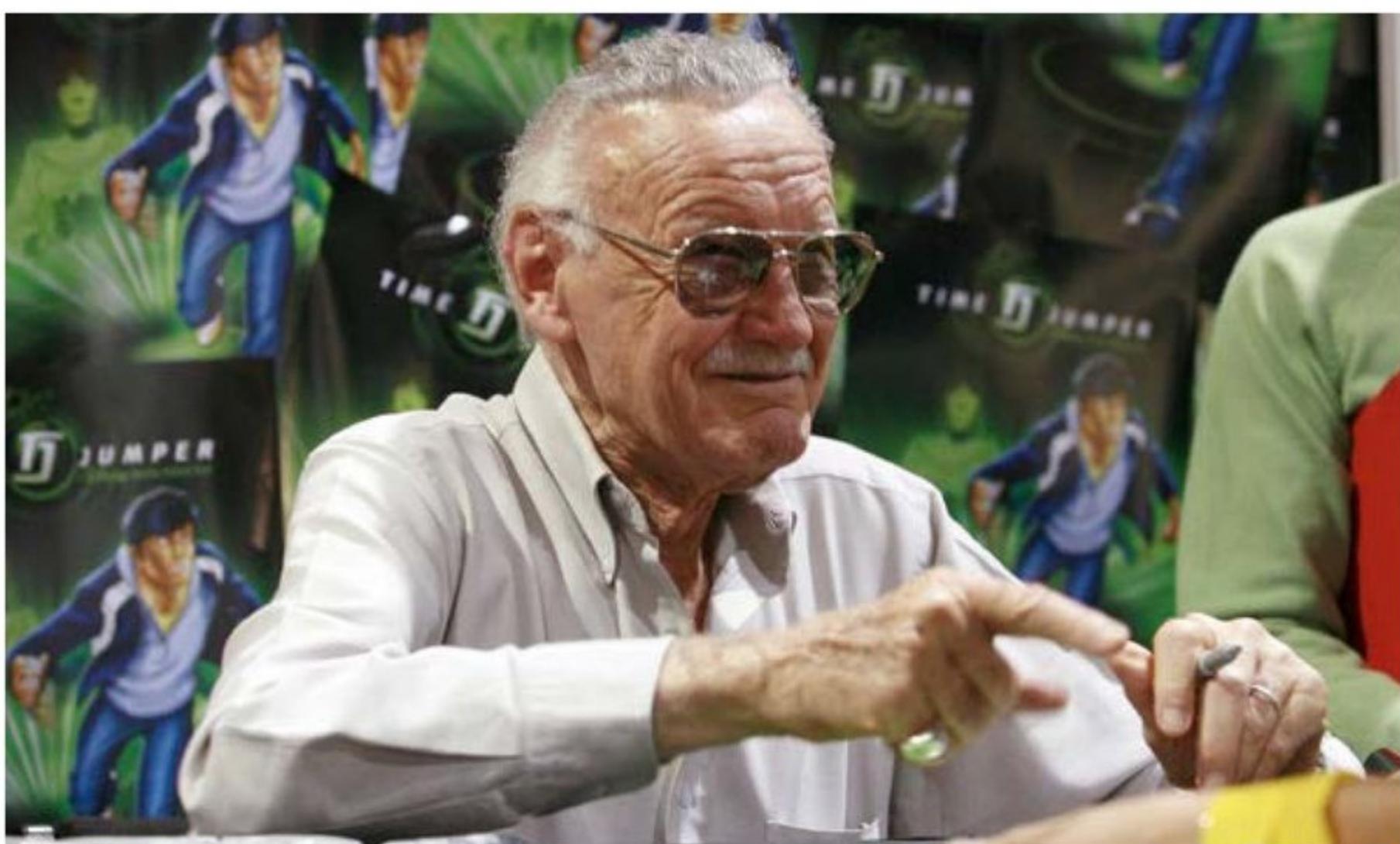
Welcome to Comic Con

Packed with thousands of other fans in an auditorium, you wait for the stars to arrive. It's warm inside your Chewbacca costume, and you're impatient. Suddenly the audience is on its feet, cheering. You jump up to see the Iron Man himself, Robert Downey Jr., walk out onstage. The *Avengers* panel has begun.

This is the world of comic cons: colorful, crowded, and built for fans of **pop culture**. If you collect comic books, watch movies, or play video games, there's something for you at a comic con. These fan **conventions**, called *cons* for short, happen all over the country.

