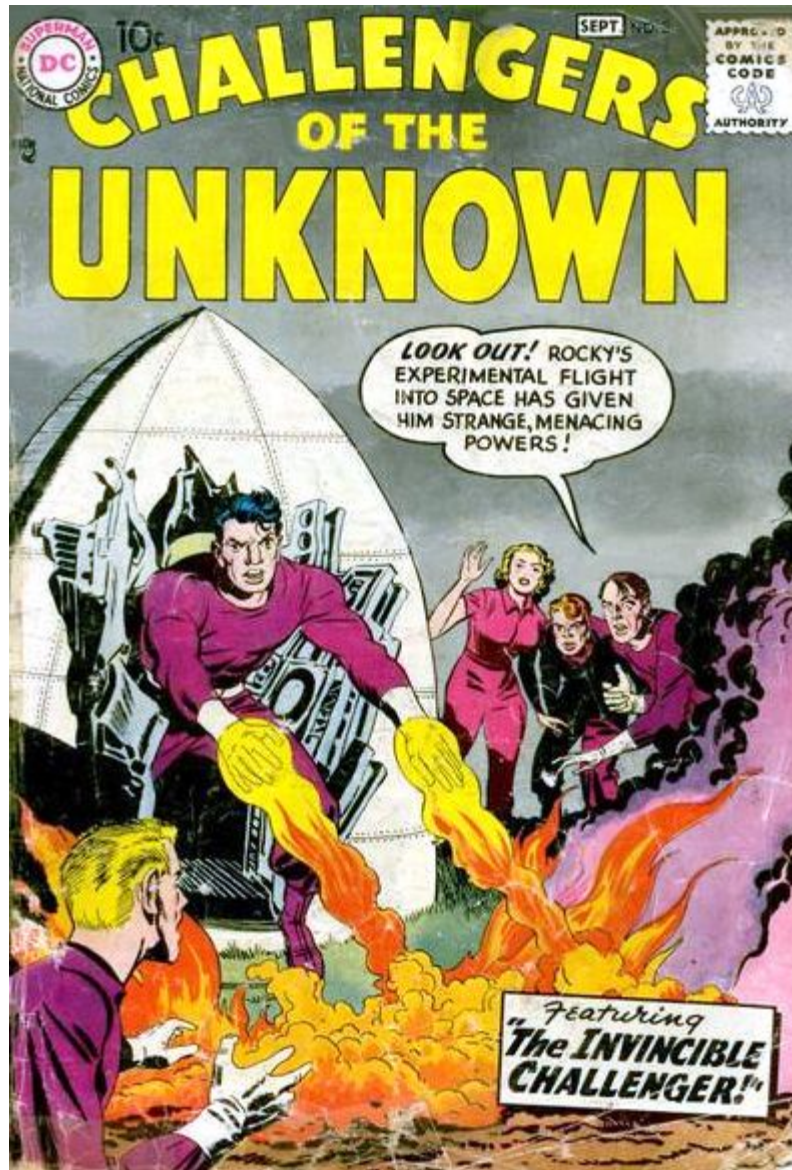


# The Case For Kirby

Jack Kirby as creator (not co-creator)  
of the Marvel Universe



by "Tuk"

version 3.0

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# Introduction

In this book I examine Fantastic Four issue 1, to see how the Marvel Universe was created.

I argue that the creation process was like the creation of the painting The Last Supper. One man (Leonardo da Vinci) created the painting, and another man (the owner of the building) made changes. Some people liked the changes, and others did not. Are the changes enough to say that both men are co-creators of The Last Supper?

Here is The Last Supper. Below it is the closest we can get to the original.<sup>1</sup>



Note the changes. The “real” Last Supper is faded and cracked, and has a doorway cut through it. These changes are due to decisions made by the owner of the building. The owner wanted the painting to be permanently on the wall of the convent dining room, so it got faded and cracked. And the owner (or his successor) decided to add a door through the wall.

These changes made the painting better for the core audience, the nuns who were eating dinner. They liked that the painting was always there, even though it meant it became faded. The fading added to its character. And they liked the new doorway, it meant they could go

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<sup>1</sup> The original was completed in 1498, and Giovanni Pietro Rizzoli made this copy in the early 1500s. His version is used as a guide when attempting to repair the original.



about their business more easily. And what else was the painting for, except to inspire them to do their holy work? So the changes added real value, at least for its original market.

However, later art critics felt that the loss of da Vinci's vibrant colours, and the missing doorway section, meant the owners actually *damaged* the painting. So the owners do not qualify as "co-creators" of the painting. Even though the nuns liked the improvements.

I argue that Jack Kirby was like Leonardo da Vinci, and Stan Lee was like the building owners. Kirby created a rich and powerful story, and Lee then changed it. Some people feel like Lee's changes made the story better, by making it more accessible. Others think he made it worse.

To measure Lee's *overall* contribution I compare sales of the Fantastic Four to sales of Kirby comics before and after he worked for Lee. And I show that Lee's net contribution to sales was probably zero.<sup>2</sup>

And so I argue that Kirby, like Leonardo, was the sole creator of his work, even though his boss made changes that some people like. Because, judged by sales, Lee added no value at all.

## Introduction to the Marvel Universe

In this book the Marvel Universe refers to the foundational characters: the Fantastic Four (first appearance 1961), the Hulk (1962), Spider-man (1962), Thor (1962), Iron Man (1963), Dr Strange (1963), the X-men (1963) and the Avengers (1963). In this book I argue that Jack Kirby created these characters<sup>3</sup>, and Lee's merely simplified his stories

## Fantastic Four issue 1 overview

Most of this book is a detailed examination of Fantastic Four 1, the book that started it all. It is the primary source document and therefore our best guide to who did what. It contains three stories: the introduction, the origin, and the Mole Man story.

## Story 1: the introduction

The first story (8 pages plus cover) is titled "The Fantastic Four". A mystery man fires a flare gun and the words "Fantastic Four" appear in the sky. Three other people then stop what they are doing and gather to the call.

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<sup>2</sup> See the final chapter and appendix 5

<sup>3</sup> See the chapter on who created the other comics



A high class woman is having tea with a friend. She sees the message, turns invisible and catches a taxi. A monstrous man is trying to buy clothes to fit. He sees the message, angrily breaks through the door and his appearance causes people to panic. Finally, a teenage boy is fixing a car with a friend. He sees the message, turns to flame, and flies off. The air force think he is some kind of enemy missile, and attack him. He barely escapes and the four of them are now together.

## Story 2: the origin

The second story (5 pages) has no title. It tells the origin of the group's powers.



They have an argument then sneak into a rocket launch site. They take a rocket into space but are hit by cosmic rays. They crash land the rocket, and find they each have strange powers. They decided to work together.

## Story 3: the Mole Man

The third story (12 pages) is in two parts. Part 1 (6 pages) is called "The fantastic Four Meet The Mole Man!"





Seismograph readings detect underground tremors. A giant monster is tunneling underneath nuclear power plants and they then disappear into holes in the ground. The team trace the origin of the tremors to a remote island. They visit the island and find it guarded by a three headed monster. The ground then caves in and two of them find themselves in a dark cave. Then they see a blinding light that causes them to collapse. They wake up wearing radiation suits, see a valley of glowing diamonds, and meet The Mole Man.

Part 2 (6 pages) is called “The Mole Man’s Secret!”



On the island, the Thing battles another monster. Back underground, we learn how the Mole Man found the underground caves and went blind. He tries to show his skill in fighting. Then the Thing and the Invisible Girl appears. The Mole Man summons his monsters, and the team runs away. As they fly away in their plane the island explodes.

## What Fantastic Four 1 reveals

Analysis shows that the Mole Man story originally featured different characters with no superpowers. That is, it was an unrelated story originally intended for one of Marvel’s monster comics. This and other evidence indicates that the origin story was originally planned in the same way as Spider-Man, Ant-man, Thor and Iron Man: as just one of several stories in a monster or sci-fi anthology comic.

The choice to instead make it a new comic must have been a last minute decision: else why waste time changing an existing story? The Mole Man story could have been unchanged, been used in another comic, and a new, more appropriate Fantastic Four story created instead.

Now we come to who created the stories. By comparing Lee’s dialog with Kirby’s art we can see different levels of:

1. **Understanding:**

Kirby understood the story and Lee did not. This clearest example is probably the seismometer: this was essential to the plot, it was how they found the Mole Man, yet Lee did not know what it was or how it worked.<sup>4</sup> There are numerous examples like this in later stories. Lee did not understand the science that was essential to the plots.<sup>5</sup>

2. **Quality:**

Kirby's art shows a story that makes more sense. For example, the Mole Man was blinded by underground atomic testing, and this caused his hatred of atomic plants.<sup>6</sup> But Lee's dialog says he hates the entire surface world, does so for petty reasons, that atomic plants are merely incidental to his plans, and that he was blinded by falling over.

3. **Realism:**

Kirby's art shows a more realistic story. Everything in the art could take place in the real world (as understood in 1961). All the unrealistic elements come from the dialog alone.

4. **Care:**

Kirby took more care over the story. He shows a good understanding of recent history (most of the Mole Man story is based on the events of 1958), of technology (the seismometers, the space capsule, or how the Torch is chased by a very particular kind of missile), of the battles (every time that Reed uses his powers he relies on tensile strength, not muscular strength), and so on. However, Lee's dialog shows inconsistencies (e.g. "central city" is by the sea), multiple spelling mistakes (as editor he should have caught these) and general bad writing (e.g. The Thing says "bah!" four times despite having very little dialog).

5. **Continuity:**

When comparing other comics, we can see that the Fantastic Four is simply "business as usual" for Kirby: all its ideas and strengths were in Kirby's other recent work, but not in Lee's work.

6. **Reputation:**

Kirby created his new characters throughout his long career. But Lee could only "create" characters when Kirby was there.

Based on this, we can infer how the Fantastic Four was created:<sup>7</sup>

1. **Kirby had the idea.**

Kirby was the driving force behind the renaissance in DC's superheroes.<sup>8</sup> So he would have discussed superheros with Lee.

2. **Lee agreed.**

Lee agreed to a superhero story based on Kirby's Challengers (the origin, and the powers from issue 3).

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<sup>4</sup> See the discussion of page 15.

<sup>5</sup> See the chapter on who created the other Fantastic Four stories

<sup>6</sup> See the discussion of page 14.

<sup>7</sup> See appendix 9 for details

<sup>8</sup> See the timeline in appendix 6

3. **Kirby created the origin story.**

The original version probably had a splash page. This page probably introduced Ben Grimm, test pilot, and had the “here they are” banner used on the current splash page. The story may have had an extra page showing how the team got home by flagging down a plane (as recalled in issue 2).

4. **Lee agreed it should be whole book**

After seeing the story Lee must have agreed it should be a whole new comic. Possibly he wrote the issue 1 synopsis before presenting the idea to the publisher, his uncle<sup>9</sup> Martin Goodman.

5. **Goodman approved a new comic.**

As publisher, Goodman had to approve any new comic.

6. **Kirby created the book to a deadline**

The book was created to a tight deadline. Kirby added an eight page introduction and adapted an existing story (the Mole Man).

7. **Lee wrote the finished dialog.**

Lee’s job was to appeal to younger readers.<sup>10</sup> So Lee’s dialog mostly described the action, made it sound as extreme as possible, and removed adult plot details (such as how the Mole Man was blinded by the good guys).

8. **And so on.**

Later stories followed a similar pattern:

- i. Kirby suggested an idea
- ii. Lee, as editor, approved it or added his own ideas
- iii. Lee sometimes wrote notes at the meeting
- iv. Kirby created it
- v. Lee added dialog and sometimes requested edits.

## Lee’s role in later years

Lee had a high opinion of his own contribution (making suggestions and writing the final dialog), so after the first year<sup>11</sup> he began to call himself the writer. He was thrilled to see the amount of fan mail, so he began to relax and add wisecracks and asides. The story was entirely contained in the art, so Lee had plenty of space to have fun without worrying about the plot.

The bottom line is that Kirby created, and Lee simplified. Lee’s changes shifted the audience demographic slightly (to younger readers) but did not affect total sales figures.

Now let us examine Fantastic Four issue 1 in detail.

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<sup>9</sup> Lee referred to Goodman as “my uncle.” (Dick Ayers interview, Alter Ego V3 No31). Goodman was actually Lee’s uncle’s brother-in-law (“Secret History of Marvel Comics” p.157). In this book I use “uncle” or “nephew” for brevity.

<sup>10</sup> See the discussion of page 3, and especially the quotation from Lee

<sup>11</sup> See appendix 10 for details



## The front cover: the history of Marvel

The cover to Fantastic Four issue 1 tells us the history of Marvel comics. Where? In the details and small print, the parts that most people ignore.



Let's start with the price, as this is the background for everything that follows.

# 10c



## Barely profitable

Comics had been ten cents for decades, despite inflation. This made them less and less profitable. Publishers were scared to raise the price in case young readers just went to a competitor instead. So instead they cut costs, offering fewer and fewer pages.

But the comics still took up space in stores. Almost anything else in that space would have made more money for the retailer. So ten years later most stores were replacing comics with more profitable magazines. But even here in 1961 everyone knew the writing was on the wall. Comics were barely profitable, and publishers knew it. The biggest sellers, like Superman, or Disney's Uncle Scrooge, could make up for small margins in high volumes, nearly a million copies per issue. But comics like the Fantastic Four were not expected to sell more than 180,000 copies per issue. The publisher, Martin Goodman, focused nearly all his attention on his men's magazines instead.

## The Comics Code Authority



Look at the box on the right that says "Approved by the Comics Code Authority". What does that tell us? Everything!

## The crisis of 1954

In 1954 psychologist Fredric Wertham published the book "Seduction of the Innocent". This created a moral panic against comics as a bad influence on children. Distributors and stores stopped handling as many comics. There were calls for comics to be banned. The industry was in crisis. As a result the comics companies set up the Comics Code, to say "we are safe and inoffensive now!" The code banned anything that might offend people, and enabled some comics to keep publishing.

The bottom line is that, since 1954, publishers were afraid to publish anything that might take risks or be adult in nature. Comics became bland. The most admired comics publisher of the time, EC, simply stopped publishing comics. In short, comics were in a bad way.

## IND



The next detail I want to point out is “IND”, short for “Independent News”, the company that delivered the comics to retailers. These three letters speak volumes.

### The greater crisis of 1957

In 1956, Goodman relied on the American News Company for distribution. But in 1952 the government began investigating it for anti-competitive practices. This made other publishers nervous, and they gradually stopped using the company. In June 1957 the American News Company ceased trading, leaving Goodman with no way to get his comics into the shops. In one month he had to cancel eighty titles<sup>12</sup>.

Thanks to the Wertham moral panic, and the very low profit margins from comics, most distributors were not interested in taking on Goodman's titles. Desperate, Goodman finally turned to his main competitor for help: Independent News was the distributor owned by National Periodical Publications, the company better known as DC, publisher of Superman.

Independent News said yes, they would distribute their competitor's comics, but not the eighty plus titles Goodman was publishing. They would only distribute eight titles per month. So Goodman fired all of his writers and artists, except for one man: his nephew (by marriage), Stan Lee. Lee now had to organise everything himself, hiring freelance comic creators as needed. Lee feared for his own job. Artist Dick Ayers recalled:

Things started to get really bad in 1958. One day when I went in Stan looked at me and said, “Gee whiz, my uncle goes by and he doesn't even say hello to me.” He meant Martin Goodman [owner of the company]. And he proceeds to tell me, “You know, it's like a sinking ship and we're the rats, and we've got to get off.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Vassallo, author of *The Secret History of Marvel Comics*, “tracked all of Goodman's publications across the decades. Goodman had been ramping up from his normal 40-something titles to 85 titles by 1957. Then in one moment almost the entire comics division was wiped out. (Note that the numbers include some bi-monthly titles: not all 85 titles shipped every month.)

<sup>13</sup> Dick Ayers, interviewed in *Alter Ego* V3 No31

## MC



Now let's look at that other symbol, "MC", meaning Marvel Comics. In previous years, Goodman's comics were branded as "Timely" or "Atlas", and since Spring of 1957 they had no shared brand at all. So why was the cover stamped MC?

### Content was unimportant

"Marvel Comics Group" was just a term used for selling advertising space. The Marvel Comics group was the group of similar comics that all had the same adverts. Women's magazines would have a different group name, men's magazines had a different group, sports magazines had a different group, and so on. This matters for two reasons.

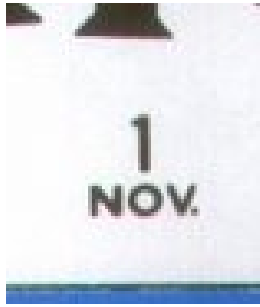
1. Goodman's comics sold so badly, and were so often replaced, that there was no point in selling advertising space in a particular title: nobody had heard of it, nobody cared, it barely mattered and might not be there the next month. So instead, Goodman sold space in a block of titles, then he could promise "this ad will appear in a million copies of *something*".
2. In later years, when the comics sold better, they needed a brand name. Goodman chose the name he used when selling advertising space.<sup>14</sup> This indicates how Goodman saw the comics: he did not care about the content. His job was just to sell newsprint by adding ink to it, and make them profitable by selling ads.

The book "The Secret History of Marvel Comics" gives more details of Goodman's attitude to content: to pay as little as possible for it. Content was the least important part of his business.

### The cover date: why it matters

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<sup>14</sup> Back when the original book called "Marvel Comics" was popular, Goodman had briefly tried "Marvel Comics" on the top of other books. This was in 1946-7. He tried again in an attempt to recover flagging sales in 1949-50. But generally the comics were sold as "Timely", or "Atlas", or with no common name at all. By 1961 the only consistent name was the one used for advertisers, "Marvel Comics Group"



Fantastic Four 1 is cover dated November 1961. The comic was on sale in August 8 and created in April. There was something very special about April 1961: Kirby was back!

## Jack Kirby in the 1950s

Kirby's decade was a story of dizzying highs and devastating lows. He was one half of the Simon and Kirby Studio, a birthplace of new ideas, new genres, and hit titles that had at times sold over a million copies per issue.<sup>15</sup> Simon and Kirby were the superstars of the business, and their names appeared on covers.

In 1954, they launched Mainline Publications, their own self-publishing venture. In a case of spectacularly bad timing, Wertham's campaign against comic books took down the distributor they shared with EC Comics, resulting in Mainline's insolvency.<sup>16</sup> By early 1956, the Mainline experiment was over.[Footnote: Robert Lee Beerbohm, "The Mainline Comics Story: An Initial Examination," Jack Kirby Collector 25, August 1999.]

Switching from owner back to freelancer, Kirby continued producing stories for the Prize romance books, sold stories to Stan Lee at Atlas, to Harvey where Simon was editor, and his work appeared in Charlton comics in the form of Mainline inventory. The industry continued to shrink, and by the latter half of the decade Kirby was trying to diversify into the more lucrative world of newspaper strips, producing a number of samples. While he continued with monthly comics to pay the bills, his dream was elsewhere. In 1957, Kirby landed on his feet at DC where the pay was good. He successfully pitched the S&K concept, Challengers of the Unknown, and was welcomed back without Simon.

In 1958, Kirby realised his dream of a newspaper strip, Sky Masters. Unfortunately, his editor at DC, Jack Schiff, had arranged the contact with the newspaper syndicate, and was due a portion of the proceeds. Kirby believed that his future assignments at DC were being leveraged to increase the editor's take from Kirby's share, from which he was already responsible for paying the inker. When the two wound up in court, Schiff won the judgment:

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<sup>15</sup> "Although Captain America sold almost 1m copies per issue, surprisingly he was not Simon's biggest seller. [...] Young Romance topped 1m sales per issue, as did its companion title, Young Love" From the Guardian's Joe Simon obituary. Joe Simon obituary, Steve Holland - <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/dec/16/joe-simon>

<sup>16</sup> Their distributor was "Leader News" who handled the highly respected EC comics. But EC published graphic horror comics. Their boss, William Gaines, was defending this comics on national TV one day, but he was on very strong "diet pills" that back then contained meth amphetamines. His pills ran out that day, and he appeared as some freakish person on live TV. EC horror comics then came under the spotlight at the Senate comic book investigation. Thus, when stores saw new comics coming from the same distributor, many just sent them back unopened. For more details on the rise and fall of Mainline, see Jack Kirby Collector magazine 25 (the Simon and Kirby issue), and Dave Rawlins' online EC discussion group



Kirby was blacklisted at DC, but his work on Sky Masters continued for another year.<sup>17</sup> His DC earnings had run dry by early 1959, but Kirby had already picked up assignments from Archie, Western, Prize, Gilberton,<sup>18</sup> and back at Atlas, from Stan Lee.<sup>19</sup> By early 1961, Atlas was Kirby's sole source of income. The pay rates were half what DC had paid: he really needed the money, yet he could see that Goodman's comic division might shut down at any moment. More than ever, Kirby had to create new hit comics, and fast!

Research suggests that writers hit their creative peak at age 42<sup>20</sup>, and artists at 48<sup>21</sup>. Kirby was 43. Just using the facts available to us in early 1961, we know that Jack Kirby, America's number one comics creator, was about to do something world changing.

## The cover picture



<sup>17</sup> Jon B Cooke, "The Story Behind Sky Masters," Jack Kirby Collector 15, April 1997

<sup>18</sup> Declaration of Mark Evanier on behalf of the Kirby family, 2011.

<https://docs.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/new-york/nysdce/1:2010cv00141/356975/74>

<sup>19</sup> He and Simon previously created Captain America for Goodman, and they were supposed to get a cut of the profits. Sales were huge yet Goodman said the profits were slim. Goodman was allegedly paying his other comics expenses out of the Captain America account. (See Mark Evanier, "Kirby: King of Comics").

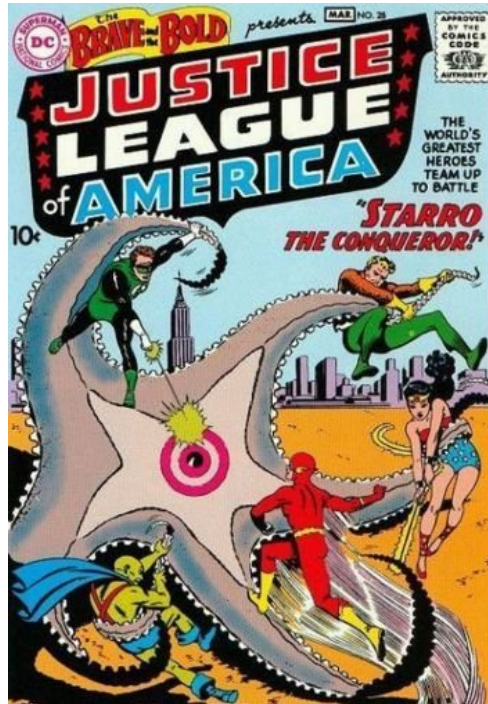
<sup>20</sup> This Is the Peak Age for Creativity, Science Says. Betsy Mikel -

<https://www.inc.com/betsy-mikel/this-is-the-peak-age-for-creativity-science-says.html>

<sup>21</sup> When Do Great Artists Hit Peak Creativity?

Tom Jacobs - <https://psmag.com/social-justice/great-artists-hit-peak-creativity-70528>

Lee later claimed that the Fantastic Four was all his idea, and that he was inspired by the Justice League comic. That claim does not stand up to examination: appendix 2 has the full details.



Based on that claim, some people like to see a slight resemblance between the cover of Fantastic Four issue 1 and the cover of The Brave and The Bold 28 (the first appearance of the Justice League). However, there is a much closer resemblance to Kirby's monster comics:



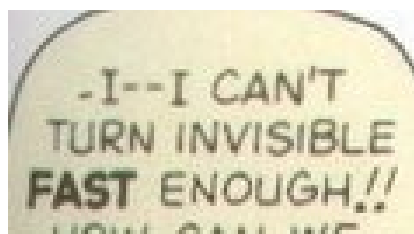
(See for example Journey into Mystery 58, or Amazing Adventures 5, published the month before Fantastic Four 1).

We will see this again and again in the origin of Marvel comics: everything can be traced to Kirby's earlier work.

## The cover text: would the editor lie to you?

All sides agree that the final text in this comic was written by Stan Lee. Let's look at that text. Reading left to right, the first text we see (other than the title and small print) is the Invisible Girl:

**"I can't turn invisible fast enough!"**



This is not true of course. On page 18 she can turn invisible instantly when a monster is chasing her. But this is not necessarily a lie, it's just a character's opinion in the heat of the



moment. And maybe it's just part of the symbolic cover: symbolic covers were normal for the time.<sup>22</sup>

The truth or otherwise of Sue's statement is a silly, trivial detail. But it raises a very serious question: how far can we go before "not exactly true" becomes a lie? Look at the next statement on the cover. This is in a text box, so it's the editor speaking to the reader:



**FEATURING "THE THING!" "MR. FANTASTIC!" "HUMAN TORCH!" "INVISIBLE GIRL!" TOGETHER FOR THE FIRST TIME IN ONE MIGHTY MAGAZINE!**

The editor implies that we should recognise these names. He implies that they have appeared somewhere before. But neither claim is true. A different character called "The Human Torch" once had his own comic, but if you bought this comic expecting that character you would be cheated. You would find you have been tricked into buying somebody completely different.

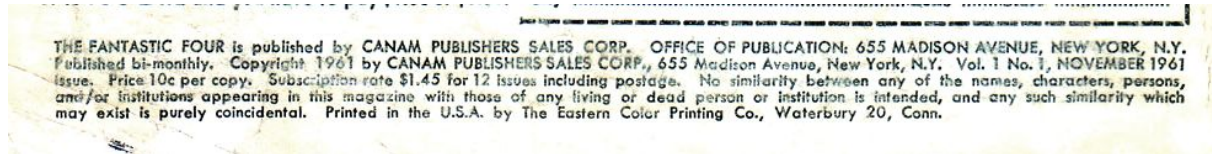
So this is a false claim, about the real world, made with the intention of getting your money. But is it a lie? How far can an editor allow the bending of the truth in order to get money? Turn the page and we will see.

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<sup>22</sup> The cover combines several different themes: the home in New York, the monster, and the powers. Issues 2,3,4,6,7, etc also had symbolic covers. The most obviously symbolic covers are those where Doctor Doom towers over everybody else (issues 5, 16, 29, 57, 84, 86, annual 2, and Treasury Edition 11).

# The inside cover: a reputable company?

Look on the inside front cover below the advertisement for building muscles. This tells us much more about the business.



If you are following along an ordinary reprint it probably misses the ads. If you have the scans<sup>23</sup> you might notice that it has the wrong page, using the inside front cover from issue 8 instead of issue 1. But they are very similar: all the early Fantastic Four inside covers had the same small print. I want to draw attention to the official company name.

## “Canam Publishers Sales Corp”

The officially named publisher of Fantastic Four 1 was not the real publisher, Martin Goodman’s Magazine Management. It was not Timely, or Atlas, the names used when talking to readers. It was not even Marvel Comics Group, the name use for advertisers. It was “Canam.” Why does this matter? Well, check the small print of other comics published by Magazine Management:

1. The Fantastic Four was published by “Canam”.
2. Spider-Man was “Non-parail”.
3. Daredevil was “Olympia”.
4. Avengers was “Vista”.
5. Hulk was “Zenith”.
6. Strange Tales was “Chipiden” (named after Goodman’s sons Chip and Iden).
7. Tales To Astonish was “Miss America Publishing Corp”
8. and so on. Goodman used **fifty nine** different company names.

These companies do not exist. Or rather, they do not have significant assets like buildings and employees.<sup>24</sup> The technical term is “shell companies” (empty shells). There are legitimate reasons for shell companies<sup>25</sup>, but they are very commonly used to prevent losing money if you are sued. Goodman was often sued, and violated FCC regulations on at least four occasions:

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<sup>23</sup> These scans are often traced to the “Gitcorp” DVD sold in the early 2000s

<sup>24</sup> Or rather, they own assets only long enough to transfer them to somebody else.

<sup>25</sup> E.g. create a company in a tax haven, transfer assets via it, and save tax.



The modus operandi that Goodman adopted to satisfy his thirst for a quick profit at any cost (except, of course, for the cost of investing in quality original material) got him censured by the federal government on at least four occasions.

In addition, he was sued by employees and competitors and, like many of the low-rent pulp and magazine publishers that entered the comic book field in the 1930s, was forever labeled by freelancers and comic book historians as a swindler of creative talent.<sup>26</sup>

One way to cheat a writer was to pay them for a story once, then later to use the old story again with minor changes, and without paying the original writer again. The “Secret History of Marvel Comics” (by Bell and Vassallo) has examples of Goodman doing this. Lee seems to have followed the same practice. For example:

The first time Stan Lee worked with Jack Kirby on a story (TWO GUN KID #54) Lee actually gave Kirby a plot. The plot was taken from an old Timely Western story called “The Tenderfoot” (WILD WESTERN #50) which was not written by Lee. Lee later used the same plot again in RAWHIDE KID #36).<sup>27</sup>

Another way was to simply not acknowledge their work at all. In Lee’s 1947 book “Secrets of the Comics” Lee gives Goodman all the credit for the existence of Captain America, never mentioning the book’s creators, Simon and Kirby, at all.

## Deceptive advertising

Another indication of the company’s standards was the advertising it accepted. These ads were perfectly normal in the comics industry as a whole, but low standards across the industry are still low standards. While we are on the inside front cover, look at that advertisement for big muscles. Look closely at the picture: it seems to have a fake head posted on the body. Look at the promise: huge muscles in “ten minutes of fun each day”.



Let’s be clear: this advertisement is lying to us. And while we’re at it, look at the other ads in the comics. Some offer magic tricks of highly dubious quality. Another says “if you know just 20 people you can make at least \$50, more likely \$100 to \$200 in your spare time”. This was a fortune in 1961 when a comic was just ten cents. Those numbers are all theoretically possible, but saying “at least” and “more likely” is simply a lie.

<sup>26</sup> Bell and Vassallo, The Secret History of Marvel Comics, 2013, p.26

<sup>27</sup> From a social media comment by Patrick Ford

Nearly all the ads are like this, either very misleading or simply lying. For example there are two full page ads looking for artists. But the comic book art industry was shrinking, indicating an oversupply of artists, and artists were the bottom of the pecking order. These ads exist precisely because artists could make more money from kids responding to these ads than from working in the industry.

All of this confirms what we saw in the small print: the business was not to be trusted.

## **Freeze frame: what happens next?**

We are about to begin the story itself. Let's pause and consider where we are.

- A company has a history of cheating writers.
- The comics division is run by the boss's nephew. The nephew has never done any other job, and his sales are mediocre.<sup>28</sup>
- The company is in crisis and the nephew fears he may be fired.<sup>29</sup>
- Then who should walk in the door? The world's greatest comics creator. A man who spends every hour at the drawing board and is consequently unskilled in the ways of business.

What happens next? How can the boss's nephew make himself so important to the boss that he can never be fired? The answer is in the comic.

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<sup>28</sup> See appendix 5

<sup>29</sup> "You know, it's like a sinking ship and we're the rats, and we've got to get off." - Lee's words to Dick Ayers at the time. Recalled in Ayers' interview in *Alter Ego* V3 No31

# Page 1:

## Signatures, and dialog versus art

Now we get to the story itself. I will use the page numbers written on the bottom right hand corner of each page. So the splash page is page 1, and the final page of the Mole Man story is page 25.

### Challengers, Challengers everywhere

Before discussing the signatures, let's look at how the story begins with a yellow box with four circles and the four heroes. The dialog says these are the Fantastic Four. But haven't we seen this design before somewhere? It was used on the original ad for Kirby's Challengers of the Unknown.



This is the first of many indications that the Fantastic Four was simply a continuation of Kirby's Challengers, with minor changes for legal reasons.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> See appendix 7 for a list of similarities

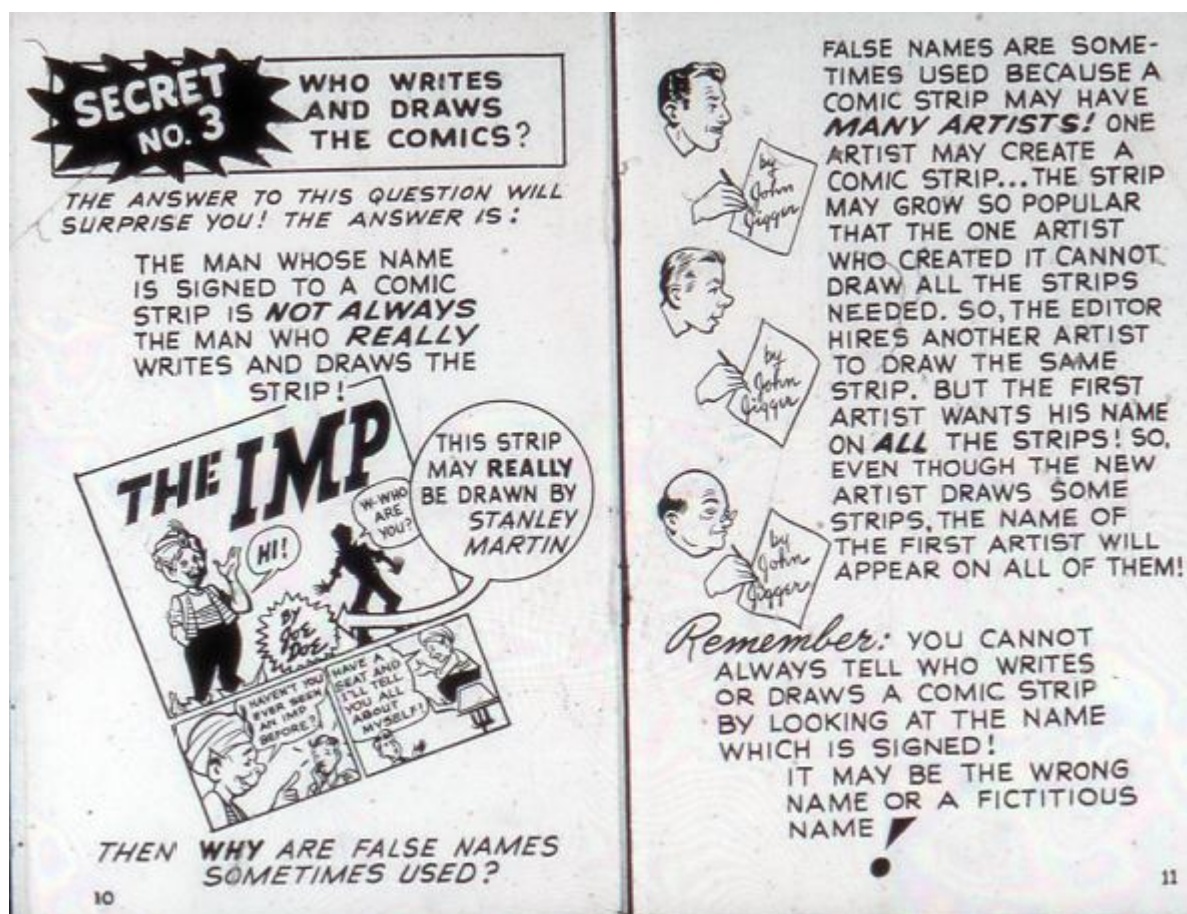
## Signed “Stan Lee and Jack Kirby”

At the top right we see the names “Stan Lee and Jack Kirby”.



What does it mean to have a name on a comic? Not much, according to Lee. Lee discussed names on comics in his 1947 book, “Secrets Behind the Comics”:





The man whose name is signed to a comic strip is *not always* the man who *really* writes and draws the strip. Then *why* are false names sometimes used? False names are sometimes used because a comic strip may have *many artists*! One artist may create a comic strip... the strip may grow so popular than the one artist who created it cannot draw all the strips needed. So, the editor hires another artist to draw the same strip. But the first artist wants his name on *all* the strips! So, even though the new artist draws some strips, the name of the first artist will appear on all of them! **Remember:** you cannot always tell who writes or draws a comic strip by looking at the name which is signed! it may be the wrong name or a fictitious name!<sup>31</sup>

Lee was writing in 1947, so probably had in mind Bob Kane, who recently (1943) left Batman but his name still appeared on every issue. Unlike most creators of the time, Kane understood the legal power of a signature: Kane made himself irreplaceable by getting a contract where his signature had to appear on every issue of Batman, even when Kane had little or no input.

The largest section in "Secrets Behind The Comics" argues that Martin Goodman should take credit for Captain America. This was probably the motive for the book, as Siegel and Shuster had recently claimed credit for Superman. Goodman would not want Simon and Kirby claiming the rights to Captain America. So Lee promoted Goodman as the genius behind the strip:

<sup>31</sup> Secrets Behind the Comics p.11, emphasis in original

# SECRET No. 12

## HOW A COMIC STRIP IS CREATED!

NOW LET'S TAKE UP A  
QUESTION WHICH HAS  
BEEN ON YOUR MIND  
AT SOME TIME OR OTHER...



HERE YOU ARE  
READING YOUR  
FAVORITE COMIC  
STRIP... YOU'RE  
ENJOYING THE  
STORY AND YOU  
LIKE THE STRIP



*But* YOU OFTEN  
THINK TO YOURSELF,  
"HOW WAS THIS  
COMIC STRIP  
CREATED?"

"THE SECRETS BEHIND THE COMICS"  
WAS WRITTEN TO TELL YOU **EVERY-**  
**THING** ABOUT COMICS. SO HERE'S  
THE ANSWER TO THE ABOVE QUESTION,  
**AS ONLY STAN LEE CAN TELL**  
**YOU...**

62

HERE  
IT IS!



HERE'S A  
MAGAZINE  
WHICH HAS  
BEEN READ AND ENJOYED BY  
**MILLIONS OF FANS FOR MORE**  
**THAN 9 YEARS!**



NOW LET'S FIND  
OUT EXACTLY  
HOW CAPTAIN  
AMERICA WAS  
CREATED!

*and why...*

63

IMAGINE YOURSELF LIVING **9 YEARS**  
AGO, BEFORE THE WAR HAD STARTED...

ALL OVER THE  
WORLD THE  
NAZI MENACE  
WAS SPREADING!

AND, IN A BUSY  
OFFICE IN A HUGE  
NEW YORK OFFICE  
BUILDING, A  
PUBLISHER PACED  
IN A ROOM, DEEP  
IN THOUGHT...



THIS PUBLISHER  
WAS MARTIN  
GOODMAN, THE  
YOUNG BRILLIANT  
MAGAZINE KING  
WHO IS TODAY ONE  
OF THE GREATEST  
NAMES IN THE  
COMIC MAGAZINE  
WORLD!

MEET  
MARTIN GOODMAN,  
PUBLISHER

*and* FROM HERE ON, WE'LL TELL  
MARTIN GOODMAN'S STORY  
-AND THE BIRTH OF  
CAPTAIN AMERICA, IN  
COMIC STRIP FORM!

### MARTIN GOODMAN'S OFFICE 1938...

SOMETHING MUST BE DONE!  
THE YOUNG AMERICAN READING  
PUBLIC MUST BE MADE AWARE  
OF THE DANGERS OF NAZISM  
AND FASCISM! WHAT CAN I DO  
IN MY MAGAZINE TO PUT  
YOUNG AMERICA ON GUARD



*And* SO WAS BORN  
A NEW KIND OF COMIC  
MAGAZINE PUBLISHING  
POLICY!

A POLICY OF  
TELLING THE  
READERS THE  
TRUTH ABOUT  
THE NAZI  
MENACE!

AND SO WAS BORN  
COMIC MAGAZINE  
COVERS WHICH DARED  
TO BE HONEST, LIKE  
THIS ...

