

"IN COMICS-IN THOSE DAYS, ANYWAY, AND ALWAYS WHEN I WAS- THERE BEING THE EDITOR MEANT BEING THE ART DIRECTOR TOO, BECAUSE YOU CAN'T JUST EDIT THE STORIES WITHOUT MAKING SURE THE ARTWORK IS DONE THE RIGHT WAY..."

-STAN LEE

Front: Stan Lee and the Marvel Heroes
Right: X-men comic strip

Stan Lee began his long career in comics at the tender age of seventeen. In 1939, Stan Lee was known as Stanley Martin Lieber. He began his career at the bottom of the barrel—as a coffee boy and a text filler writer at a comic book company owned by his cousin's husband: Martin Goodman. Timely Comics, later Marvel Comics, was a family ordeal, with relatives everywhere. His job as a text filler was less than desirable for the average comic book writer. "Nobody wanted to do that stuff because nobody read it—and so Stan did it, and he treated it like it was the great American novel. And he kept doing them, and he loved doing them, and it turned out he made a career out of it. He respected it..." recalls Joe Simon, artist-editor of Timely Comics. Stanley Lieber adopted his pen name, Stan Lee, upon his first published work. The 1941 piece was merely text filler titled "Captain America Foils the Traitor's Revenge" in Captain America Comics #3. (Rhoades 32).

In 1942, the editor in chief and art director of Timely Comics were hired to work for DC Comics, therefore leaving both positions to the nineteen-year-old Lee (Rhoades 35). "I was responsible for all the stories, either writing them myself or buying them from other people," Lee says. 'In comics—in those days, anyway, and always when I was there—being the editor meant being the art director too, because you can't just edit the stories without making sure the artwork is done the right way so it enhances the stories... and the stories have to enhance the artwork. They have to go hand in hand. So I was really the editor, the art director, and the head writer.' (Rhoades 36).

Through his work as editor in chief, Lee developed what is now known as the 'Marvel Method'. Lee would never give his staff the complete script. His method was a collaborative one in which he would write the dialogue and script outline, then leave the rest up to the artist

MARVEL



(Rhoades 36). This hands-off approach allowed the story to be told and gave the artist creative license all while allowing Lee to have a final review of the work before publication.

In the late 1930s, the writers of comic books predicted that their nation was soon to be at war. Their superheroes lived in this mindset throughout World War II: fighting Nazis in 1941, and later, Japan. Fuelled by new patriotism, Captain America was born, along with other wartime heroes. "Superhero comics changed their focus from crime-fighting to war stories, but retained their escapist nature". In 1942, Lee gave up his post as editor in chief of Timely Comics to enlist in the Army Signal Corps. He was "stationed in North Carolina and Indiana, drawing cartoons to help train payroll clerks and creating posters to war troops about the dangers of syphilis" (Rhoades 37).

Comic books were a key source of pro-war and pro-patriotism propaganda in World War II. Kids enjoyed the stark contrast between the Ally superheroes and their Axis counterparts, parents were encouraged to buy their children comic books to show their own patriotism, and soldiers enjoyed the luxury of comic books and the affirmation that they provided. "In fact, comic books sold better during the War than they did any other time in their history" (Rhoades 40).

Lee returned from the war in 1945 and resumed his post as the editor in chief at Timely

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Comics. With the war over, superhero comics were less popular. "Except for three enduring originals—Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman—superheroes had all but disappeared by 1952" (Rhoades 47). In the late 1940s and 1950s, comics fell on hard times. There was an enormous backlash against them, blaming the influence comics had over children for juvenile delinquency. To remedy this, a Comic Code was put into place. Comics with this seal of approval were guaranteed to be appropriate for children. Additionally, throughout the 1950s, the popularity of television gained momentum and took the focus off of comic books. During these times, "...Lee preferred just to say he was a writer, but if pressed on the issue, referred to himself as a writer of illustrated children's books" (Duncan 41). Lee turned to silly cartoons, romance and science fiction comics while trying to keep Timely Comics in business (Duncan 39-41).

"In the early 1950s, Timely became Atlas Comics, which in turn was the predecessor of Marvel Comics" (Weiner 11). Lee was tired of simply following the trends of comics; he wanted to set them. After decades of working in the comic book industry, Lee was ready to quit. "[My wife] Joan was commenting about the fact that after 20 years of producing comics I was still writing television material, advertising copy, and newspaper features in my spare time. She wondered why I didn't put as much effort and creativity into the comics as I seemed to be putting into my other freelance endeavors... [Her] little dissertation made me suddenly realize that it was time to start concentrating on what I was doing—to carve a real career for myself in the nowhere world of comic book." So he decided 'for just

this once, I would do the type of story I myself would enjoy reading...and the characters would be the kind of characters I could personally relate to: they'd be flesh and blood, they'd have their faults and foibles, they'd be fallible and feisty, and—most important of all—inside their colorful, costumed booties, they'd still have feet of clay" (Rhoades 78). "Marvel Comics as we know it today did not have its crucial start until the first issue of The Fantastic Four, which was published in 1961" (Weiner 12). Stan Lee and colleague Jack Kirby had been brainstorming ideas about how to rival the very popular Justice League of America comic. The Fantastic Four were different in that they had real problems with which people could relate. Also, they "...had no secret identities, ...initially wore no costumes, and one of their members was the grotesquely misshapen Thing. Upon closer inspection, readers would discover characters who bickered amongst themselves, struggled with self-esteem issues, and had financial woes" (Duncan 46). Readers could see part of themselves in The Fantastic Four. This new kind of superhero was revolutionary for the comic book industry.

