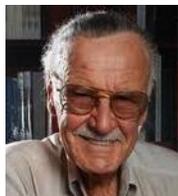# Virtual Soapbox

What I Love About Heroes
Stan Lee

A legendary comic book writer shares his perspective on what he loves about heroes and what makes them so popular with readers.

I was 17 years old in 1939 or 1940 when I saw an ad in the paper for a position in a publishing house. I thought it might be books or a magazine like *Time*. It was comics. But I figured, "Hey, what the hell. I'll try comics. That sounds interesting."

I always figured I would quit after a few months. I would just get some experience and then go into the real world. I did a million characters that nobody has heard of since. Every time I wanted to quit, I got a raise or something happened, and I figured, "Well, I'll stay a little bit longer. This isn't so bad." Before I knew it, it was my life's work.

By 1962, believe it or not, I was the editor because, after I was hired by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, they left and there was nobody else around. I had already done *The Fantastic Four* and *The Hulk*, and they were doing pretty well. My publisher said, "How about dreaming up another superhero?" So I said, "Okay."

When you do a new superhero the biggest problem in the beginning is what super power do you give him? They've all been taken! I was sitting at my desk trying to think of one and I saw a fly crawling on a wall, and I said, "Gee, wouldn't it be great if I could get a hero who could crawl on walls like an insect?" I thought that was original.

So then I needed a name for him. I figured, how about Insect-Man? And that didn't sound dramatic. Mosquito-Man? Nah. I went down the list. And when I got to Spider-Man, somehow it sounded dramatic. Spider-Man! So, I had my name.

I took the idea to my publisher and he hated it. I told him I wanted to call the character Spider-Man. I wanted him to be a teenager who gains super-powers after he is bitten by a radioactive spider, and I wanted him to have a lot of personal problems.

My publisher said to me, "Stan, first of all, you can't call him Spider-Man because people hate spiders. That can't be a hero's name" And he said, "He can't be a teenager because teenagers can only be sidekicks. A teenager can't be the hero. Don't you know what a superhero is? And finally you want him to have personal problems!" So he definitely hated the character and didn't want me to do the story, but I quietly went ahead with it anyway.

First I gave it to Jack Kirby to draw, but Jack always drew these very heroic characters, like Captain America. I said to him, "You know Jack, I want this fellow Peter Parker to be just an average teenager. Don't let him look like your typical muscular superhero." I guess Jack was so used to drawing those kinds of people, that after he drew a page or two I looked at it and I said, "No, that's not right. Forget it Jack. I'll give it to another artist." Jack didn't care; he had a lot of other things to do, and we didn't realize it would be such a big script.

So I gave it to Steve Ditko, who tended to draw things a little more realistically and more down to earth. He did it, and I really didn't interfere much in what the costume would look like. Steve pretty much invented the Spider-Man costume himself. It was also Steve who decided, "Hey why shouldn't he shoot webs too?"

We had a magazine that we were about to kill because it wasn't selling too well. When you are about to discontinue publishing a magazine, nobody cares what you put in the last issue, because that's the end of it. The magazine is dying anyway. So I featured Spider-Man in the last issue of this magazine and since I knew nobody would care whether Spider-Man was in there or not, I even put him on the cover.
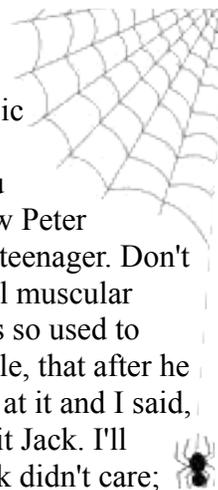
A short time later we got our sales figures on *Amazing Fantasy* – this magazine that we had wanted to kill – and we found it had been the best selling book of the month with Spider-Man on the cover. I still remember my publisher walking into my room when he got the sales figures and saying, "Hey, Stan, remember that Spider-Man character of yours that we both liked so much? Why don't you make it a series?'"

For me, story is all about conflict: the conflict between the hero and the villain, and whatever problems I could bring into the hero's personal life. It's not always just the villain fighting the hero. With Spider-Man, Peter Parker had all these personal problems: He had to go save the world at one end of town but his aunt needed her medication at the other end of town. That made it fun to write the stories -- to have that additional level of problems.

Up until that time, comic book heroes had mostly been one-dimensional. They were just good guys who'd see a crime and they'd go out and catch the criminal. I thought it would be fun to delve into their personal lives and what problems they have. It can't be all perfect being a superhero. What do they do about their love life? What do they do about earning a living? What do they do if they have dandruff or whatever? That made it fun writing the stories.

I think if they're not flawed, they become incredibly uninteresting, because they become one dimensional. If the character can do no wrong and is perfect in every way, he is not a terribly interesting character. So, I've always tried to make the characters I've written as realistic and empathetic as possible, and then just give them one attribute that makes them incredibly colorful so you want to read about them.

When I was 10 year old, my favorite movie star, far and away, was Errol Flynn. I thought that this guy was the greatest because he always played such heroic roles. He was either the sheriff of Dodge City, or he was Robin Hood, or he was Captain Blood. When I would leave the theater, I'd imagine that I had a little crooked smile on my face the way Errol Flynn did, and an imaginary sword at my side. I'd be looking around for little girls that might be attacked by some bullies.

So If I have a hero say something, I am thinking to myself, "What would I say if I were him in that particular situation?" If I have a villain say something when I'm writing his dialogue, I become the villain. I'm putting myself in that spot and I'm thinking, "What would I say?" You can only write a character well if you think you're that character at the moment; if you can be that character in your mind.

A case in point, when Jack Kirby and I were doing the Fantastic Four, we needed a new villain for an issue on a tight deadline. I said: "Jack, I think a great name is Diablo; why don't you draw a guy called Diablo, and we'll give him some kind of power." And he drew a real scary-looking guy, but I had no idea who Diablo was or where he came from. I must have batted out something and Jack drew it. To this day I can't remember the Diablo story; the only thing I ever wrote that I don't know what it was!

Why are superheroes so popular? A superhero by definition is a superpower. People love fantasy. We love things that are bigger than life. We love things that are very imaginative. I think that we will always love superheroes as long as they are bigger and more colorful than normal people, yet at the same time we can empathize with them.

Stan Lee *is a comic book writer, editor, actor, producer, publisher, and the former president and chairman of Marvel Comics. With several artists, including Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko, he co-created Spider-Man, the Hulk, the X-Men, the Fantastic Four, Iron Man, Thor, and other characters. He was inducted into Will Eisner Comic Book Hall of Fame in 1994 and the Jack Kirby Hall of Fame in 1995. He is now Chairman and Chief Entertainment Officer of* [*POW! Entertainment*] *in Los Angeles, California.*

Editors Note

This article is based on excerpts from several on-line conversations.