I KNOW! I'LL USE STORIES IN  
MY MAGAZINES WHICH HAVE  
NAZIS AS THE VILLAINS!  
I'LL TAKE THE STORIES  
FROM REAL LIFE!



MARTIN GOODMAN  
PUBLISHER

65



I MUST CREATE A COMIC  
CHARACTER WHO WILL  
REPRESENT FREEDOM'S  
BATTLE AGAINST FASCISM!

UNTIL FINALLY,  
ONE CHARACTER WAS CHOSEN!



In 1961 Lee was placed in the same predicament again. Here was Kirby, the creator of the company's biggest hit, with his name on a new comic. Lee had to assert his claim over the Fantastic Four, just as Goodman had asserted his claim over Captain America.

## The Matthew Effect

Bosses often take credit for their employees' work. This is not a controversial idea. In science this is called the Matthew Effect, after the statement in Matthew 25:29 that "to he that has shall be given". If a scientific team discovers something it is generally the head of the team who gets the glory and the awards, regardless of who did what. The team head is then more likely to be the team head in future, and will therefore attract even more money and more awards regardless of who did the actual work.

As head of the comics division, Lee could put his name on any comic he wanted. He could call himself "writer" even if he was merely copywriter - someone who added the final printed copy (text) to another person's ideas. Within the comics industry Lee had a reputation for signing his name on other people's work, but perhaps that reputation was not deserved? In this book I focus on the primary documents to see where the evidence leads.

Lee did the same thing when he left writing comics in 1972, "Stan Lee presents" was written at the top of thousands of comics that Lee seldom read, let alone created.<sup>32</sup> True, Lee did not assert that he wrote these later comics, but he did not assert that he wrote Fantastic Four issues 1-8 either. We'll discuss that next.

## No "writer" claim for over a year.

For the first year, the books were merely signed "Lee and Kirby"



Lee did not call himself the "writer" until issue 9, dated December 1962<sup>33</sup>. For the evolution of Lee's claim to be the writer see appendix 10.

## What "Lee and Kirby" meant in 1961

"Lee and Kirby" is like "Simon and Kirby", where both men shared in writing and drawing (though Simon also had to split his time with running the company).

<sup>32</sup> We can be fairly sure that Lee stopped reading comics around this time, because when in 2007 Lee wrote "the Last Fantastic Four Story", although the story was set in the future, the characters were mostly as they were in 1973, around the time that Lee left day to day contact with the comics.

<sup>33</sup> The first few issues were bi-monthly. Issue 1 was cover dated Nov 1961, issue 9 was Dec 1962.





Fantastic Four 1 was essentially a Goodman monster comic. Goodman monster comics were signed “Kirby and X” (where X is usually the inker Dick Ayers, but could be Joe Sinnott, etc).



This topic is discussed in more detail when we examine page 4. That analysis suggests that “Kirby and Ayers” meant the same as “Simon and Kirby”: it meant that between them they created the comic. No more, no less. If it meant “A wrote it, and B drew it” then it would have said so.



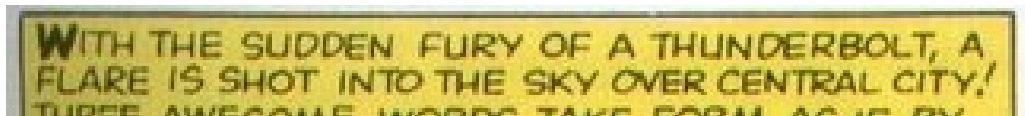
Give that “Lee and Kirby” just meant “both were involved”, and given that Fantastic Four 1 was essentially a monster comic, and given that Kirby wrote the monster comics, the signatures “Lee and Kirby” would suggest that Kirby had at least some part in writing Fantastic Four issue 1.

For how Lee’s claim to be the writer evolved, see appendix 10.

However, the finished dialog, written onto Kirby’s finished pencils, was by Lee. Nobody disputes that. That is what allows us to compare Lee’s dialog with Kirby’s art, and see what that tells us about the creation process.

## Dialogue versus art: the city

Now we begin the story itself.



The dialogue refers to a fictional "Central City". Here are some real life locations called “central city”: There’s Central City, Missouri, Central City, Nebraska, Central City, Colorado... notice anything in common?



City planners call a place “central city” because it’s *central*. The clue is in the name. But a few pages later we see that this comic book city is on the coast, the opposite of being central.



It's a minor point, but it suggests that either Lee did not know what would happen later, or he didn't care. We will see this again and again as the book continues: either Lee did not know what was in the book or he did not care.

## New York and realism

The art shows that this could easily be New York, where Kirby and Lee both lived. But for the first two issues Lee called it Central City. In issue 3 Kirby set a battle outside the Bijou Theatre, a landmark on New York's 45th street<sup>34</sup>, and from then on Lee began to refer to the city as New York.

This is a common theme throughout the book: Kirby's art shows things that might exist in the real world, then Lee's dialog destroys the believability. This matters because many fans felt that realism, such as heroes living in New York, was the key to Marvel's success:

It was important that Lee's heroes lived in the real world, and not in Gotham City or Metropolis, because they were real people. That is, Marvel Comics imagined how real people might act if they suddenly gained superpowers -- confused, conflicted and not necessarily eager for the responsibility. They were a departure from that straight-arrow hero of the Golden Age, Superman. The next age belonged to Marvel. And Stan Lee ushered it in with his creations.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> At the time, in 1961, it was officially called the D.W.Griffith theater, but everyone still knew it as Bijou.

<sup>35</sup> Article titled "Stan Lee" at Salon: <https://www.salon.com/1999/08/17/lee/a>

Calling the city “Central City” contradicts Lee’s later claim that having superheroes “live in the real world” was his own idea from the start:

"For years we had been producing comics for kids, because they were supposed to be the market," Lee explained. "One day, out of sheer boredom, we said let's do something we would like. So we tried to get rid of the old clichés. Comics were too predictable. Why not accept the premise that the superhero has his superpower, and then keep everything else as realistic as possible? If I were Spiderman, for example, wouldn't I still have romantic problems, financial problems, sinus attacks and fits of insecurity? Wouldn't I be a little embarrassed about appearing in public in a costume? We decided to let our superheroes live in the real world." <sup>36</sup>

Realism was not a minor thing, Lee said being “in the real world” was “the whole formula” for their success:

"The whole formula, if there was one, I think was to say -- let's assume that somebody really could walk on walls like Spider-Man, or turn green and become a monster like The Hulk, that's a given, we'll accept that, but accepting that -- what would that person be like in the real world if he really existed? Wouldn't he still have to worry about making a living, or people distrusting him, or having acne and dandruff, or his girlfriend jilting him, or what are the real problems people would have? and I think that's what made the books popular -- but it took years for the competition to realize that, I'm very happy to say."<sup>37</sup>

We will see throughout issue 1 that the realism, the secret of Marvel’s success, came from Kirby, and Lee fought against it.

## Dialogue versus art: the “flare gun”

The art shows wobbly writing projected onto clouds. That is, something like Batman’s Bat signal, or (a couple of years later) Spider-Man’s Spider Signal. The pulp hero The Phantom had a similar device.

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<sup>36</sup> “The Stan Lee Universe” by FIngeroth et al, p.74

<sup>37</sup> Stan Lee, in 1984

[http://www.etonline.com/movies/155709\\_flashback\\_stan\\_lee\\_talks\\_future\\_of\\_marvel\\_1984\\_it\\_a\\_growing\\_compa ny](http://www.etonline.com/movies/155709_flashback_stan_lee_talks_future_of_marvel_1984_it_a_growing_compa ny)



Sky projection is a real thing, and has been used since the 1920s as an advertising gimmick. Modern laser projectors make it even easier and the words are surprisingly clear (due to the distance and therefore viewing angle)





This works with regular lights, but the first laser had just been built, the year before *Fantastic Four 1* came out, so Kirby may have had this in mind.<sup>38</sup>

## Occam's razor

It is possible of course that the story involves radically new technology that appears to defy all known laws: the text says the words “take form, as if by magic” and then later form into the number 4. That would require numerous new discoveries and technologies that are not implied by the story. If we allow things that are not implied then why not say the *Fantastic Four* are really fluffy bunny rabbits in disguise, and are controlled by a flying teapot just out of view? Occam's razor is the principal that we should shave off unnecessary parts from any theory. New flare gun technology is not necessary, so we should shave it off.

Other “problems” with the image are easily explained: the wobbly edges to the letters are the same as we see in the sky projection photos. And the smoke appearing to come from behind the building is a mistake in the reprint: the original published comic shows it could have been from either in front or behind - the point is that the people watching do not know its source.

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<sup>38</sup> The first laser was demonstrated in 1960, by Theodore H. Maiman at Hughes Research Laboratories. Kirby kept up to date with science magazines, as we can see from the Sidewinder missile, seismometer, etc., in this issue alone.

reprint



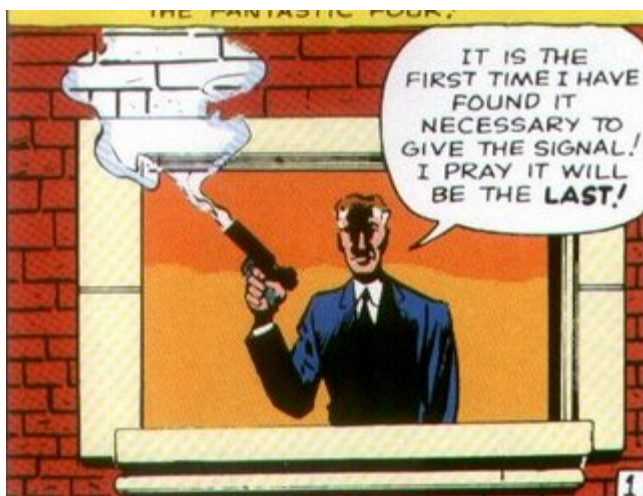
original comic



In conclusion, just as with the New York / Central City example, the art shows something that could be real. But the dialog (and the reprint) makes it *not* real.

## Dialogue versus art: Reed's hesitancy

Reed's first words are:



It is the first time I have found it necessary to give the signal! I pray it will be the **last!**

This suggests he does not want to use his powers to help the world. But later pages reveal that he hijacked a rocket ship, taking enormous risks to oppose the authorities, and did not hesitate in using his later powers aggressively. Then the Mole Man story shows him piloting his own plane, so there's a lot of planning. The later dialog says Reed called himself "Mister Fantastic". Is this a hesitant man? A man who prays he will never have to use his power?

So is Lee unaware of what happens later in the story? Or is Lee just careless? Or not at all concerned with internal contradictions? The following pages support all three conclusions.

## **Conclusion**

At the end of page one we already have hints that Lee is adding dialog to a story he has never seen before, that Lee contradicts himself, and that above all the the original story was realistic but Lee makes it unrealistic. This evidence will mount up, page after page.

## Page 2: Sexism

The first person we see in action is Sue Storm. She is also the first person we saw on the cover (reading left to right, top to bottom), and will be the first person to gain powers. Her face is confident and serious. She learns of the alarm and does not hesitate, even to check for herself, or to tell her friend, but she immediately moves into action. She pushes men (and some women) out of the way.



Also note that outfit. Later issues of the comic mention Dior several times (most notably in annual 1). Let us compare the Dior summer 1960 collection (beehive hair, big flower prints dresses) to the summer 1961 collection: the latest fashions are exactly what Sue is wearing: minimalist jacket, three quarter length sleeves, accented with neck details.

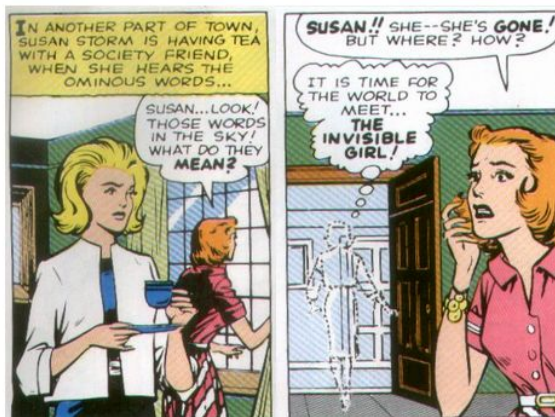




1960 Dior collection (Spring, Paris)



1961 Dior collection (Summer, Paris)



FF 1  
(on sale  
July-Aug 1961)



Note the detailed belt: the 1961 Dior look was a simple jacket, accented with detail around the neck (see FF2 and 3) or on the narrow waist (FF1). Contrast with billowing patterns of the 1960 collection.

Why does this matter? The old vision of women, as pretty things wearing long flowery dresses and impractical hair, changed in 1961. The future belonged to practical women who got things done. We are now building up an image of Jack Kirby from his art. He's a guy who noticed what was up to date and looked to the future. Later we'll see examples of Kirby being up to date with politics and science as well.

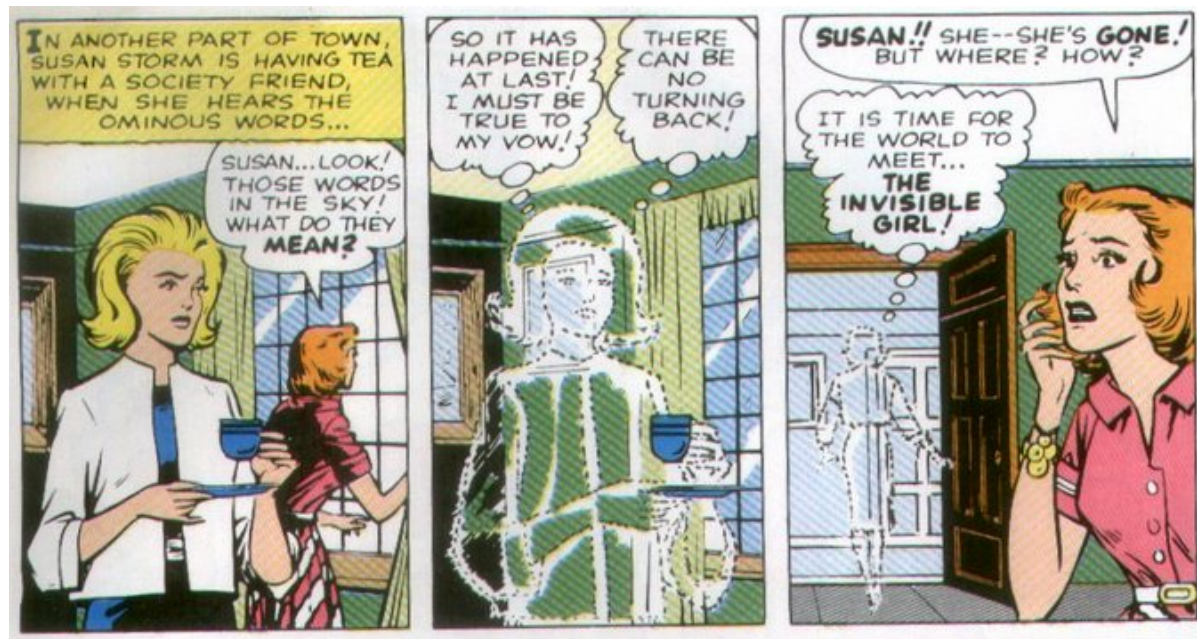
## Sue's place in the book

The art puts Sue first: First on the cover, first to use her powers in the book, first to use her powers after the spaceflight, and she is the one to make Ben join so the flight can go ahead. She acts decisively without hesitation, and pushes men out of the way. Later art and later issues will make this even clearer.

We saw the same thing with Kirby's Challengers, even though they were originally just men. (June, the computer expert, joined the group later.) The origin story began with the men coming second to four heroic women.



Now that we have seen how Sue as described in the art, let's look at the dialog and see the contrast:



So it has happened at last! I must be true to my vow! It is time for the world to meet The Invisible Girl!

It's subtle, but it's a different message. According to the dialog, Sue was waiting for someone else to tell her to use her powers. That other person was of course a man. She was apparently hesitant and only did it because of her vow: a vow she made to men.

On its own this is a minor point. But examples in later Fantastic Four comics, are far, far worse. The art often showed her as independent and dominating men, and on the same panels Lee added dialog that made her scared or subservient to men.



Kirby's art



Lee's dialog

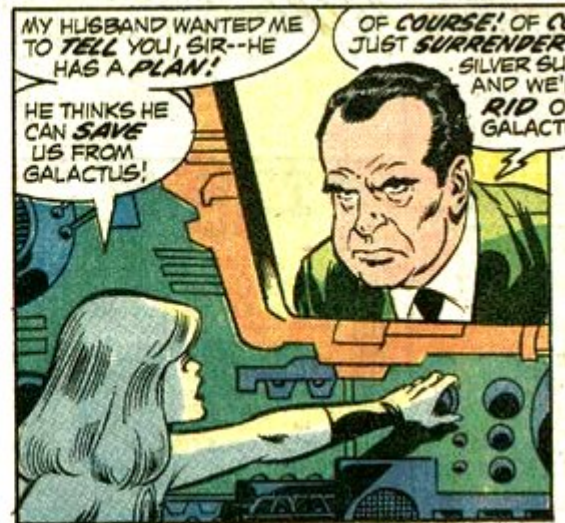


Once Kirby left and Lee wrote the book (issues 103-125), Sue was reduced to fainting and being rescued almost every issue.

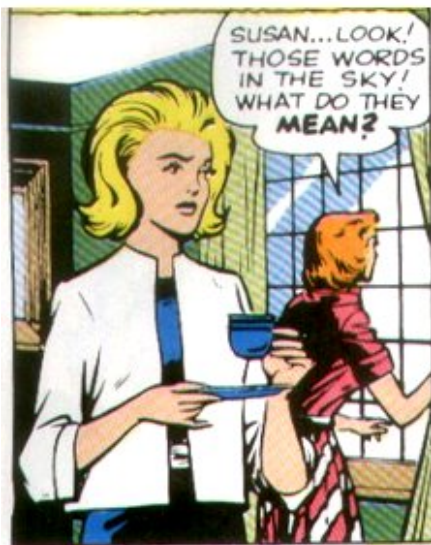


While the boys were out fighting bad guys, Lee's Sue sometimes stayed home to answer the phone.





The result of Lee's dialog (and later his writing) is that readers now see the early Sue in that context. For example, a reader recently criticised page 2 of Fantastic Four issue 1 for showing Sue "demurely drinking tea". Would the same critic have referred to James Bond in the same pose as "demurely drinking Martini"?



In short, Kirby's art empowered women, but Lee's dialog made them weak and dependent on men.

## Who was the better writer?

Strong, independent women are generally considered a sign of good writing. Or at least modern writing.

The remainder of the dialog on page 2 simply describes what we can already see in the art. Jerry Bails, founder of Alter Ego, described this problem a couple of years later:



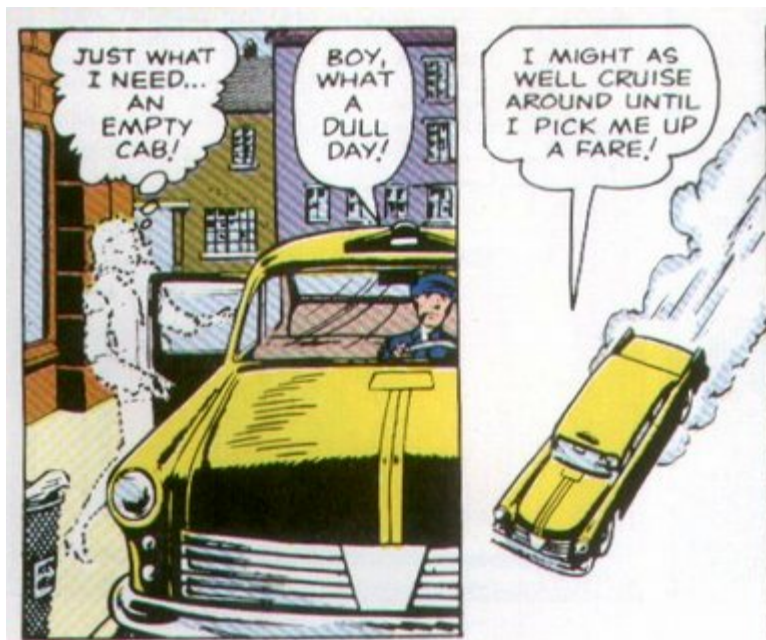
Stan writes a one page synopsis of an entire FF story [after meeting with Kirby: see appendix 4] then Kirby breaks down the whole story even before any dialogue or captions are written. Naturally then, there can be little in the way of real plot carried in the "script". Captions must be limited largely to describing the action in the box, and dialogue must consist largely of wisecracks, both of which can be added directly to the pencilled drawing.<sup>39</sup>

In this first issue the problem is even worse: Lee is using the dialog as well as the captions to describe what the reader can already see. Later he will adopt the method observed by Bails, leaving dialog free for wisecracks. Either way, in these pages the story is fully told in the art, and Lee's dialog is redundant.

"Show, don't tell" is the usual advice when writing. So in this as well as the sexism, Kirby is shown as a better writer than Lee.

## Did Lee know what would happen next?

We saw on page 1 that Lee might not know what happens on later pages. We see it again here on page 2. A taxi ride is a classic example of a time when a writer can develop the plot: a taxi ride means they are going to somewhere, but the hero has time to anticipate what will happen. So this is a perfect moment to reveal information, foreshadow what is to come, and build the tension. But instead Lee simply describes the taxi ride. He has the taxi simply wander aimlessly, killing any sense of urgency, whereas the art shows it speeding, leaving a trail of dust in its path.



The speeding taxi makes a far better story, but it requires some idea of what is happening next.

Lee's taxi dialog suggests again that either he is a bad writer (killing the tension) or that he does not know what happens next, and is just making up dialogue to fit whatever he sees for the first time when seeing each page.

<sup>39</sup> Jerry Bails, Alter Ego issue 2, 1964

## The secret of Lee's charm

Lee's apparent method, taking a fully complete story and adding his own comments, evolved over time into something unique and appealing to many fans (while irritating and empty to others). It's like Mystery Science Theatre, where a clever friend is watching the story with you. The fact that the story does not actually need dialog gave him plenty of space to chat with the reader, add wisecracks and asides, and so on. Competitors like DC comics did not have that luxury. Kirby could tell a complete story just with the art, but few other creators had that skill.

IMHO, Lee's comics do in fact read better, in the main, than their DC counterparts, despite Lee's writing being perhaps technically worse than the DC writers. The fact that Lee is actually NOT the writer, but is a kind of a disreputable uncle figure improvising commentary on, and even undermining, a story he has little personal investment in, made these comics feel livelier to me as a kid.[...] Neither one is very readable to me now, but to the young me the Marvel books felt spontaneous compared to the neatly scripted DC superhero books.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Aaron Noble, commenting on social media about his memories of Marvel and DC in the 1960s

## Page 3: “Bah!”

On this page we start to see Ben's dialog:



Bah! Everywhere it is the same!

Bah! I cannot delay!

Bah! What'd you expect?

Bah! How can you care for that weakling when I'm here?

Notice a pattern? Ben doesn't have much dialog in this issue (he appears to have been added as an afterthought to the Mole Man story, but we'll get to that) so all this "bah"ing stands out. It's fairly typical of the clunky dialog in this issue.

## Who wrote better dialog?

It is commonly claimed that Lee improved Kirby's dialog. But the evidence from the comics themselves shows the opposite. It is true that in later years Kirby preferred a richer, more intense style. By 1970 he had spent thirty years writing simple dialog and human level plots, and he had nothing to prove. He wanted to move on to bigger topics, and they required bigger language. But in 1961 Kirby was still writing simple language that any child could follow. I give examples in appendix 1.

Compare Kirby's dialog in appendix 1 with Lee's dialog in Fantastic Four 1. Is any of Kirby's dialog hard to follow? Would any of it feel "clunky" to a child? Does Kirby lack the human touch? Judge for yourself.

Both Kirby and Lee could write easy dialog. But compare their dialog, and ask yourself, who was the better writer?

## What was Lee's job?

Lee's job at the time was to keep the comics simple.

[O]ne edict that my publisher had was that the stories had to be geared towards young readers; or unintelligent older readers. We weren't supposed to use words of more than two syllables, and we had to have simple plots; no continuing stories, because he felt our readers weren't smart enough to remember from month to month where they had left off. It was really boring.<sup>41</sup>

This seems to be exactly what he was doing in Fantastic Four issue 1: Kirby provided a complex story and Lee simplified it for younger readers.

## Page 3 summary

So far we see energy in the story, and interesting plotting. But it's all in Kirby's art, not in Lee's dialog. Perhaps we could still argue that Lee wrote the original plot, but let's look at the next page.

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<sup>41</sup> Stan Lee's 2000 interview with Kenneth Plume.  
<http://uk.ign.com/articles/2000/06/26/interview-with-stan-lee-part-1-of-5>



## Page 4:

# Who wrote the monster pages?

This page features a lumpy orange monster, then half under water, then bursting from underground. These are typical scenes from numerous Kirby monster stories.<sup>42</sup> So whoever wrote those scenes probably wrote these Fantastic Four scenes as well.



The Kirby monster stories are all conveniently reprinted in the "Monsterbus". If we examine each one we find that Stan Lee did not sign a single one. But many of the monster comics have the signatures "Kirby & Ayers" and once "Kirby & Sinnott".<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Another monster bursting from underground is on the cover and also later in the story. The discussion of the cover gives other examples. The water pose is next seen on the splash page of issue 2. The Challengers' first adventure combines both scenes, with a monster bursting from underwater, grabbing a hero in his hand. As for the orange lumpy Thing, even if we restrict ourselves to Goodman monster comics dated the same month (November 1961), we have "The Thing in the Black box" from Journey into Mystery 73, Sserpo from Amazing Adventures 6, "The Creature in the Black bog" (arising from the sea) and also "I entered the dimension of Doom" both from Tales of Suspense 23, "The Creature from Krogarr" in Tales to Astonish 25, and Orrgo the Unconquerable in Strange Tales 90.

<sup>43</sup> Thanks to Michael Hill for checking every issue. Examples of signatures are:  
Tales of Suspense 34, October '62, Kirby/Ayers two stories, sig on the first.

"ST 100, '[Kirby][Ayers]' (boxed) two stories.

ToS 33, '[Kirby][Ayers]' (boxed) two stories, Ayers cover unsigned.

ST 99, '[Kirby][Ayers]' (boxed) cover and two stories.

TtA 34, '[Kirby][Ayers]' (boxed) story, Ayers cover unsigned.

ToS 32, '[Kirby][Ayers]' (boxed) cover and two stories.

JIM 82, '[Kirby][Ayers]' (boxed) on cover

ToS 31, 'Kirby+Ayers' two stories, Ayers cover unsigned.

TtA 33, 'Kirby+Ayers' two stories.

Etc., etc....

ST 94, 'Kirby + Sinnott' story, Ayers cover and story unsigned."



Lee (or someone working for him) would often paint over their signatures. Here's an original penciled monster page: you can see where the signatures were covered up.:





Ayers later wrote

So... regarding those Kirby / Ayers signatures... I always put the signatures on our work together just as I always sign my work. I noticed that the 'whiteouts' were happening and it sure didn't make me happy for I usually had the signature as part of the composition of the drawing. It was a sore point. I'm not keen on the credit boxes that are added to the drawing and confuse the composition of my drawing.<sup>44</sup>

In later years, reprints with signatures were altered to say that Kirby and Ayers only did the art. In this example the scan is poor, and the colouring makes it hard to see in the original, but you can just about make out how the rock has been extended to make space for the changed credits:

<sup>44</sup> Dick Ayers, Dec. 8, 1998, on the Kirby-List forum



original: Tales of Suspense 15



reprint: Giant Size Man Thing 1 (?), 1974



It seems unlikely that Lee had written these stories, as his signature was never there. After Marvel's bankruptcy in 1996-97, the question of legal ownership became a hot topic. At that point Lee began to say that he, or possibly his brother, wrote them.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Patrick Ford has researched the topic and Lee's claims seem to date from the 1990s. For example, the Lieber claim (Lee's brother) first appeared in an interview in "Alter-Ego" #2, October 1999. The interview was with Lee's friend Roy Thomas, who was not there at the time in question, so the claim probably came from Lee. "Comic Book Marketplace" (Jan-Feb 1993) an article by Dr John Townsend briefly mentioned Lieber in a list of monster comic inkers, but there is no other evidence for this so Ford suggests it may have been a typo.



But there is no actual evidence (beyond those late claims) for Lee or Lieber writing them:

In summary, page 4 reminds us that the Fantastic Four was in many ways a monster comic, and Jack Kirby wrote all his monster comics himself.

## Who wrote the sci-fi pages?

A couple of months before this issue was written, Kirby had just finished plotting “Sky Masters”, a newspaper strip about the space race.



The Sunday edition would include a section where Kirby covered real world space science.



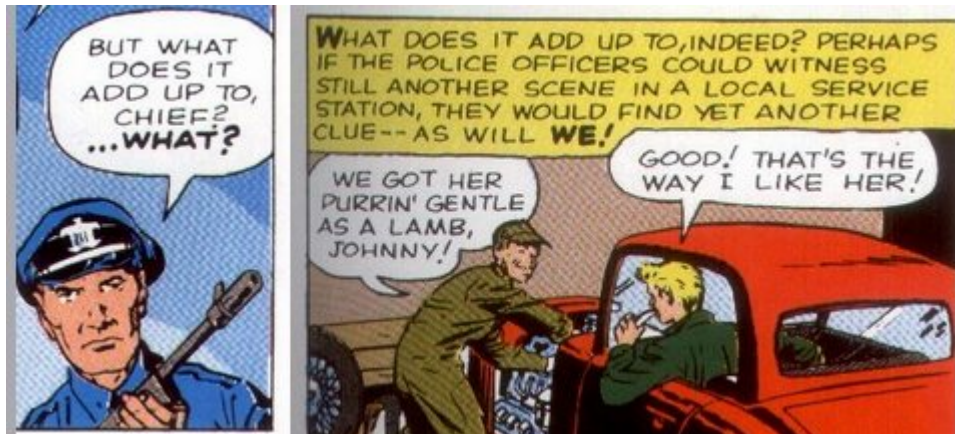
Kirby's superhero and romance comics strips will be discussed on a later page. The point is that Kirby was already producing high quality material in every area touched on by the Fantastic Four: superhero, sci-fi, monster, emotional drama, etc.

The Fantastic Four is not some great leap forward, or some miracle that can only be explained by Lee adding some mystery ingredient. The Fantastic Four is just Kirby doing what Kirby always did. If anything, the Fantastic Four is Kirby when he's rushed, because he worked on five other books the same month. It's a normal Kirby comic, no more no less, except the dialog got dumbed down.

## Page 5:

# Why Lee was good at connecting with readers

As mentioned earlier, Lee writes as if he is sitting next to the reader, commenting on a story that somebody else has written. Page five has a particularly clear example:



(Dialogue:) But what does it add up to, chief? What?"

(Caption box:) What does it add up to, indeed? Perhaps if the police officers could witness still another scene in a local service station, they would find yet another clue – as will **WE**!

Why was Lee so good at acting like the reader, not the writer? Other writers sounded fake when they wrote that way. The simplest explanation is that Lee was not faking: he really was reading the story, and reacting like any reader would react.

## Inside the mind of the writer

A comment like "what will happen next?" is only possible because there is space: normally the story would need that space for some useful information. But all the information in this story - the entire plot - can be seen in the art. So whoever wrote this story thought in terms of pictures, not words.

## Up to date with culture

Later on the page we see that Johnny Storm loves cars.<sup>46</sup> This story comes soon after the

<sup>46</sup> We actually see Johnny in two different cars (look at the windows), and in the second his friend is at the opposite end. This suggests a couple of minutes' difference between the establishing scene on page 5 and the action scene on page 6. Unfortunately the colourist chose to colour the cars the same, and Lee's dialog makes it sound like a continuous sentence, giving the impression that the car and friend had changed mid-sentence.

opening of America's interstate highways (the act was passed in 1956). That and increasing wealth meant cars became a big part of youth culture.

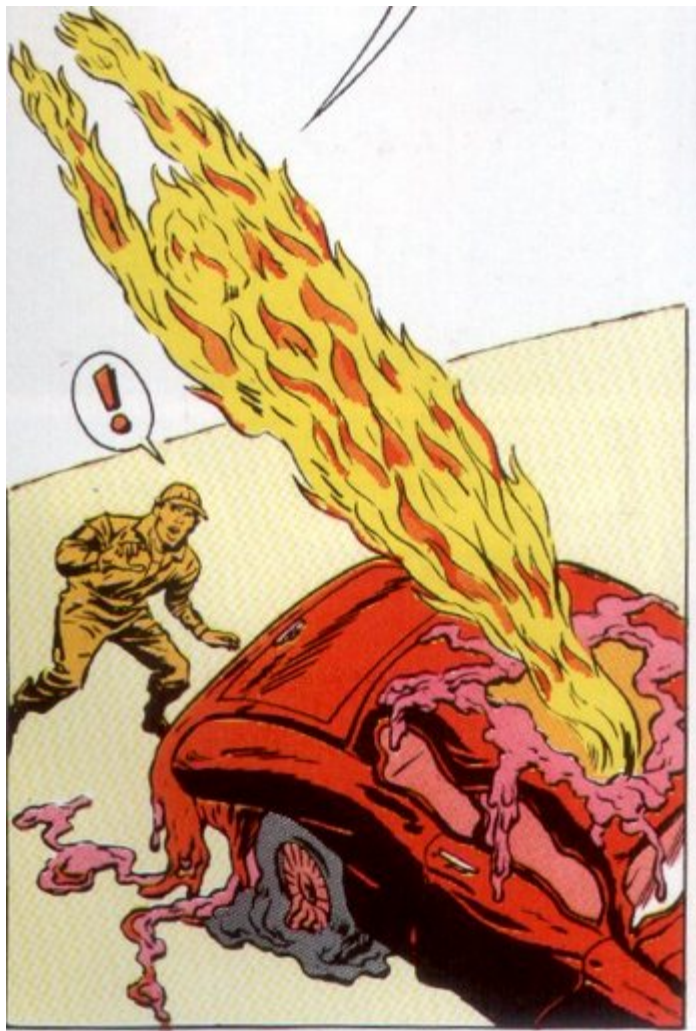
This of course is just one data point, but it's part of a pattern: this is a story based in the real world. This matters, because the art was as realistic as possible, but the dialog was not. And as we saw earlier, realism is what made people buy the book.



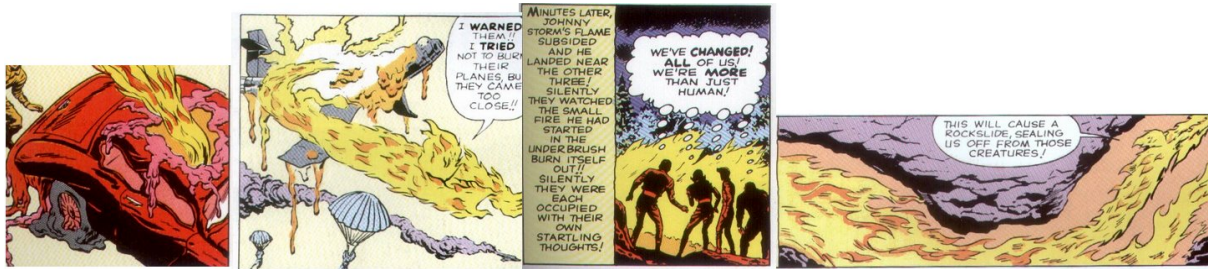
## Page 6: The flame demon

### Is this “The Human Torch”?

On this page we see Johnny turn to flame for the first time. Look at every time the Torch is on fire in this issue (and the next): he has no face, no legs, and does not use the "arm" shapes for anything. He is basically a continuous long flame with vaguely arm and head shaped flames. He is just as misshapen and monstrous as Ben, probably far more so.



This flame monster is a force of chaos, creating uncontrollable destruction wherever he is (without using his arms): destroying airplanes with men inside, setting fire to the forest, and making caves collapse.



In contrast, The Human Torch was a well known superhero owned by Goodman's company. He had a distinctive look, recognisably very human, and used his flame in skillful, human ways.



## What did Lee want?

Lee wrote the dialog and called this new creation The Human Torch. Whoever decided the name, Lee seemed happy with it. And two issues later this new Torch was drawn to look like the original Torch. The art change was probably requested by Lee: Kirby had chosen a different style, more in keeping with the monstrous look of the others, and the new style took longer to draw.

Lee had previously shown himself keen to keep the look of the original Torch. When that Torch was relaunched seven years previously (1954), and the artist drew him slightly differently, the Torch art had to be changed by Carl Burgos, the original Torch artist. Lee was in charge of the comics, so the decision was probably his.



So the Torch we see is not the Torch Lee would have written, but a different, less controlled, more monstrous character.

## Maybe Lee was being creative?

Of course, the difference can easily be explained by Lee being creative. Perhaps he liked the idea of someone less controlled, more likely to destroy planes and set fire to forests? But the dialog does not mention this, and Lee usually mentions everything that matters. The only dialog that might hint that the Torch might be uncontrolled is when he says he warned the planes. But being able to warn the planes suggests at least some level of control.

## A simpler explanation

While it is certainly possible, in theory, that Lee could have requested the new character in this uncontrolled form and then changed his mind, there is a much simpler explanation: Kirby had a long history of creating superhero stories, monster stories and horror stories. This monstrous, destructive fire being is just what we would expect from Kirby.





One year before this, Kirby created the fire creature Dragoom (Strange Tales 76). A couple of years before that, in Tales of the Unexpected 22, Kirby created flaming lava men (and did so again later in Thor). Around the same time, in Challengers of the Unknown, Kirby created a flaming monster (Showcase issue 12) and later a human figure with flaming powers (Challengers issue 6). Kirby's best known fire demon was probably Surtur in Thor. Fire demons were Kirby's bread and butter.

In later years Kirby said he threw in Carl Burgos' Human Torch "for entertainment value", but the context indicates this was an afterthought.<sup>47</sup> This is consistent with deciding on a flaming character first, then later thinking "we can get extra sales by making the link."

## Conclusion

So while it is possible that either Lee or Kirby created this Human Torch, the evidence suggests it is more likely to be Kirby.

It might be argued that Lee improved the character by his change in issue 3, but we can't say that without seeing what the more monstrous Torch would have worked out. The monstrous Ben worked well, so perhaps this would have strengthened the rivalry with Johnny. The question of whether Lee's changes add to sales figures is examined later.

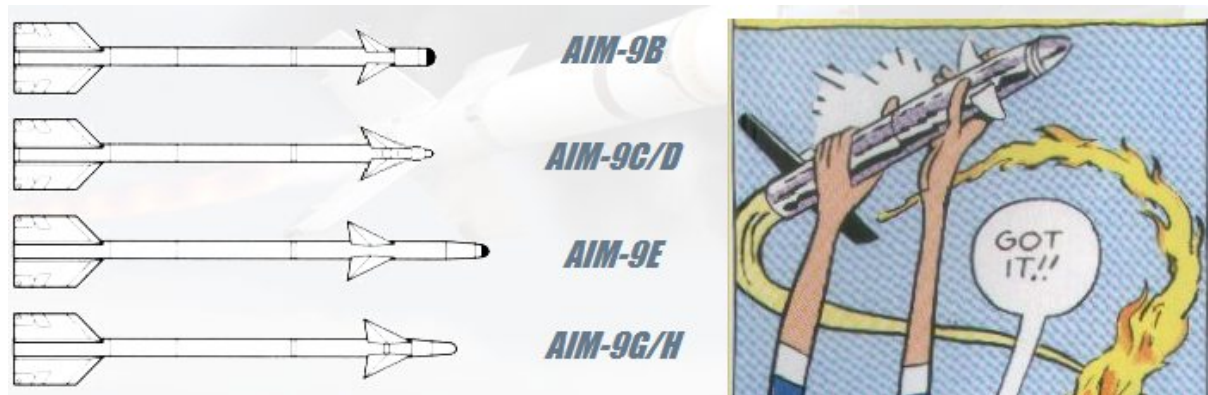
Regardless of what happened in later issues, this part of the book is just about who created the ideas for Fantastic Four issue 1. And this page, like every other, points more to Kirby than to Lee.

