

Stan Lee Presentation

Who would've thought that a company that produced books covered by and colored with heroes would need an ordinary teenager to waltz into their production and save them from their ultimate doom? For Timely Publications, now Marvel Comics, Stanley Martin Lieber was that teenager. At the age of 17, the aspiring novelist jumped into the industry thanks to a family member. After a few years, he began to unofficially fulfill the role of the producer while the company searched for someone to fill the position. However, due to Stan Lee's creative mind, the company very simply never found a replacement and the job officially became his. Lee took the heroes out of the far beyond where they existed in imaginary worlds and plopped them down on the streets of New York City changing comic books for the better and earning himself worldwide fame. Lee left a lasting impression on the world of comic books by founding what modern writers have dubbed "The Marvel Method" of creation, he created realistic characters, he increased respect for comic books by making the literature more challenging, and he incorporated realism by adding current issues into his plot lines. Comic books went from an embarrassing piece of literature to a collector's item under the ink from Lee's careful pen.

To learn about Stan Lee, I took a trip to Laramie Wyoming, to the University of Wyoming to examine his archival papers. The information I examined varied from personal correspondences with his secretary or Bill Clinton to newspaper articles from famous media outlets or college classrooms to original comics sketched and noted on by the man himself. Throughout my research it quickly became very

evident that I was studying a legend and that he is responsible for the revival of the comic book industry.

After World War 2, the comic book industry was in a bit of a pitfall, unable to produce anything that kept their readers entertained. If romance sold at the time, all the books became about romance. If westerns sold, it was all westerns. Finally, Lee realized something needed to change. Before coming into Timely Publications, he had a dream of being a novelist. When he got his job writing for Timely, Stanley Martin Lieber wrote under the pen name of Stan Lee for fear that if his name was tied to comic books, it would ruin his reputation. In addition to working with Timely, Lee wrote other freelance works for newspapers and other copy, putting much more effort into those writings. However, in 1975 Lee told the *UCLA Daily Bruin* that his wife Joan finally called him out asking why he never put forth the effort into comics like he did into his other work. Fortunately for the industry, this was the wake up call Lee needed and sparked the revolution of the comic book. In the early 60s when Lee created the Fantastic Four, Timely Comics switched to Marvel and the next decade became known as the Marvel Age. Lee's creativity brought many new ideas to the drawing board, including how he influenced the creative and publication processes.

An idea that the industry ran wild with was Lee's method for creating his comics. The method that has been labeled as "The Marvel Method" was one of Lee's simplest, but lasting contributions. This method was Lee's way of giving the artists more freedom in drawing each frame of the comic. He would write the basic storyline or plot for that comic and give it to the artist. He would tell them how

many frames they needed to fill and let them draw what they thought matched that plot. After they had it drawn up, Lee would fill in the dialogue. He started the method with his artist Jack Kirby when illustrating the first issue of the Fantastic Four. Lee gave Kirby a synopsis of what he wanted the comic to accomplish and let Kirby work his magic. Lee knew he could trust his artists and would have no problem adding dialogue and captions when the comics came back to him. This allowed for the artist to have much more freedom by not forcing them to follow along with the dialogue. They could create the comics in the best way they believed the story needed to be told. All in all, it created much more cohesive comics. When other comic companies got word of this system, they began to follow suit, mimicking "The Marvel Method." It kept artists and writers busy by allowing multiple stories to be worked on at once. However, Lee knew a new method of creation wasn't going to be able to save the industry on its own.

Stan Lee's next step was to increase the literary value of his comic books so readers would no longer be ashamed to be reading what was then classified as a children's book. He started by making his story lines more advanced. Lee wrote in his book *So This Is Spider-Man* in 1979, that his stories must always contain two elements: "a highly motivated villain and an equally intriguing subplot that ties in with the hero's battle." The plots became more complicated than a hero being placed in the frontlines of a battle with villains and ultimately coming out on top every time. Lee carried the plots trying to make what he called "fairy tales for adults." The reader should be clued in to each aspect of the storyline, especially when things get more complicated. Plots were even stretched over multiple books, keeping readers

in suspense until the next one released. Marvel was the first in the industry to feature continued storylines in titles. Marvel also spear headed the idea of allowing characters to soliloquize. Lee believed it was imperative to allow readers to peek into the thoughts of his characters. He believed if a frame was just a character, it would add to the storyline by giving the reader what the character is thinking at that given time. Storylines were much more complex, including the ideas of soliloquies and continuous storylines through multiple issues, making the issues more advanced. Lee transformed the magazines farther by advancing his writing.

