"HOW COULD A TEENAGER BE A SUPER HERO?"
BY ARLEN SCHUMER

Within the core of Publisher Martin Goodman's rejection of writer/editor Stan Lee's Spider-Man proposal lies the very heart of the character's everlasting appeal.

Previous to Spider-Man's creation in 1962, the only teenage super heroes in comics were sidekicks, a tradition begun with Batman's Robin in 1940. The accepted notion that teenage heroes'—by definition, sidekicks—only function was to provide young male readers with someone to identify with was soundly rejected by Lee. He believed readers would always choose to identify with the main hero, so he decided to "do the sidekick right," as he said at the New York Comic Convention in 2007. That meant giving a teenage super hero the lead role for the first time in comic book history.

In doing so, Lee might have been influenced by the burgeoning youth culture rising out of the 1950s, as evidenced by the spate of teenage monster, horror and science-fiction films that littered the pop culture landscape. These popular myths were feeding a throng of young Baby Boomers searching themselves and the popular media for something that spoke to them. Lee's prescient creation of Spider-Man as one of them anticipated the coming generation gap of the tumultuous 1960s, and gave the younger generation a four-color figurative leader they could rally around.

When he appeared on the American pop culture stage in 1962, Spider-Man occupied a fairly singular position. While Kennedy's Camelot might've been passing the torch to a new generation, The Beatles were barely out of Hamburg, much less subverting the public main with *Sgt. Pepper's*. Only the iconoclast Bob Dylan's coincidental emergence in music and hero-with-a-license-to-kill James Bond in movies could have legitimately vied for Spider-Man's youth culture spotlight. Perhaps that's why one of the first major media coverages of the Marvel phenomenon, 1965's *Esquire* magazine story, polled college readers and found that Spider-Man ranked alongside Dylan (and Che Guevara) as their favorite revolutionary icon.

But Spider-Man was not just the first teenage super hero in comic book history, he was the first antihero. Though it might be said that Lee's two previous creations that began the Marvel Age of Comics, The Fantastic Four and The Hulk, could be considered antiheroes as well, Spider-Man was different. The Thing played off the Frankenstein monster model of a man trapped tragically inside the body of a monster; The Hulk was, in essence, a super-variation of the Jekyll and Hyde monster motif. Both, however, were spin-offs of the "big monster" comics that were the company's fodder for years before and only evolved over time to become the truly tragic characters they're known as today.

Spider-Man, in contrast, was comics' first antihero who was man not monster (though the spider-like aspects of artist and co-creator Steve Ditko's conception were so fully realized that they make Spider-Man somewhat a vestige of Marvel's pre-hero monster era). And as a man, he was prone to all the sins and failings and foibles that befall all of us—despite (or because of) his superpowers.

This was a radical premise, in evidence from the very beginning of the Spider-Man saga, when Parker first receives his powers. Rather than altruistically fight crime, as every super hero before him unswervingly swore to do, he selfishly decides to use his newfound powers to make money—even going on television to show off his amazing abilities and make a quick buck. Afterwards, he refuses to cooperate with a policeman who's trying to run down a criminal (a decision with the direst of consequences), unlike all prior super heroes who, if they weren't already chums with their commissioners, acted as honorary deputies of their respective police departments.

And as the series progresses, Lee and Ditko continually foil our expectations about not only how a super hero is supposed to act, but how super-hero stories are supposed to be told. Parker expresses doubt, guilt, shame and worry about his powers and secret identity, both in and out of costume, in contrast to the smug confidence and air of superiority every other super hero carried himself with. Spider-Man doesn't always win, save the day or capture the bad guy at the end. He is misunderstood, rarely seen by the public as the hero. More often he is mocked, hunted, hated—everything a super hero is not supposed to be. Ergo, the first super-antihero.

The kernel of Stan's vision for the character was brought to crystalline reality by Ditko, who added his own inimitable vision, forming a bond with his creation more idiosyncratic than any other artist/character in super-hero history. The costume design alone is without question the most unique in the history of super heroes; the mask was revolutionary in concept, the first to cover the hero's entire face, thereby allowing the reader to place themselves in the space that that webbed avatar created. As Ditko elaborated in a 1990 article for *The Comics*: "I wasn't sure Stan would like the idea of covering the character's face, but I did it because it hid an obviously boyish face. It would also add mystery to the character and allow the reader/viewer the opportunity to visualize, to 'draw,' his own preferred expression on Parker's face and, perhaps, become the personality behind the mask." By the time of Ditko's 1966 departure from the character, ironically, the mask had become the de facto logo of Marvel Comics, much like Mickey Mouse's face is Disney's.