<sup>47</sup> In his 1986/7 interview: <http://kirbymuseum.org/blogs/effect/2012/08/06/19867-kirby-interview/>



## Page 7: On realism

Page seven has Johnny and a heat seeking missile. Not just any heat seeking missile, but the granddaddy of them all, the AIM-9 Sidewinder.<sup>48</sup>



The Sidewinder was the first big heat seeking missile, first used in 1958 to devastating effect.

The Soviets, weapons suppliers to half the world, later admitted that the Sidewinder's near-biological intelligence was a complete revelation to them.<sup>49</sup>

This is an example of how Kirby's art was often based on recent science and technology. But not *just* the art: the *story* was also based on the science: the Sidewinder was notable for being a heat seeker, with "near biological intelligence" for changing direction to follow a target. So what is more natural than that a flaming man should attract such a response, resulting in almost certain death for the hero?

This was a realistic response from the authorities: this was 1961, the height of the cold war, and the authorities saw what seemed to be a missile over the city. It kept changing direction, so what could they do except scramble military jets with Sidewinders?

However, this is where it become unrealistic. The art shows realism, but the dialog says the missiles carry a nuclear weapon.

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<sup>48</sup> Later versions (e.g. the 9L) had thinner tail fins as in the image, though this may just be foreshortening. Kirby's version only shows two fins on each section, almost certainly for artistic purposes: all air to air missiles have four fins, but changing it to two fins makes the perspective much stronger at the end of page 7. It also simplifies and takes up less space on page 8. Similarly the forward facing front fins allow the hands to grasp it without needing a larger image. But otherwise the detail suggests a reference image was used, and the sidewinder is by far the closest candidate.

<sup>49</sup> The story of the Sidewinder: <http://www.donhollway.com/foxtwo/>



Lee seems unaware that these are Sidewinders: why not use such a cool name if he knew it? Worse, not only did sidewinders *not* carry nuclear warheads, but using a nuclear weapon over one of your larger cities (probably New York, though Lee calls it Central City) would be madness.

So this is another example of Kirby's art creating a realistic story, and Lee's dialog making it unrealistic.

## Realism and the question of creativity

Readers may wonder why I keep discussing realism. Realism is relevant to the question of "who created what", in four ways.

1. **Connecting with the reader:**

While there are anti-realistic forms of literature, "that was unrealistic" is seldom a compliment. It generally means the reader is pushed out of the story. If Kirby was realistic and Lee was unrealistic, then this makes it more likely (though not proven) that Kirby was the better writer.

2. **Creativity:**

Realism provides a guide to which of the authors was widely read, was most aware of the world around him, etc. That is, who was more likely to come up with interesting new ideas.

3. **Depth:**

Realism is a quick way to show the layers of depth. By referring to a real world situation a writer can introduce a host of interesting and relevant ideas at a stroke. My argument is that Kirby, by connecting to more of the real world, is a deeper and more interesting writer than Lee.

4. **Who understood the story?**

If the stories are based on the real world, but Lee did not understand that, then Lee could not have written the stories.

## Realism? From superheroes?

Although The Fantastic Four is conventionally called a superhero comic (or possible a monster comic) it is more accurately hard science fiction. Kirby described it as a look at what might be possible from radiation. Everything else is as accurate as possible.

The idea for the F.F. was my idea. My own anger against radiation. Radiation was the big subject at that time, because we still don't know what radiation can do to people.<sup>50</sup>

"My stories were true. They involved living people, and they involved myself. They involved whatever I knew. I never lied to my readers. [...] If you analyze them, you'll find that I'm not really fictionalizing."<sup>51</sup>

Kirby's predictions about radiation ended up coming true. Not in the exact way he described of course, but the general concept was true: radiation can make us stronger, more flexible, more dangerous and invisible. Today, for example, mobile technology relies on microwave radiation for both wifi and the atomic clocks that drive global positioning. Mobile technology makes us stronger (we can more easily work in larger groups), more flexible (we can do more things), more dangerous (we can organise fighters) and invisible (we can do it almost undetected).

All of this is just from microwave radiation: radiation in the wavelength around one centimetre. Imagine how much more will be possible once we improve our understanding of the much shorter wavelengths produced by atomic radiation. At present atomic radiation cannot be very precisely targeted, so it is most useful for killing cancerous cells (that is, cells that grow too quickly). Researchers can now switch molecular triggers on and off using radiation<sup>52</sup>, which promises more precise control. Imagine what might be possible after another fifty years of research, when the switching on and off of molecules is routine along with splicing genes from one place to another. In Challengers of the Unknown issue 3, Kirby explained that these superpowers were simply gene manipulation by highly advanced alien societies. Kirby was simply looking ahead.

## Good writing versus bad writing

A different way to define Kirby's story is not as hard science fiction, but as what Tolkien calls a "fairy story". Tolkien defines this as follows:

A "fairy-story" is one which touches on or uses Faerie, whatever its own main purpose may be: satire, adventure, morality, fantasy. Faerie itself may perhaps most nearly be translated by Magic—but it is magic of a peculiar mood and power, at the furthest pole from the vulgar devices of the laborious, scientific, magician.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Jack Kirby Interview, Leonard Pitts, 1986.

<http://kirbymuseum.org/blogs/effect/2012/08/06/19867-kirby-interview/>

<sup>51</sup> Jack Kirby Interview, Glenn Danzig, <http://www.twomorrows.com/kirby/articles/22danzig.html>

<sup>52</sup> Scott, Marples, etc.: "A radiation controlled molecular switch for use in gene therapy of cancer." Gene Therapy 7: 1121–1125, 2000

<sup>53</sup> Tolkien, "on Fairy Stories"

That is, any story that involves something amazing and unusual. Or, as Tolkien puts it, a story involving “Marvels”. Tolkien says that a story about Marvels should give no hint that it is not real. Otherwise we have a lesser or debased form:

It is at any rate essential to a genuine fairy-story, as distinct from the employment of this form for lesser or debased purposes, that it should be presented as “true.” The meaning of “true” in this connexion I will consider in a moment. But since the fairy-story deals with “marvels,” it cannot tolerate any frame or machinery suggesting that the whole story in which they occur is a figment or illusion.

To clarify, Tolkien rejected the fake kind of fairy story. So did Kirby:

I didn't want to tell fairy tales. I wanted to tell things as they are. But I wanted to tell them in an entertaining way, and I told it in the Fantastic Four.<sup>54</sup>

Kirby said his stories were real:

My stories were true. They involved living people, and they involved myself. They involved whatever I knew. I never lied to my readers. [...] If you analyze them, you'll find that I'm not really fictionalizing.<sup>55</sup>

Tolkien explained how fairy stories can and should be real: they should be internally consistent, and also reveal truths about the real world:

Probably every writer making a secondary world, a fantasy, every sub-creator, wishes in some measure to be a real maker, or hopes that he is drawing on reality: hopes that the peculiar quality of this secondary world (if not all the details) are derived from Reality, or are flowing into it. If he indeed achieves a quality that can fairly be described by the dictionary definition: “inner consistency of reality,” it is difficult to conceive how this can be, if the work does not in some way partake of reality. The peculiar quality of the “joy” in successful Fantasy can thus be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth. It is not only a “consolation” for the sorrow of this world, but a satisfaction, and an answer to that question, “Is it true?” The answer to this question that I gave at first was (quite rightly): “If you have built your little world well, yes: it is true in that world.”<sup>56</sup>

How can a fairy story tell us truths about the real world? By focusing on simplicity:

Fairy-stories deal largely, or (the better ones) mainly, with simple or fundamental things, untouched by Fantasy, but these simplicities are made all the more luminous by their setting. For the story-maker who allows himself to be “free with” Nature can be her lover not her slave. It was in fairy-stories that I first divined the potency of the words, and the wonder of the things, such as stone, and wood, and iron; tree and grass; house and fire; bread and wine.<sup>57</sup>

Incidentally, Tolkien uses Thor as an example of a story about marvels. We could also give the example of the Human Torch: in the popular Alex Ross book “Marvels” the story of marvels begins with the Human Torch.

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<sup>54</sup> Quoted in “The Formative Fantastic Four”, Alter Ego #78

<sup>55</sup> Jack Kirby Interview, Glenn Danzig, <http://www.twomorrows.com/kirby/articles/22danzig.html>

<sup>56</sup> Tolkien, “on Fairy Stories”

<sup>57</sup> *ibid*





Tolkien warns against thinking such marvels are for children:

It is true that in recent times fairy-stories have usually been written or “adapted” for children. But so may music be, or verse, or novels, or history, or scientific manuals. It is a dangerous process, even when it is necessary. It is indeed only saved from disaster by the fact that the arts and sciences are not as a whole relegated to the nursery; the nursery and schoolroom are merely given such tastes and glimpses of the adult thing as seem fit for them in adult opinion (often much mistaken). Any one of these things would, if left altogether in the nursery, become gravely impaired. So would a beautiful table, a good picture, or a useful machine (such as a microscope), be defaced or broken, if it were left long unregarded in a schoolroom. Fairy-stories banished in this way, cut off from a full adult art, would in the end be ruined; indeed in so far as they have been so banished, they have been ruined.<sup>58</sup>

To summarise, the Fantastic Four, like Thor and others, is what Tolkien calls a fairy story, because it deal with Marvels in the real world. A good writer will make it totally believable, focus on simple concepts, and not aim it at children in particular.

Throughout this book I argue that Kirby is concerned with realism, he focuses on how people react to conflicts at their simplest level (in the moment, shorn of all details) and he deals with adult topics like survival, science, and sexual equality. In contrast, Lee avoids realism, he deals with surface appearances,<sup>59</sup> and simplifies stories to be more suitable for children. It follows that, by Tolkien’s measures, Kirby was a good writer and Lee was a bad one.

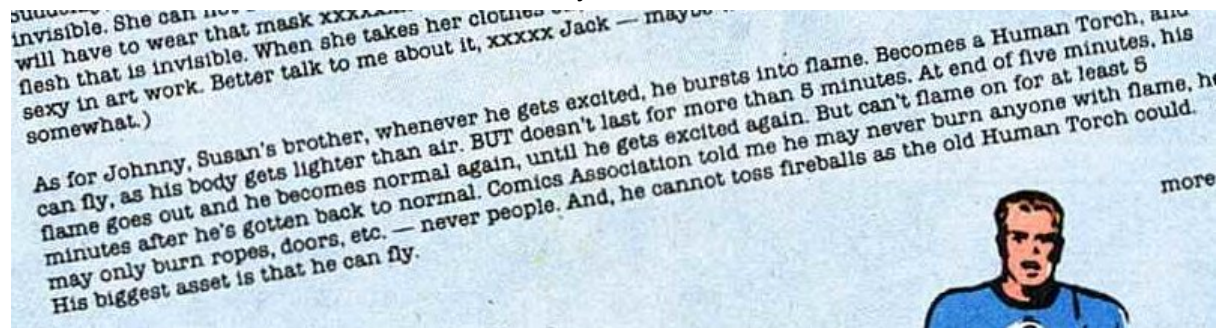
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<sup>58</sup> *ibid*

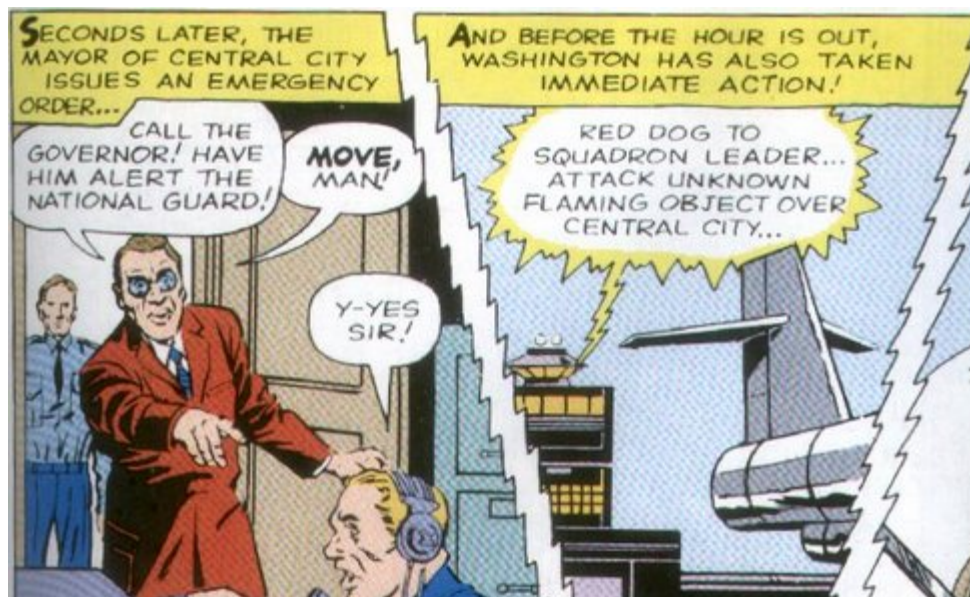
<sup>59</sup> See appendix two for how his career was built on copying others’ ideas. And see the issues after Kirby left for how he simply copied plots created when Kirby was there, but without the original depth.

## Bad writing and the synopsis

On the topic of page 7 and bad writing, long-time fans of the Fantastic Four may remember a synopsis printed in issue 358. It first appeared over twenty years after Fantastic Four 1, in the 1980s, when fans were starting to question whether Lee really invented these characters. So Lee produced a typewritten manuscript that he said was his original script. I examine it in detail in appendix 4, but here is the part that's important for page 7. I scanned it from issue 358. Like I said, all the evidence you need is in the comics themselves:



Lee said that the Human Torch could only flame on for five minutes, and then had to wait until he became excited before he could flame on again, and that would be at least five minutes later. But now look at page 7 of the comic:

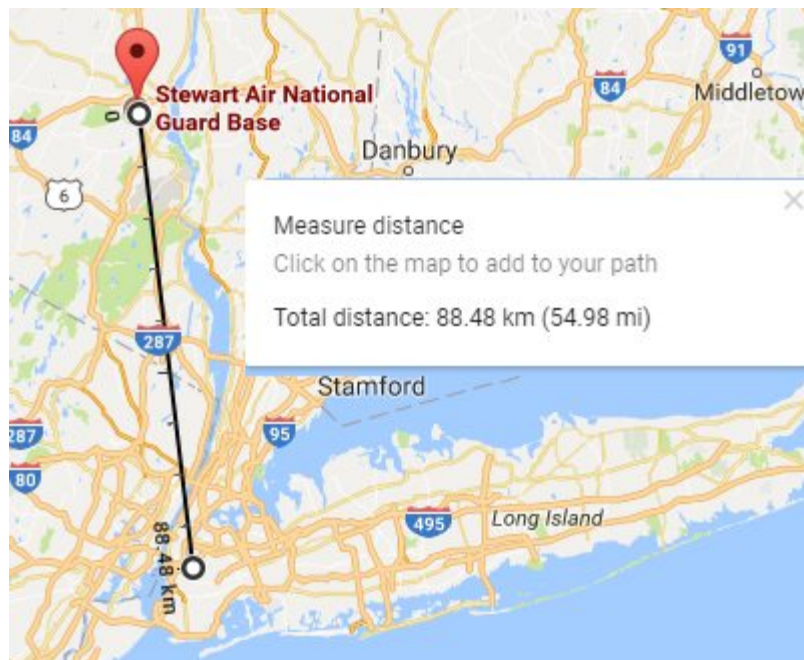


The Torch is chased by planes sent by Washington “before the hour is out”. That is, closer to an hour than five minutes. “So what?” you may ask, Lee changed his mind and the story was better for it? But that’s the point, The original plan was a bad idea from the start. Anybody who was used to creating stories would know that a guy who can only flame on for five minutes would be very limiting to the stories. Lee just wrote it without thinking it through. We see that again and again in Lee’s writing.

And on that topic of not thinking it through, why was the Torch flying around Central City for nearly an hour? He was already in the city, close enough to Reed to see the flare gun, and

had to get there in a hurry. How long would it take to fly across a typical city? A minute? Five? Ten if he took the long route? Lee's dialog makes no sense when we think about it. Yet the art not only tells the story on its own, but makes more sense.

The art looks like New York, one of the biggest cities in the world. Johnny knew the others would also have to reach Reed, so he may have taken a long route round the coast to scout for problems on his way. At the height of the cold war, such as 1961, a bomber could be scrambled in two minutes.<sup>60</sup> The nearest jets were probably at Stewart National Guard base, 55 miles to the north.



Given their expectation that this could be a Russian nuclear attack on New York City, they would have pushed the jets to their limits. So reaching Johnny within ten minutes is reasonable. The art shows he was then directly above Reed's location. A ten minute journey fits perfectly and adds to the drama: who would reach their goal first, Johnny or the planes?

You are probably thinking "he takes this way too seriously!" And that is why Lee's dialog is so damaging. Everything about the story could have happened in real life. But generations of readers, raised on Lee's dialog, find it impossible to imagine these stories as anything but silly.

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<sup>60</sup> This is the consensus when the topic comes up in military forums. Obviously this assumes a state of high alert, such as 1961, when tensions were at their highest and the nation's biggest city would be its most vulnerable spot..



## Page 8:

# Characterisation

By page 8 the art showed us a fascinating and horrifying view of Johnny storm. It revealed his character through his choices: how he throws himself into danger, sometimes at the cost of destroying what he loves:

First, the art showed that he loves cars, and spent a long time working on them. But in responding to his call he destroyed one of the cars he was working on.<sup>61</sup>



Next we saw him destroying planes, almost killing several people.

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<sup>61</sup> The art indicates this was a different car: see the window strut and general shape. In the second picture the friend is at the back. But the dialog makes a delay less likely, as if it was the same car.



Later in the story we will see him set fire to a forest



Look at that face. He is never happy when he flames on. Yet Lee's dialog says he loves it.

Finally we see him cause the caves around him to collapse, which may or may not contribute to the radioactive materials exploding..



After destroying the planes we saw him hunted by a heat seeking missile, and without miraculous intervention he would have been dead.





Next we saw that his flame suddenly ran out, leaving him falling hundreds of feet to be smashed onto the concrete below.



This is a man who causes destruction on a large and chaotic scale. His life expectancy is measured in minutes, not years! And the life expectancy of those who come close to him isn't much better.

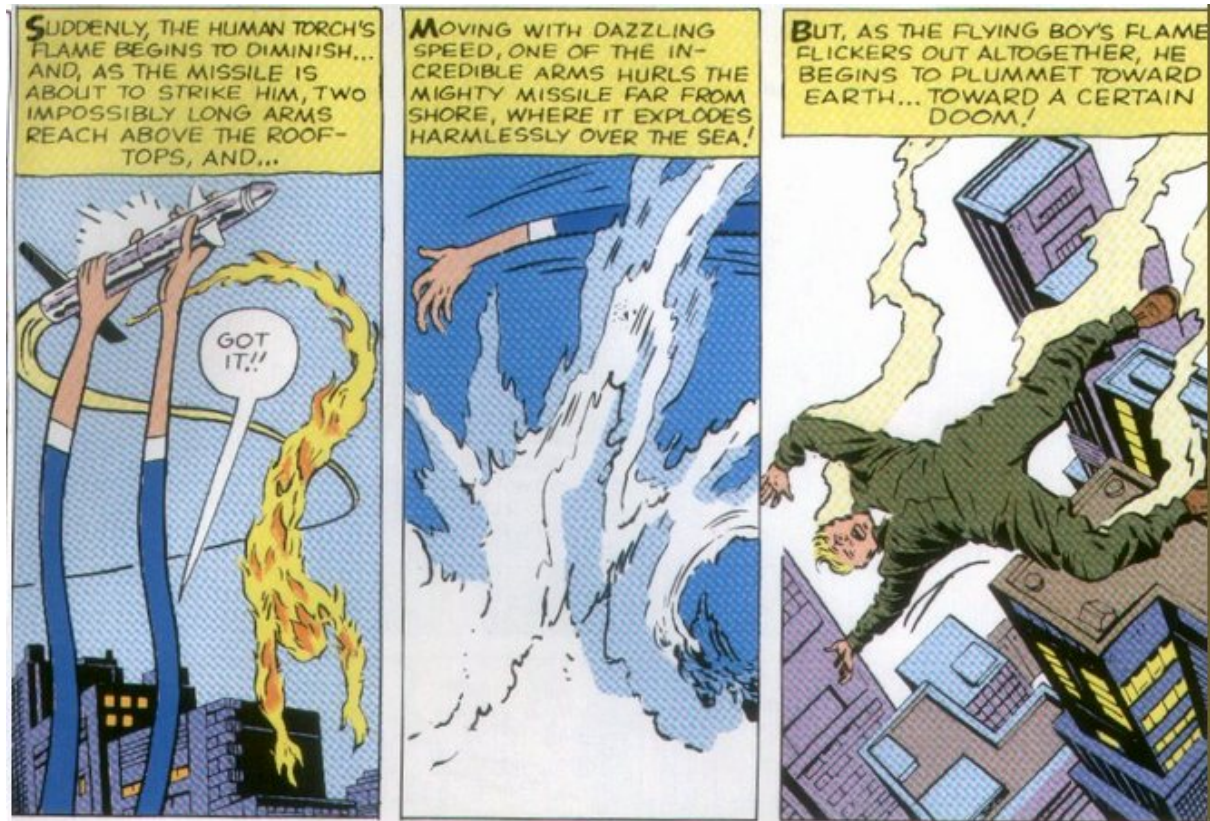
At least, that is the horror story told by the art, a story set in the real world, a story of what could happen if radiation did unimaginable things to our bodies. What kind of person is Johnny Storm that he *chooses* to burn up like that? He is a fire starter in the biggest way! Through these few acts we see his character. And we get an idea of the underlying message of the story, the horror and danger when radiation goes wrong.



We get all that from the art. But the text, on the other hand, is literally a different story.

## The text

The text captures almost none of this tragedy. The text says Johnny loves flaming on! The text does not have Johnny react to destroying his beloved car. The text underplays the destructive horror: Johnny blames the planes for being destroyed and says it's their fault! And when he falls from the sky he doesn't even have any dialog: the text is a passive and detached description.



In fact the whole of page 8 is almost all verbose description of what we can already see: it is all about how the reader wonders what happens next, there is no insight into how these characters think or feel.

In summary, the art shows more intense horror and more insights into characterisation. But the text reduces both. Once again we see that the Kirby's art creates a rich and dynamic story and Lee's text waters it down.



## Page 9: Heroes with moral flaws

On page 9, Ben's anger clouds his judgment, and he will eventually pay a high price.



Ben and his anger become the heart of the Fantastic Four, it is what set them apart from other comics where characters always seemed to be friends. A person's attempt to control their anger was a common theme in Kirby's work over the years. The theme is perhaps best known from the Hulk, but here a fan talks about Kirby's 1948 story "Disgrace":





"ALTHOUGH, I WAS BORN AND RAISED ON THE SURFACE OF THE EARTH, I HAD NEVER SEEN THE FULL BRIGHTNESS OF THE SUN OR FELT THE CLEAN, FRESH TOUCH OF THE AIR... THE TOWN OF COALVILLE WAS A DARK MINE SHAFT --- AND, IN ITS DEPTHS, MY SOUL MOVED --- HARNESSSED IN THE YOKE OF RESIGNATION..."



"LIKE PAUL KOVAK, THE MEN IN COALVILLE WERE BIG, HEARTY GIANTS WHO TOILED CEASELESSLY IN THE MUCK TO PROVIDE FOR THEIR FAMILIES... THEIRS WAS A WORLD DEVOID OF SOCIAL GRACES AND DRAWING-ROOM GALLANTRY... HARD LIVING HAD BRED BRISTLING TEMPERS... VIOLENCE WAS NOT UNCOMMON IN COALVILLE!!



"Disgrace!" from Young Romance July 1948, which I believe stands alongside the best of anything Kirby ever wrote. At first I was struck by the language, so distinctly his:

"Although I was born and raised on the surface of the earth, I had never seen the full brightness of the sun, or felt the clean, fresh touch of the air...The town of Coalville was a dark mine shaft...and in its depths, my soul moved...harnessed in the yoke of resignation."



The story contains his greatest theme, which he has explored many times in works such as The Pack, The Frog Prince, and with The Thing and The Hulk, et al: Man's violent nature and the struggle to overcome those base instincts.<sup>62</sup>

Usually Kirby didn't have the space to explore repressed emotions in detail, as a typical story was often just eight pages. But when he did have the space his work showed great sophistication. Take for example his story The Frog Prince (circa 1950), about a man's frustration:

Clay Chapman is both the title character and the protagonist in Kirby's play "The Frog Prince." Chapman had been running around town as an egotistical golden boy until his face is scarred in an automobile accident. Like Doom, Chapman is unable to deal with his spoiled profile even though his scars are not grotesque.<sup>63</sup>

When Kirby co-created the romance genre in comics, he was very much at home with the human, emotional side of stories. In contrast, Lee did not have a track record of subtlety or characters with real human emotion: it's not even clear how much Lee wrote at all. His dialog in Fantastic Four 1 does not suggest a writer capable of subtlety or realism.

## The missing splash page

On this page we have first evidence of major changes to the book before publication.

Kirby's stories always had splash pages when the story took a new turn. It didn't matter how relatively minor the change was, or how long it was since the last one, if a new section of the story began we always got a splash page.

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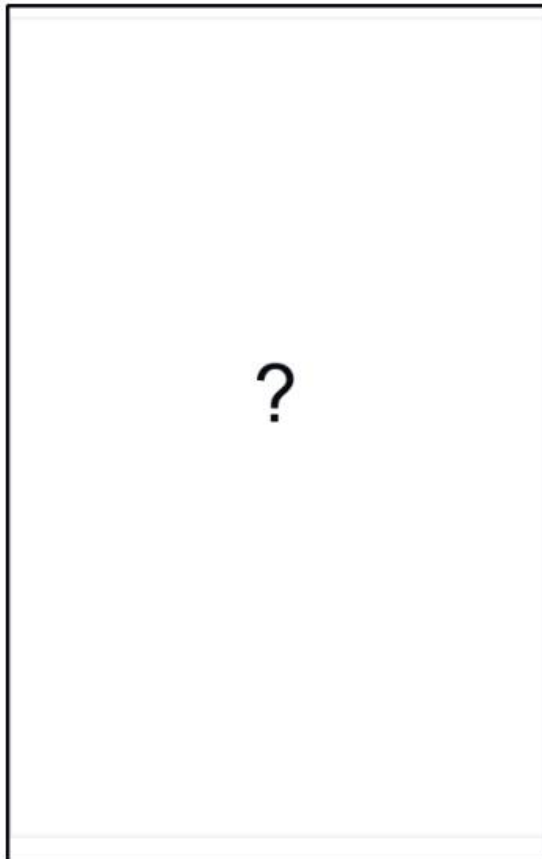
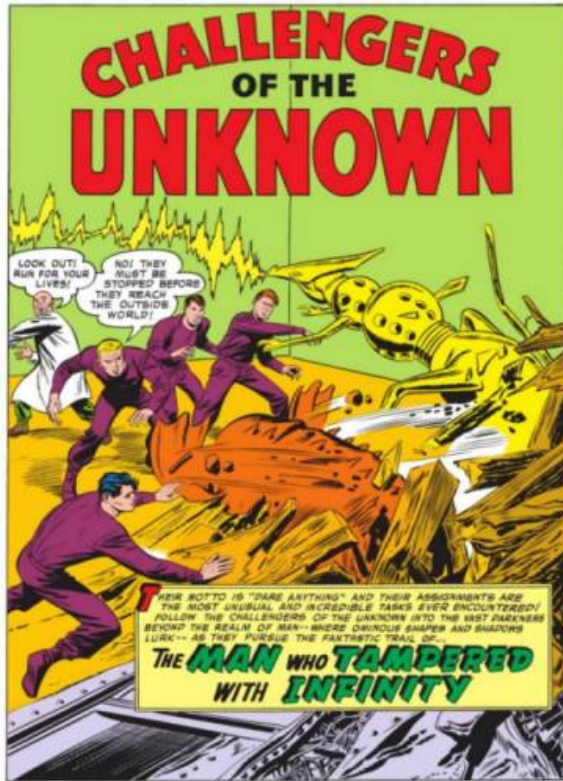
<sup>62</sup> Patrick Ford, via social media

<sup>63</sup> *ibid*



This is not an idea Kirby just invented half way through issue 1 and then used in later issues. It was normal for his previous comics, like the Challengers. Here is the start of Challengers of the Unknown issue 1. The story begins the same way as the Fantastic Four origin, with the team standing around discussing a problem. But first we have the splash page. But where is the splash page for the Fantastic Four's origin?





Here are three more clues that suggest a splash page has gone missing:

1. **“Show, don’t tell.”**

Throughout the book, Lee’s dialog simply embellishes what can already be seen. That is, the story can be read purely from the pictures alone. This is what we would expect from a comic artist after twenty years at the top: “show, don’t tell”. However, on this page the reason for Ben’s anger is only in the text. We should expect the art to tell us why Ben was angry.

2. **Ben appears from nowhere.**

Ben is at the heart of the Fantastic Four. The emotional core of the story is that he lost everything. Yet we barely see him. A good storyteller would have introduced him before we reach this dramatic moment, so we have more reason to care when the tragedy strikes. This point is particularly important if we accept the later argument that this story is the first time we see Ben Grimm in any form.

3. **Kirby’s later recollection.**

Kirby later emphasised how the origin story was all about Ben losing his perfect life. But we never see his perfect life in the current version. I discuss this in more detail in relation to page 14, on reconstructing the original story.

The apparent loss of the splash page is the first of many hints that the book was changed before publication. Later hints will be stronger.

## Dialog versus art: realism is destroyed

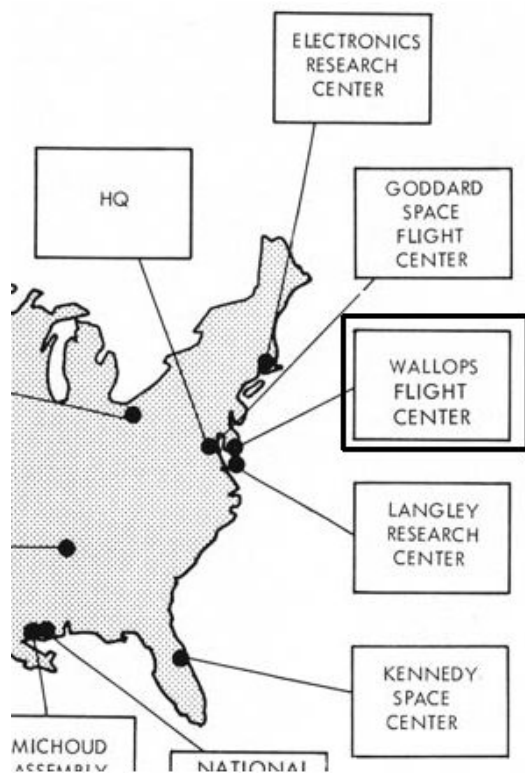
The art shows four people involved in a space flight. They oppose protocol and force the flight to leave earlier than planned. So far this is a realistic possibility. In the early days of spaceflight everything depended on one person. In Russia this man was Sergey Korolyov. In America it was Wernher Von Braun.



Everyone in the ground crew would hold these men in awe. If either of these men had decided to launch a rocket earlier than planned then the ground crew would have followed orders. They would of course risk an army of angry bureaucrats a few hours later: but if they succeeded it wouldn’t matter.

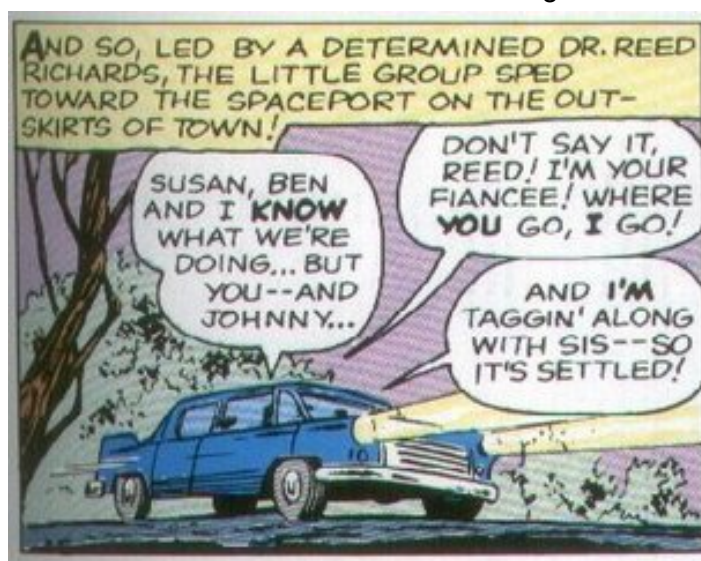
As for the location of the spaceport, the art suggests the team are based in New York. Kirby had just finished Sky Masters, which included features on the real world space race, so Kirby would be well aware of launch facilities near the city where he lived. The closest launch site to New York was Wallops Flight Facility, Delmarva Peninsula, Virginia, established 1945.





There have been over 16,000 launches from the rocket testing range at Wallops since its founding in 1945 in the quest for information on the flight characteristics of airplanes, launch vehicles, and spacecraft, and to increase the knowledge of the Earth's upper atmosphere and the environment of outer space. The launch vehicles vary in size and power from the small Super Loki meteorological rockets to orbital-class vehicles.<sup>64</sup>

So the art shows a story that could be real. But the dialog turns this into something unrealistic: a scientist decides to take his girlfriend and her kid brother into space!



<sup>64</sup> Wikipedia. Note the reference to Loki



This may be a fun idea for children, but it ruins the story for adults. If the dialog had better reflected the story then it could have worked on *both* levels.

## Page 10:

### Who had the idea for superpowers?

On page ten we see the first indication that the team are gaining superpowers. Except that at this stage this is simply a horror story.



We have seen (and will continue to see) that Lee aims his stories at children, so this horror story was not created by Lee.

Who had the idea for superpowers? At this point (1961), Kirby had just introduced a new, more realistic kind of superhero: the Challengers. He had also just created more conventional superheroes, in "The Fly"...

The Wide Angle Scream presents



...and the Double Life of Private Strong.



WHO IS THIS MAN? WHAT IS HE? WHAT IS THE INCREDIBLE SECRET THAT MAKES HIM THE MOST FEARSOME FIGHTING MACHINE EVER ENCOUNTERED IN THE BATTLE FOR JUSTICE?

# MEET **LANCELOT STRONG**

**THE MAN WITH THE DOUBLE LIFE!**



SEE HIM  
HURL BOLTS OF  
LIGHTNING GENERATED  
IN HIS OWN BODY...

...GASP AT THE  
REFLEXES THAT  
DEFY THE DEADLIEST  
WEAPONS AT POINT  
BLANK RANGE!

WATCH HIM ADAPT TO  
TEMPERATURES IN  
WHICH NOTHING CAN  
STAY ALIVE!

FOLLOW HIM  
INTO UNDERSEA  
DEPTHS WHERE NO  
MAN CAN FOLLOW--  
BEGIN THE AMAZING,  
SPINE-TINGLING  
ADVENTURES OF THE  
**SHIELD**--A NEW AND  
DIFFERENT TYPE OF  
HERO WHO PACKS THE  
PUNCH OF A HYDROGEN  
BOMB!

DARKNESS CANNOT STOP  
HIM--NO MORE THAN  
IT DOES THE BAT,  
WHOSE UNCANNY  
INSTINCT IS MORE  
ACCURATE THAN  
RADAR!

BEGIN HIS STORY NOW--  
ON THE FOLLOWING  
PAGES!

Lee later said that superheroes were *his* idea, based on DC's recent book Justice League of America. However, Lee's story falls apart on closer inspection.<sup>65</sup> For example, a look at the timeline suggests that Kirby was responsible for kick-starting the superhero era that became the silver age of comics.<sup>66</sup>

The Fantastic Four's superpowers were practically the same as he had recently given Rocky in Challengers issue 3 (flame, invisibility, size changing and great strength). Kirby was just continuing what he was already doing.

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<sup>65</sup> Appendix 2

<sup>66</sup> Appendix 6

# Page 11:

## Was Lee “concentrating”?

By 1961, Lee had been making comics for over twenty years. His stories sold poorly and were by definition mediocre at best.<sup>67</sup> But when Lee started a new book with Kirby, suddenly his plotting and characters improved. This improvement ended the moment that Kirby left.<sup>68</sup> Lee explained it this way: one day he just decided to concentrate, and then his writing improved.

It was time to start concentrating on what I was doing — to carve a real career for myself in the nowhere world of comic books.<sup>69</sup>

However, right from page 1 (Central City, Reed’s hesitancy) we have evidence that Lee was not concentrating as much as he might. Page 11 has some clear examples of carelessness.

## Typos



Page 11 contains not one but two typos: “completely” is spelled “completly” and “invisible” is spelled “invinsible”. Typos elsewhere include on page 16, where “countless” is spelled “coutless”, and on page 17, where “equatorial” is spelled “equitorial”.

Anybody can make a typo, and perhaps a great writer, engrossed in a stream of consciousness, would make more. But didn’t he read it back afterwards? Lee was an editor, and an editor’s job is specifically to spot these things. And this was a first issue: in *Secrets Behind the Comics*, Lee claimed that “when a comic strip is born, the greatest effort is made to see to it that the comic strip is perfect!”

<sup>67</sup> See appendix 3 for his output and appendix 5 for sales figures.

<sup>68</sup> See the chapter on who wrote the other Fantastic Four stories: once Kirby left, every single Stan Lee plot was based on a Kirby plot.

<sup>69</sup> Stan Lee, 1974, “Origins of Marvel Comics”





Not only was this his “greatest effort” but Lee claimed to be “concentrating” more than ever before in his career. Something does not add up. As Kirby argued later, how could Lee come up with this comic when Lee “could hardly spell”?<sup>70</sup>

## Inside Lee’s mind

Some typos might be blamed on a letterer: errors like repeated words can be signs of concentrating on the letters and not the meaning of the sentence. But “equitorial” is harder to explain that way. If Lee spelled it right, why would a letterer get it wrong?

A person is very unlikely to get “equitorial” wrong if they understand the meaning: from “equator”, from the word “equate”. “Equitorial” just screams out that it is wrong as soon as it is written. Whoever made that typo wasn’t a science fan, that’s for sure. On the same page Lee didn’t recognise a piece of scientific equipment, so he is the prime suspect. Either way, as an editor taking “the greatest effort” he should not let four typos pass him by.

## Other comics

Other comics of the time also imply that Lee had trouble spelling. How did he miss the word “Pharoah” in large letters on a cover, twice? Even if he can blame someone else, as editor he should have spotted those.



<sup>70</sup> From the Gary Groth interview, [www.tcj.com/jack-kirby-interview/6/](http://www.tcj.com/jack-kirby-interview/6/)

There are plenty of indications that Lee didn't always concentrate. He admitted that he gave characters alliterative names (such as Reed Richards, or Sue Storm) because he tended to forget who was who:

"It would be hard for you to believe this, because I seem so perfect: I have the worst memory in the world," Stan said. "So I finally figured out, if I could give somebody a name, where the last name and the first name begin with the same letter, like Peter Parker, Bruce Banner, Matt Murdock, then if I could remember one name, it gave me a clue what the other one was, I knew it would begin with the same letter."<sup>71</sup>

This recollection was not just Lee being modest. Bruce Banner spent a whole issue being called Bob Banner, and in the first Spider-Man issue, Peter Parker (named in *Amazing Fantasy* 15) became "Peter Palmer".