Origin Story

Shel Dorf, a comic book artist, was one of the first people to start comic book conventions. Dorf organized small gatherings of comic fans in Detroit in the 1960s. He went on to found the convention now known as Comic-Con International (CCI): San Diego in 1970. The first San Diego convention attracted about 100 fans; it now hosts over 130,000 people every year. Hundreds of other comic cons have sprung up across the country. There are large comic cons in New York, Seattle, Denver, and Phoenix every year, to name a few. Tickets for these events sell out months in advance. Some fans camp at ticket booths for days to be sure they get in.



Legendary writer, editor, and publisher Stan Lee often appears at comic cons. Lee helped create many of Marvel Comics' most popular superheroes, including the Fantastic Four, the Incredible Hulk, Thor, Spider-Man, and the X-Men.



A "Golden Age" comic dealer holds the first issues of *Superman* and *Captain America* and the first appearance of Batman in *Detective Comics*.

The Rise of an Art Form

What has caused this explosive growth?

First, comic books have become more popular in recent years. Comic books had many readers during the "Golden Age" of the 1930s and 1940s. They became much less popular for several decades afterward. During that time, many people thought of comics as kid stuff. But in the late 1980s and early 1990s, comic book series such as *The Sandman* and *Watchmen* broke new ground and were praised by critics as serious works of art. Since then, interest in comic books has soared, and writers and artists continue to explore new topics and styles.

A modern comic might tell a traditional superhero story, a story about war, or a story about family drama. Comic books known as graphic novels are popular with young adults. Graphic **memoirs**, another kind of comic book, often deal with serious **themes**. For example, Art Spiegelman won a Pulitzer Prize—a highly respected achievement—for his graphic memoir *Maus*. His work was based on interviews with his father, a Holocaust survivor. As topics for comic books have expanded, so have audiences. Fans of every color, age, and gender can find something to relate to in comic books. As a result, comic cons are booming.

Second, the enormous success of recent Hollywood movies based on comic books has brought many people to comic cons.

Movies such as *Iron Man* (2008), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014) attracted many new fans. Movies are now a big part of comic cons. Famous actors, writers, and directors from comic-book movies often appear on panels and draw huge crowds.



Spider-Man first came to the big screen with a blockbuster film in 2002.



Manga illustrators display their work at a comic con in Europe.

Movies are only the beginning, though. Comic cons around the world also celebrate video games, novels, and television shows. The audience has become so large that some cons focus on just one art form. For example, many fans attend cons for anime and manga (animated films and comic books from Japan). There are cons for fans and collectors of classic comics. There are cons for fans of sci-fi and fantasy fiction. There are even cons for fans of steampunk, horror, and humor, among many others.

Big Cons and Small

Comic cons happen in cities all over the country, too. Outside the huge conventions in San Diego and New York, the crowds are smaller but just as enthusiastic. Check online or in your local newspaper to find out if there's a comic con coming to a town near you. You might be surprised at what you'll find: local fans mix with big-name cartoonists and movie stars at many smaller cons. If you go, you just might see the star of your favorite show or your favorite writer. You are also likely to meet local artists and make new friends.



A boy practices his lightsaber fighting technique during the Philadelphia Comic Con Wizard World Convention.



A group of cosplayers show off their costumes inspired by the sci-fi computer and console game *Halo*.

Cosplay

Many fans display their own creativity at comic cons. Some do this through cosplay. In cosplay, fans dress up in costumes as characters from comic books, anime, manga, and other fantasy genres. Cosplay is serious business for fans worldwide. Costumes can be bought, custom-built, or handmade. Many cosplayers make realistic props that go with their characters. Some cosplayers act like their favorite characters while they are in costume. Costumes can be simple or incredibly detailed. Figuring out how to make or build a costume is a big part of the fun for many fans. Cosplay is a major part of comic cons, with hundreds of costumed fans in the audience. Many conventions also hold cosplay contests, where cosplayers can pose for photos and act in skits based on their characters.

Celebrity Appearances

At comic cons, fans can also meet creators personally. Stars often take part in panels where they speak about the experience of making comic books, films, and shows. Audience members can sometimes ask questions during panels, have their photos taken with celebrities, and get **autographs**. These personal meetings become treasured memories for many fans.



Isaac Hempstead-Wright and Elle Fanning appear at CCI: San Diego to promote their animated film *The Boxtrolls*.



Attendees flow through the giant exhibit hall at the New York Comic Con in New York City.