In addition to the plot, Lee also upgraded the vocabulary in his dialogue from POW and WAM to complete sentences and full thoughts. Marvel was first again in using college level vocabulary in their magazines. Lee wanted to eliminate clichés and show that Marvel was for intelligent people. In this process, Lee was never afraid of losing younger readers. He refused to write down to his audience. From the *Chicago Tempo*, in an article called “An Off-The-Wall Superhero” in 1986, Lee said that he’s “always tried to write comics as if they were literature and not just nonsense.” By becoming more advanced, they became educational. In turn, Marvel comics became a way to teach vocabulary to younger readers while keeping them entertained with his fiction. His complex story lines that entranced his readers were not only successful because of their new vocabulary, but also by the elements of realism he added to his books.

One important idea that Stan Lee gets credit for is bringing comics back to the real world, New York City to be exact. All his characters exist in the same universe. As they all dwell in the same dimensions, the characters have the ability to

interact with each other. Hence why the Avengers can all come together although they are all separate heroes with their own stories. Marvel was first in allowing all their characters to interact with each other.

Those characters followed suit of their setting and also became much more realistic. Lee wanted to create characters that the audience could empathize with. Heroes and villains alike are created with redeeming qualities and fallouts. It forces the reader to sympathize with them. It also required heroes and villains to be interdependent on one another. Lee told the *UCLA Daily Bruin* in 1975, “for the first time, a comic book reader would be confronted with a case where there were no completely good or bad characters, but characters with shade in between.” This way, the readers found themselves never truly hating a villain or completely idolizing a hero. They were both incredible, but they were both flawed, much like the average person.

Thus, the characters became relatable to the readers, struggling with every day issues. Lee believed even if he were a hero, he would still struggle with allergies, paying bills, and running late because of traffic just like everyone else. As a teenager, Peter Parker struggles with acne, girls, and making money working for a newspaper. As a superhero, Spider-Man has to deal with those issues as well. In creating the character, the writers and Lee would ask themselves how they would act if they suddenly had super powers. This was Lee’s ultimate role in the “Marvel Method”; he was to make the storylines and dialogue that reflected the way readers would respond to being super. Marvel kept their comics as realistic as possible. Each panel purposely emphasizes realism.

Unlike heroes before the Marvel revolution, the heroes Lee creates are human with explainable powers. Much like Peter Parker's transformative spider bite, Lee ensures that all powers can be traced back to a cause. Lee's characters became extremely relatable and human like. In one of Lee's 1985 editions of "Stan Lee Sounds Off", which was an opinion column written in his comic books at the end of the issue, he says that when creating a new hero, he asks himself if there's someone he's known in his life that has interesting personality traits he could base his character off of. Lee's favorite characters to create are the villains because he believes it's the perfect form of revenge. When there's someone he dislikes, or something someone does that's particularly obnoxious, he'll use those traits to create his newest villain. Dr. Doom was one that he lists as clearly based off someone he was angry with. Using the world around him isn't just distinctive of his characters, though, but is also incorporated through cultural issues in the story lines.

An iconic piece of Marvel's comics is their incorporation of cultural issues into the storylines. Lee believed that, in writing, it's impossible not to allow the world around you to affect your writing. As I previously mentioned, Lee wanted to stress realism in each panel. When addressing that idea from a conceptual standpoint, that meant Marvel would address social issues in their comics. In 1971, Lee told *The Daily Free Press*, "The Panther and The Falcon are black superheroes struggling for their race and for themselves. The submariner and Iron Man battle pollution. The Avengers confront Women's liberation; Captain America and the Hulk are involved in student rebellions; and Spiderman fights organized crime and the

drug problem.” Contextually speaking, this being post World War 2 and in the midst of the Cold War, Lee used his comics to write a societal critique.