Is this the sign of a writer who cares about his characters and their unique situations and personalities?

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<sup>71</sup>Stan Lee's "A Brief History of Marvel" with Kevin Smith, <http://www.cbr.com/stan-lees-a-brief-history-of-marvel-with-kevin-smith/>



# Page 12:

## Heroes who fight each other

On page 12 we come to the heart of the Fantastic Four: the serious fighting between Ben and the other men. This is what made the Fantastic Four different from other comic books of the time. It made the book stand out as more alive, more real, more interesting. Whoever added this detail was responsible for making the book a hit. But was it Lee or Kirby?

### Internal evidence: dialogue versus art

In several places in Fantastic Four issue 1, Kirby's art depicts violence and Lee's text either tones it down or misses the reason.

On pages 4-5 we see Ben destroying a door he previously walked through, then in an aggressive pose to a police officer, then tearing up the streets, then destroying a car, and people running in panic. The dialog could have gone either way, but Lee chose to make it all seem accidental, just a guy in a bad mood, rather than someone who maybe hated the world and had the power to do something about it.





In every appearance of the Torch we see violence and danger, even horror, but Lee tones it down.

On pages 20-21, discussed later, Lee misses the significance of the battle.

On page 23, discussed later, Lee again misses the significance of the battle.

Each of these examples is subtle. Lee did not make enormous changes, but his changes were all in one direction: Kirby creates stories with conflict everywhere: in battle, in romance, inner conflict with yourself, and so on. Lee then tones down the conflict.

In every case the conflict is seen in the art more than in the dialog. So if we are asking who created the conflicts between the characters, it had to be Kirby.

## External evidence: interviews

Both Lee and Kirby have described their version of how the Fantastic Four came about. We could examine their particular claims (see appendix 2) but we don't even need to go that far. Whenever Lee talks about the origin of the Fantastic Four he talks like this:

After about 20 years on the job, I said to my wife, "I don't think I'm getting anywhere. I think I'd like to quit." She gave me the best piece of advice in the world. She said, "Why not write one book the way you'd like to, instead of the way Martin wants you to? Get it out of your system. The worst thing that will happen is he'll fire you -- but you want to quit anyway." At the time, DC Comics had a book called The Justice League, about a group of superheroes, that was selling very well. So in 1961 we did The Fantastic Four. I tried to make the characters different in the sense that they had real emotions and problems. And it caught on. After that, Martin asked me to come up with some other superheroes. That's when I did the X-Men and The Hulk. And we stopped being a company that imitated.<sup>72</sup>

Lee talks about himself for half the time. Then he talks about the surface details: these characters have superpowers. He then talks about what made them different in the most abstract way: they had real emotions and problems, but which emotions? Which problems? Why should a reader care? Now compare how Kirby describes what happened:

The idea for the F.F. was my idea. My own anger against radiation. Radiation was the big subject at that time, because we still don't know what radiation can do to people. It can be beneficial, it can be very harmful. In the case of Ben Grimm, Ben Grimm was a college man, he was a World War II flyer. He was everything that was good in America. And radiation made a monster out of him—made an angry monster out of him, because of his own frustration.

If you had to see yourself in the mirror, and the Thing looked back at you, you'd feel frustrated. Let's say you'd feel alienated from the rest of the species. Of course, radiation had the effect on all of the F.F.—the girl became invisible, Reed became very plastic. And of course, the Human Torch, which was created by Carl Burgos, was thrown in for good measure, to help the entertainment value..<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Stan Lee, "How I Did It", <https://www.inc.com/magazine/20091101/how-i-did-it-stan-lee-of-marvel-comics.html>

<sup>73</sup> Kirby, 1986/7 interview with Leonard Pitts  
<http://kirbymuseum.org/blogs/effect/2012/08/06/19867-kirby-interview/>

We can't rely entirely on memory of course, but note how Kirby talks about the underlying motivations, the feelings, what made each individual character different. Kirby knows what drives the characters as individuals, and hence where conflicts would arise. So who is more likely to have written these conflicts? Lee or Kirby?

## External evidence: Lee's earlier work

Lee's earlier work was all aimed at younger readers and had no serious continuing stories, as he admitted himself in an earlier quote. So there were no serious internal conflicts. A typical Lee series was Millie the Model:



This follows from Lee's personality: while Kirby is a natural fighter, Lee's style is to be likeable and light hearted. It is notable that years later, when Lee took over writing

Spider-Man,<sup>74</sup> Peter Parker became more popular and had more friends. He still had self doubt - this seems to be Lee's contribution to the character - but not the savage hatred of friends that we see with Ben Grimm, Rocky Davis, etc., or even the hard edge of the early Ditko Spider-Man. Kirby fought in the war and struggled his whole life. He understood conflict. But Lee always had a much easier life, ever since his uncle gave him a job as a teenager. It is only natural that Lee's work would tend toward the frivolous and fun with just the occasional self doubt.

## External evidence: Kirby's earlier work

What we see here is what we saw in Kirby's *Challengers of the Unknown* issue 3. In the story Rocky (the character like Ben Grimm) tests an experimental space capsule, travels to the edge of space, and returns with the ability to turn invisible, flame on, change his body size and use great strength. The experience gave him a murderous hatred of his former teammates, and he could only be calmed by June (the *Challengers*' equivalent of Sue).



For even more parallels, look no further than Kirby's romance and crime books.

<sup>74</sup> Lee and Ditko used the "Marvel Method", meaning that Ditko created the story and Lee merely edited the dialog. This is clear from both external and internal evidence. John Romita also helped with the plots, but at least he and Lee were on speaking terms, so there would be more of Lee in the plotting.





## Why the characters fight

Look at every time Ben Grimm becomes angrily violent in the early fantastic Four. In every case, the art (and sometimes, as in this case, the dialog) shows it is about losing Sue Storm.



We might think there are exceptions when Ben gets angry with Johnny Storm, Sue's brother. But again, look at the art (and often the dialog). Johnny is making fun of Ben for being ugly and therefore having no chance with the ladies.

In other words, the violent infighting all stems from a love triangle. This kind of thing was meat and drink to Jack Kirby, who (with Joe Simon) invented the genre of romance comics. (His "Young Romance" sold a million copies per issue<sup>75</sup>.) Kirby also created numerous "true crime" comics, and what is more common than a crime of passion, where a man becomes angry and violent because he lost his girl to another man?

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<sup>75</sup> See appendix 5

## **Writing from experience**

We only need to look at their lives to see which man had to fight constantly. Kirby grew up in one of the rougher parts of New York. As a short guy he had to fight constantly. He then fought on the front lines in WWII. He had no particular business skills so had to struggle every day to pay bills and put food on the table. Lee in contrast got a well paying job from his uncle, was tall and good at talking, spent the war in America chasing girls, was a natural joker and was never short of money. Which of these men is more likely to have written about conflict in a powerful, believable way?

In conclusion, the core of the Fantastic Four's success is the conflict between Ben and Reed. Internal and external evidence all point to Kirby as the writer behind the conflict.



# Page 13: The smoking gun

Now we come to the space flight and crash. This is the single biggest indication that Kirby created this story, like finding a smoking gun at the scene of a crime.



The Fantastic Four origin is simply the Challengers of the Unknown origin story...



... combined with Challengers Of the Unknown issue 3 (where Rocky goes into space and returns with the ability to flame on, change size, use great strength and turn invisible).

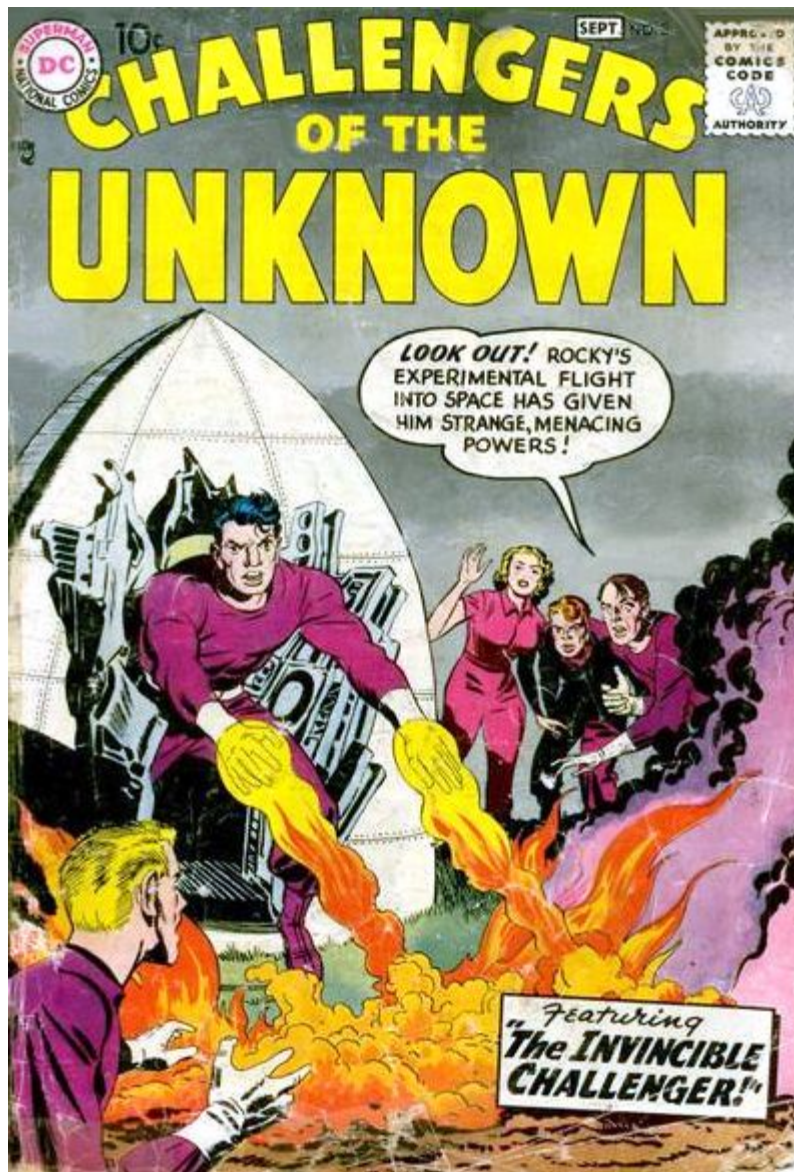
Kirby created the Challengers and left after issue 8. There are so many other parallels that Fantastic Four issue 1 is essentially Challengers issue 9, with trivial changes for legal reasons.<sup>76</sup>

According to an anecdote that is widely repeated (but I am unable to trace its source), when the Fantastic Four became a sales success somebody at DC made a large size poster of the

<sup>76</sup> See appendix 7 for details



cover of Challengers issue 3. They put it on the wall at the DC offices, without comment.



The cover speaks for itself. Anyone who sees it knows where the Fantastic Four came from.



## Page 14:

## The book was changed. Why?

Now we come to the start of the Mole Man Story. This is the key to how Fantastic Four issue 1 was created. In later pages we will see much stronger clues, but the clues begin right here. I will point out the clues on this page, then give an overview of where all the clues, taken together, seem to point.

### The monster's face

Look at the the monster's face. Let's be honest, the face is not well drawn.



Which is odd, because if there is anything Kirby could draw better than anyone else at this point, without even trying, it was solid, three dimensional looking monsters. Compare the same monster in almost the same pose on the cover and later in the story:



The other monsters have satisfying, solid looking faces. But the monster on this page has his face squashed. Why squashed? Apparently to make space for the Human Torch, a character whose powers, just like the others, adds nothing to the story. Kirby characters are always doing something to progress the story. But here the characters just stand in symbolic poses, as if their only role is to just be there.

## Heavy editing was very common

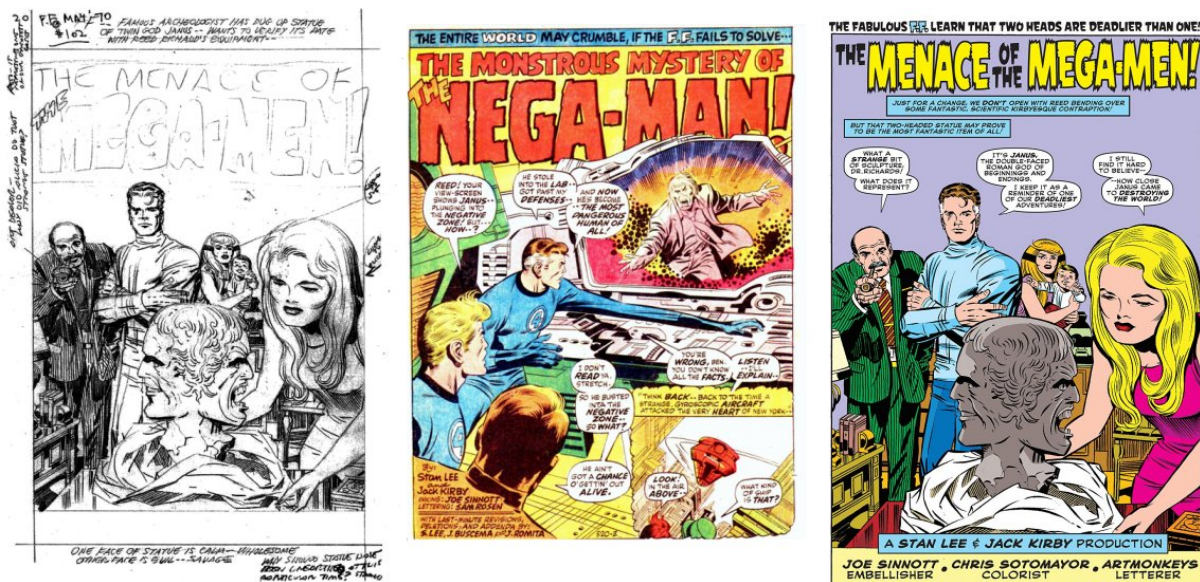
Editing, even heavy editing, removing and reordering pages, was not unusual. As was adding characters to a scene. For example, there are at least two slightly different versions of the cover to this comic - Lee wanted more people added to the background.



Perhaps the best known major edit was Fantastic Four 108, which had so many pages removed that Marvel was later able to sell the original version again as a completely different



story. And even that version wasn't the same as the story Kirby created: Lee changed it again, perhaps because the story looks like a subtle dig at Lee himself.<sup>77</sup>



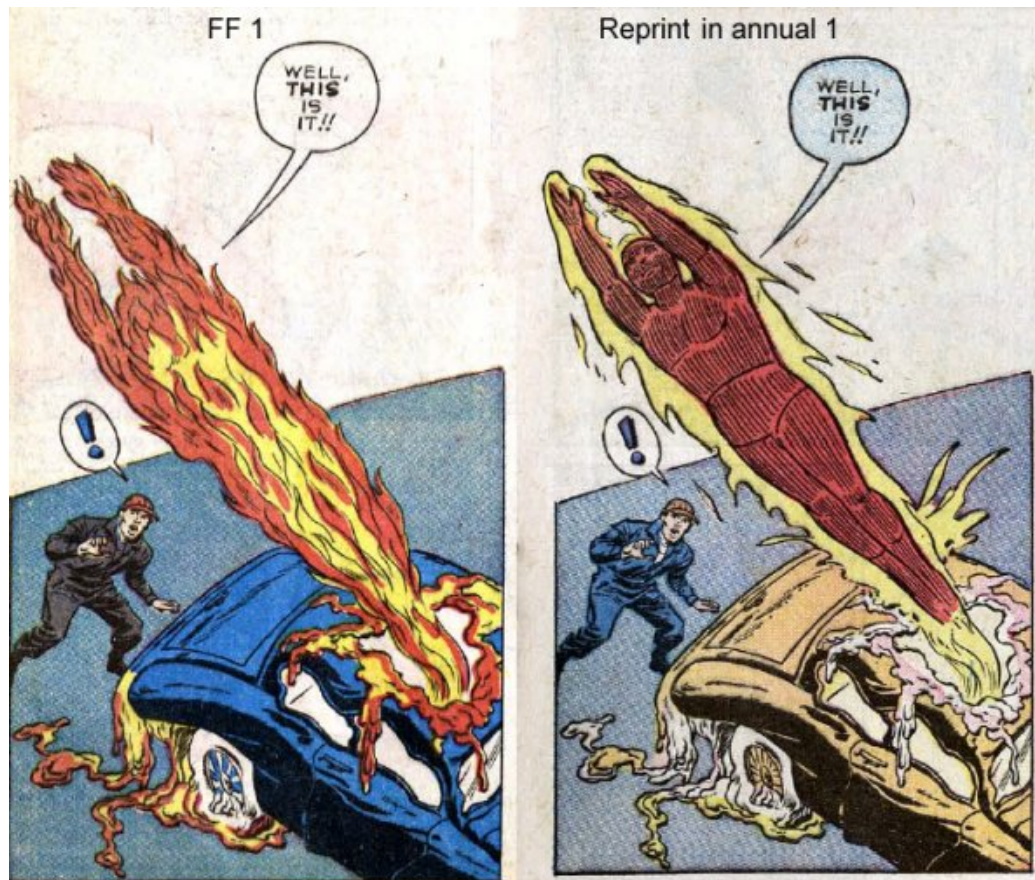
Above: Kirby's original, complete with margin notes where he explained the story to Lee. Then the version Lee published, largely rewritten with new pages by a different artist. Then the "lost adventure" version.

Lesser edits, such as removing pages for a reprint (e.g. Marvel's Greatest Comics) or having another artist change a face, were also common.<sup>78</sup> In this example, Fantastic Four issue 1 was reprinted two years later but the Human Torch was redrawn by a different artist:

<sup>77</sup> The story began with a two faced god. The splash page has some similarities with the splash page to Kirby's "Funky Flashman" story, where Lee was portrayed as two faced and seeing himself as godlike. In the reconstructed version Lee changed the two faced god to be just some random bust. The rest of the story was about a nice guy, who nevertheless had a darker side that just wanted power.

<sup>78</sup> A well known example is when Kirby left for DC: they redrew all his Superman faces, so that every Superman image they sold would look exactly the same.





It was apparently normal for Lee to ask for major changes or reject pages. In a later legal deposition, Kirby's son Neal recalled what this was like:

Q. Did you have an understanding when you were living in East Williston about the economic terms of your father's relationship with any publisher?

A. Well, I knew that Marvel paid him by the page, and that he and mom used to argue about it, because he would be up all night doing pages, and Marvel would say, "Well, we don't want to buy this." Then they would go ahead and make him do the whole thing over again, and he would just get paid for the artwork that he did over again. So he was doing things twice, and getting half the money.

Q. When do you recall hearing a conversation to that effect?

A. Early '60's, late '50's.

Q. Do you know what character or characters were involved in those discussions?

A. No.

Q. Was there any mention of who it was that was asking your father to redo pages or correct pages?

A. From what I recall, Stan Lee.<sup>79</sup>

There must have been a lot of edits each month, as Kirby was creating a huge amount of material at this time, The same month that he produced Fantastic Four issue 1 (issues cover dated November 1961) he also worked on:

- Amazing Adventures # 6,
- Gunsmoke Western # 67,
- Journey into Mystery # 74,

<sup>79</sup> Deposition of Neal Kirby, 2010.

[https://ohdannyboy.blogspot.co.uk/2011/04/marvel-worldwide-inc-et-al-v-kirby-et\\_11.html](https://ohdannyboy.blogspot.co.uk/2011/04/marvel-worldwide-inc-et-al-v-kirby-et_11.html)

- Love Romances # 96,
- Strange Tales # 90,
- Tales of Suspense # 23,
- Tales to Astonish # 25,
- and Teen-Age Romance # 84

Kirby was generally too busy to read his comics once they were published. So it is possible that he never read the printed issue 1 with Lee's dialog.

## Scrapping several pages was common

Larry Lieber once mentioned a batch of finished pages being rejected by Lee (probably intended for Hulk issue 6). This must have been a fairly common occurrence as Kirby never mentioned those Hulk pages to anyone else.

Q: Can you tell me how you came into possession specifically of these drawings?

LARRY LIEBER: They — I was in the office, the Marvel office. It probably was at — no, it must have been at the — on 57th Street when they were there on Madison, and Jack Kirby came out of Stan's office from — and from the direction of Stan's office. He may, probably, he had come out of Stan's office, and he seemed upset. And he took the drawings, he had these drawings, he took them and he tore them in half and he threw them in a trash can, a large trash can.

And I, since I was such a big fan of his, I knew that at the end of the day, they would be discarded, you know, and would be trash. And I — I saw it as an opportunity to have some of his originals to keep, to look at and study, and so I took them out of the trash can.

And there were other people in the office, but nobody else seemed to have noticed this, which I was glad about, and I just took them, walked over to where I was sitting and put them in my case. And I took them home and I taped them together, you know, I taped them all, and I kept them and I've kept them all these years to look at them and, as I say, to study them.<sup>80</sup>

Note that Kirby was proud of that work and Lieber studied it to learn from it. It was good quality material, but it was removed.

When removed pages are saved like this they sometimes turn up at auctions. The FF #31' page is another page of rejected Kirby art which found it's way into the hands of Larry Lieber. I assume he still has it. Here for example is a lost page from issue 31. This is a particularly important page because it shows Sue meeting her father and Kirby's notes (instructions to Lee) say that Sue does not recognise her own father (he had been in jail since Sue was a child).

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<sup>80</sup> Larry Lieber's deposition,

<https://www.bleedingcool.com/2011/03/09/the-larry-lieber-deposition-for-the-kirby-family-vs-marvel-lawsuit/>



This simple touch tells us so much about Sue's character, her loneliness, but also her strength in facing him down. The art suggests that he is a crook who is deceiving the older woman in some way. This makes his eventual redemption all the more powerful. But this storyline - strong women, weak man - would be unacceptable to Lee: as I show in the discussion of page 2, Lee has to always have strong men and weak women. In Lee's version, without this scene, Sue is simply portrayed as weak throughout the story, and her father's redemption is less powerful because he was never bad in the first place. This is another example of Lee destroying Kirby's powerful story and replacing it with a weaker one.

Another example of pages being removed before publication is from annual 5. The original version had several more pages of action:





Those pages later turned up at auction. The original story apparently also had a sequence with Crystal, but that is now lost. We can deduce that because part of the edit was to remove her from the group photo. Here is the pencil art and the finished version:



Winston Smith would be proud!

Yet another example of pages being removed was Fantastic Four issue 100, which was originally planned as a double sized special. I have given numerous examples to show that removing pages was so common that we should not expect anyone to remember it years later. We have to rely on the original pages turning up at auction, or failing that, piecing together the original story from the clues that remain.

## Why make changes?

Why would issue 1 have been edited? What was the motive? In this book I give examples of Lee changing stories to make them easier for children. Editing issue 1 to make the superpowers more obvious would fit that pattern.

Later I will argue that in Kirby's original version the superpowers only appeared at the end of the book, just as they did in the Challengers' powers<sup>81</sup> and Dr Strange origins. But I think Lee wanted them at the beginning, and an intro where they show the powers in use. These

<sup>81</sup> Challengers issue 3, second story

changes may make the story appeal more to younger children, but at the expense of making the stories worse for adults. For example, the Mole Man story is now more disjointed. And I will argue that the changes removed the danger (superpowered people were always going to win), the realism (the plot about underground testing) and the motivation (how underground testing made the Mole Man blind).

For an attempted reconstruction of the original story, see appendix 9.



## Page 15:

### Lee did not understand the story

The Mole Man story is about a man who is mocked for being ugly, so he goes to live underground. The current dialog suggests that this is also his motive for attacking the entire surface world. Destroy the world because people call you ugly? It's a pretty weak motive. But the art on its own suggests a different motive.

### What the story is really about

The story art shows a monster from underground attacking military bases (shades of Godzilla, a monster awakened by nuclear tests). These bases, judging by the art and the context, are probably nuclear bases: they are power plants in deserts, protected by soldiers, this was the height of the Cold War. The soldiers look French, and France had just started underground testing.



The art shows circular cave-ins, similar to ones caused by underground atomic tests.



The team later wear radiation suits.



The Mole Man goes blind in an underground event that, the art suggests, is like some kind of explosion.

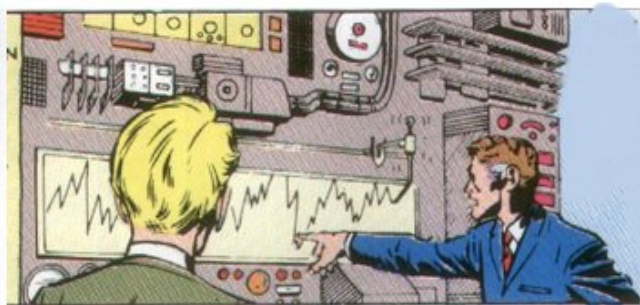
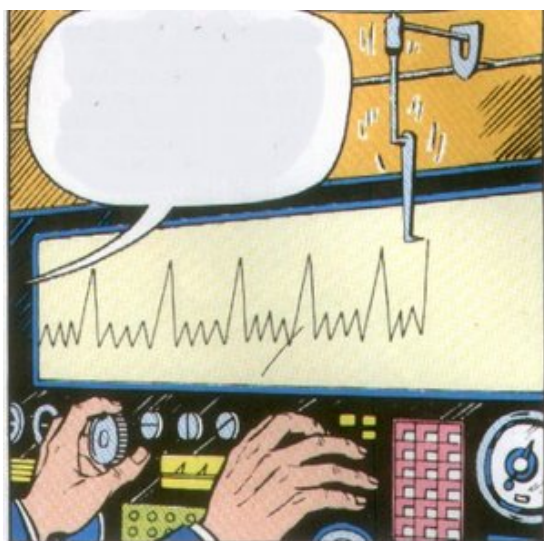


The story ends with a mushroom cloud explosion.



The Mole Man was located using a network of seismometers that were designed to locate underground tests (see “recent history” below).





Notice a pattern? The story is about underground testing, which was big news at the time (see “recent history”, below). *But Lee’s dialog and text makes no mention of it.*

This omission weakens the story, as it removes the villain’s motivation. Did Lee simply remove it (making the story worse) for personal political reasons? Possibly, but that is pure speculation, and the story provides its own explanation: Lee simply didn’t understand the history or the science, as we shall see.

## Recent history (in 1961)

1961 was the height of the cold war, when everyone feared nuclear weapons. Three years earlier (1958) saw the biggest hope for nuclear peace: the first ever limitation on nuclear testing. Signed in Geneva, The Limited Test Ban Treaty *moved all nuclear testing underground*. The key part of the treaty - the part that made it work - was the establishment of a network of 170 control posts around the world, each equipped with seismometers. Through triangulating their results they could pinpoint the source of any disturbance in the Earth (such as a nuclear test) anywhere in the world.<sup>82</sup> These are the seismometers that Kirby drew (that Lee wrongly called “radar machines”).

A year before the story (1960), France began underground nuclear tests in Africa. Until then, only America and Russia, then Britain in 1952, had nuclear weapons. (As such a close ally of America, Britain merely shared American technology.) This was a major spreading of nuclear weapons to other countries.

So the story, or underground monsters destroying a French nuclear base, was inspired by the news. But Lee did not understand (or care for) the news, as evidenced by his dialogue that Australia had a nuclear base. It did not. So Lee cannot have plotted this story. This ignorance (or lack of concern) is compounded by the “radar scope”.

<sup>82</sup> The Making of the Limited Test Ban Treaty, 1958-1963, William Burr and Hector L. Montford, editors, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB94>

## “Radar-scope”??

Lee’s dialog calls the seismometer a “radar machine” and later “radar scope,” like it’s some weird science fiction device rather than the instruments used in the real world. Did Lee just think “seismometer” was a difficult word for young readers? If so, then why not call it a “vibration-scope” or “vibro-scope”? Or just an “earthquake detector”? “Radar” is pretty much the opposite of a seismometer: radar uses radio waves, usually in the air (i.e. to detect airplanes). Ground penetrating radar has a very specialised use and only penetrates a very short distance. Because radar is at its best in the air or a vacuum, whereas seismography deals with the rocks below our feet. One is for above, the other is for below. One is for air, the other for rock. Calling a seismometer a “radar machine” shows that Lee had no idea what it was or what it did, despite its use being indicated by the art. The seismometer appeared *twice* at the start. It is how they located the monsters and saved the world. It matters to the story, and Lee did not understand it.

## Kirby’s Reed was realistic

Reed, in Lee’s dialog, is implausible. He designs or steals a rocket, and in the next story he has his own seismographs and private plane. However, Kirby’s emphasis on radiation unifies both stories. If Reed’s field of expertise was atmospheric radiation, this would make him vitally interested in keeping track of atom bomb tests (the start of the Mole Man story) and also at the forefront of studying the Van Allen belts (the origin story). So while Lee’s story is implausible, Kirby’s story could be set in the real world.

Kirby’s Reed, a leader and adventurer, a man with means and contacts, an expert with rockets and seismometers, was basically James Van Allen.<sup>83</sup> This is not to say that Kirby consciously copied Van Allen, it merely shows that Kirby’s story was realistic. (The Time cover is from May 4, 1959, two years before the Fantastic Four.)

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<sup>83</sup> James A. Van Allen, Discoverer of Earth-Circling Radiation Belts, Is Dead at 91, Walter Sullivan, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/10/science/space/10vanallen.html>; James Van Allen Biography, <http://www.notablebiographies.com/newsmakers2/2007-Pu-Z/Van-Allen-James.html>; Dr James Van Allen, NASA, <https://image.gsfc.nasa.gov/poetry/tour/bioAllen.html>



James Van Allen, like Reed, was an adventurer at heart. As a young adult he was invited to join Admiral Byrd to study the Antarctic<sup>84</sup> (note the icy wastes in the Mole Man story) and he was obsessed with outer space. As a child he “enjoyed building motors, radios, and electrical generators that threw foot-long bolts of lightning across the room.” In the war he developed new kinds of bombs and earned four combat stars. On his return he worked on the newly captured V2 rockets.

Van Allen specialised in seismic testing (he was supposed to operate seismic and magnetic equipment with Byrd) and was later involved in Operation Argus, where atomic bombs were exploded over the south Atlantic to see what happened. Was this the fictional location of Monster Isle? Were Reed’s atmospheric tests responsible for the Mole Man? Is this why Lee removed the central plot about the bomb, because it might imply the hero caused the problem and the villain was innocent?

At the same time as Operation Argus, Van Allen was instrumental (literally!) in sending detectors into space to prove that a radiation field existed around the Earth. Hence his fame as discoverer of the Van Allen belts: he proved that, in his own words, “space is radioactive!”

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<sup>84</sup> His mother persuaded him not to, so he reluctantly stayed home



And what else did he do, the same day that he announced the van Allen belts to the world? He planned to set off atomic bombs in space.

While looking through the Van Allen papers at the University of Iowa to prepare a Van Allen biography, Fleming discovered "that [the] very same day after the press conference, [Van Allen] agreed with the military to get involved with a project to set off atomic bombs in the magnetosphere to see if they could disrupt it."<sup>85</sup>

The same year, Van Allen was chairman of a group of top scientists (which included Von Braun and the heads of important institutions) who recommended that America send a man to the moon within ten years (that is, by 1968). So while Lee's Reed could only exist in a comic, Kirby's Reed not only *could* exist in Real Life, but practically *did*.

Readers may think I am labouring the point, just a fan boy talking about his favourite comic. But if you remember nothing else about this book, I want you to remember this: Kirby created an amazing story about the real world. And Lee destroyed it.

Note how the two stories deal with underground, distant lands and outer space, and with children, romance, drama and conflict: all human life is here. When Kirby said he would create a story that would save Goodman's comics business, he was not kidding. And you can see why I am so angry at what Lee did to Kirby's stories.

My stories were true. They involved living people, and they involved myself. They involved whatever I knew. I never lied to my readers.

If you analyze them, you'll find that I'm not really fictionalizing.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> A Very Scary Light Show: Exploding H-Bombs In Space, Robert Krulwich, <http://www.npr.org/sections/krulwich/2010/07/01/128170775/a-very-scary-light-show-exploding-h-bombs-in-space>

<sup>86</sup> Jack Kirby Interview, Glenn Danzig, <http://www.twomorrows.com/kirby/articles/22danzig.html>

## Page 16: Lee's hyperbole

Lee is known for exaggerating. It's his style, and it's part of why fans love him. Everything was "Senses shattering", "Pulse pounding", or

An Adventure Epic of Most Compelling Excellence<sup>87</sup>

Lee exaggerated not just when selling the story, but in the story itself. The art shows a rocket that only goes beyond the atmosphere, just as rockets did in 1961. But the dialog says it's "to the stars" (and issue 2 says it was to Mars). The art shows them in a cave that can't be very deep, but the dialog says it is at "the center of the Earth". The Mole Man, an ordinary human, becomes "the strangest menace of all time". This current page has the clearest example:



A gigantic pair of claws, the like of which have never been seen on Earth, or on any planet in the universe!!

"Or on any planet in the universe!!" Really? That's hyperbole. Hyperbole can be fun, but it creates problems in two areas:

1. Intelligence:

Hyperbole breaks down when you think about it. Does the writer know every planet in

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<sup>87</sup> The first Sandman story in Spider-man

the universe? Is the universe really so limited? We might recall that Lee was, at the same time, publishing stories in other comics about even bigger, stronger monsters, including this Kirby comic from the very same month. Of course, Lee had very little to do with those comics (he did not sign them, and only later claimed to have written them, so maybe he was not aware of their content).



2. Continuity:

If every issue has the biggest, strongest, most amazing, etc, then after a few issues we realise that nothing in the universe can defeat our hero for long. So all danger is lost. The comic only works if we don't think about continuity.

So hyperbole is bad for intelligence and continuity. But these are supposed to be what made Marvel different. As Stan Lee later claimed:



It was now 1960. By now, I really wanted to leave, because one edict that my publisher had was that the stories had to be geared towards young readers - or unintelligent older readers. We weren't supposed to use words of more than two syllables, and we had to have simple plots - no continuing stories, because he felt our readers weren't smart enough to remember from month to month where they had left off. It was really boring.<sup>88</sup>

True, Lee's memory is seldom reliable<sup>89</sup> (e.g. there were plenty of three syllable words, even in the comic titles: "America", "Mystery", "Magician", etc.). But he often repeated the claims: Marvel comics were for more intelligent readers, and (undeniably) Marvel comics had more continuing stories (compared with DC). But both intelligence and continuity were harmed by Lee's hyperbole. Whatever was pulling the stories toward intelligence and continuity, Lee was pulling in the opposite direction.

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<sup>88</sup> Interview with Stan Lee, Kennect Plume,  
<http://uk.ign.com/articles/2000/06/26/interview-with-stan-lee-part-1-of-5>

<sup>89</sup> Appendix 2

## Page 17:

## Kirby was ahead of his time

On page 17 the team arrive, wearing their Challengers uniforms. The first monster they see is well known to moviegoers: the three headed King Ghidorah from the Godzilla movies. Except that Kirby drew this in 1961, and Ghidorah did not appear until 1964.



This was not an isolated incident. While researching this book I read the first Challengers of the Unknown book (Showcase issue 6) for the first time. I was disappointed to see that Kirby had simply copied elements from the hit movie Jason and the Argonauts: notably the giant Greek statue that attacks a ship (but this time is submerged in the sea like the giant Poseidon in the movie).



The same story has a reference to the story of Cadmus and his seeds, the basis of the fighting skeletons at the end of the movie.



But then I checked the dates: Kirby created Challengers story in 1957, and the Argonauts movie was not released until 1963.

A better known example of having a movie idea first is from Star Wars. Darth Vader's look, his mixture of royalty and black magic, the father-son plot, the term "dark side" (Kirby spelled it "Darkseid"), and so on, are a mix of New Gods and Dr Doom. As Mark Hamill recalls:

I also went out to [Jack's] house once in Thousand Oaks. [Jack] was a very self-effacing guy. You'd never know from his demeanor how important he really was. We were joking, and I said that when I first saw Darth Vader, I thought, "Oh, it's Doctor Doom." (laughter) He certainly didn't say, "Oh, he took my ideas," or any of that kind of stuff. He was content with who he was and his abilities.<sup>90</sup>

Kirby even had a character called the Sky Walker<sup>91</sup>, and at least one scene in Empire Strikes Back is, frame for frame, the same as a sequence in the Fantastic Four.<sup>92</sup> This may not be coincidence: at the time George Lucas was writing Star Wars, he was part owner of the Supersnipe comic art gallery (named after the famous Supersnipe comic shop).

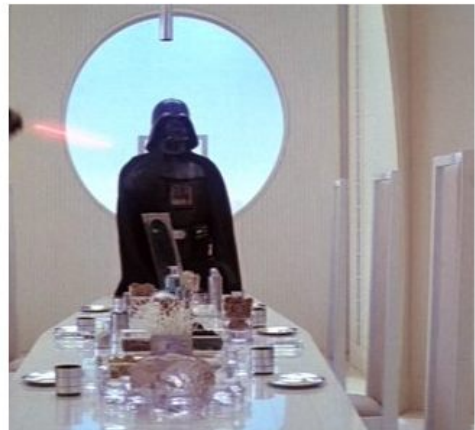
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<sup>90</sup> Mark Hamill Interview, John Morrow, <http://twomorrows.com/kirby/articles/28hamill.html>

<sup>91</sup> In Justice, Inc issue 2, published in 1975. The story was based on Paul Ernst's story "The Sky Walker" in Avenger Magazine in 1939

<sup>92</sup> Fantastic Four 141, from 1974, a major issue of the flagship title, introducing the first new F.F. artist since Stan Lee left. So any comic fan would have seen it, including others involved in Empire - which of course was not directed by Lucas. That scene in turn was based on Kirby's Fantastic Four issue 87.





These movie examples are trivial. More important was Kirby's ability to see the future of comics, and the need to move to graphic novels and more adult work. That is a whole topic on its own and will not be discussed here.

Even more important than that is Kirby's ability to foresee major trends in the wider world. If I had the time I would write a large book on Kirby's predictions that came true, drawing mainly on his OMAC and Eternals titles. Originally that was going to be the focus of this present book, with Kirby and Marvel as just the introduction. But that would have taken too many years. A person could easily spend a lifetime studying Kirby's ideas and only see the tip of the iceberg.

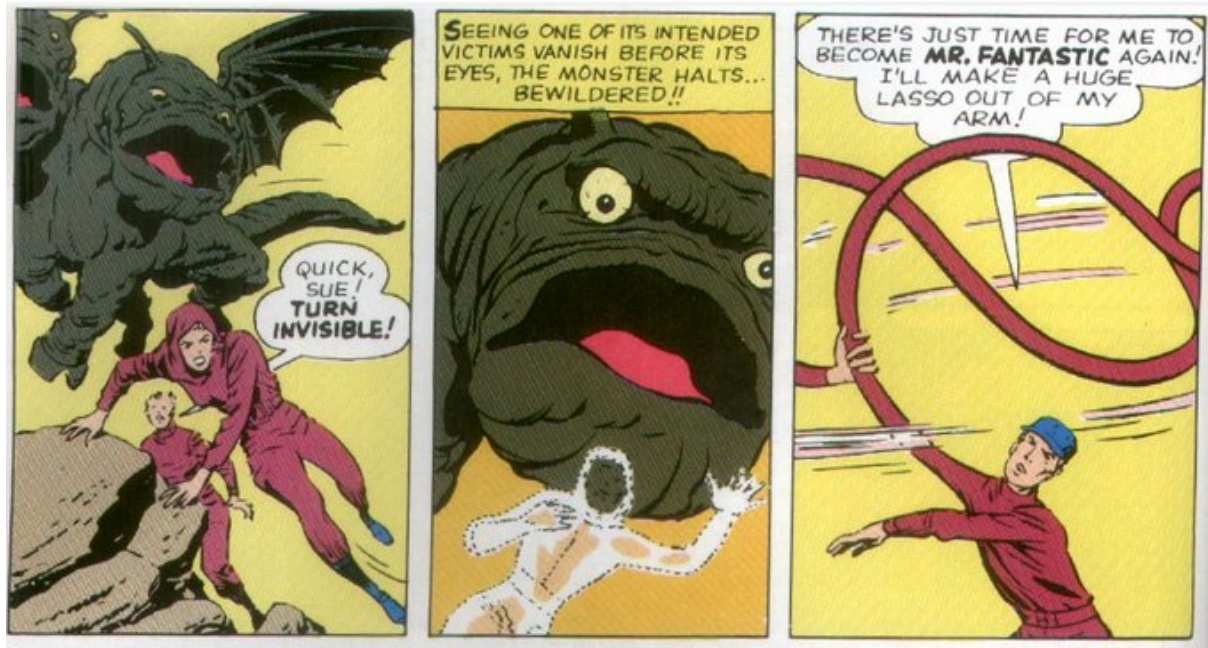
So the three-headed monster was not a coincidence. Kirby was always ahead of his time.