But it was more the way Ditko made Spider-Man move in that costume, bending, twisting, arching, swinging on his webs and walking on walls, that stamped the character with an offbeat individuality that film director Sam Raimi and his team of special effects artists have realized so perfectly on screen (Raimi reportedly would not agree to direct the first film unless Ditko received an on-screen credit). After all, Batman swung on a rope and Tarzan on a vine, but neither of them moved through the two-dimensional comic book plane with the innate grace and gravity-defying derring-do Ditko endowed Spider-Man with.

Ditko and Lee had been honing their craft on short fantasy stories with surprise twist endings that were more or less comic book versions of *Twilight Zone* episodes. Rod Serling's renowned fantasy TV series had hit the airwaves in 1959, the same year Lee and Ditko first teamed up, and made the twist ending an art form in itself. Spider-Man's origin story, appearing in the last issue of the *Amazing Fantasy* series, and its surprise ending—the murderer Spider-Man captures is revealed to be the same criminal he selfishly refused to apprehend prior—presented a twist as brilliant as the TV series' very best. By courting the reader's expectations of a pat heroic ending, Lee and Ditko truly shocked their reader with its somber conclusion, and in so doing turned the super-hero genre's conventions inside-out.

Spider-Man's origin, born in the tragedy of his Uncle Ben's death, mirrors that of another super hero's—Batman's—but with a crucial difference, and cannot be underestimated for providing Spider-Man with the psychological foundation that supports all timeless creations. Peter Parker's authentic, conscious guilt over his Uncle's death—failing to apprehend the killer when he had the chance—was a literalization of Batman's subconscious guilt over his parents' murders when he was a child. As such, it provided the stage for Lee's most classic line, "With great power there must also come great responsibility," the ironic, tragic underpinning that defined the character to his core. It not only reflected Parker's guilt, but it drove his will. It acknowledged his failure, something universally identifiable, but rather than give up, it gave him the indomitable power to strive on and succeed. In short, what every teenager anywhere in the world needs to learn.

And while Parker's will provided an end to strive for, the burden of shame and discomfort he bears in hiding his Spider-Man alter ego from his loved ones draws a direct metaphoric relationship to anxiety over the changes of teenagehood. Though at his best Parker was often a roiling mass of guilt and anxiety, he nevertheless provided young readers a sympathetic shoulder for their own adolescent angst and confusion. Whether subconscious to the reader or not, it nevertheless formed a key piece of the character's identifiability with his audience.

And though Peter struggles as the awkward social outcast when we first meet him, he grows, changes and matures as these issues progress in a near-realtime timeline, unlike the never-aging, never-changing comic characters that preceded him. By issue #28 he's graduated high school and cast off the previously crippling worries over meeting with his peers' approval, and exactly three months/issues later, he's off to college in issue #31. The character grew with his audience, an extremely rare occurrence, not only in the greater super-hero world, but even within the other Marvel titles of the period.

Perhaps Lee and Ditko's ultimate skewing of the standard super-hero creed was their characterization of the Peter Parker/Spider-Man duality. Unlike the Clark Kent/Superman model, Parker's nerdiness was real, not an act. And he wasn't a sideshow, either; *Spider-Man* is about Peter Parker first and foremost. While Parker might dress up and go out on adventures as Spider-Man (often to escape the troubles of teenage life), the stories were centered squarely around Parker and his seemingly endless misery from girls, bullies and dear, old Aunt May. In comparison, Kent and Bruce Wayne—and every prior civilian identity in comic book history—were little more than ciphers, rote stand-ins who took up space during super-hero breaks. By making the "secret identity" the focus instead of the costumed hero, inverting their traditional roles, Lee and Ditko invited a new generation of readers to identify with a "super hero" as never before.

And yet, as the ol' Parker luck demands, Spider-Man received none of the adulation and respect afforded Superman or any of the other super heroes; worse, he was hated by the media (spearheaded by arch-nemesis J. Jonah Jameson) and even wanted by the police, which only added to Parker's anxieties and confused, love/hate relationship with his alter ego. Parker/Spider-Man was an outsider in both identities—another first.

All the aforementioned was major fuel for the underdog status Spidey rode to his eventual symbolic and sales triumph over all super heroes, becoming, within a generation, the preeminent, most relevant, super hero of our time.

Revenge of the nerd, indeed.

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