In his ability to raise awareness for social problems through his comics, schools not only used issues to teach vocabulary, now they were also using the books to teach students about cultural issues. Needed a way to capture a student’s attention in an anti-bullying campaign? There’s a Spiderman issue for that. It happens to be called *The Amazing Spiderman on Bullying Prevention*. Want a piece of literature students will want to read for an anti-drug campaign? There’s an issue for that as well; Issue 137: *The Green Goblin Strikes* to be exact. In this issue, the Green Goblin says, “When I take over as crime lord of New York, there’ll be no drugs in this city. No more innocent children poisoned by you miserable vultures.” Because characters were neither inherently good nor bad as heroes and villains, Lee even has the Green Goblin, Spiderman’s best friend turned arch nemesis, making a comment about the obvious crisis emerging from drug use and the selling of drugs.

As a writer, Lee had a huge hand in spreading awareness for these societal problems. As a citizen of New York, Lee gave a hand to many philanthropies using Marvel as support. He would donate comic books to children’s hospitals for the kids to read, he employed Lighthouse workers which gave employment to the blind, he worked with inmates, as well as the big brother program, he partnered with schools and veterans, and he was a part of the United Support of Artists for Africa. Just to name a few. Stan Lee was more than just a comic book producer. He refused to live in a vacuum and separate himself from the world around him. He used that to his advantage making his books even more desirable.

That desire for Marvel comics didn't go unnoticed by the other companies in the industry. The mimicking of "The Marvel Method" wasn't their only form of flattery. As Marvel became more successful, other producers like DC comics, began to make their stories more current with the times and their plots more complex. DC even went so far as to have Lee recreate their characters and some story lines in a book they called *Imagine if Stan Lee created...* In this book, Stan Lee took the characters and plots of DC Comics and morphed them into the Marvel style making characters more humanlike and the plots much more realistic. Lee's impact went far beyond inspiring other creators though.

His fame went worldwide. By the 80s, Lee's comics were being translated into nearly every language and sold to readers of all ages across the world. In 1985, Lee talked about this worldwide fame in his book *Spidey and Me*, saying "In France, he's called L'homme Araignee, in Italy, L'vomo Ragno, and he also answers to a host of different names in Scandinavia, South America, Germany, Japan, the Philippines, Australia, and so on throughout the free world." Lee's worldwide fame, however, was not surpassed by his national fame. With the support of Bill Clinton as a friend, Lee was virtually unstoppable. He was going on college tours starting in the 70s, which he's still doing to this day as a 91 year old. He also received recognition through awards, for example in 1968, fairly early in his career considering the bulk of his characters were created in the 60s, Marvel swept the Society for Comic Art Research and Preservation's convention with 27 awards. In 1988, Lee won the Lifetime Achievement Award. Marvel would have never become what it is without the incredible Stan Lee and his fame because of that is undeniable. In his book *How*

to Write and Draw for Comic Books, Lee says that “the name Stan Lee is to comic books what Walt Disney is to animated cartoons. There is simply no other name in the entirely field which is remotely competitive.” While he may not be the most humble man, he has a point. After World War 2, comics seemed to have no hope in rising to the mainstream parts of literature. Lucky for us, Stan Lee gave comics the comeback they needed to exist in modern literature and film as well.

It’s obvious that Stan Lee created stories that would last a lifetime. As we see more and more movies released under the Marvel name, it’s important to remember the name behind each of those story lines. Lee created stories he wanted to read, with characters he could relate to, experiencing life the way he would and that made all the difference. In each Marvel movie, Lee makes a cameo appearance so he can continue to be a part of his work. 74 years after he began in the industry, he still continues to lead it.

As I was sitting in my hotel room in Wyoming, waiting for a cheese pizza to be delivered, a US postal service commercial came on using Stan Lee and his character Spiderman as spokes people. A flier in my hotel room had the image of Spiderman in the corner, advertising for the newest *Amazing Spiderman* movie. Later that evening, I watched the Toby Maguire *Spiderman* on Netflix. Modern readers and moviegoers continue to recognize this man to be an icon in 2014. As a legend, he can’t be ignored. 74 years after he stepped foot into Timely Publications, 74 years since he started revolutionizing comic books, 74 years since he made his decision to be in the industry, 74 years and still going strong.

College level vocab: Enraged, fatal, divertissement, menace went beyond using the words mad, dying, distracted, villain