## Page 18:

### A Challengers story, no superpowers

This page is full of instances where the story works better without superpowers and the superpowers appear to be clumsily added later.

The page begins with Sue turning invisible in front of a monster. But the story would be more exciting if she could not turn invisible: the powers remove the tension.



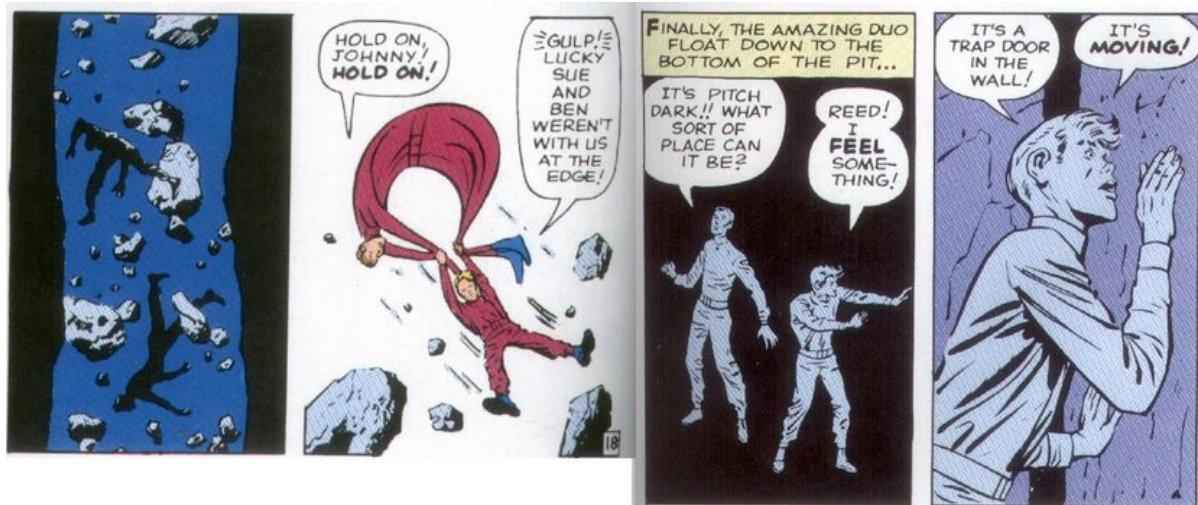
Next, Reed uses his arm as a lasso, but an ordinary lasso would have made more sense. If you can stretch your arm into a lasso then it would be quicker to just stretch and grab the monster. Or do something more dramatic, like stretching to giant size. The lasso is problematic in another way: it's a very badly designed image, where much of the arm is cut off (and he has two left hands!). No competent writer would have written it this way, and no competent artist would have drawn it this way. So it looks like this may have been Reed using a regular lasso, but the picture was changed when it was decided they had superpowers.

Next, Reed and Sue watch the monster fall into the sea. Look at Reed's arm. Try to tell me that arm was not added later!





Next, they suddenly fall down a hole without warning. This might indicate frames were cut out - how often do people fall down holes when they are just standing there? But we cannot prove that, maybe it was just a very fast moving story. They are then shown free falling, yet the introduction showed that Johnny loved flying more than anything else. Why didn't he just fly? Unless in this story he originally didn't have superpowers.



The next page is even worse: Johnny cannot see because it is dark! Yet this is supposedly the human torch! The clue is in the name - the human torch - and he doesn't have any light? Clearly the characters had no superpowers in the original version.

Next, Reed stretches into a parachute shape. But the story would have been more dramatic if they simply fell, just as the Mole Man did later in the story: the Mole Man didn't need a parachute. The superpower here is not needed, and simply removes tension from the story. So once again it looks like the original story was changed to add superpowers.

Why does this matter? Because without the superpowers, the original story is basically just Challengers of the Unknown. This page is yet more evidence that the Fantastic Four began as a continuation of Kirby's earlier work. Except that when he left DC, DC retained ownership



of those characters. Kirby replaced them with three new characters and added the fourth one in the next story where they gain powers.

## Page 19:

### Another smoking gun

Page 19 has the clearest example that something weird is going on in the Mole Man story in its current form. First the characters are knocked unconscious by a light. Really? How can that happen? But much worse, they are suddenly wearing radiation suits of the kind used in the 1960s. Why?



The text calls the radiation suits "adhesive-type suits". Presumably it means they very quickly stick to the body, yet the art shows them as being very baggy, and easily removed later.



“Adhesive suit” must be an attempt to explain why the heroes’ clothes changed so quickly. It implies that Lee knew that the change of clothes was a problem. He further “lampshades” the problem by having Johnny ask how they got into the suits. But Johnny’s question is never answered.

The text box tries to explain that the suits are to protect them from the light... but the only part of the body that is not covered is the eyes!

At the very least, the “light” had to be radiation (the original plot, concerning underground testing, was discussed earlier). The radiation suits otherwise serve no purpose: they are merely discarded later.

It is possible that the suits are explained in panels that are now removed (presumably to make space for the new Thing battle on the following page). Any missing panels might explain how Reed and Johnny hit the ground and began to explore the caves.

All we can say for sure is that the story has been changed: the dialog struggles, and fails, to make sense of the art. Perhaps Lee planned a story about underground radiation and then completely changed his mind. But why would he do that?

- Because he suddenly feared that people would think opposed nuclear weapons and was unpatriotic?
- Because he suddenly remembered that the word “radiation” has four syllables and Martin Goodman told him to use two syllable words?
- Or did Lee simply decide to shorten the story, and was not a good enough writer to think of an explanation that made sense?

Any theory that requires Lee to be the writer also requires him to dramatically change his mind while writing, or simply be a bad writer. But there is a much simpler explanation for the changes: Kirby delivered a story ready made. Lee, the editor, saw it and wanted a change.



That is how publishing normally works. That is how Kirby always worked. It requires mental gymnastics to force Lee into the role of writer, so why do it?

## Evidence for editing

It is possible that frames have been rearranged or redrawn. Later pages have more examples, but let's focus on the bottom of this page.



The final two panels break a principle of good design (known as the "180 degree rule"<sup>93</sup> in cinematography): a character who is on the left in one shot should not be on the right in the next shot as if the camera has flipped over. Look at the the valley of diamonds: note the direction of the the speech bubble: the Mole Man would be facing right, as also implied by the previous panel. But in the next panel, the reveal, he is facing left. We could say this was a momentary lapse by an overworked Kirby, but look closer at that last panel.

If you have a good scan of the original comic (not a reprint, though sometimes these artefacts survive in reprints as well), zoom in on the final frame where we first see the Mole Man.

<sup>93</sup> Arguably the Goozlebobber example later also breaks it, but I think he was just comically turning his head looking for the "wild animals" - that will make sense when you see it.



Notice how the Mole Man is to right of centre, with unused space on the left of the panel. Now zoom in on the left part of the panel. Just where the edge of a well-balanced panel would be, there is a vertical line in the shading, such as you see when drawing over paper that has been physically cut and pasted. (This cannot be explained by a ghost image of the previous printed page, as there is no line in that position.) It looks like the original panel was narrower. Now look closely at the top and right of the panel. The blacks are less dense. This might be because of the purple added below, but it could also be a sign that the panel was

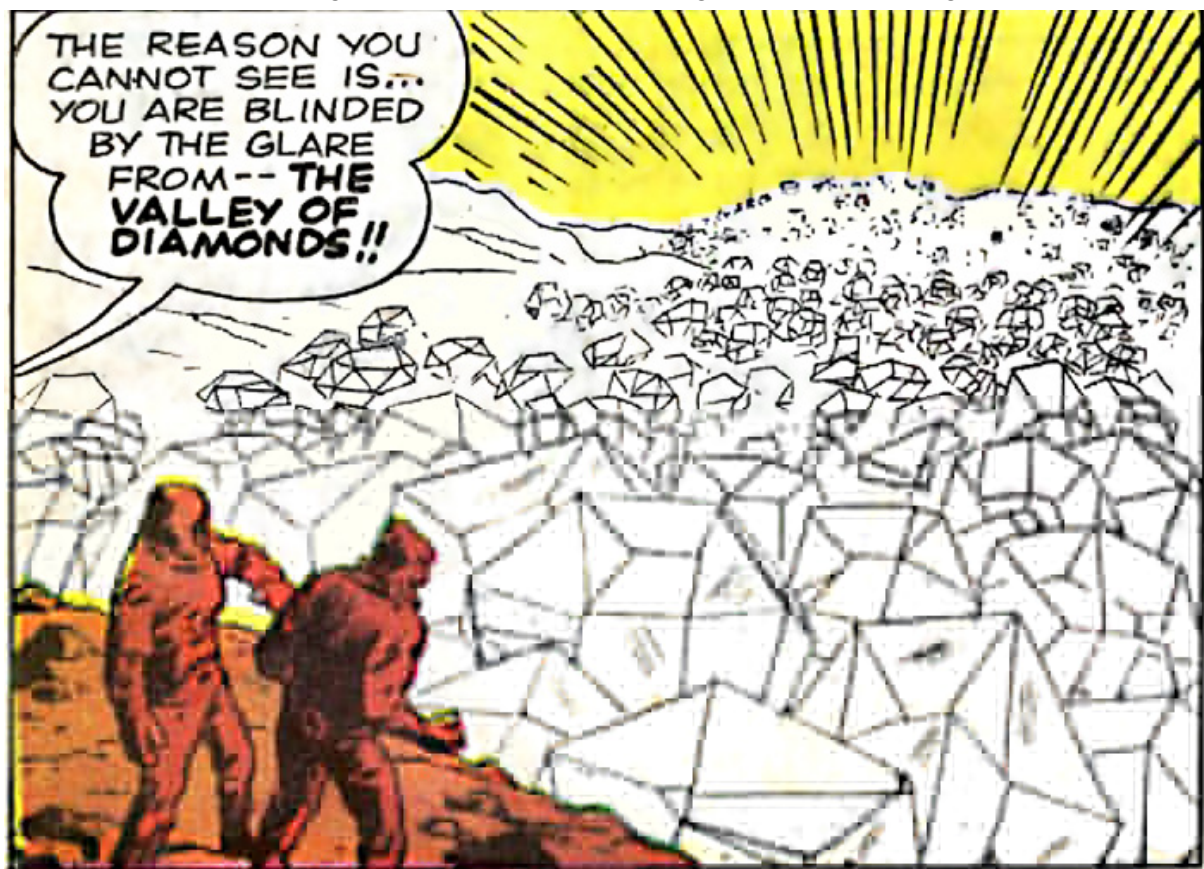


originally shorter. The height could go either way, but the panel was probably cut and expanded on the left.

At the very least, the reveal was originally on the left and the valley of diamonds was on the right. Why change it? It seems likely that the Thing battle was added later, and the following splash page (Sue shading her eyes) would have been the Mole Man's throne room. So it would naturally fit that the previous picture was the valley of diamonds. We then have a natural reveal: the Mole Man's voice, then his face, then the first evidence of his world, then a big picture of his world. However, once the Thing battle was added they needed a dramatic break, one that would also link to the next shot. So the Mole Man was put at the end (and perhaps flipped over). That does not explain why the image would be widened - why make the diamond picture narrower? Again we are left with the suggestion that more panels were removed.

## What were the “diamonds” originally?

Let's remove the colouring from those “diamonds”, to get closer to the original art:

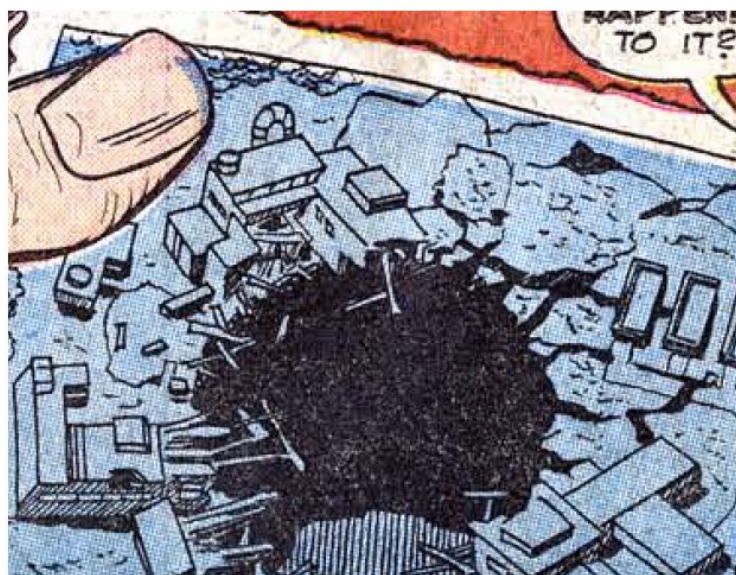


Notice anything? Look closer, especially at the back:





These are badly drawn! We can't blame the fact that they are tiny details. Look at other tiny details, blown up:



Kirby was probably the greatest comic artist in the world. Even his tiny details look right. But those diamonds are just horrible.

Did Kirby just rush his drawing at that point? He didn't rush the drawings at either side. And this the "big reveal", where the heroes finally see something more than just rocks. It seems clear that they saw something, and it was not those badly drawn diamonds.

Reader MW Gallaher points out what we should expect to see in their place, and from that, we can reconstruct the original story:

The crudity of the diamonds is what first caught my attention. At a glance I knew Kirby didn't draw that. Assuming it was changed, then, what was it changed from? Radioactive stuff, of course...and then, the original plot starts to show: monsters causing nuclear facilities to

collapse underground, they loot the fuel and transport it through underground tunnels to Monster Isle where it mutates more monsters from Mole Man's army.<sup>94</sup>

What Gallaher describes is simply good storytelling. We see the nuclear plants disappear under the ground. The team investigates, so we have to see where they ended up. This also solves the problem of where the extra monsters came from: the first monster is a kind of Godzilla, created by earlier tests. The new smaller monsters might be early stages in mutating new giant monsters: Monster Isle then becomes the island of Doctor Moreau, where the Mole Man is deliberately experimenting to create his own army. For more about reconstructing the original story, see appendix 9.

If the original pencil art ever surfaces at auction then we will have more clues. But until then all we can say for sure is that this page had the radiation story removed. Lee was unlikely to change his own story, and if he did he wouldn't do it in such a clumsy way. This implies that Kirby is more likely to be the writer, and Lee just his editor.

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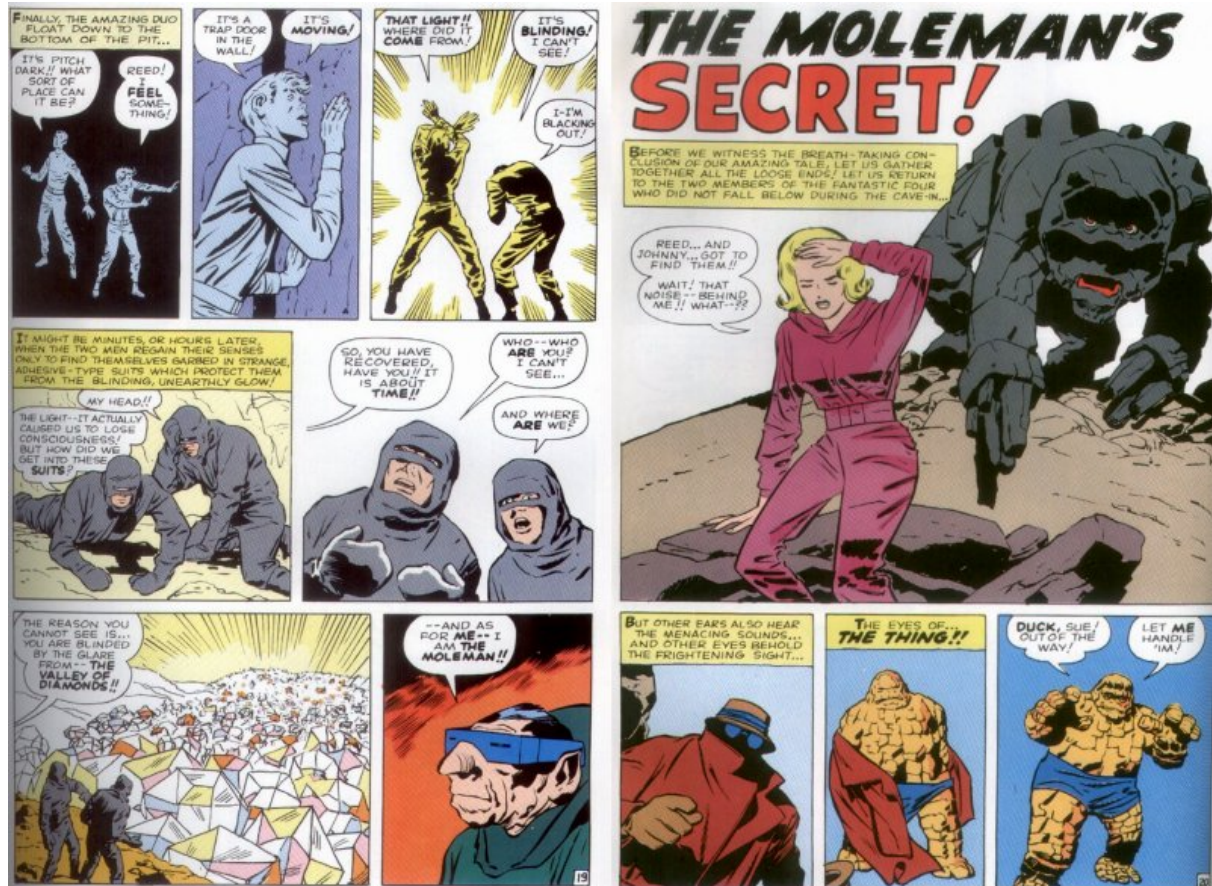
<sup>94</sup> From a comment on the Classic Comics forum



## Page 20:

# The emotional core

This new sequence interrupts the flow of the story, which is taking place underground.



It comes between the surprise appearance of the Mole Man and a small picture of his throne room. We would expect to see a new chapter title and big picture of the throne room at this point. That was probably the original page, but it looks like it was removed to add an extra page of The Thing fighting.







The new sequence establishes Susan as fully adult and sexy, and eligible to be Reed's love interest. Since Kirby is adding a new sequence with a sexy Sue, he took the opportunity to add to the emotional story, and this is something Lee completely missed.

## Lee missed the point

As usual, let's start with the art and ignore the text:







Sue looks sexy and vulnerable. The thing sees her and strips off. He fights the beast in front of her while she watches. He raises it above his head in triumph. He throws it into the sea and they run off together.

If the problem had been urgent, why strip off? Would he risk Sue's life just to save dirtying his coat? In fact, he could have just told Sue to become invisible, then step out of the way. And there was certainly no need to lift the creature over his head: when Reed had a similar problem he just pulled the creature off balance so it fell into the sea. But Ben has to show off. "Look at my strength!" This is a classic example of a man trying to impress the girl.

We saw earlier that the conflict over Sue is the emotional core of this story. And here, with Ben and Sue alone, Kirby knows it is inevitable that Ben will show off. But Lee seems to miss the point. Let's look at his dialog:

BUT OTHER EARS ALSO HEAR THE MENACING SOUNDS... AND OTHER EYES BEHOLD THE FRIGHTENING SIGHT...



THE EYES OF...  
**THE THING!!**



DUCK, SUE!  
OUT OF THE WAY!

LET ME  
HANDLE  
'IM!



THE SECOND GIGANTIC GUARDIAN OF MONSTER ISLE IS POWERFUL BEYOND BELIEF... BUT HE IS FIGHTING AN ENEMY WHOSE EVERY ATOM HAS BEEN CHARGED WITH COSMIC RAYS... AN ENEMY WHO **CAN'T BE STOPPED!**



YOU'VE DONE IT, BEN!  
YOU'VE BEATEN HIM!



WHAT DID  
YOU EXPECT??

I'M THE THING,  
AIN'T I??



NOW LET'S GO  
AND FIND THAT  
SKINNY, LOUD-  
MOUTHED  
BOY-FRIEND OF  
YOURS!

OH, BEN--IF ONLY YOU  
COULD STOP HATING  
REED FOR WHAT  
HAPPENED TO YOU!



In Lee's dialog there is no hint of Ben caring for Sue any more than he would care for Johnny or Reed in the same situation. Indeed, he seems irritated by Sue and reacts just as he would with Johnny or Reed (saying "what did you expect?"). And when they are alone together what does Ben talk about? He insults her boyfriend, and by implication insults Sue for choosing him. Lee's Ben Grimm has the emotional intelligence of a five year old. After saving her life he should be asking about her, and how she feels.

So Lee misses what should have been an emotional highlight and it becomes just a pointless fight. And look at the panel where Sue is watching Ben fight. This is Ben at his most vulnerable: he desperately needs to impress the girl. But instead Lee's comment is about the surface detail, the fight, and says Ben "can't be stopped." No, Stan, Ben *has* been stopped, Reed has defeated him. This is not about the rock monster, you are totally missing the point! Ben can beat an even rockier monster than himself, but he cannot defeat Reed. This sequence was about their romance. This was Ben's big chance to try and win Sue's heart. But Lee's dialog killed the moment.

We will see a similar clumsiness three pages hence with the Mole Man. Lee misses the loneliness and vulnerability in the art, and again just sees a pointless fight and an unsympathetic character whining about how he is better than Reed.

In conclusion, the comic shows that Lee seems not to understand the emotional core of the story. He only sees the fights, and the only person who matters to Lee is Reed, the boss. But Kirby, the man who invented the romance genre in comics, understood it perfectly.

In summary, how could Lee have written the story when he did not understand its emotional core?



## Page 21: forgetting the name of the villain

Page 21 contains many of the problems already noted, plus a new one.

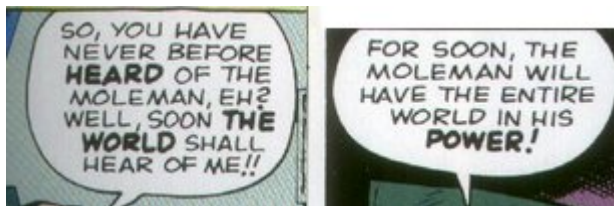
### More signs of heavy editing

As noted previously, the tiny throne room picture only makes sense if there was previously a larger picture, but it as removed to make more space for the Thing fight. And while we're here, look at the poor quality of the drawing of the two heroes. Was this just the inker having trouble with a baggy suit? Or signs of further last minute editing?



### More bad dialog

The Mole Man's dialog is corny, which again contradicts Lee's claim to be concentrating on writing better stories.



### More dumbing down for children

Most of the page is in words of two syllables or fewer, as if written for younger readers. Lee later claimed that the comics improved because he stopped writing for children. There is no evidence of that in this issue.

## Not paying attention

Lee cannot even remember the name of the villain. "Mole Man" is two words in the story title:



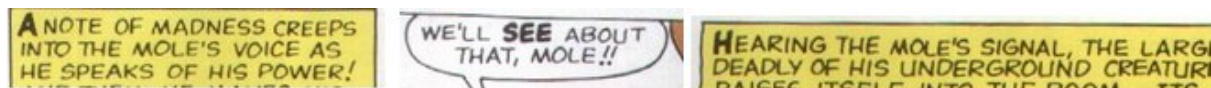
It is two words in most later appearances.



But for most of this issue he's called the "Moleman", one word.



Which would be fair enough, a single slip up is only human. But toward the end Lee seems to forget both names, and refers to the villain in text boxes (and dialog) as "The Mole".



If Lee created the plot wouldn't he at least remember the names of the characters?

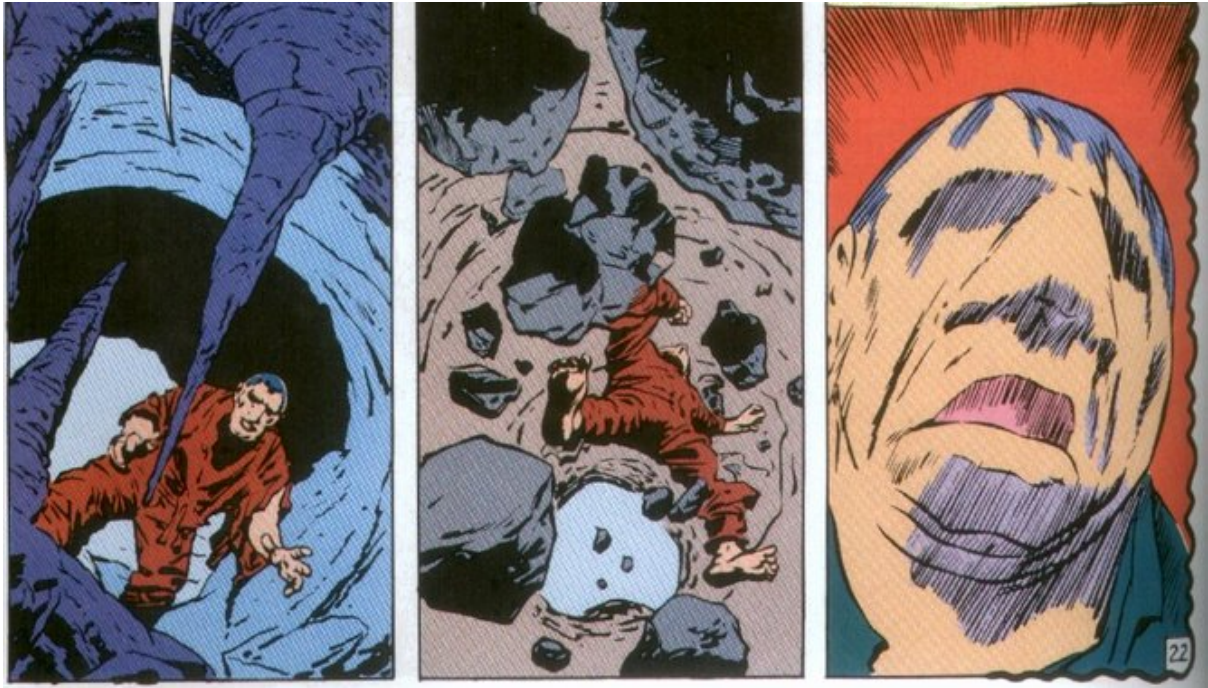




## Page 22:

### The dialogue weakens the story

Once again ignore the text and look at the art.



First look at the final panel, where the Mole Man becomes blind. That is not a normal picture! Have you ever seen a picture like that before? He is apparently being affected by some kind of radiation, or perhaps an explosion. The dialog just said that our heroes were knocked out by a light, which had to have been radiation also: how does a blast of regular light knock a person unconscious?

Now look at the previous two panels. We are seeing the same character from the same angle, with a tunnel behind him each time. So the camera has not moved. It appears that some kind of explosion has knocked him off his feet.

Now look at the page as a whole, without Lee's dialog.



There is nothing in the art to suggest that the Mole Man was heading anywhere in particular, especially not the center of the Earth: he first goes to the frozen north, and then to an island, and then to a cave. The common feature is that these places are remote. It is clear from the first panels that he feels rejected by humanity so he is simply trying to get away. But Lee's dialog says he wanted to find the Center of the Earth. If so, wouldn't he *begin* in caves instead of going there as a last resort?

Lee's dialog is both redundant and undermines the tragedy: if he had some pre-existing interest in very deep caves then the other people did him a favour by prompting him to start his life's quest. The quest idea also destroys the pathos: Kirby drew a man in ultimate despair, wandering the world unable to find a place to call home. But Lee's dialog gives him a purpose and hence a reason to live.

Lee's purpose, besides being redundant (he already has a motive to leave), makes no sense. If the legends of the center of the Earth were already known, wouldn't professional climbers and expert explorers have already found it? How likely is it that a sad loser with no resources (unable to get a job, according to Lee) would succeed where they failed? It's just one more example of Kirby creating a realistic, powerful story and Lee making it less believable.

Most importantly, Lee's dialog destroys the power of the story, and our reason for caring, and the villain's motivation. Kirby drew in one page the story of a man who is persecuted because he is ugly, then spending his life looking for anywhere he can call home. When he finally discovers a remote island and a cave to live in, he has stumbled on exactly the kind of remote island that America uses for underground atomic tests, and he is blinded. He is finally befriended by other blind monsters and vows to stop the nuclear program by attacking nuclear bases. But all he really wants is to be wanted.



## Dumbing down for children

Note the symbolism: who is really the ugly one here? Who is really the blind one? Who is the monster? What is really going on under the surface of our nuclear energy programs? This is adult stuff! But Lee's job was always to fit his stories for younger children. So Lee removed the motivation, turning the Mole Man into a one dimensional villain who wanted to kill everybody simply because he was ugly.

Once again we see the common themes: Lee takes an existing story he would not (or could not) have written. The story is about the real world, but Lee makes it unrealistic, removes crucial details, and aims it at younger children. Lee was just doing his job: his job had always been to create simple stories for children.

## Did Lee ever improve?

A critic might say that change does not take place overnight. Perhaps issue 1 was childlike, but Lee got better and was soon writing with older readers in mind? But an examination of later issues shows Lee did not change very much: always Kirby provided the adult story and Lee dumbed it down for children. Here is just one example, as it provides a close parallel with issue 1.

Fantastic Four issues 66-67 parallels issue 1: Its focus is a man who, due to surface ugliness, is lonely and in despair (Ben on the cover, and losing Alicia).



That leads to the most remote places on Earth, where well meaning scientists are experimenting with dangerous radiation. You enter caves where, if unprepared, you go blind. At the heart of the caves is a very lonely man with great power. Both stories end with beings gaining superpowers and starting the next stage of humanity.





Once again Lee used his dialog to change the story (and add hyperbole<sup>95</sup>). Lee made the scientists one dimensional villains, wanting to conquer mankind.<sup>96</sup> Lee was always the same.

This was the last straw for Kirby. From that moment he began to hold back his new ideas from Marvel, and to look for another employer.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>95</sup> The cave in issue 67 became "possibly the remotest spot on the face of the earth" just as issue 1 became "the center of the Earth" (issue 67, page 3)

<sup>96</sup> Fantastic Four 67, page 4

<sup>97</sup> For more details see the chapter on who created the other Fantastic Four stories

## Page 23:

# Removing humanity from the story

In Lee's dialog on page 23, the Mole Man simply brags about his abilities. There is no hint of humility, self doubt, or tragedy: no humanity at all. But the art tells a different story.



The art shows a man who controls giant monsters and can destroy nuclear plants anywhere in the world; a man who owns a whole valley of giant diamonds and a network of tunnels extending throughout the globe. When measured by military force, wealth, or land area controlled, he is the most powerful ruler in the world. Yet he chooses to fight a stranger with a stick. Why?

The previous art gave us the answer: he was a very small and ugly man, humiliated by others. Judging by the art, all he wanted (other than an end to the nuclear program that blinded him and possibly created the other monsters) was to show he was just as good as any other person. But Lee's dialog misses this. And worse, Lee gives him superpowers (the ability to see in the dark and echo locate) so he becomes even less sympathetic. We lose the idea that this man has been practicing and practicing just to prove to someone anyone, that he is not a failure.

Perhaps the saddest part is near the end of the book, where Reed tries to rescue him, to bring him back to the surface before the bomb explodes. But he wants to stay and die with his fellows monsters.



We also see very clearly that he is small and light: this would have been part of his misery and inferiority complex, though Lee simplifies it to being about ugliness.

That vulnerability is in the art but not the dialog. Lee removed the humanity from Kirby's story.

## More bad dialog, and no superpowers

This page has another striking example of Lee not paying attention to the story. The text often has cliches that make no sense. For example, the text tells the reader that the Mole Man "makes his first fatal mistake". But it is not fatal: he survives. And it is not a mistake: he wins.





And of course the whole page reminds us that in the original story Reed had no superpowers.

## Page 24:

### Powers added later

This page has the clearest examples of heavy editing, and of powers not being in the original story.

First, look at where the monster rises from the ground.



The characters are squashed into a tiny blank space. What artist would design an image like that? It works better with either no heroes there, or three unpowered characters. Three humans facing a monster is dramatic. But four superbeings including one who is proven to beat monsters? No danger at all.

Second, look at where the Mole Man is pulling the cord. On the next page he is still pulling it. Yet the previous frame showed him running away! Something is wrong here.



Even if we ignore the running frame, the entire Mole Man story is fast paced. The pacing is wrong if we have more than a couple of frames while he is pulling that cord.

Now look at this section between the cord pulls.





First, it has no backgrounds, so was probably rushed. And it adds absolutely nothing to the story. The Thing does nothing as usual (he's not even present). The Invisible Girl does nothing either. If anybody was going to grab the Mole Man without making him run away, wouldn't it be her? Johnny flies around in circles as usual. And Reed's arm reaches out, but the next frame shows the Mole Man was never running away in the first place.

The new section is badly drawn compared with most of the story. Look at that first face, with the eyes too far up the head. This would be fine if he was supposed to be showing extreme anger, but it's Reed who always stays in control. Kirby was the master of his craft, and this is not the work of a master.



Or compare the monster's face to the higher quality monster that rose from the ground. And why is the monster at an angle? How often did Kirby draw panels at angles? Did somebody else help draw this section?



One or two details do look OK to me, or at least consistent with the rest of the story: see below for which ones, and a possible reconstruction of the original art.

## Lettering edits

The lettering on the new section is intriguing. In panels 3 and 6, the words “fly”, “flies” and “tries to” have clearly been edited:

AND THEN, THE FANTASTIC  
FOUR FLY INTO BLAZING  
ACTION...

BACK AND FORTH, BUZZING AROUND  
THE MONSTER'S HEAD LIKE A HORNET,  
FLIES THE HUMAN TORCH, AS THE  
GIGANTIC CREATURE VAINLY TRIES TO  
GRASP HIS FIERY FOE!

By far the simplest explanation is that these were originally in the past tense: “flew” and “tried”. As if these panels were written separately, then somebody noticed that the rest of the story was present tense, so they quickly made the changes.

An alternative explanation is that Lee was just not paying attention again. See also: spelling mistakes, contradictions, forgetting the villain’s name, etc.

## Reconstructing the original ending

To my eye, the running Mole Man is the one part of these superpower pictures that looks reasonably well drawn.



This solves a problem on the next page: we see Reed holding tight onto the Mole Man but we don't see the Mole Man escape. Reed removing the radiation suit *might* be original as well: it's not a *great* picture, but not as ugly and badly framed like the rest, and the original would need an image like this.

We can use these clues to reconstruct the original ending. See appendix 9 for details.



## Page 25:

### Where's the humour?

This is the last page, and we still haven't seen any humour. We'll discuss this later, but first let's have a final look at dialog versus art.

#### Dialog versus art: the last page

The first thing we notice is that, as usual, the ending comes from earlier Kirby work. This example, from *Challengers 4*, suggests that perhaps Kirby intended the Mole Man to be rescued at the end. We saw Red pulling him, and able to carry him, so that seems likely.



On previous pages the art showed that the Mole Man story was probably supposed to be first, with no superpowers, and no Ben Grimm. So the original story, the story created by the art alone, would have been:

1. More exciting. There was never any doubt that four superheroes could defeat monsters. But three ordinary people? That adds genuine danger.
2. More urgent: The story ends with a mushroom cloud. This implies that they are not just running from monsters but from an imminent explosion.
3. More meaningful: a story about underground testing that ends with a tragic figure. They tried to rescue him (top of page 25) but he wanted to stay with the monsters, his only friends, and they were all finally killed by the explosion.
4. More immersive: adding the superpower panels meant losing essential panels that would have given pacing. For example we only see the monsters once in the final version, and we don't see the escape through the tunnels at all (except for a vaguely humanoid flame shape).

5. Less cluttered: the loss of those details means the current version has big blocks of text to try and tell the story. These would not be needed in the original where the art tells the story. The final image would not have The Thing squashed into the corner. The final image currently has a text box where Lee says very little but in a lot of words. Kirby would have a better idea of the next issue so could simply say "next issue; alien invasion". (This would probably be at the end of the origin story, the original ending of the book.)
6. Better drawn. We would have the original art, not the hurriedly drawn superpowers.

To illustrate how Kirby's ending would have been better, here is the end to Kirby's last ever Challengers of the Unknown story. This was, in effect, the previous issue of the Fantastic Four.<sup>98</sup>



The ending is similar - they triumph over monsters and the last frame is the four of them piloting a plane home. But:

1. The triumph was more impressive, because they lack superpowers.
2. It's easier to follow, because no panels have been removed.
3. The art is less squashed, because art and dialog are laid out by the same artist.

<sup>98</sup> See appendix 7 for how the Fantastic Four is a continuation of Kirby's Challengers

4. There is much more story, because the dialog adds to the art: it does not merely try to explain what we can already see.
5. There is more humour (the joke at the end).

## Humour

This last part is important, because it is easy to assume that Lee made the lightness and humour to Kirby. But here we see it was Kirby who added the jokes<sup>99</sup> and Lee's dialog was plain and dark. Over the following year Lee learned from Kirby and added more humour. But Lee's humour was in wisecracks: it never had Kirby's subtlety, love of life, or madcap energy.

Humour is missing from Lee's dialog in issue 1, but it is crucial to future issues, so I will finish by spending some time on the topic. Let's look at each main kind of Kirby humour in turn:

## Wisecracks

The "Tin man" comment was an example of a wisecrack, a witty remark or joke. Lee had little control over the story, but plenty of space to write whatever he wanted, so wisecracks became his trademark.



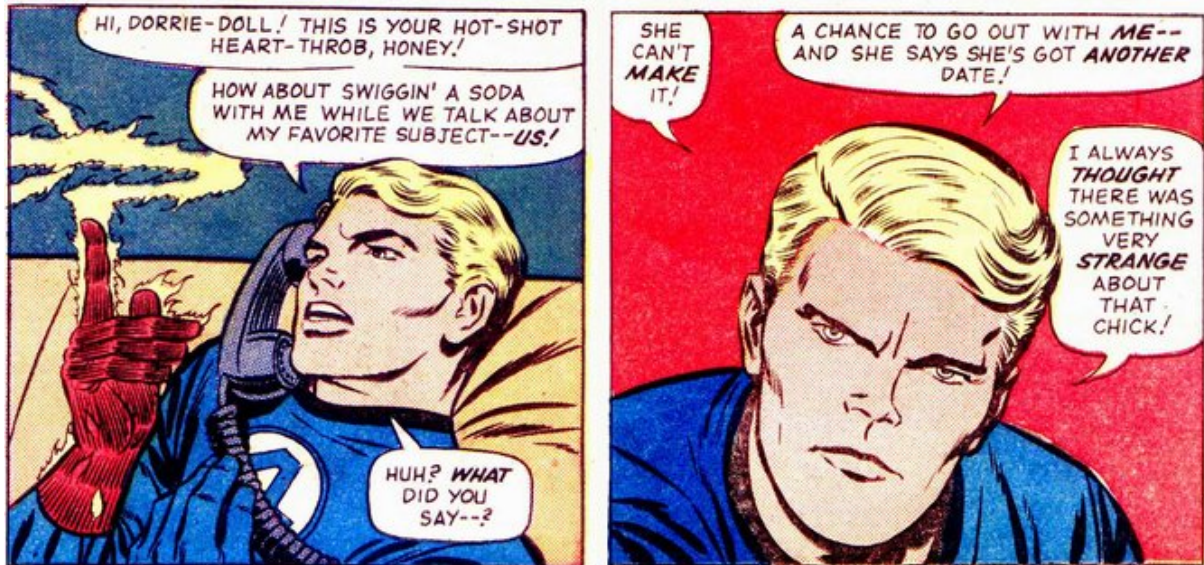
Wisecracks depend on three things:

- 1: The situation implied by the art. As in this example, "I always thought there was something very strange about that chick".