The Exhibit Hall

The center of most comic cons is the **exhibit hall**. Fans can buy and trade comic books here, along with action figures, toys, and other **merchandise**. Experienced collectors can find rare editions of comic books. New collectors can get a head start on their collections. There is often an author signing area in the exhibit hall where fans can meet artists and writers. Even if you're not looking to buy anything, there is always a lot to see in the exhibit hall. Cosplayers wander by in colorful costumes; movies and movie trailers are shown regularly. Celebrity sightings are always possible, and there is an endless supply of colorful merchandise to browse through.

Growing Pains and Issues

The popularity of comic cons has not come without some **controversy**, though. Some comic book fans feel that the bigger cons have become too large. They think that the focus has moved away from comic books. Many comic cons could, in fact, be described as pop culture conventions rather than comic book conventions. The audience for comic books and comic cons has changed as well. While comic con attendees used to be mostly male, about forty percent of recent CCI: San Diego attendees are female. More than half of the people attending recent cons are under twenty-nine. The increased **diversity** of the comic con audience brings larger crowds and is a welcome development for most fans.

Comic cons can also be a place to discuss larger controversies. With the recent comeback of the comic book form, authors have taken on serious topics like race, gender, politics, and war. These comics are not to everyone's liking. Some comics can even become the subjects of "banned book" campaigns, where a library is asked to take a book off the shelves. *Spider-Man* and *Batman* comics, for example, have been challenged in some places because of adult themes. Readers, teachers, and librarians often discuss **censorship** on panels at comic cons.



A panel of experts discusses the anime industry during the MCM Comic Con in London.

One result of these talks has been the rise of the labels “graphic novel” and “graphic memoir” to describe comics that are meant for adults. Some comics are still aimed at children, but comics as a whole are no longer “kids only.” Some comics are fictional and some aren’t; some are educational and some are meant for entertainment. Some deal with adult themes, while others provide an escape into fantasy worlds. Since comics are diverse, should all comics be shelved together in libraries and schools? What role do comics have in our society? These questions are frequent topics at comic con panels.

Pushing the Boundaries

Keeping up with the variety of comic books can be challenging, but overall, it's an exciting time for comic cons. The huge range of the comics available today has resulted in bigger and wider audiences for comics and conventions. Fans of every age, color, and gender can find themselves represented in a comic somewhere. Heroes might look like Superman, a young girl from Botswana, or a reporter on the ground in Bosnia. There is no limit to what can happen in a comic book or who can be its heroes. In the end, this is what draws people to comic cons. The cons (and the stories that inspire them) create worlds where ordinary people can be transformed into heroes. Many people return to that experience over and over.



A young girl shows off her pink *Star Wars* stormtrooper costume at CCI: San Diego.

Glossary

| | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| autographs (<i>n.</i>) | signatures, especially those of famous people (p. 11) |
| censorship (<i>n.</i>) | the omission or suppression of all or part of a publication, play, or film because its content is considered offensive or threatening (p. 13) |
| controversy (<i>n.</i>) | a disagreement over an idea or issue (p. 13) |
| conventions (<i>n.</i>) | large gatherings that can last for several days where people discuss their work or a shared interest (p. 4) |
| critics (<i>n.</i>) | people who find fault or carefully judge for review (p. 6) |
| diversity (<i>n.</i>) | a wide variety of many things (p. 13) |
| exhibit hall (<i>n.</i>) | a large room used to display one or more objects to many people (p. 12) |
| memoirs (<i>n.</i>) | written retellings of people's experiences (p. 7) |
| merchandise (<i>n.</i>) | items that are bought or sold (p. 12) |
| panel (<i>n.</i>) | a group of people invited to knowledgeably discuss a subject in front of an audience (p. 4) |
| pop culture (<i>n.</i>) | popular ideas communicated through mass media that are part of the mainstream experience of modern societies (p. 4) |
| themes (<i>n.</i>) | the main ideas of artistic works (p. 7) |

Comic Cons

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Connections

Writing and Art

Create a comic strip featuring your favorite fictional character.

Math

Pretend that you spend \$20,000 to organize a comic con. You decide to charge a \$25 admission fee. How many people will have to attend to cover your expenses? Show your work two different ways.

The logo for Reading A-Z features the word "Reading" in a large, bold, red sans-serif font. The letter "R" has a small sun-like icon with rays above it. To the right of "Reading" is a large, stylized red letter "A-Z".

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