After the first few comics, Lee and his colleagues at Marvel experienced something that was new to the group: fan mail. Letters began pouring in over the new Fantastic Four series. Readers were giving feedback about what they liked and disliked about the comics. They told the writers what they wanted to see from the series and offered endless praise. Sales at Marvel skyrocketed as Stan Lee and Jack Kirby garnered a following amongst comic enthusiasts. Along with this new comic, Lee, Kirby, and others at Marvel began to intricately interlace their stories; issues would pick up where the last left off, cliffhangers and sub-plots arose. Events in one series would trigger events in another series. While this is seen today in television, comic books, novels and movies, the idea was new in the 1960s. Through this technique of interlacing stories, Lee slowly grew what he first called the 'Marvel Universe'. (Rhoades 80)

The next big success came with The Incredible Hulk. Stan Lee had always been a fan of both Frankenstein and Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. He created a superhero by combining characteristics of both while inserting a sense of morality into the beast. The Incredible Hulk lead to the superhero that made Stan Lee an international icon, a household name and a legend in the comic book industry: The Amazing Spider-Man. At first, Lee's publisher, Martin Goodman, turned down the idea for Spider-Man. He did not think that the comic book would sell. Goodman,



"DO YOU REMEMBER THAT SPIDER-MAN CHARACTER OF YOURS THAT WE BOTH LIKED? WHY DON'T YOU DO A SERIES WITH HIM?"

-MARTIN GOODMAN

Left: Stan Lee
Right: The Amazing Spiderman #1

who usually allowed Lee artistic freedom, saw that the comic did not follow the trends, had a silly name, and had a teenager for the hero. Up until this point, teenagers had been sidekicks, not heroes. Additionally, Lee envisioned Peter Parker as having lots of personal issues including financial, employment, romantic, moral, and family issues. Goodman did not see this kind of comic fitting into the Marvel Universe. (Rhoades 80)

Lee got his opportunity to debut Peter Parker and Spider-Man in the 1962 series closing issue of Amazing Fantasy #15. Being its last issue, Goodman was not concerned with its content. Lee jumped at the opportunity and the issue flew off of the shelves. "I threw Spider-Man into that book and I featured him on the cover. A couple of months later we got our sales figures, that had been the best-selling book we'd had in months" recalled Lee (Rhoades 81). After seeing the sales, Goodman said to Lee "Do you remember that Spider-Man character of yours that we both liked? Why don't you do a series with him?" The series took off after that. "The Amazing Spider-Man #1 debuted in March 1963. A second series came out in 1972. Since then, Spidey has had at least two ongoing series at any given time..." (Duncan The Spider-Man franchise we know today consists of television shows, merchandise, several series of comic books,





video games and three full-length feature films, with another film in the making.

With the success of Spider-Man came controversy over who actually created the character. A character not unlike Spider-Man had been conceived earlier by Joe Simon called the Silver Spider. Also, Simon, along with Jack Kirby and artist Steve Ditko could not remember who actually came up with the name for Spider-Man. The project was so collaborative that the group decided to simply share credit, although Lee is usually unofficially given credit. (Rhoades 83)

Over the next decades, Stan Lee continued working for Marvel and producing comics. Over the years he has created hundreds of memorable characters and changed the face of the American comic industry. He retired from editing in 1971. Lee is the face of Marvel comics and frequently makes cameo appearances in the movies about his characters. Lee will always be remembered for his contributions to the comic book industry. He revolutionized the way comics were produced with the Marvel Method, and changed the face of superheroes by giving them human qualities and problems. Today, at the age of 86, he continues to write and produce, while also giving lectures and writing books about his long and fruitful career.

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"I THREW SPIDER-MAN INTO THAT BOOK AND I FEATURED HIM ON THE COVER. A COUPLE OF MONTHS LATER WE GOT OUR SALES FIGURES, THAT HAD BEEN THE BEST-SELLING BOOK WE'D HAD IN MONTHS"

-STAN LEE

Above: The Incredible Hulk

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Personal Statement:

Attempting to size the accomplishments of Stan Lee into an 11 by 17 inch format proved difficult. In his years, Lee has accomplished so much, and influenced so much that the amount one could write about him is overwhelming. It is no surprise to me that I was able to find a multitude of books about him. When I first received the assignment to do this paper over Stan Lee, I knew who he was, but I had no idea that his influence reached so far. The fact that all of these memorable characters that I have heard about all of my life can be traced back to one man is astonishing. I decided to focus this research paper on the beginning of Lee's career rather than the end because I hope the reader can gain an appreciation for how far Lee has come in his career in the comic book industry. Most people today know that Stan Lee is the face of Marvel, and that he makes many cameo appearances in the movies based off of his characters, but I was interested in how he got his start and his slow climb to fame. This paper was written chronologically for that reason. If I could continue this paper, I would have gone into far more detail with the debut and success of Spider-Man. It is Lee's best-known work and his claim to icon status. Although Lee is still alive, he has become a legend. Also, I would have liked to give a more thorough history of Marvel comics. There were times when Marvel was going through some very rough times that I would have liked to touch on more. Although I have learned a lot about Lee, I find myself picking up some of my reference books and reading parts of them that are completely unrelated to Lee. The comic book industry began in the last century and has grown to astronomical proportions in a relatively short time. This project was rather fascinating, and I cannot wait for Christmas break when I can dive further into these books and learn more about comic book culture in America!



STAN LEE