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<sup>99</sup> Perhaps an editor at DC added the joke? But we see humour throughout Kirby's work, so he didn't need any help. However, Kirby had to plan for the possibility that his dialog would be changed, so most of his Kirby's humour tended to arise from ironic situations or from the fun of life, and less from superficial wisecracks.





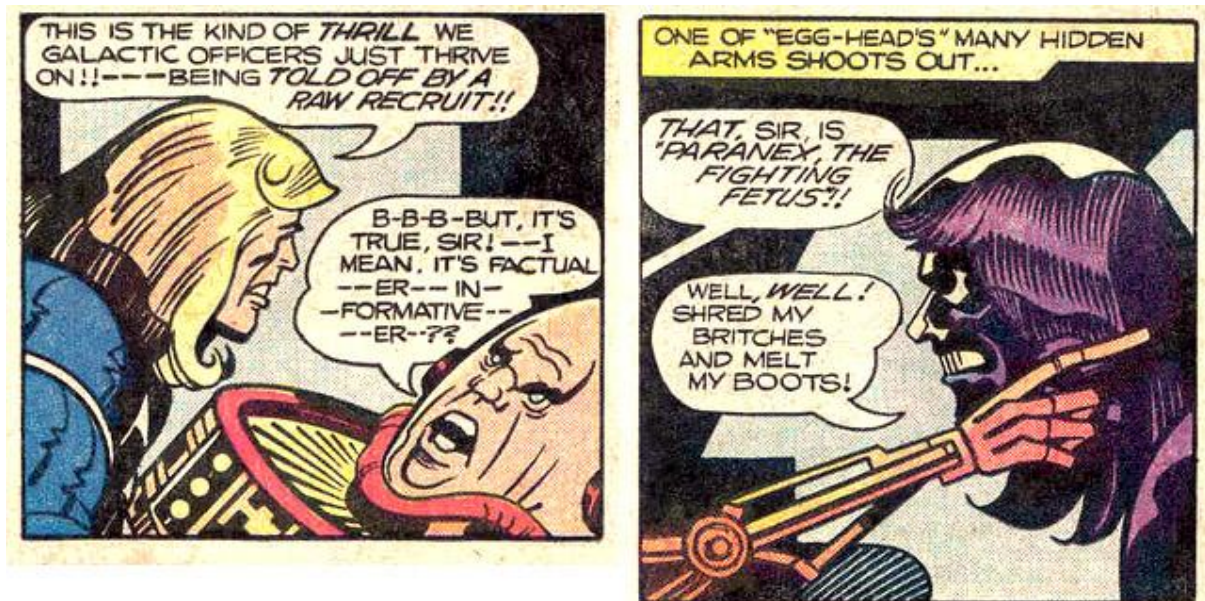
This dialog arises from the art, and is only funny because the art shows his lack of self awareness.

2: How the dialog writer was feeling at the time. It's difficult be funny when you're worried. In the first few issues of the Fantastic Four, when Goodman's comics were still in a bad way, there was very little humour in Lee's dialog. But in the period 1963-66, when sales were growing at their fastest, Lee's dialog was light hearted and happy. Later, when Kirby left and sales declined, Lee's jokes became repetitive and fewer in number.

3. Freedom to control the dialog. Jokes often depend on precise wording. For most of his career Kirby could not rely on having final say over the dialog, so he generally used other forms of humour.

## Subtlety

As with Jane Austen, Kirby's humor often comes from irony. Take this example from Captain Victory. It's so subtle that most readers miss it, but spotting it is half the fun.



I love Captain Victory's sense of humour. It's extremely subtle but it's there. For the first arc he seems deadly serious all the time, and this is necessary because it establishes the pressures he is under. But look at the times when he smiles. He gets innocent playful pleasure from the very few things he enjoys. And one of the things he enjoys is his little contests with Mr Mind. As a telepath, Mr Mind should know exactly when Captain Victory is winding him up. But CV gains pleasure from misdirection, and the intellectual exercise of pitting his mind against one that is (on paper) superior to his. Mr Mind's weakness is that he is so overwhelmed by data that he tends to take things literally where possible. CV is tickled by these little conflicts, pretending to be super angry. You can tell he likes it.

When Kirby had complete control over dialog then much of his humor came from verbal sparring and wordplay, much as with Shakespeare. Here the Goozlebobber has fun with a policeman. But it's loving fun: see the complete concentration on his face as he tugs the officer's strings but never goes too far.





Note the references to swift talking and changing of forms, the very essence of wit, but here the wit is also visual. Note the final image where Goozebobber takes the form of a racially stereotyped Irishman who had obviously eaten many donuts: making himself a mocking stereotype of the Irish policeman, and daring the officer to see him now as a friend. It's brilliant stuff.<sup>100</sup>

## Love of life

Most of the comedy in Kirby is comedy in its purest form: love of life! The word "comedy" literally means "happy ending". It comes from the Greek "komos" (to "revel" or enjoy) and "aoidos" ("singer") 'singer'. Kirby's stories are full of this joy, this optimism, this playful twinkle in the eye. The final Captain Victory story is about three friends just having fun in a Jacobean romp. Note the absurd use of cod Shakespeare.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>100</sup> Very little of this would be conscious on Kirby's part. He was simply drawing on a lifetime of experience of what felt funny, including his childhood on the streets playing cat and mouse with police officers. Goozebobber felt hilarious to Kirby, and fans were left scratching their heads at first.

<sup>101</sup> Lee used such silly language without irony when dialoguing Thor. When Kirby dialogued gods or Elizabethan scenes he never did that. Kirby reserved the style for comedy where it belonged.





Sadly, readers often missed the subtlety. For example, many people thought that Kirby's satirical series, "Fighting American", was played straight. They didn't get it. Kirby was making serious points through hilariously absurd characters.



# THE MAKING OF **FIGHTING AMERICAN**

FOR OUR NEW FRIENDS  
AND OLD FANS, WE  
PRESENT THIS REVIEW  
OF THE ORIGIN OF  
**FIGHTING AMERICAN.**  
THIS STORY OF HOW A  
NINETY POUND WEAKLING  
BECAME A GREAT COMMIE-  
BUSTER, WILL SURELY  
HELP YOU TO KNOW AND  
ENJOY YOUR FAVORITE  
HERO EVEN MORE!



BEFORE THERE  
EVER WAS A  
**FIGHTING  
AMERICAN,**  
THERE WAS THE  
CHALLENGING  
VOICE OF A  
TELEVISION  
NEWSCASTER,  
**JOHNNY FLAGG.**  
HIS UNCANNY  
TALENT FOR  
UNCOVERING  
SPIES AND  
TRAITORS  
WAS A THREAT  
TO ALL  
ENEMIES OF  
THE COUNTRY  
HE LOVED  
ABOVE  
ALL ELSE!

AMERICANS... **BEWARE**  
OF PERSONS WHO WILL  
TRY TO GET YOU TO  
INVEST IN AN OPERA  
FOR SO-CALLED PA-  
TRIOTIC PURPOSES---  
THEY ARE HEADED  
BY A COMMIE  
NAMED PETER  
PIPER--



THE MONEY THESE RATS COLLECT  
WILL BE USED FOR GUNS AND  
BULLETS TO BE USED AGAINST  
US! **FELLOW AMERICANS--  
BEWARE OF THIS VERMIN  
IN OUR MIDST!** IF YOU SEE  
HIM, **CALL A COP!**  
CONFIDENTIALLY, HE  
CAN'T EVEN SING!



**DON'T MOVE!  
ANY OF  
YOU!**





## Madcap energy

Captain America and Fighting American show some of Kirby's madcap energy. He used it in pure slapstick mode in *Fantastic Four* annual 5.



IS IT A TUFFY PULLY? IS IT A MASSACRE? IS IT SOME RIGHT IN A BUCKLE? QUIXOTIC MARVEL MADMEN, THIS TRANSCENDS THE COMPLEXITY OF THE TV HILL BILLIES THEMSELVES!

# THIS IS A PLOT?

ON THE *OUTSIDE*, OUR NEW CHARACTER MUST BE SMOOTH, DASHING, CONTINENTAL--A TERROR IN *TUXEDOS* WHO CLEANS HIS FINGERNAILS BEFORE DEFUSING AN *H-BOMB*!

WELL, TO BE REALLY FRANK, PUSSYCAT, IT'S AN ITTY-BITTY, RIBBY-TICKLE, JIM-CRACKY LITTLE LAUGH-GETTER OF A *PUT-ON* ON HOW PLOTS ARE HATCHED IN THE MARVEL ROOKERY! DON'T BE CHICKEN! SO WHAT IF IT *IS* A TURKEY! *READ IT!* IT'S ONLY THREE PSYCHEDELIC PAGES!

YEAH--BUT ON THE *INSIDE*, HE'LL BE A FUTURISTIC, MEDIEVAL *PRIMITIVE* WITH A CLEVER ANSWER FOR THE FORCES WHO WOULD OPPRESS THE WEAK--*BUTCHERY!!*

ALL YE WHO ENTER HERE--MUST BE OUT OF YOUR MIND!!

IRVING FORBUSH--THIS IS MOTHER--

WHY DID I EVER QUIT MY NICE, QUIET JOB AT THE *BOILER FACTORY*?

PROPERTY OF BUDGET SLASHING DEPT.

'NUFF SAID!

A HERO SHOULD LOOK LIKE A HERO--LIKE ME--*RASCALLY ROY THOMAS*--MUSCLE OF THE MIDWEST!

IT HAD TO HAPPEN! JOLLY JACK NOT ONLY DREW THIS WHOLE FRENETIC FARSE, BUT HE ACTUALLY *WROTE* IT ALL BY HIS LONE--SOME! HIS PURPOSE, OF COURSE, IS TO SHOW THAT COMIC MAG CREATORS ARE JUST AS NORMAL, SANE, AND CONSERVATIVE AS ANY OTHER NUT!

INKED BY:  
FRANK GIACIOIA

LETTERED BY:  
L.P. GREGORY

WEPT OVER BY:  
GORGONUTUL STAN





When I first read this as a child I was so used to Lee's simple dialog that I couldn't follow it. So I naturally concluded that Kirby was not a good writer. Maybe he wasn't, if "good" means "make it easy for children." But if "good" means "challenging children to raise their game" and "gets better on third and fourth read" then this writing was superb.<sup>102</sup>

Compare the intensity and layers of Kirby humour with Lee's style humour. This is a typical example, from Lee's earlier "Willie Lumpkin" strip



Lee's humour used to be very simplistic. Possibly he learned to become a little cleverer after he dialogued Kirby's work. But he never learned Kirby's range or depth.

## Summary of page 25 and the whole story

In short, Lee's decision to move the superpowers to the start, and his choice of dialog, ruined the ending.

The same decisions, by forcing changes on the Mole Man story and losing the origin splash page, also ripped the heart out of the story: it no longer had the core truth about nuclear testing. We no longer got to know Ben Grimm at the start, so his tragedy meant less. But thankfully Kirby poured so much into each issue that even half a story was worth reading. And in later issues Kirby was able to develop the Thing's tragedy so that readers began to see what Ben Grimm had lost.

For how Lee changed later issues, and the Fantastic Four as a whole, see the final part of this book ("about the author"). There I give my personal experience with the Fantastic Four and why I wrote "The Case For Kirby".

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<sup>102</sup> Note that Kirby slips in hints that all is not as it appears. Not just the obvious "budget slashing" while Lee eats caviar and pheasant, but details like "little absentee bullpen": Lee called it a bullpen, implying an office where everyone works, but Kirby and most others worked from home, and only came in to deliver the finished work.

# Who wrote the other Fantastic Four stories?

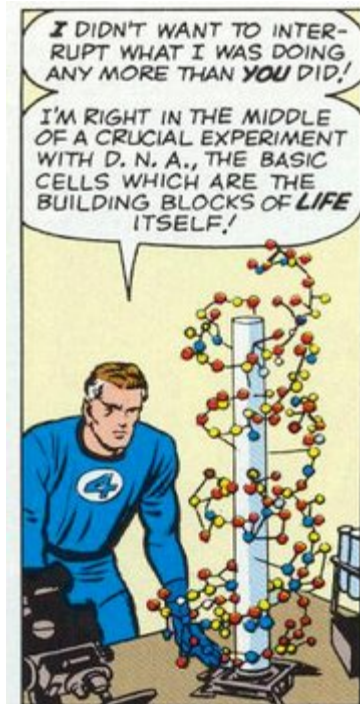
In this chapter I discuss who wrote the remaining Fantastic Four issues. We could repeat the same page by page analysis for a hundred issues, but it may be quicker to focus on the science in the stories. Kirby's stories tended to feature up to date science:

In all my work, you'll see the times are reflected. I don't contrive stories. I don't give you B.S., and I'm not giving you fairy tales. At the time, radiation was the big topic and The Fantastic Four came out of those times.<sup>103</sup>

The art indicates that Kirby followed and understood the science news. The text indicates that Lee did not. So Lee cannot have written those science based plots. Here are some examples of science details that Lee got wrong. There are no doubt many, many more, but these are the science topics that I happened to notice and that were easy to prove.

## DNA

In Fantastic Four #15, Lee's dialog referred to "DNA, the cells that are the building blocks of life".



Anybody who read an article about DNA knew that DNA is not the cells, DNA is the stuff *inside* cells. Now, the picture of a helix is accurate enough, given space constraints, and even includes spare plastic rods as often seen in plastic models. This indicates that Kirby

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<sup>103</sup> Kirby, quoted in Comics File Magazine #2 (Psi Fi Movie Press 1986)



was working from a picture in a science magazine article. But Lee could not have read the article, as he got the details wrong. The fact that Lee got the words right, but in the wrong order, suggests he heard it from someone else, presumably making notes as Kirby explained the story.

And another thing. When I first read this story I could not understand why the Mad Thinker would encase the Baxter Building in a giant crystal. There is nothing in Lee's dialog to suggest why, or how. It was one of those mad comic things that comes out of nowhere.



This kind of nonsense makes people laugh at these comics: clearly they are unworthy of serious thought. But somebody who had read about the discovery of DNA would know that the secret to discovering DNA was X-ray crystallography: Francis Crick and Rosalind Franklin were both crystallographers. Kirby, who must have read the article to draw the helix, would have known the connection between DNA and crystals. But Lee's dialog shows no evidence that he understood the link.

Incidentally, the rest of Fantastic Four issue 15 has numerous examples of Lee not paying attention to the story. He confused the time of day, he confused Broadway with Hollywood, and of course he would not see the significance of Ben as a wrestler and Johnny as circus daredevil (their previous Challengers occupations). But for brevity I will just focus on the science.

## The Trebelev Mole

In Fantastic Four #21 Kirby drew a Russian tunnelling machine, and drew something like an actual Trebelev Mole.



This was before the days when you could Google such things, so Kirby must have read an article about it. He would probably know from the article that the new Russian device relied on a nuclear engine to generate heat to vapourise the rocks, and so that is what Kirby drew. But Lee's dialog said it used a rocket engine on "reverse thrust". Kirby would know that a rocket engine made no sense, as rockets are designed to produce force, not heat. A rocket engine on reverse would push the mole back against the solid rock and it would never move forwards! Kirby served in the army, he had flown on planes, he had fired guns, he would understand action and reaction. Kirby drew nuclear heat, not rocket thrust. But Lee got it wrong again.

## The solar wind

In Fantastic Four #23, Kirby drew the solar wind, something that had recently been discovered, so was in the science news. But Lee's dialog called it a solar wave.



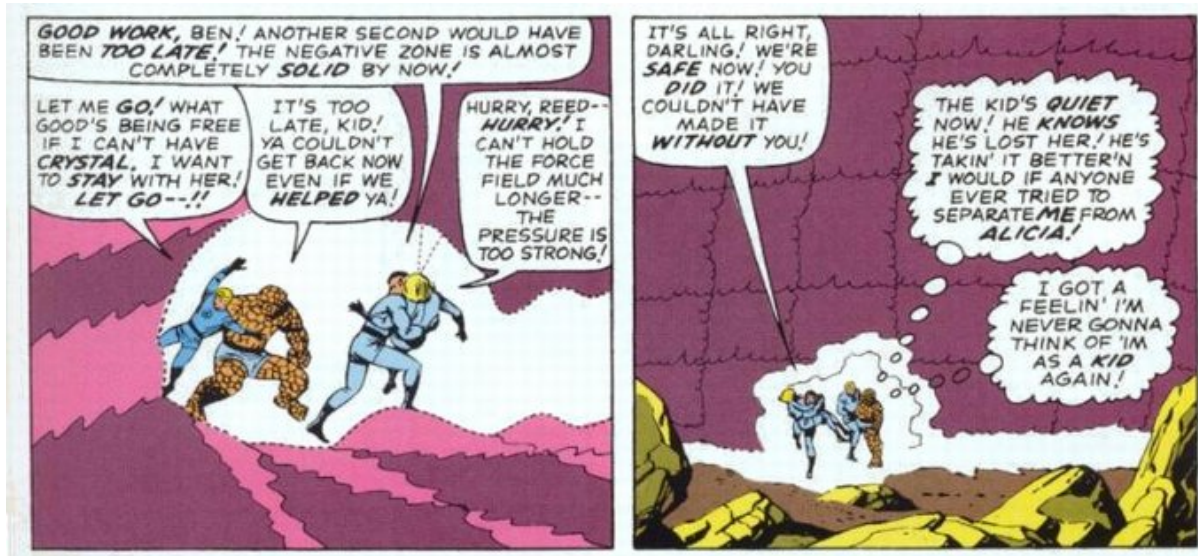


"Solar wind" is the correct term. Whoever read the article would have known that. But Lee's dialog got it wrong again.

## Antimatter

This next example is more subtle, but it's a far more common type. It's not that Lee's dialog is wrong (in this case), but it could be a lot clearer.

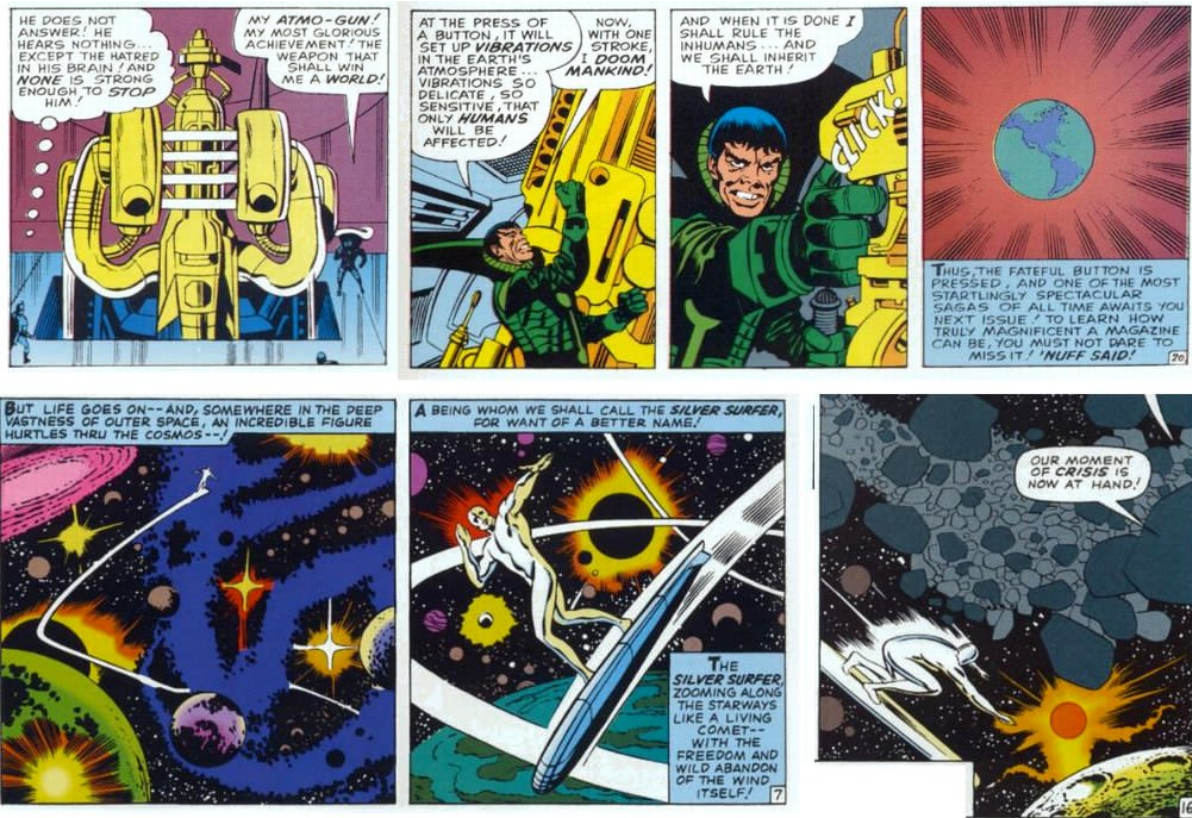
In Fantastic Four #48 the Negative Zone was introduced. We saw a different negative zone three issues later in issue 51, but that time it was explained: positive matter becomes negative, and if you touch it, it explodes. The art showed the same thing happening in issue 48: they needed to get out before the material around them changed, and they needed a force-field to protect them from explosions.



Yet the dialog did not describe what was happening (that positive matter was becoming negative). It's as if Lee didn't understand it the first time, but he did the second time. His dialog isn't "wrong" here, it's just unclear. As if he didn't understand his own story.

Here's another example from the same issue: Lee's dialog made the first half of the story (the Inhumans) seem totally unrelated to the second half (Galactus).





But if we ignore Lee's dialog the art is clear: Maximus fired a gun into space, causing the whole world to vibrate. Then out in space the Silver Surfer abruptly changed direction and became aware of Earth. Lee's dialog did not make the connection. This suggests that Lee did not understand the story.

## Vulcanism

In *Fantastic Four* #98 the story revolved around a "nameless mass" that "slithers" beneath the moon. Why is it called a "nameless mass"? And the art does not show it slithering but rather expanding, building up pressure beneath the rocks.



It would be more exciting to call this the real thing that scientists were really afraid of: volcanoes! They thought the craters might be the tops of volcanoes, and maybe they could collapse, or erupt, as the Apollo craft landed!

Geologists didn't know, for example, whether volcanism or meteor impacts were responsible for the moon's pockmarked surface. (Current wisdom says meteors.)<sup>104</sup>

We didn't finally see the moon erupt, because the team saved the day. But we did see the danger mirrored on Earth: the SENTRY's island formed like a volcano out of the ocean, and at the end it exploded like a volcano.

<sup>104</sup> Moon Landing Facts: Apollo 11 at 40, Anne Minard,  
<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2009/07/090715-moon-landing-apollo-facts.html>





Once again, Kirby's art showed a strong understanding of a then-current science topic, while Lee's dialog seemed unsure of what was going on in the story.

Incidentally, a year or so later Kirby shows us what the moon might look like if massive volcanoes erupted: the planet of Apokolips in *The New Gods*!

## Vandalising issue 1

In earlier chapters I argued that Lee changed issue 1. And I argued that the story was better if we ignore Lee's dialog: it makes more sense, contains more depth, the villain has a clearer motive, etc. Could we call this vandalism?

Lee damaged a work of art due to a lack of understanding, then wrote all over it and signed his name inappropriately. Imagine if he had done this to a painting on a wall. Wouldn't vandalism be the right word?

## Vandalising issue 2

Lee vandalised issue 2 with his dialog, just as he did with issue 1. How? The clearest example is the ending:





These aliens are so advanced that they have city sized space ships. They study us so closely that they can duplicate individuals down to the smallest detail. But they are defeated by being shown clippings from comics. They think those monsters are real and they run away scared.

This colours how we see the whole story from the start. Turn back to the opening pages and we see the aliens destroy some kind of ocean rig and turning the power off to the city. It looks like random violence. See the sneaky grin as the alien turns off the big switch. It's all very silly.





But look closer at Lee's dialog and we see problems as usual. Lee wrote that the comic clippings are from the Marvel titles "Strange Tales" and "Journey into Mystery". But try searching those comics for those images: you won't find them, or anything close. So let's remove Lee's dialog, and see what is really going on.



Those are clearly photographs, not comic clippings. And the images appear to come from recent movies: the creatures with the tentacles and claws are the race from "The She Creature" (1956),





the satellite guns are from “War of the Satellites” (1958, a movie which also featured aliens impersonating humans),



and the giant ants are from “Them” (1954).



Movie still photos could easily be purchased in New York in 1961, from kiosks such as “Irving Klaw’s Movie Star Photos”.



This changes the story completely. Watch those three movies: regardless of their acting, they try to be believable. “War of the Satellites” is about how Sputnik could lead to guns in space. “Them” is about atomic tests causing radiation which causes mutation in ants. “The She Creature” is about hypnotism uncovering abilities humans used to have. Although they use models and costumes the right photos could pass for spy photos taken in dangerous conditions. The Skrulls would not see these things from space because of course they are



our secret weapons. Suddenly a story that was just absurd becomes one that could perhaps take place in the real world.

With this new, more serious view, return again to those opening scenes. The apparently silly crimes are real events that actually happened, just before the comic was written. The disasters at the Texas Towers took place in January 1961. Large parts of New York had a blackout due to a faulty circuit breaker on June 13th 1961, exactly when the story would have been plotted. The middle section of the story is basically McCarthyism: the best and brightest Americans are condemned as enemy sympathisers, when in fact they are needed to save the nation. The alien invaders, hiding among us, are of course symbols for communists or other sleeper agents and false flag attacks.

So Kirby's art shows a deadly serious story about the real world. Children could see it as fun, but adults could see more depth. However, Lee's dialog removed the adult layer. Once again Lee destroyed half of the story

We could see the same thing in issue 3 (a story essentially about McCarthyism), issue 4 (which has insights into the Cuban crisis), and so on. Kirby created a rich, layered story each time, and each time Lee vandalised it.

## More Kirby = better comic

Comic historians agree that the best Fantastic Four issues were those published between 1965 and 1967. These were possibly the best comic books ever, period:

Lee and Kirby's Fantastic Four run is the Mount Olympus of comic book storytelling. Nothing else can touch it in its innovation, sustained excitement, consequential events, and unprecedented character development.<sup>105</sup>

Stan and Jack's Fantastic Four was, at its peak, almost unarguably the richest and most imaginative comic in the history of the medium.<sup>106</sup>

"Those fifty issues [FF25-75] were, simply put, the best super-hero comics ever done and nobody, let me repeat that, nobody, has done it better."<sup>107</sup>

"For about twenty Issues, on either side of 50, it was possibly the best comic book ever done."<sup>108</sup>

"The general wisdom is that the Stan and Jack Fantastic Four is the greatest run of any comic book, ever."<sup>109</sup>

What was different about this period? Many people say that Kirby's art improved, or he was dealing with bigger concepts. But a closer look shows that everything here was also present

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<sup>105</sup> Mark Engblom in Comic Coverage: March 21, 2009

<sup>106</sup> Mark Waid's Fantastic Four Manifesto, in "Comics Creators on Fantastic Four" page 202

<sup>107</sup> Marv Wolfman, [http://www.marvwolfman.com/marv/Wade-ing\\_Through\\_The\\_Fantastic\\_Four.html](http://www.marvwolfman.com/marv/Wade-ing_Through_The_Fantastic_Four.html)

<sup>108</sup> Len Wein, <http://www.kleefeldoncomics.com/2012/06/old-wolfmanwein-interview.html>

<sup>109</sup> Bob Reyer, comics expert on the Talking Comic Books podcast episode 89

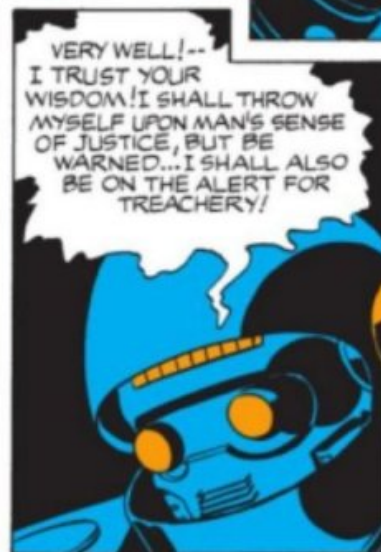


in the earlier issues, and in the Challengers of the Unknown. For example, compare the Silver Surfer cosmic art in issue 48 with the cosmic art in issue 7.





It's the same art, but the later issues have a better inker and Kirby is allowed more space: he can spend three issues with an idea instead of just one. The same is true for the writing. Compare the debate with Galactus and the debate with Ultivac in Kirby's *Challengers* comic.



The same grand themes are here, the only differences are the inker and the freedom to use more space. When Kirby had the space, his art was just as good before the Fantastic Four as during that period, as this Ultivac image demonstrates:



The secret to getting the best stories from Kirby is to give him more freedom. The stories improved in the mid 1960s when Lee was less involved. As we see from the surviving synopses<sup>110</sup>, by the mid 1960s Lee had less and less time to spend on the Fantastic Four, and that's when the story quality improved. Lee admitted at the time that Kirby basically did it all.

Some artists, such as Jack Kirby, need no plot at all. I mean I'll just say to Jack, 'Let's let the next villain be Dr. Doom'... or I may not even say that. He may tell me. And then he goes home and does it. He's so

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<sup>110</sup> Appendix 4



good at plots, I'm sure he's a thousand times better than I. He just about makes up the plots for these stories. All I do is a little editing<sup>111</sup>

In short, the Fantastic Four got better when Kirby had more freedom and Lee was less involved.

Another factor affecting the quality of Kirby's work was his page rate. At Marvel's rates in the early sixties, Kirby needed to maintain a pace he described as "back-breaking" just to make ends meet. After the departure of Ditko and Wood, Kirby received an increase which allowed him to cut back to a working pace that allowed him to instill more detail into his stories and art.

## 1967

The same people who note increasing quality in 1965 admit to a slide in quality after 1967. This is measurably true: after issue 67 we have fewer new characters and more plots based on movies and TV shows.

From November '65 to November '67 —two years where Jack was pretty much doing the stories on his own, plus plotting for other books that he wasn't drawing—from the imagination of this man came:

Black Bolt, Gorgon, Crystal, Triton, Karnak, Lockjaw, Galactus, The Silver Surfer, Wyatt Wingfoot, The Black Panther, Klaw, Sub-Space (later dubbed The Negative Zone), Blastaar, The Sentry, The Supreme Intelligence, The Kree, Ronan, Him, Psycho-Man, Hercules, Pluto, Zeus and the Greek Pantheon, Tana Nile and The Space Colonizers, The Black Galaxy, Ego the Bioverse, The High Evolutionary, Wundagore and The New-Men, The Man-Beast, Ulik, Orikal, The Growing Man, Replicus, The Enchanters, The Three Sleepers, Batroc, A.I.M., The Cosmic Cube, The Adaptoid (who later becomes The Super- Adaptoid), Modok, Mentallo, The Fixer, The Demon Druid, The Sentinels, and The Mimic. This is not complete as secondary creations such as The Seeker, Prester John, The Tumbler and others weren't mentioned; but they all premiered within the two-year period.

After November '67, for the last three years that Jack worked for Marvel, you get the exact opposite; many secondary characters, but very few memorable ones. In FF, the only character of note after November '67 is Annihilus.<sup>112</sup>

At this point Kirby was increasingly unhappy at Marvel, and Fantastic Four 66-67 (late 1967) was the last straw. Kirby had plotted a sophisticated story about Objectivist philosophy and the direction of science. Then Lee's dialogue vandalised it, turning the good guys into bad guys and removing the point of the story.

According to Mark Evanier (based on conversations he had with Kirby), Jack originally intended for this storyline to represent his take on the Objectivist philosophy. [...] Stan didn't notice any villain in the story and almost always felt that every story had to have a bad guy, so he had to come up with one. [...] The story that Jack wanted: "Create a superior human and he just might find you inferior enough to get rid of," became through Lee another "bad guys try to take over world and get their comeuppance" story. (ibid)

This was the last straw for Kirby. From this point (the story went on sale in August 1967) Jack began holding back his best ideas. He kept them for what would become his Fourth World books at DC instead.

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<sup>111</sup> Lee, interviewed in "Castle of Frankenstein" 12, 1968

<sup>112</sup> Mike Gartland, Jack Kirby Collector 24, <http://twomorrow.com/kirby/articles/24compare.html>

Jack Kirby developed the concept of the New Gods in 1967 while still working for Marvel. [...] The characters — Darkseid, Orion, Mister Miracle, Metron, Mantis, and Lightray — are all recognizable and were tweaked only slightly when they debuted at DC in 1971.<sup>113</sup>

The decline began when Kirby began holding back his best ideas. But it might still be argued that Lee contributed ideas to the Kirby stories. So let us see what happened when Kirby left.

## Lee had no ideas of his own

When Kirby left Marvel, Lee continued to write the Fantastic Four on his own. Every single issue was a copy of a Jack Kirby plot. Yet when Kirby was there, plots were always original.

**Fantastic Four 103-4:** Prince Namor kidnaps Sue Storm and declares war on the surface world.

This plot was previously used in Fantastic Four annual 1. This time Lee adds Magneto, presumably to increase interest in the X-Men title, where sales were falling.

**Fantastic Four 105-6:** A mystery man shooting bolts of power appears on the streets of New York. The mystery man is linked to a close family member, a scientist who uncovered a new type of energy and created the villain by accident. Reed befriends the scientist and thus neutralises the menace.

This plot is essentially the same as the last plot that Kirby submitted. But Lee held that back to become FF 108. As a result, Lee's first solo plot appeared to be original, whereas Kirby's plot, being published later, then looked like the copy. For years, when growing up, I thought this first Stan Lee story was proof that Lee was the writer, and I was disappointed that Kirby's later story seemed hackneyed and confusing. Lee's trick worked. For more about how Lee made Kirby's final story look bad, see issue 108.

**Fantastic Four 107:** Reed tries to cure Ben, but it turns Ben evil.

This plot was previously used in Fantastic Four 68-69.

**Fantastic Four 108:** An original Kirby plot, held back to coincide with the first Kirby material published by DC. Lee made some changes, which he admitted made the story harder to follow (an apology for the confusing nature appears at the bottom of page 3).

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<sup>113</sup> <http://www.cosmicteams.com/newgods/>

Years later, Kirby's art was pieced together again for "The Lost Fantastic Four story". But once again Lee added the dialog and changed crucial parts. For example, the story begins with an ancient discovery, but Lee's dialog glosses over that part, changing it into a modern sculpture, thus losing the crucial "lost gods" foundation for the story.

**Fantastic Four 109-110:** Reed is trapped in the Negative Zone as a result of his thoughtlessness (not packing enough fuel) while the other team members fret and worry outside.

This plot was previously used in Fantastic Four 60-61. We could perhaps argue that 60-61 was Kirby re-using a plot device from Fantastic Four 51. But in that case Reed being trapped was just an enabler for the main plot: Kirby did not reuse a main plot like Lee did. Kirby used a detail from another story, but with major differences. In the first story Reed was trapped there by an enemy, but in issue 60 it was his own fault: that was a turning point, the first time Reed's moral weakness (his secrecy and trying to do everything himself) led to an obvious bonehead mistake. Whereas in issue 51 the story was about the opposite: Reed's moral strength. Issues 51 and 60 thus made a fascinating couplet. At that point the idea of "trapped in the Negative Zone" had been done to death and Kirby did not return to it. But once Kirby left, later writers reused the same plot again and again: in the 110s, 130s, 180s, 230s, 250s, etc., etc.

**Fantastic Four 111:** see issue 107 above (reuses the plot to 68-69)

**Fantastic Four 112:** an inconclusive (and pointless) battle between the Hulk and Thing, for the sole purpose of increasing sales by promising something more.

This plot was previously used in Fantastic Four 12, exactly 100 issues earlier.

**Fantastic Four 113-116:** the Watcher warns the team that an alien being has been crossing the galaxy destroying worlds, and is headed to Earth. He is finally defeated by a *deus ex machina*.

This plot was previously used in Fantastic Four 48-50: the Galactus trilogy. Note the contrast: when Kirby was there, the story was unforgettable, the high point of the series. But Lee's version is wisely forgotten. The idea of a violent composite being, the combined power of a whole civilisation, is from Kirby's Mangog in Thor.

**Fantastic Four 116-119:** these were written by Archie Goodwin and Roy Thomas, not Stan Lee. While the stories did not become classics, at least the plots were original.



**Fantastic Four 120-123:** An air-walking herald appears, announcing the end of the world. Galactus then appears and is only defeated by being sent into the Negative Zone.

This plot was previously used in Fantastic Four 48-50. That is, in two consecutive plots (for him), Lee copied the exact same Kirby plot. This time it's even closer, with the Air Walker instead of the Silver Surfer, and the idea of Galactus endlessly exploring the Negative Zone is a variation on the Surfer endlessly exploring the Microverse in another Galactus story, issue 75. It could be argued that when Galactus reappeared in issues 74-75 this was Kirby reusing a plot. But read the story closely: the purpose is different. Galactus is far away and simply wants his herald back. He only threatens Earth as a way to persuade the Surfer to find him food. And the appearance of Galactus was almost certainly demanded by Lee, as a way to promote Lee's new Silver Surfer comic. A comic which, lacking Kirby's plots, failed.

**Fantastic Four 124-5:** The Monster from the Lost Lagoon:

This plot was previously used in Fantastic Four 97. At first glance it might look like Kirby also reused the plot from the movie *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*. At this point Kirby was planning his move to DC, and was deliberately holding back his new ideas. But even here, Kirby's plot was original, and was the opposite of the movie. The movie was about an ancient inhabitant of Earth that killed people and was itself killed. Kirby's plot was about the opposite; how the creature was innocent, people had the wrong idea, and it simply needed materials to help its mate, and then it left. Interestingly, the Lee dialog in issue 97 suggests that the creature stayed on Earth for weeks or months simply to gather water. Which of course makes no sense: it could have gathered all the water it needed in seconds. The art however implies that something in the materials it gathered was needed for its mate: this is the plot that Lee reused.

Fantastic Four 125 was Lee's final issue. (Though it was probably scripted, uncredited, by a young Gerry Conway: Conway mentioned in an interview that he did an uncredited script under Lee's direction when he started, and internal evidence suggests that it was this one. But the general plot would have been dictated by Lee.) Fantastic Four 126 was then a re-run of the Mole Man story, including a homage to the original cover.

**"The Last Fantastic Four Story":** Many years later, Lee wrote one more solo Fantastic Four story. In it, the Watcher warns the team of a giant planet destroyer on his way. He was sent by an alien race that has judged the Earth and found it guilty. He is defeated when the Surfer (instead of the Watcher) provides unbeatable machines that threaten the enemy's existence.

This was another copy of the Galactus saga, just like Lee's previous two Fantastic Four stories. But this time it is combined with the plot from Fantastic Four 65, where the Kree

send an Accuser to judge the Fantastic Four. Only here Lee renames Kirby's "The Accuser" as the less exciting name "The Adjudicator".

The bottom line is that Kirby's Fantastic Four plots were always new. But Lee's Fantastic Four plots were always based on Kirby's old plots.

## **Conclusion**

In summary:

1. Lee did not understand the stories he claimed to write.
2. Lee added dialog that vandalised the story.
3. When Lee was less involved the stories got better.
4. Lee had no new ideas of his own.

From this I conclude that Kirby wrote the Fantastic Four, and Lee merely tried to dumb it down for children.

# Who wrote the other Marvel stories?

In this chapter I suggest that Kirby wrote all the stories he illustrated at Marvel. To be clear, the process apparently went like this:

1. Kirby was pushing for superheroes: see appendix 6 for the timeline.
2. Goodman would occasionally approve a new book.
3. Lee and Kirby would then discuss it. We have a written record of four such meetings, and in each case all the best ideas (the most original and the ones with the longest commercial value) came from Kirby. Lee would also suggest ideas. Kirby would use as few of Lee's ideas as he could get away with. For the details see appendix 4.
4. Kirby then presented his finished story to Lee, and either explain it (in the early days when their meetings were longer), with Lee taking notes, or write explanatory notes in margins.
5. Lee would then ask for changes, or just add dialog.

Here is a typical example of Kirby's notes telling Lee what to write:



THAT  
AT A MOMENT NEWSMEN COVER BIG  
GAME BETWEEN METRO AND  
SPIDERMAN COLLEGE

5/1  
MIX  
STORY  
KID

ANNOUNCER SEES FLASH -- THEN  
HE SEES A GAL AND BIG DOG  
APPEAR FROM THIN AIR ON FIELD



WYATT  
SEES  
GIRL  
HE  
SAYS  
THAT  
MUST  
BE  
CRYSTAL  
AND  
LOCK-  
JAW  
DE-  
SCRIBED  
BY  
JOHNNY



WYATT SAYS - GEE KID - YOU  
MISSED JOHNNY BY MINUTES -- HE  
TOOK OFF WHEN HE HEARD THE  
NEWS - SHE SAYS WHAT  
NEWS

WYATT LETS HER LISTEN TO  
TRANSISTOR RADIO -- WHICH BARES  
NEWS OF FF FIGHT WITH SANDMAN  
WHICH HAS DRAWN CROWDS TO SCENE

## Before Fantastic Four 1

As we saw in the discussion of page 4, Kirby wrote the Monster comics that were the immediate forerunners to Fantastic Four 1. Even without that evidence, it would be insane for Lee to write stories for Kirby. Because before joining Marvel, Kirby's stories typically sold around 300,000 issues. When he previously worked for Goodman he sold up to a million copies per issue. Lee's books only sold around 180,000. Marvel was in trouble when Kirby came back, so Lee desperately needed the sales that only Kirby could bring. Lee's own career depended on him letting Kirby write his own stuff.

It would also be a waste of time to write for Kirby. By that point in his career Kirby had created around a thousand stories: he could write monster stories as he drew, probably faster than he could draw from someone else's script, as he wasn't used to the separate script method. When DC gave Kirby scripts for Challengers, Kirby said he ignored them and did things his own way anyway. By comparing Challengers stories to other DC stories, and to Kirby stories both before and after, we can see that Kirby was right: those were Kirby stories, though no doubt an editor may have changed some parts.

## The Hulk

All the elements of the Hulk's origin story can be found in previous Kirby stories. He even created a monster called "The Hulk" in Journey into Mystery 62.



The scenes involving the gamma bomb and rescuing Rick Jones are very similar to a sequence in Kirby's Sky Masters.





The transformation from Banner to the Hulk is very similar to a sequence in a Kirby story called "The Midnight Monster".





Early villains, such as the Ringmaster and his Circus of Crime, were very similar in name and appearance to previous Kirby villains.





## Thor

This was the fourth time that Kirby created a Thor character:  
In Kirby's Captain America 1, we have Hurricane, Son of Thor



THOR,  
ND

In “Adventure Comics” 5, Kirby’s Sandman story has a character masquerade as Thor through the streets of New York.



In DC's "Tales of the Unexpected" Kirby produced "Tales of the Magic Hammer" about the power of Thor's hammer. This scene with the hammer splitting a tree was even used in the Marvel Thor origin.





Kirby then put these elements together by having the real Thor living in New York, powered by his hammer. Meanwhile Lee, who put his name on as writer, did not even know how to spell Thor, calling him "Thorr" at the end.



Even if we blame the letterer, Lee as editor should have caught it as it was in very large type and dominated the final frame.

## Iron Man

Iron Man is clearly based on the character, Metallo, from Action Comics 252 (1959).



The same wound in the heart, the same metal chest plate, even the same facial features.



The name "metallo" or a man in a metal suit was apparently generic: it was also used (spelled "metalo") in 1942<sup>114</sup>

<sup>114</sup> World's Finest Comics, 6





The name was used again for a different character in Superboy 49 (1956). Kirby then used this familiar concept - man in a suit of high tech armour becomes “Metallo” - in a story he wrote in 1961 for Tales of Suspense.



Iron Man was just yet another Metallo.

The origin story - being forced to create a scientific miracle by a southeast Asian warlord - is from a Kirby Green Arrow story in Adventure Comics 255 for DC.





## Dr Strange

Many people have commented on how Dr Strange is very similar to a Dr Droom from Amazing Adventures issue 1, in 1961. Lee claims to have written it. But the outlines are by Kirby (and finishes by Ditko) which indicates that Kirby would have supplied the plot. As for the name and costume, two months before Ditko's Dr Strange premiered (in Strange Tales 110, July 1963), Jack Kirby drew a story in Tales of Suspense 41 (May 1963). Called "The Stronghold of Dr. Strange". The name and costume are the same.



## The X-Men

Kirby had created plenty of teams of young adventurers: Boy's Ranch, Young Allies, Boy Commandos, etc. They often had an adult mentor:



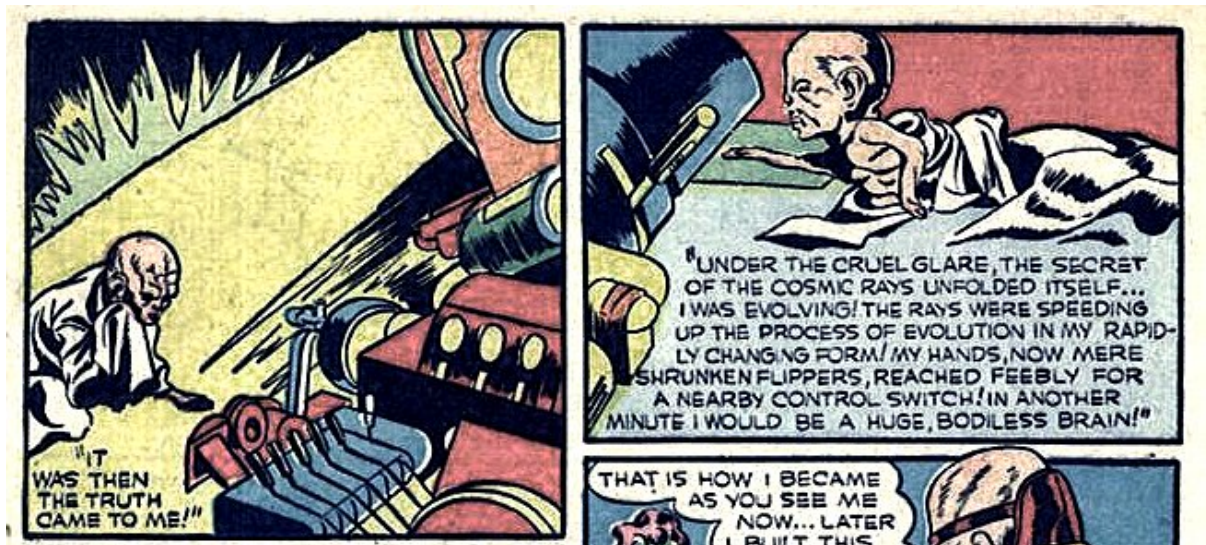


But what about a team with mutant superpowers? Yellow Claw 2 (1956) credits Kirby as both writer and penciller. In it, the Yellow Claw gathers a group of mutants and says their combined brain power is more effective than a dozen H-bombs. In the story FBI agent Jimmy Woo defines mutants as "people with deviations... in either mind or body... or both!"









The remaining details of the X-Men (outcasts, led by a man in a wheelchair, enemies called "the brotherhood", tag-line "the world's strangest heroes") are identical to Doom Patrol, a DC comic that came out three months earlier. Three months is not long enough to read a comic on the newsstands and then create your own comic, so this argues for inside information. At the time, some DC artists were secretly moonlighting for Marvel: Gene Colan called himself Adam Austin, Gil Kane called himself Scott Edward, Jerry Siegel called himself "Joe Carter", etc. So Stan Lee, as editor, was in regular contact with insiders at DC. Arnold Drake, creator of Doom patrol, explained:

I've become more and more convinced that [Stan Lee] knowingly stole The X-Men from The Doom Patrol. Over the years I learned that an awful lot of writers and artists were working surreptitiously between [Marvel and DC]. Therefore from when I first brought the idea into [DC editor] Murray Boltinoff's office, it would've been easy for someone to walk over and hear that [I was] working on a story about a bunch of reluctant superheroes who are led by a man in a wheelchair. So over the years I began to feel that Stan had more lead time than I realized. He may well have had four, five or even six months.<sup>115</sup>

Kirby had no reason to copy DC, but Lee's whole career had been sent following trends. So the Doom Patrol details probably came via Lee. This illustrates the difference between Stan's ideas and Jack's ideas. Jack's ideas were creatively different, and can be seen evolving in his own earlier comics. But Stan's ideas tend to be straight swipes from other people's work.

Even the Doom Patrol ideas can be traced to Kirby eventually, because Doom Patrol was DC's answer to Kirby's Fantastic Four. Negative Man was a test pilot like Ben Grimm, and when flying looks like the Human Torch. The leader, Niles Caulder, is a brilliant scientist like Reed, but is visually missing from the action, like Sue. Elastigirl has Sue's gender and Reed's power. Robotman is a big orange strong guy who wants to be human, like Ben Grimm. The team were outcasts, like the FF in issues 2, 7 and 9. Of course the FF were themselves a continuation of the Challengers... by Jack Kirby. Every original idea seems to come back to Jack Kirby eventually.

<sup>115</sup> An Incessantly Asked Question, Mark Evanier, <http://www.webcitation.org/5lXJY5e28?url=http://povonline.com/iaq/IAQ05.htm>

# Spider-Man

I left this one until last as it's the most interesting. Jack Kirby rightly gives credit to Steve Ditko for Spider-Man being such a success.

My initial concept was practically the same. But the credit for developing Spider-Man goes to Steve Ditko; he wrote it and he drew it and he refined it. Steve Ditko is a thorough professional. And he an intellect. Personality wise, he's a bit withdrawn, but there are lots of people like that. But Steve Ditko, despite the fact that he doesn't disco— although he may now; I haven't seen him for a long time— Steve developed Spider-Man and made a salable item out of it."<sup>116</sup>

Kirby's Spider-Man would have been too muscular, too confident. Ditko was able to turn Spider-Man into a skinny kid with self doubts and an inability to solve his problems. That was the demographic that bought the most comics and they loved it! But where did the idea come from originally? Here is a timeline, based on research by Stan Taylor and others. Unless stated, quotations are from Taylor.<sup>117</sup> Note that 1954 is when Kirby and Simon launched mainline, so Kirby was creating all kinds of ideas that year, and only used some.

- **1954: The Silver Spider**

In 1954 Kirby and Joe Simon (mainly Simon) developed the Silver Spider, but did not use him. It featured an orphaned boy living with an old couple finds a magic ring that granted him extra strength, including the ability to leap.

- **1954: web fluid**

Their publisher then suggested some changes: "a tall thin wiry person with long legs and arms." and he "could accomplish great acrobatic tricks, an almost flight, by use of silken ropes that would enable him to swing a-la Tarzan, or a Batman. The silken threads that the spider would use might come from a special liquid, from some part of his costume that would become silken threads in much the same way as the spider insect. These threads would also be used in making of a web, which could also be used as a net."

- **1954: The name and costume**

1954 was when Ben Carson, the biggest Halloween costume designer in America, began selling a "Spider man" costume. The surviving versions are all in yellow, not red, but they have the name, the full face mask, and the distinctive web design and black around the eyes, spider on the chest, etc.

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<sup>116</sup> Jack Kirby Interview. Leonard Pitts, <http://kirbymuseum.org/blogs/effect/2012/08/06/19867-kirby-interview/>

<sup>117</sup> Spider-Man: The Case For Kirby, Stan Taylor, <http://www.adelaidecomicsandbooks.com/kirbycase.html>



Kirby's son Neal was six years old at the time (and 15 when Spider-Man was published) so would have been the target market for such a costume. Ditko had no children so was unlikely to have seen it.

- **1954: The name "Spider Man"**

The same year that the Halloween costume launched, "Simon had rejected a working title 'Spider-man' for his Silver Spider project, and showed a logo to Kirby". Eventually the Silver Spider idea was shelved, and never used.

- **The full face mask**

A key claim is the full face mask that Ditko says he chose to hide the fact that Spider-man was young. But many of Kirby's characters had full masks: from his first ever character, the Lone Rider, through to Iron Man, Dr Doom, Mr Miracle, etc. So this is not conclusive. Ditko has no history of lying or reason to do so: choosing the full face mask does not mean he had never seen one before, it just means he considered other masks and rejected them.

- **The big white eyes**

In 1968 (long before the issue of who created what became a hot topic) Kirby was



interviewed for the Excelsior fanzine (issue 1). Kirby mentioned that he created the pre-Marvel Vision's costume with big white eyes, and called it "the forerunner of the Spider-Man and Silver Surfer eye", perhaps implying that he created all three sets of white eyes.



All we know for certain is that whited out eyes were a familiar idea for Kirby. And that Lee went to Kirby for the initial cover (after rejecting Ditko's cover): it is normal for Kirby to be consulted for anything art related. But Ditko could have come up with whited eyes independently.

- **1957: insect powers**

In 1957 Kirby drew the story "'The Ant Extract' in which a meek scientist discovers a serum that gives him the proportional strength of an ant. Because of his new power, the scientist is feared and ostracized by authorities."



- **Late 1950s: Peter Parker at school**

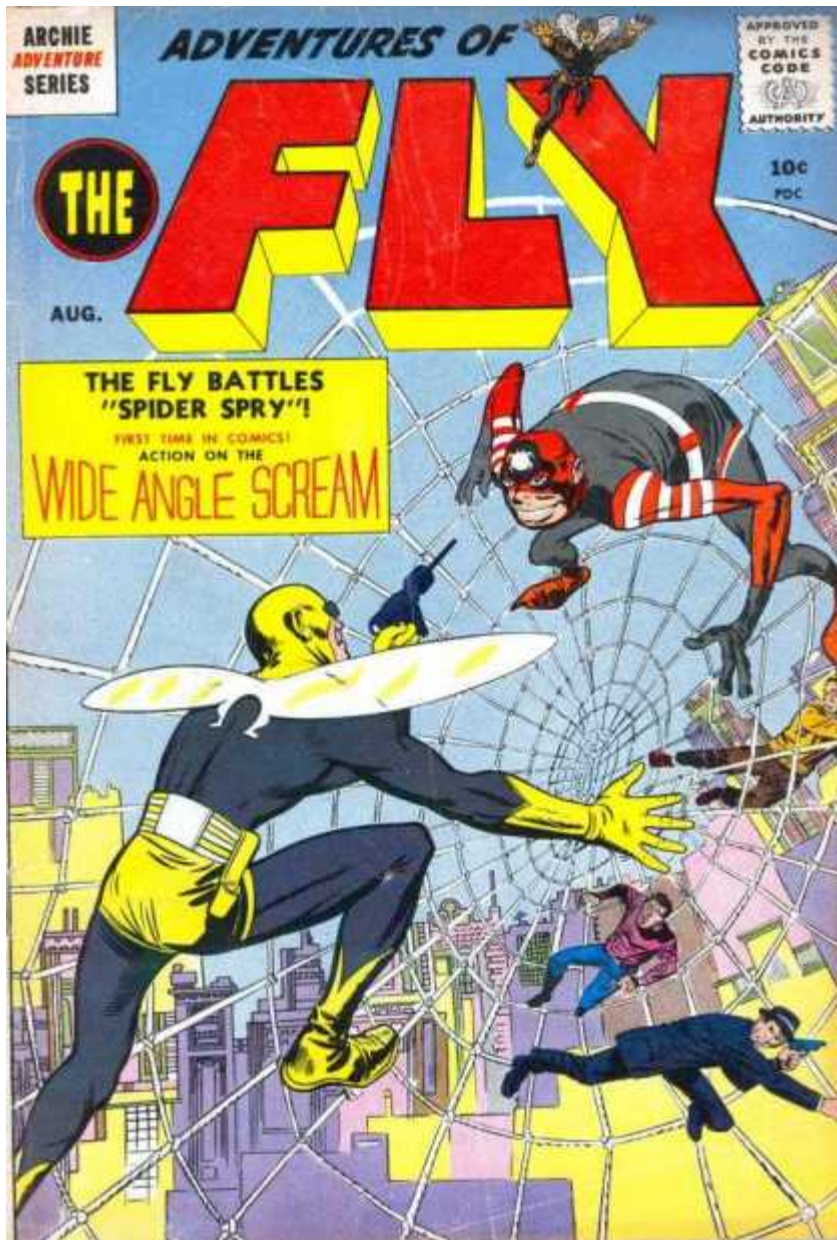
In the late 1950s Kirby proposed a strip called "Chip Hardy" - a college freshman on a science scholarship. "Moose Mulligan, the campus jock, teased young Chip about why he didn't try out for football, instead of 'hiding behind a mess of test tubes'. Other students followed suit and mocked the youngster, labeling all science majors as "squares". Eventually, this taunting escalated into a physical confrontation between Moose and Hardy, with young Chip getting the better of it, mimicking exactly the character template and early relationship between Peter Parker, Flash Thompson, and the other school mates."

- **Peter Parr**

At the same time Kirby created a character for another strip named 'Peter Parr'.

- **1959: The Fly**

In 1959 Kirby and Simon created the Fly, who clings to walls, senses danger, and is super strong (he could also fly). "The first use of his powers is to bring to justice, a petty crook that had assaulted his guardian." When Kirby suggested his Spider-Man idea to Lee, Ditko pointed out that it was very similar to the Fly, and that caused Lee to ask for changes.



- **1959: Spider Spry**

The Fly issue 1 had an enemy called "Spider Spry" with thin legs and a bulbous head, who "walks up thin silken lines, traps the Fly in a web-like net, and wears a colorful costume complete with a spider icon."

- **1958 and 1959: The spider emblem**

In 1958 a Charlton comic that Ditko either drew or was familiar with had webbing patterns. They looked like the one on the Halloween costume, and later on

Spider-Man. However, Spider-Man's spider image on his back looks more like a tick than a spider. Just like the emblem on Spider Spry.

- **1959: Uncle Ben's death**

In 1959 Kirby also created Lancelot Strong, aka The Shield, "an orphaned high school senior, and like Peter Parker, his surrogate parents were gentle, compassionate, and supportive. His powers were the result of a scientific experiment, in this case, genetic engineering... While rushing off to test his new-found powers against a rampaging alien monster, The Shield, (Lancelot Strong), in his teen exuberance, ignores and leaves his best friend Spud in harm's way. After defeating the brute, the Shield returns to celebrate his triumph only to learn that the monster has killed Spud. The distraught Shield blames himself, and vows that it will never happen again."

- **1961: The bookworm**

Tales to Astonish 22 had "The Crawling Creature" by Kirby. "The hero is a high school student, a skinny, dorky, academic sort, laughed at by the jocks for his lack of athletic ability, and taunted by the girls. Typically, by the end of the story, it is the bookworm, not the jock who saves the world. Even the visuals of the lead character strongly resemble the Peter Parker character as shown in AF#15."

- **Lee and Ditko's earlier work**

For comparison, neither Lee nor Steve Ditko had anything like these parallels.

- **1963: Kirby showed Lee**

In 1963, according to Lee, Goodman asked him for a new superhero. Lee had a meeting with Kirby. Kirby showed the Spider character to Lee, who liked it.

- **Goodman's decision**

Martin Goodman reportedly approved the name and "ordinary teen" concept.[Footnote: According to Lee.]

- **1963: The first six pages**

Kirby then drew the first six pages, and Ditko was going to ink it. Lee decided it looked too heroic, and asked Ditko to re-do it. Ditko says he only saw five pages from Kirby: they did not show Spider-Man after the transformation.

- **The magic ring**

At some point someone said to drop Stan's idea of using a magic ring to gain the powers. The Kirby art that Ditko saw did not include the transformation so nobody knows who said this.

- **1963: The cover**

Lee did not like Ditko's cover, so got Kirby to pencil the version they used.

- **Lee's dialog**

Lee is definitely responsible for one thing: the dialog based on whatever Kirby or Ditko gave him.

- **The first three stories**

The first three issues (Amazing Fantasy 15, and Amazing Spider-Man 1 and 2) are full of elements from Kirby stories (see the Stan Taylor article) and typical Kirby elements like spaceships and aliens. The stories then settle down to the kind of cerebral plots that Ditko does on his own.

- **Story "conferences"**

Ditko has written various letters and fascinating essays on the creation of



Spider-Man, and on related topics such as when “bad memory” is just an excuse for lying.<sup>118</sup> Ditko’s descriptions of the initial story conferences with Lee (before Lee stopped speaking to him) indicate that Ditko had to steer Lee away from bad decisions. For example, Lee wanted to use magic in the stories, but that would undermine the realistic world Ditko was building: The title’s entire strength was that ordinary readers could relate to everything. Ditko’s accounts of blocking Lee’s bad suggestions are like the stories from the White House about the presidential handlers using distraction techniques to move the focus away from the nuclear football.

- **After those three issues**

Ditko then did the rest up to issue 38. Toward the end Ditko was unable to speak to Lee at all, but delivered the pages ready for dialog. This is important. Nobody disagrees that after issue 1 Spider-Man is Steve Ditko's baby. The character changed and evolved. Ditko was a creative genius. Spider-Man 1 to 36 is a tremendous story in its own right, with a beginning, middle and end (for his last two issues Ditko seemed to just "phone it in" as they say.) But "who created Spider-Man" is a different question, a very narrow question about who got him to the first issue.

- **FOOM**

Ditko later claimed to have designed the iconic costume. But the official Marvel publication FOOM (issue 11, 1975) said it was Kirby. It was normal for Kirby to create character designs for other artists.

- **The shoes**

Ditko's memory can be unreliable, just as anyone's can. He says he gave Spider-man soft soled shoes for climbing, and others have claimed that Kirby always used full boots. But issues 1-3 of Spider-Man show him with hard soled shoes. Meanwhile Kirby did not give hard shoes to his climbing characters (e.g. Spider Spry, Toad, Cobra, the Beast).

- **Belt, but no shorts**

During this time Kirby's costumes tended to have belts and shorts. Ditko's costumes (e.g. Captain Atom, Vulture, Mysterio, Kraven) tended not to have either. Spider-Man has a belt (it's where he kept spare webbing) but not shorts, so this is inconclusive.

- **1976 changed everything**

In 1976 the law on work for hire changed, so suddenly Kirby was able to sue if it could be proven that he created the characters. If he won, Marvel would have to pay millions of dollars (today, billions) in royalties owed.

- **The missing costume proposal**

Jim Shooter says he saw Kirby's costume proposal in the 1970s, but since then it mysteriously disappeared.

- **Lee claims credit**

In 1977 Lee published an article entitled "How I created Spider-Man".

## Where Lee deserves credit

Lee definitely deserves credit for at least one thing: the Spider-Man dialog filled with self doubt. Self doubt is not a Kirby thing: Kirby is about fighting. Self-doubt is not a Ditko thing: Ditko is about Objectivism, absolute certainty. But self-doubt is definitely a Lee thing, and

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<sup>118</sup> For where to find Ditko’s essays, etc., see the blog: <http://ditko.blogspot.co.uk/p/ditko-book-in-print.html>

probably the reason he hides behind his larger than life image. Mark Evanier, who knew Lee for years, said:

When you talk to Stan Lee, when he turns the Stan Lee act off, he's a very decent human being who is chronically obsessed with himself. He's very insecure. Those of us who have trouble being angry for some of the things that happened, it's because we saw the real human being there at times.<sup>119</sup>

Lee's traces his insecurity to seeing his father unemployed during the Great Depression:

Seeing the demoralizing effect that his unemployment had on his spirit, making him feel that he just wasn't needed, gave me a feeling I've never been able to shake. [...] It's a feeling that the most important thing for a man is to have work to do, to be busy, to be needed."<sup>120</sup>

Kirby said Lee was running away from something:

PITTS: Are you claiming that ego has run away with him?

KIRBY: Not ego. Oh, there's ego in it, but he's running away from some deep pain or hurt and I don't know what it is. I feel sympathy for him in that respect. I have an idea of what it is, but it's not my right to analyze Stan Lee.<sup>121</sup>

So the self doubt came from Lee. And it resonated with readers, many of whom were young, insecure introverts. But the Spider-Man plots (from issues 4 to 38) seem to have been from Steve Ditko, and the original idea (without the self doubt) from Jack Kirby.

## Case study: Thor 97

When we look closely at any issue of a Lee-Kirby book we see that Kirby wrote it, and Lee may have made changes, but those changes are always problematic. Take Thor in Journey into Mystery (JiM) issue 97 for example. JiM 97 was where the epic Thor story really begins, and had the first "Tales of Asgard".

### Earth and Jane were by Lee; gods are by Kirby

By comparing the Kirby issues and the non-Kirby issues, we can see that Kirby probably wanted to get rid of the Jane Foster romance subplot, and have Thor go cosmic much earlier. But Lee wanted to keep it down to Earth, based on Earth and with a human love interest. In JiM 97 Kirby finally got his way and the epic Thor story took off.

It would take a hundred pages to prove what I just said, so let's focus on just one small part to illustrate how the art and dialog pulled in opposite directions. If you have a copy of Journey into Mystery 97, turn to the two pages where Thor saw Odin and then Loki unleashed a fire demon.

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<sup>119</sup> Why is Stan Lee's Legacy in Question? Abraham Reisman, <http://www.vulture.com/2016/02/stan-lees-universe-c-v-r.html>

<sup>120</sup> Excelsior! By Stan Lee, quoted at <http://www.vulture.com/2016/02/stan-lees-universe-c-v-r.html>

<sup>121</sup> Jack Kirby interview. Leonard Pitts, <http://kirbymuseum.org/blogs/effect/2012/08/06/19867-kirby-interview/>



The key is the top right hand corner: in Lee's dialog Loki referred to previously bringing the lava man to the surface, then forgetting about him. But we never saw that in the comic. Just before that Loki was frustrated that he had no way to attack Thor. Yet the coming of the lava man was all over Earth's newspapers for three pages. Having such a major event happen off screen is bad enough, but then having Loki immediately forget? Something was wrong here. But the art told a different story. Odin was not coming to discuss Thor's love life, he was coming to warn Thor of the lava man. Consider parallel scenes in the Fantastic Four: the Watcher warning the FF of Galactus, or later warning them of the surfer, or the cosmic Doom appearing as a warning in the thunder. This was a common Kirby theme.

Previous issues (the Kirby issues, not the non-Kirby ones) shows a steady build up in power and threat. Everything points toward Ragnarok. The big war begins here. Note how the lava man appears gigantic in his first appearance (where we see just his feet) and at the end he grows to the size of a gigantic boulder to crush Thor. This is a gigantic event, but Lee's dialog does not acknowledge that.

## Sky versus earth: stone men, lava men and Surtur

Kirby was doing something epic here: throughout mythology we have the gods of the sky and the gods of under the Earth. Kirby had only shown us two non-human enemy races until



now and they were both rock men. This was rock (Earth, below) versus gods (sky, above: with storms, rainbows, flying, bird's wings on the helmet, etc). Here we had a rock-fire demon arising from the depths of hell: the earth itself was finally beginning to convulse in preparation for Ragnarok.

## **Surtur and Ragnarok**

The very first "Tales of Asgard" was in this issue, and reinforces the point. This issue was about Surtur, the flaming demon who waits underground for the end of the world. Yet by pushing the lava man story aside to make space for a silly "will they won't they" love story, the epic importance of this story was lost. The picture of Loki foreseeing Ragnarok became just Loki noticing some random fire. The whole story was destroyed by the dialog, in my opinion.

## **The love story was just wrong**

The love story was not only silly, did not only take space away from the building story, but it went totally against the nature of this epic. Gods do not worry about marrying mortals; they take what they want and leave. Even if they wanted to it would be unethical to marry a human, Thor would have to put the planet at risk to save her. And it is absurd to think she could ever relate to him as an equal: Thor would be taking advantage of a desperate groupie. Plus, Thor was already married to Sif, a fact that anybody who was aware of the legends (enough to know about Balder, the rainbow bridge, etc) would know.

The art makes more sense if this was Thor choosing his destiny: Blake left Jane behind, just as Shakespeare's Henry V left Falstaff behind. The characters' feelings were unfortunately obscured by Don Heck's inking: every face looked dramatically different from previous inkers, so it's hard to say if this reflected Kirby's pencils. (I can't help but think "Happy Hogan" whenever I see this Blake). But most likely, Blake looked happy because he (Blake) had found Jane a better job. Maybe we should give Lee credit for making Jane a stronger character, as the dialog has her initiating the change.. but is she strong, really? Her life revolved around men. At least Kirby's art was consistent with the original epics, where mortals' only role was to provide contrast with the gods. The whole Blake-Foster romance always felt out of place to me.

## **Grasping the hammer**

Finally, see the frame where Thor grasped his hammer for strength. The dialog made him weak: we are supposed to believe that he felt weak because he could not have a woman who was so shallow that, despite secretly loving Blake, she immediately switched when Thor came along. That story might have fitted in Kirby's romance comics, which dealt with mortal weakness. But this was a story of gods! Thor was not weak!!

Thor was grasping his hammer like that because he knew that the end was coming. He finally understood why he was chosen, and how he and all the gods must ultimately die in order to save Midgard, and why the hammer was the key to the memory of the gods

surviving Ragnarok. But by shoe-horning in an unnecessary and foolish love story the timeless epic was diminished and ignored. In my opinion.

## **When Kirby was away the story became small**

When Kirby is there the stories are big. When Kirby was not there the stories were small.

In JiM 97 we saw the start of classic cosmic Thor: we had Odin! Loki! Fire demons from within the Earth! Thor preparing for the final great cosmic war! Then in JiM 98-100 Kirby was not there. The writer then invented third rate nobodies Cobra and Mr Hyde. We also saw Don Blake and Jane Foster in a domestic romance. Kirby avoided that (though the dialogue often tries to add it anyway).

In JiM 101 when Kirby's Thor returned he looked angry. He casually knocked a chunk out of an iron lamp post merely by brushing past it. As if to remind us that Kirby's Thor was a god, not like the weak Thor of the previous two issues.

## **Changes to the art**

There are several places in early Thor where it looks like the art was changed after Kirby finished it, in order to change the story. How could this happen if the writer was telling Kirby what to draw?

Take JiM 113 for example: at the end, Don Blake had a strange looking smile. Remove the dialogue and it is clear that this was not a Kirby smile, and Blake probably had a serious face as in every other panel. But the dialogue added a romance subplot, so somebody changed the frown into a smile.



Two issues later, (JIM 115) there were several scenes where somebody drew Jane Foster squashed into gaps in the picture with a generic “scared female” pose. Kirby’s women were strong, his frames were well composed: this addition was not Kirby.





When we remove the dialogue there is no reason for Jane to be present. In the previous issue the dialogue said she had been kidnapped, but the art showed no evidence of that. It looks like Kirby created a story without Jane, and the person adding the dialog wanted to change Kirby's story to have Jane there.

## Who wrote Tales of Asgard?

Just as Lee did not understand the science in *Fantastic Four*, he does not appear to know the legends in *Tales of Asgard*.

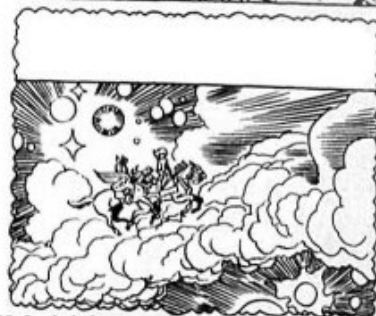
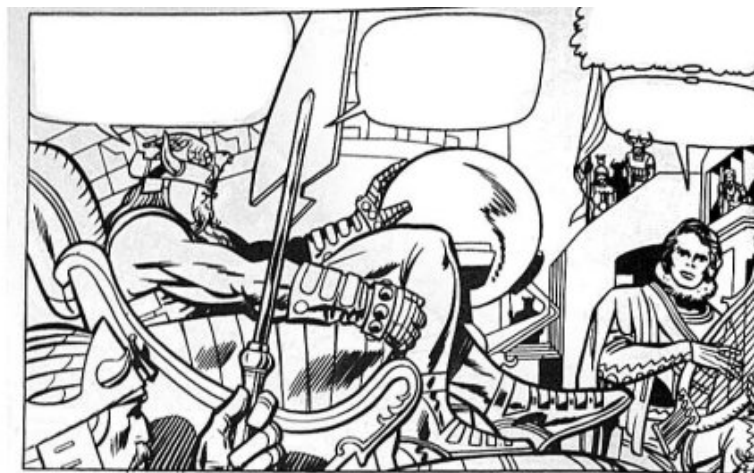
I mentioned Lee's desire to have Jane Foster as a love interest. But the writer of *Tales of Asgard* knows the legends, so he knows that Thor is already married, to Sif. Perhaps Lee chose to ignore that part? Then why have the legend of how Thor rescued Sif and carried her away on horseback (JiM 102)? That is how he chose his bride. Why would Lee choose that legend and also have Thor looking for romance on Earth? The art on its own (without the text) is closer to the original legends where Sif is Thor's bride. Odin's flashback in the main story seems to support that view.



AND SO IT WAS THAT THOR FIRST GAINED POSSESSION OF HIS MAGIC HAMMER--BY OFFERING HIS LIFE FOR THAT OF ANOTHER! AND THE TRAGEDY OF THE TALE IS THIS--NOT UNTIL AFTER DID THE MIGHTY GOD REALIZE HE HAD WON HIS GOAL!



Journey into Mystery 102, Thor rescues Sif and earns the right to the hammer



JiM 111



detail

Another example is in JiM 114, the Apples of Idunna story. The previous and next stories are about Loki's childhood. But Lee begins the apples story by saying "we interrupt our biographies in depth series of the life of Loki". If Lee knew the legends he would know that this legend is also about Loki. The original legend is about Loki and the giants, but for space reasons Tales of Asgard combined them in the form of Fenrir. Fenrir is the son of Loki (father) and a giant (mother) so he can represent them both. But Lee seems unaware of this.

This has just been a few brief examples: illustrations, not proof. But wherever we look we see the same themes: Lee does not understand the story he claims to be writing. When he writes alone his writing quality takes a huge drop. He adds sexism to the stories, but otherwise dumbs them down for children.

## **Conclusion**

Once again we see that Kirby invents the characters, Kirby writes the stories, and Lee then comes along and tries to make sense of it.

It follows that Kirby is a writer, not a co-writer. Kirby is the creator of Marvel, not “co-creator”. Lee was simply the editor. Lee chose to dumb down the stories and then gave himself the writing money.



# Did Lee add any value?

For some people Lee added great value: he made the stories, simpler, in later years he made them lighthearted and fun, and his instincts for editing perhaps added impact. For example, Lee is probably responsible for the structure of *Fantastic Four* 1 (big introduction, then intro, then Mole Man story) and many people find that works well. However, others feel that this does not offset his “dumbing down” and his changing of the stories. So, what was Lee’s *net* contribution, the positives minus the negatives?

## Did Lee increase sales?

Before Lee and Kirby got together, a Stan Lee comic typically sold 180,000 issues, and a Jack Kirby comic typically sold just over 300,000. Some Kirby comics sold a million copies per issue.<sup>122</sup>

After ten years with Jack Kirby, when Kirby became the house style, and Kirby characters were the main earners, a Stan Lee comic typically sold just over 300,000. That is, they sold the same as a typical Jack Kirby comic. No more, no less.

So the net difference between “Lee and Kirby” sales and “just Kirby” sales was zero. So for every person who was attracted by what Lee added, another person must have been repelled.

I grew up with Marvel. I read *Bullpen Bulletins*, and heard rumours of “Marvel Zombies” who would buy anything with the name “Marvel” on it. So I was convinced that (1) Marvel was a huge success, and (2) Lee’s salesmanship and branding must be the reason. But the sales numbers do not support either claim.

## Lee created a successful company?

By the end of the 1960s Lee made it sound like Marvel superheroes were a huge success. But privately it was a very different story.

Comics had always been a cyclical business, and almost everybody in 1971 thought that superheroes must inevitably be on their way out again. That’s why there was such a gold rush on to find the next big genre--sword-and-sorcery looked like it might be a contender, and there were a lot of new mystery (watered-down horror comics without much horror), war and western comics being churned out in this period. But the classic Marvel, Stan’s Marvel, was still seen as something of a fad (even by Stan himself), and the common wisdom was that everybody was going to be doing something else very soon (possibly in another field entirely.)<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> See appendix 5

<sup>123</sup> Tom Brevoort, on his now defunct blog, 8 November 2010

After Kirby left, Lee merely recycled Kirby plots for two years (e.g. Fantastic Four 103-125), and then Lee left as well. The superhero comics that were Lee's speciality were declining fast. True, they were number two behind DC, but that was also true in the 1950s before the crisis, and the recovery can be traced to Kirby's work. Any final success (decisively overtaking DC, the 1980s, the movies) happened when Lee was more absent than present.

The claim that Lee's personality helped in any way is hard to quantify. Back before the crisis of 1957, when Lee was almost invisible, and by his own admission his job was to produce very boring comics, the comics sold much better: up to 85 titles per month is some achievement, and while individual sales were low by industry standards the company was still one of America's biggest comic publishers.

## Spider-Man sold better under Lee?

At first glance, Spider-Man numbers might seem to support Lee's position: Ditko left in 1966, then Lee had more influence, and the sales went up. Here are the sales figures:<sup>124</sup>

1962: 126,000 (estimate)<sup>125</sup>

1963: 190,000 (estimate)<sup>126</sup>

1964: 240,000 (estimate)<sup>127</sup>

1965: 280,000 (estimate)<sup>128</sup>

1966: 340,000

1967: 361,000

1968: 373,000

1969: 372,000

1970: 322,000

1971: 307,000

1972: 288,000

John Romita, the artist, said he provided the plots, but at least he was talking to Lee: Ditko and Lee simply never spoke after the first two dozen issues.<sup>129</sup> So Lee had at least some input here. The numbers rose sharply under Ditko, until Lee and Romita took over, then rose slowly, then declined sharply. The continued small increase might be due to inertia, or due to

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<sup>124</sup> Amazing Spider-Man Sales Figures,: <http://www.comichron.com/titlespotlights/amazingspiderman.html>; Comic Book Sales Figures for 1965, <http://www.comichron.com/yearlycomicssales/postaldata/1965.html>; for 1964 etc. change the last part of the URL or search on that site.

<sup>125</sup> Not every title reported its sales. Spider-Man first appeared in Amazing Fantasy 15 in 1962. The title was selling so badly that it was already slated for cancellation. Marvel's lowest selling reported sales that year was Tales of Suspense at 126,000

<sup>126</sup> Amazing Spider-Man launched in 1963, when a typical Marvel comic sold 190,000 or so.

<sup>127</sup> Marvel's best selling reported sales were from Strange Tales (the Human Torch) at 215,000, Internal evidence suggests that Spider-Man sold better. This fits a straight line from the 1963 estimate to the 1966 number.

<sup>128</sup> Marvel's best selling reported sales were from Journey into Mystery (Thor) at 233,000. Around this time Marvel was selling the rights to cartoons. The Fantastic Four and Spider-man got their own cartoons, indicating that they were the top sellers. This agrees with internal evidence in the comics. Rights to other characters (Thor, etc) were lumped together and sold as a block to a Canadian cartoon company. So again this fits a straight line from the 1963 estimate to the 1966 number.

<sup>129</sup> Steve Ditko's letter, printed in Comic Book Marketplace #63, October 1998

Lee, or due to Romita (the new art looked gorgeous). But none of the factors explain the sharp decline in 1970.

There is an obvious explanation for an increase in sales in 1967 and a decline in 1970: the famous Spider-man cartoon aired on TV between those dates.



The Spider-Man cartoon was highly memorable: its catchy music was still referenced in the movies a generation later. And unlike the Batman TV series, the cartoon was entirely in keeping with Lee's comic, so could help sales.

The fact that the sales increase was small, but the sales drop at the end was big, suggests that without the cartoon the sales would have been declining under Lee.

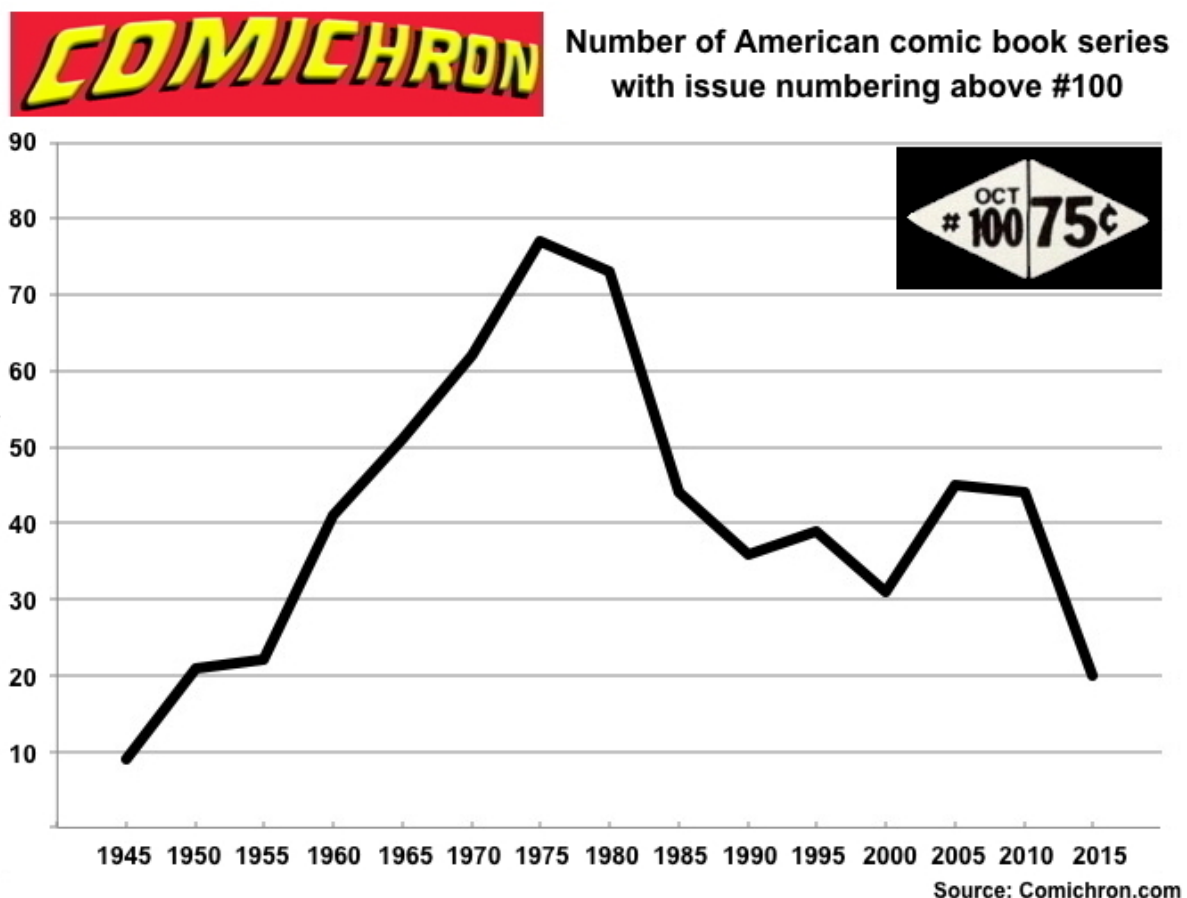


## Long running titles

Despite the “no better than normal” sales and long term decline, this period did have one stand-out feature: The early “Lee-Kirby” titles are still selling today, after five or six hundred issues. What caused that? Was it Lee?

Take a closer look. The six hit titles (Fantastic Four, Hulk, Spider-Man, Iron man, Avengers, and X-Men) all began between 1961 and 1963. Lee was editor with Kirby as freelancer from 1958 to 1970, but those early years were different: it was not simply the collaboration.

This graph shows long running titles at any point. Remember that the later titles are just the earlier titles still running: to find the key moments, find the steepest slope, then look back 100 months (around 8 years)



Long running titles are a special feature of (1) World War II, and (2) the years 1956-1963. Both were the periods of greatest economic and cultural change. A smaller bump is seen in titles that began in the late 1990s, the crash of the speculation bubble and start of the Internet: another period of great economic and cultural change when the industry was turned upside down again.

Can Lee take credit for the 1956-1963 bump? No, because DC saw the same effect, but DC saw it first. In the period 1956-1964, DC introduced the new Flash, Justice League, Doom Patrol, and Teen Titans. Those titles are still successful today.



The 1956-64 cultural shift wasn't just reflected in comics. We see the same in sci-fi TV shows, the closest thing we can get to superhero comics. While Star Trek was not until 1966, Roddenberry was trying to make it from 1964. Dr Who began in 1963, and both followed the highly influential Twilight Zone (1959-64). This period is when the biggest ideas began.



All youth oriented culture saw the same effect: the biggest, longest running hits began in the period 1956-64. Take the music industry for example. The biggest names of all time appeared in those years: Elvis Presley (1956), the Beatles (1962), the Rolling Stones (1962), etc.



We see a similar trend in movies. The much greater cost of movies means they are much slower to invest in new ideas, but the longest running and most successful movie franchise of all (James Bond) began in 1962.

The major cultural winners were simply the first in a time of great change. Obviously they had to be natural winners anyway - a Beatles or a Kirby - but they were the first in a new race. That gave them a natural advantage over later contestants who might offer similar

ideas and similar quality. And the longer they stuck around, the higher their brand awareness, so they gathered long term fans, merchandising, and eventually movies.

So, what was Lee's role in this crucial 1956-64 window? Kirby had the track record of top quality comics. He was the guy who was always starting new comics with new ideas. He arrived at Marvel in 1958, at the crucial moment. But Kirby was not allowed to start a new comic until 1961, toward the end of this short window in time. Far from creating hit comics, Lee may have simply held them back.

## **“Marvel Zombies”**

There is another, less flattering theory for long running titles. That these particular comics lasted as long as they did because of Lee's style. He dumbed down, and flattered the readers, and this attracted a needy group of Marvel Zombies. Then the first six or so titles lasted longest simply because after that the kids ran out of money.

However, this “Marvel Zombie” theory does not explain why DC's more traditional style also created long lasting titles that sold just as well. The numbers show that there was nothing special about what Lee did, Zombies or otherwise. The 1950s and early 1960s were just a very special time to be young.

## **Lee and fandom**

It might be argued that Lee's larger than life personality helped the fan community to grow. However, fan communities were growing in the 1960s in every other medium (TV, movies, music, etc) without Lee's help.

The comic fan industry was nurtured by DC before Lee got involved. The earliest major fanzine, *Alter Ego*, was originally going to be called “The JLA Subscriber” because it was inspired by The Justice League. The magazine was sent to a growing list of fans, and was encouraged and supported by DC editor Julius Schwartz.

The DC letters pages did not have the frenzy of fake personality (pretending the comics were all written by one man, pretending the artists all worked in a bullpen, pretending everyone was friends) but instead they treated readers with respect and discussed matters as adults. And in the 1970s and 1980s it was DC who led the way with creators' rights, not Marvel.

Lee's brand of self promotion encouraged a certain kind of fan. But as the numbers indicate, it discouraged another kind.

## **Lee and name recognition**

It is sometimes claimed that Lee pioneered giving credit to named talent, through the use of credit boxes. But the comics themselves show that the opposite is true: the credit boxes were designed to *take credit away*.



For years, Joe Simon and Jack Kirby had routinely put their names on the front covers of their comics...



...and over a decade before Lee began listing the names of others, EC regularly featured the artist's signature on the opening splash. It was another forty years before mainstream comics caught up.



When working for Lee, frequent Kirby inker Dick Ayers tried to sign Kirby + Ayers very discreetly on the cover and the splash page, but as noted before, Lee had their names painted over. Lee sometimes let a cover signature pass, sometimes didn't. And sometimes a signature would later be changed to make it seem that it only referred to the art: the discussion on page 4 has the details.

So rather than raising the profile of creators, Lee reduced their profile. Lee later used credit boxes inside the comics, but they were unreliable and misleading: they routinely listed himself at the top as writer when he had merely edited the dialog. To this day, most fans believe that Jack Kirby was only the artist, thanks to these boxes.



## How Marvel finally beat DC

When Lee stepped away from the position he held since age 17, his comics were in the same position they were in the mid 1950s, before the twin crises knocked the company down and Kirby bought them back: second to DC.

Both companies saw a gradual decline in sales across the 1970s, but Marvel gained a small lead around 1972, then bumped up in 1977 and again in 1978 and 1979. But ***none of this was due to the quality of Marvel's writing.***

## 1972: dirty tricks

The biggest problem that comics faced in the early 1970s was that newsstands were replacing spinner racks because other products brought in more money. Why use valuable space for a 15 cent comic when the same space could have a dollar magazine and bring in ten times the profit? Comic companies knew that they needed to move to higher priced comics (either with more pages or better content). But nobody wanted to be the first to raise their prices: they all remembered what happened to Uncle Scrooge comics! But in 1971, Martin Goodman “made a handshake deal” with DC’s boss Carmine Infantino, so they would raise their prices and page counts together.<sup>130</sup>

So the issues dated November 1971 jumped from 15c to 25c, with more pages. DC breathed a huge sigh of relief, and did the same. But the next month, Goodman immediately dropped to 20c. DC had invested heavily in extra paper, and they knew that low prices were killing newsstand sales, so they stuck with the higher prices and more pages for a few months. But the kids just saw that Marvel was cheaper. At the same time, Goodman gave the newsstands a bigger slice of the 5 cent rise, to make them more likely to stock Marvel instead of DC. This was the moment when Marvel decisively beat DC in sales. It was not due to the quality or otherwise of the product, but because Goodman was willing to shake on an agreement then shoot his partner in the back, even when it harmed the industry as a whole.

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<sup>130</sup> “American Comic Book Chronicles: The 1970s” by Jason Sacks et al. p.36

## 1977: Luck

In the mid 1970s both Marvel and DC thought comics would die, due to the loss of spinner racks to more profitable products. But Marvel got lucky: Roy Thomas was friends with George Lucas, and wanted to publish a comic based on Star Wars. Stan Lee had turned the idea down. But Thomas managed to persuade him.<sup>131</sup> The Star Wars Comic sold so well that it saved Marvel Comics. This is important. Marvel did not become number one due to the quality of its writing, as Jim Shooter admits:

Many books, despite my best efforts to shore up the bottom were unreadable. Not merely bad. Unreadable. Almost all were less than they ought to be. There were a few exceptions. [...] However, what can't be debated is that sales were bad and falling. It was almost all newsstand sales then, by the way. This was before the Direct Market was a significant factor. The comics overall were breakeven at best. Upstairs, the cheesy non-comics magazine department was losing millions. It seemed like the company as a whole was in a death spiral.<sup>132</sup>

Star Wars saved Marvel while DC continued to decline. So at that point Marvel was clearly the number 1 selling comics company, though it didn't mean much.

## 1978: DC shot itself in the foot

Without Star Wars to help it, DC sales continued to slide. In 1978 the company decided to just close twelve of its titles overnight. This became known as it "The DC Implosion". DC itself could see that the new Superman movie gave them hope, but the people higher up in the parent company (Warner Brothers) never read comics and just decided to cut the less profitable titles. The result was that Marvel's lead became even clearer.

## 1979: DC shot itself in the other foot

By far the most important factor in sales in the 1970s was not quality, but the decline of the newsstands. In 1979 comic speciality shops began to take over.<sup>133</sup> It was a huge shake up. DC remembered that in the last huge shake up (1954 and 1957) they won by being extra cautious and letting others take the risks. So DC let Marvel invest in comic speciality shops, and planned to copy only if it worked.<sup>134</sup> This proved disastrous for DC. For comic fans, Marvel was now way out in front.

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<sup>131</sup> A really long time ago, Marvel played fast and loose with Star Wars, Tegan O'Neil, <https://aux.avclub.com/a-really-long-time-ago-marvel-played-fast-and-loose-wi-1798286716>

<sup>132</sup> Roy Thomas Saved Marvel, Jim Shooter, <https://web.archive.org/web/20150912134444/http://www.jimshooter.com/2011/07/roy-thomas-saved-marvel.html>

<sup>133</sup> When newsstands didn't sell a comic they just returned it for a refund. This was expensive for the publisher. A speciality shop was different: it kept unsold comics and hoped to sell them later to collectors. In return for never sending comics back it got a better price. Convention organizer and distributor Phil Seuling arranged the first such deal in 1972. But in 1978 another distributor, Irjax, sued Marvel and DC, saying Seuling got special treatment, like getting his comics earlier. By 1979, Marvel and DC realised they either had to either stop helping speciality shops, or gamble their whole future on them. See "Comic Shop: The Retail Mavericks Who Gave Us a New Geek Culture" by Dan Gearino

<sup>134</sup> Gaining a Firm Control on the Direct Market, Chuck Rozanski, <http://www.milehighcomics.com/tales/cbg116.html>



## What was Lee's role in Marvel's success?

The 1972 “dirty tricks” were due to Goodman, not Lee. The 1977 Star Wars license had been opposed by Lee. And Lee's greatest contribution to the 1978 and 1979 success was that he got out of the way: DC was overly cautious because its management remembered the 1950s. But all the old leadership (including Lee) had left Marvel, and it was led by younger people who were a little more ready to take risks.

## Lee and movies

When Lee left the day to day running of comics in 1972, he spent that time in Hollywood, working on deals. But the deals seldom came to anything, and any movies were generally poor. Lee was the public face of the movies, the one who was supposed to make deals, when the company made its most costly mistake: irretrievably selling the movie rights to the X-Men and Fantastic Four.<sup>135</sup>

Marvel's movies did not become hits until the 2000s, when Lee was no longer directly involved. But they are still trying to undo the damage caused when he was there.

It might also be argued that Lee's publicity and movie cameos are now a net benefit to the company, but they may only appeal to people already predisposed to like the movies. I have heard people complain that the cameos are distracting, removing the necessary realism, but the belief may not be widespread.

## Did Lee help Kirby's work improve?

It might be claimed that, even if Kirby did the work, Lee somehow gave him the freedom to flourish. For example, Sequart's Richard Bensam writes:

It's astonishing to look back at FF #1 and then jump ahead to The Battle of the Baxter Building, the wedding of Reed and Sue, the introduction of the Inhumans and Galactus and the Silver Surfer, and that transformation takes place in just four years. Four years!"<sup>136</sup>

However, this theory fails if we compare Kirby's pre-Fantastic Four work. There were plenty of spectacular and choreographed battles in Captain America, plenty of weddings in Kirby's romance comics, and plenty of majestic aliens in his monster comics. As for the art improving, as noted in the chapter on later Fantastic Four comics, the cosmic art in issue 7 (and the dramatic alien scenes) are just as good as anything later. Yes, Kirby's style evolved incrementally as always, but the real difference was that later Kirby had more space and a better inker. Kirby had used more space in his Captain America comics as well, with spectacular results. All Kirby ever needed was to be set free.

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<sup>135</sup> “Captain Finance”: The Secret Hero Behind Marvel Studios, Kelly Konda, <https://weminoredinfilm.com/2016/05/05/captain-finance-the-secret-hero-behind-marvel-studios/>

<sup>136</sup> Fantastic Four at 55: Talking With Sequart's Richard Bensam, Michael Brown <http://comicbook.com/marvel/2016/11/25/fantastic-four-at-55-talking-with-sequarts-richard-bensam/>

Kirby had more freedom by 1965 simply because the title was selling so well. But it was merely selling at normal Kirby levels.

## **Lee's long term legacy**

As argued throughout this book, Lee's primary role was to dumb down stories. He attracted people who like simple stories and drove away people who like sophistication. At the time the net result was zero. But the long term result may have been to destroy the comics industry.

Mainstream comics have been in decline since the 1960s. A "hit" comic now may sell just 30,000 copies: fewer than one per large town in the USA. This decline is usually blamed on the rise of TV, video, games, etc: readers now have more choices.

However, TV has not led to the death of the regular printed book. Why?

Normal printed books survive because they offer something TV does not have: greater depth. People who are tired of dumbed down media can escape to a book. Books are mainly for adults. So books survive.

But comics? While Lee would praise his young readers as being intelligent, he nevertheless produced a dumbed down product. Kirby produced a sophisticated product, and Lee dumbed it down. This is not to insult comics readers: even a genius might need mindless relaxation at times. But TV (and games, social media etc.) can provide mindless relaxation better than comics can. Lee's dumbed down comics cannot compete with TV.

Perhaps comics would have dumbed down even without Lee. But Lee's principal influence is in dumbing down. Therefore, to the extent that Lee had any effect, it was to help destroy the long term future of comics.

# Appendices



# Appendix 1: Kirby the writer, pre 1961

Many readers only know Kirby's later prose, where he deals with huge concepts. Naturally this prose is information-dense and punchy, not like Lee's smooth, simple style. But Kirby wrote plenty of simple, easy to read comics before 1961. This appendix has some examples.

## How to identify Kirby's writing

A writer can be identified by their distinctive style. This is the science of stylometry (Google it) and is used for identifying disputed documents. Martin O'Hearn applies this to comics: he discusses this in detail in his blog, "Who Created the Comic Books", with numerous examples.<sup>137</sup> And so, for example, he can confidently say that the Captain America stories credited to Otto Binder were completely rewritten by Kirby: the finished product was Kirby dialog, not Binder dialog.<sup>138</sup>

Even if we don't use formal methods, when we read enough of an author's work we grow familiar with the tell-tale signs. Kirby stands out a mile!

## Kirby's romance books

The romance books (Young Love, Young Romance, etc) show Kirby's ability to write simple yet compelling character-driven dialog. Though they were signed "Simon and Kirby", classic Kirby phrases turn up again and again. It is very clear that the dialog is written by the same person who wrote the Fourth World comics twenty years later. Sometimes entire phrases are the same. For example, Aaron Noble noticed this example, from the introduction to "Hands off Lucy" in Young Romance 20:

There are episodes in the lives of all of us which remain forever hidden shadows in the mind...on occasions, they drift like dark mists across our thoughts —to be fleetingly relived!

Now compare this passage from New Gods 11:

The moments are few when the shadows of deep concern creep across Darkseid's granite visage —and the secrets hidden there begin to emerge—as if to retreat before great pain—!

The Romance books typically start with an intense emotional description like that, before moving into the everyday dialog of the characters. Here's are two sample pages, from Young

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<sup>137</sup> For methods used, see Identifying the Writers, Martin O'Hearn, <https://martinohearn.blogspot.co.uk/2011/07/identifying-writers.html>; For Kirby examples, see Who Created the Comic Books? Martin O'Hearn, <https://martinohearn.blogspot.co.uk/search/label/Kirby%20scripts>

<sup>138</sup> "O'Hearn's fellow scholar Rich Morrissey said that O'Heran had a copy of Otto Binder's assignment log and that early Captain America stories known from the log to have been written by Binder had been so heavily rewritten by Kirby that the stories could not be identified as Binder's work using O'Hearn's stylometry method." - Patrick Ford, on the Jack Kirby Dialogue Facebook group

Romance 6. The whole story is available on the Comic Book Plus site<sup>139</sup>, along with dozens of other complete Kirby stories. See for yourself!



<sup>139</sup> Young Romance v1 6, Prize, <http://comicbookplus.com/?dlid=57915>





It's richer than Lee dialog, but still easy to read. If you don't think Kirby writes like that, try the next example:



## The Frog Prince

The Frog Prince is a screenplay Kirby wrote in 1949 or 1950<sup>140</sup>, about a proud man who cannot stand it when his face is scarred (a forerunner of Kirby's Dr Doom). Here's part of an action scene:

THE DEMONIC SMILE IS STILL ON HIS FACE  
AS HE GRATES OUT HIS WORDS TO CLAY

EASY BUCK

Wanna know who ran you over? THIS STARTLES.  
CLAY Why don't you ask Julie? HIS FIST  
LASHES OUT AND HURLS CLAY FROM HIM. EASY  
BUCK FOLLOWS UP AND STRIKES HARD, ONE  
SUCCESSIVE BLOW AFTER THE OTHER Ask  
Julie! SMASH It's someone SMASH in her  
house SMASH.

CLAY IS ON THE FLOOR. HE IS STUNNED,  
LIVID WITH RAGE AS EASY BUCK ADVANCES  
ON HIM LAUGHING

EASY BUCK'S VOICE

Nice, sweet kid, Julie! Hahahaha-  
CLAY SUDDENLY HEAVES HIMSELF FROM THE  
FLOOR AND HURTLES AT THE CAMERA.

And here is a more domestic scene:

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<sup>140</sup> For the full screenplay, see Jeremy Kirby's book "Jack Kirby: A Personal Look"

CARL

What happened to him now? I thought he was asleep?

JULIE

Nothing. Nothing. TO GEORGIE There, there, Honey, there's nothing to be frightened of--

GEORGIE

STILL SOBBING They were monsters! Big, black ones with red eyes--they were chasing me-

JULIE

Oh shush, Georgie. It was just a bad dream, that's all. Dreams can't hurt you, you know that.

GEORGIE

IN REBUTTAL It's scary when you're in 'em. JULIE SMILES AND CARL LAUGHS. HE WALKS OVER AND KNEELS BY THE COUCH NEXT TO GEORGIE.

CARL

TO JULIE He's got a point there! TO GEORGIE Say can't you dream about nice things like flowers or dogs or rockets to the moon?

GEORGIE

I like cowboys and indians--and dragons and Jack and the Beanstalk!

CARL

Dragons, oh great! TO JULIE Just when you begin to think they're precocious, they prove they're disappointingly normal.

And here's a descriptive passage, showing how Kirby handles character and emotion:

JULIE SUDDENLY LOOKS UP. SHE HAS HEARD SOMETHING WHICH GEORGIE, WHO IS ABSORBED IN THE BOOK, HAS NOT CAUGHT. IT IS THE SOUND OF THE DOORKNOB TURNING, THE DOOR SWINGING QUIETLY OPEN AND THE BATTERED HULK OF CLAY CHAPMAN CROSSING THE THRESHOLD, HE IS A GROTESQUE FIGURE MADE MISSHAPEN BY HIS TORN DISARRAYED CLOTHES, THE INHABITANT OF A NIGHTMARISH DREAM, GIVEN THE DIMENSION OF REALTY. AND IN THE DIM LIGHT, THE BRUTE FACE EMERGES FROM THE DEEPER SHADOWS. A THIN LINE OF BLOOD BRACKETS THE LIP AND JAW. AN EYE GLEAMS FROM A SWOLLEN SOCKET AND THE SWEAT GLUES STRANDS OF HAIR ACROSS THE BRUISED FOREHEAD. JULIE'S FACE IS A MASK OF CONTROLLED FEAR AND SHE IS HELD AS IF IN A TRANCE, BY THAT TERRIBLE VISION. GEORGIE TRIES TO GET JULIE'S ATTENTION. HE DOES NOT AS YET NOTICE CLAY IN THE DIM LIGHT. HIS VOICE SEEMS TO CUT THE STRING OF TERROR BINDING JULIE TO THE APPARITION AND ALTHOUGH, SHE STILL PACES CLAY, SHE IS ABLE TO MUSTER A MEASURE OF COURAGE TO RESIST WHAT CONFRONTS HER.



## Kirby writes sci-fi

Next is a page from one of Kirby's many sci-fi stories: it's from "Alarming Tales". Again you can read the whole thing on the Comic Book Plus site.<sup>141</sup> I urge you to do so. Kirby is a brilliant writer!

This story is about a post apocalyptic world inhabited by humanoid animals. This was a classic Kirby theme, most famously used in Kamandi.

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<sup>141</sup> Alarming Tales #1, Harvey Comics, <http://comicbookplus.com/?dlid=16924>

I COULD ONLY SENSE THE REST--BEING DRAGGED INTO SOME SORT OF TUNNEL IN THE GROUND--THEN I PASSED OUT--



IF EVER ANY MAN WAS IN A JAM, IT WAS HAMMOND DRAKE, MYSELF. I COULDN'T GUESS HOW FAR UNDERGROUND THEY'D TAKEN ME. WHEN I AWOKE, I WAS FACING AN INQUISITION--



**ATOM BOMBS!!**



I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU MEAN--



Incidentally, note the underground setting, the small angry rat-man with a stick, and the map of tunnels on the wall. Look familiar? Glimpses of Kirby's later Mole Man story (and this one ends with a nuclear bomb as well).

Next is a page from a journey into a higher dimension, an idea Kirby would return to with the subspace portal (the negative zone entrance) in the Fantastic Four. Note Kirby's lighthearted use of humour, something else that will figure in the Fantastic Four: the title is playing with the title of the 1955 movie "Love is a Many Splendored Thing".

Once again I urge you to read the whole story, and the whole issue, available online for free.

<sup>142</sup> Kirby's writing is just wonderful!

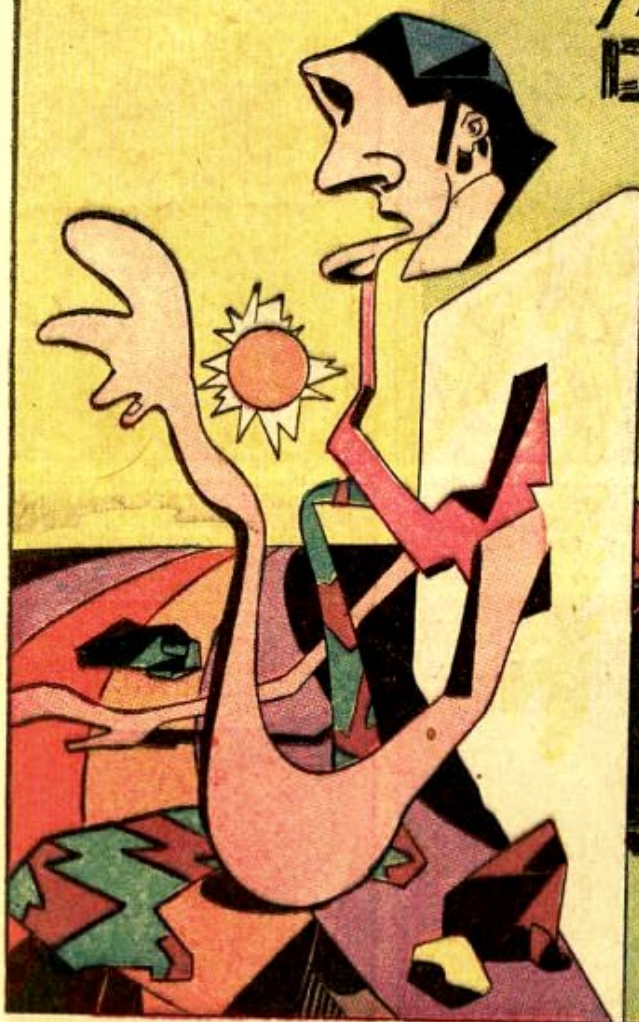
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<sup>142</sup> Alarming Tales #2, Harvey Comics, <http://comicbookplus.com/?dlid=16918>



EDDIE COULD NEVER BE CONFUSED IN THIS WORLD... BUT...

# The FOURTH DIMENSION IS A MANY SPLATTERED THING!



EDDIE-- NO!  
DON'T GO THROUGH  
THAT SCREEN!



AT THE TIME, MAX HALL AND I OWNED A LITTLE HAT STORE ON HIGH STREET--AND ON SUNDAY WE LIKED TO SLEEP LATE AND RELAX IN THE APARTMENT WE SHARED. BUT WHEN THE TROUBLE STARTED, OUR RELAXING DAYS WERE OVER--



WHAT--  
AGAIN?

YEP--  
AGAIN!

THIS MAKES THE  
THIRD TIME WE'VE  
BEEN ROBBED! I  
WONDER WHO'S AT  
THE BOTTOM OF IT?

THIS TIME WE'RE  
GOING TO STAY AWAKE  
AND FIND OUT!



## Conclusion: Kirby could do dialog too

As these examples show, Kirby could write simply when he needed do. It wasn't quite as simple as Lee's, but it didn't need to be. Children will make the effort if the story is rewarding, as Kirby's sales demonstrate.<sup>143</sup>

By 1970 Kirby knew that the average reader was a little older, so he adjusted his dialog accordingly. Kirby always challenged his readers with bigger ideas. And by the 1980s they were older still, so he produced rich poetic language like this example from Captain Victory. But in 1961 Kirby was writing for younger readers, so would have no trouble dialoguing the Fantastic Four. Kirby could write for all ages.

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<sup>143</sup> Appendix 5







## Appendix 2: Lee's version of events

Here is Lee's story of how he created the Fantastic Four, from his "Origins of Marvel Comics":

"Martin [Goodman, the publisher, and Stan's uncle by marriage] mentioned that he had noticed one of the titles published by National Comics seemed to be selling better than most. It was a book called The [sic] Justice League of America and it was composed of a team of superheroes . . . 'if the Justice League is selling', spoke he, 'why don't we put out a comic book that features a team of superheroes?'" Joan [Stan's wife] 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 books."

"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."

"After kicking it around with Martin and Jack for a while, I decided to call our quaint quartet The Fantastic Four. I wrote a detailed first synopsis for Jack to follow, and the rest is history."<sup>144</sup>

Lee often retold that story, with more details:

"It was now 1960. By now, I really wanted to leave, because one edict that my publisher had was that the stories had to be geared towards young readers; or unintelligent older readers. We weren't supposed to use words of more than two syllables, and we had to have simple plots; no continuing stories, because he felt our readers weren't smart enough to remember from month to month where they had left off. It was really boring.

"In either '60 or '61 I said to my wife, Joanie, 'This time, I'm really going to leave.' She said, 'Well, if you're determined to leave, why don't you first do a book or two the way you wanted to, no matter what the publisher says? The worst that can happen is that he'll fire you. You won't care, because you want to leave, but at least you'll get it out of your system.'"

"It happened that; at that time; my publisher had been playing golf with Jack Liebowitz, who was one of the bosses at DC comics; which in those days was called National Comics. Jack Liebowitz had told him that he had a magazine called The Justice League, which was selling very well, and it was a group of super-heroes. So Martin came to me and he said, 'Hey Stan... Why don't you do a group of super-heroes?' Again, this business of following the trend.

"I figured, 'All right, but this time I'm going to do it my way.' Instead of the typical heroes that have secret identities and nobody knows who they are, I did The Fantastic Four; where everybody knew who they were. And instead of the girlfriend who doesn't know that the hero is so-and-so, I had the girl in the series actually be engaged to the hero, and she was a heroine; she was part of the team. Instead of the typical junior sidekick, I had a teenager who was also the brother of the heroine; and the hero would soon marry the heroine, so they would be brothers-in-law. The fourth member of the team was a monstrous-looking guy, called The Thing, which was not a typical super-hero type in those days. I also

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<sup>144</sup> Stan Lee, 1974, "Origins of Marvel Comics"

tried to give them fairly realistic dialogue, and I didn't have them wear colorful costumes. I always felt that if I had super-power, I wouldn't immediately run out to the store and buy a costume.  
"Somehow or other, the book caught on."<sup>145</sup>

Is the story real? Readers with good memories will recall a similar claim by Lee, written back in 1947, called "Secrets behind the comics". In it, Lee claimed that Captain America was the result of Martin Goodman's foresight and genius. Even though Goodman simply bought a book that was already created by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby. So perhaps we should look again at Stan's claims.

## Lee's memory

Lee is famous for his bad memory. E.g.

"My memory is not the best,"

"I have the worst memory in the world,"

"Obviously my memory is wrong."<sup>146</sup>

This is not a new thing:

"I even had a bad memory when I was young. I'd call him 'Bob Banner' instead of 'Bruce Banner,' etc. I hadda give out a heap of no-prizes!"<sup>147</sup>

## Does Lee always tell the truth?

A cynic might point out that by "bad memory" Lee means "I do not tell the truth." Here are some examples:

### 1.

For years Lee told the story of how he got his first job in comics by answering a newspaper ad. When confronted with evidence that actually his uncle got him the job, Lee admitted:

I've been saying this [classified-ad] story for years, but apparently it isn't so. And I can't remember because I've said it so long now that I believe it..<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Stan Lee's 2000 interview with Kenneth Plume

<sup>146</sup> <http://twomorrows.com/comicbookartist/articles/02stanroy.html>

<sup>147</sup> Stan Lee, on Twitter. <https://twitter.com/therealstanlee/status/5997120542>

<sup>148</sup> See Joe Simon's 1990 autobiography, "The Comic Book Makers"

## 2.

Readers may also recall Lee's claim (in the famous 1966 newspaper interview) that he won the Herald Tribune competition three times. That claim has been thoroughly investigated and found to be false.<sup>149</sup>

## 3.

Sometimes Lee's memories cannot be checked, but are just highly unlikely if not physically impossible. For example:

I was a show-off, in my early twenties, as I look back at it. What I would do was dictate two or three stories at a time. I'd quickly dictate a page of one story to one girl, and while she was transcribing it. I'd dictate a page of another story to another girl, and then maybe a third one to a third girl. I had this great feeling of power, that I was keeping three secretaries busy with three stories, and I knew that occasionally people were watching—and I was so proud.<sup>150</sup>

A good secretary can type at least 60 words per minute, often more. People talk at around 140 words per minute, and a fast novelist would expect to produce 1500 words per day, or 10 minutes of good quality finished work in 8 hours.<sup>151</sup> If Lee's story is true, then it is false: because Lee could not be creating usable stories that way. If he really did dictate at such a speed, any useable results would have to come from the secretaries themselves.

## 4.

Even today, Lee "remembers" things for their effect rather than their accuracy. For example, at the 2017 D23 expo, Lee was given the Disney Legends award. Yes, he is very old, but had plenty of time to prepare his speech, and plenty of money to have a secretary check the facts. He spoke about how, as a penniless "kid of eight or ten", he wanted to buy the book "The Art of Walt Disney". However, The Art of Walt Disney was not published until 1942, the year when Lee turned 20, and had been making a good living in his uncle's company for three years. Kirby's Captain America had debuted the year before, selling a million copies an issue, so Lee, as editor, was neither "penniless" nor a "kid of eight or ten".

## 5.

Lee's story about creating the Fantastic Four seems to be another example of a fabricated memory. Let us examine the claims, one by one.

## Lee wanted to quit?

This part is supported by the surrounding evidence, but not quite the way Lee tells it. Rather than Lee being a TV and newspaper writer who could choose other jobs, Lee was a

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<sup>149</sup> "Stan Lee and the Rise and Fall of the American Comic Book" p.6

<sup>150</sup> Stan Lee: Conversations, page 61

<sup>151</sup> <http://thewritepractice.com/how-fast/>



desperate man. Lee had run his uncle's comics since he left school, with a business model of copying other people's ideas. When the comics business slumped in the 1950s (largely due to Fredric Wertham) his uncle's comics lost their distributor and almost collapsed. Dick Ayers recalls:

Things started to get really bad in 1958. One day when I went in Stan looked at me and said, "Gee whiz, my uncle goes by and he doesn't even say hello to me." He meant Martin Goodman. And he proceeds to tell me, "You know, it's like a sinking ship and we're the rats, and we've got to get off." When I told Stan I was going to work for the post office, he said, "Before you do that let me send you something that you'll ink."<sup>152</sup>

Lee could be a nice guy. He wanted to help those around him who were losing their jobs. But he was in a very weak position himself.

## **"I was writing television material television material, advertising copy, and newspaper features"**

This quote implies that Lee was a successful writer. But when we look closer it tells the opposite story. In danger of losing his job, Lee tried creating a newspaper strip, called Willie Lumpkin. That was for "Publishers Syndicate", "a relatively small outfit" and "1960 was the only year the syndicate advertised it to potential buyers".<sup>153</sup>

A few newspapers carried it for a while, but the last one stopped after 18 months. I can't find any other evidence of Lee writing either "television material", "advertising copy", or "newspaper features". Perhaps he sent off scripts, or did the odd job for his uncle's publications. But when in the 1970s he tried selling scripts he was generally unsuccessful, despite his fame from Marvel that opened doors and given him free publicity. Those doors opened, they saw the quality of his work, and the doors closed again.

## **The golf game with Jack Liebowitz?**

Comics historian Michael Uslan has researched this and it simply did not happen. Jack Liebowitz did not play golf. It was suggested that maybe Lee meant Irwin Donenfeld, but that didn't happen either. Could it be somebody else? Maybe, but why would you play golf with your direct competitor, and then give him your most valuable trade secrets, your sales figures? Goodman relied on copying trends, so he would have inside information from somewhere, but probably not golf.

## **The Justice League as motivation?**

Fans sometimes point to a faint similarity between the cover of Brave and Bold 28 (the first Justice League comic) and Fantastic Four 1. However, there is a much closer comparison

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<sup>152</sup> Dick Ayers, interviewed in Alter Ego V3 No31

<sup>153</sup> <http://www.toonopedia.com/wililump.htm>

with several Kirby covers and splash pages of the same time: see for example Kirby's splash page in Journey into Mystery 58, which is almost identical.

If Goodman had been inspired by Justice League then the rational response would be to make a team out of the biggest hitters you have: bring back Captain America, the Torch and Sub-Mariner on a team. Yet when the Sub-Mariner did come back he was as an enemy. And if Goodman was afraid of being too obvious (since National distributed his comics), and wanted to phase in the big hitters quietly, at least have a team that is capable of having new members!

## They wanted a team book?

Lee claimed that Goodman knew that a team of superheroes would sell, thanks to the Justice League. But that logic makes no sense, and this is why:

The new Justice League averaged 335,000 sales, but The Flash was not far behind at 305,000, and Kirby's old comic The Fly was not far behind that. And The Flash had been selling better and better for two years at that point. We know that Lee was aware of the Flash because on page 1 of Fantastic Four 1 Lee called New York "Central City", the Flash's city. It's like calling it "Metropolis" or "Gotham": it indicates what you've been reading.

But if Goodman was looking at comic sales, wait, who is that in *eight* of the top ten spots, dwarfing Justice League's sales? Superman and Batman.<sup>154</sup>

So it's a safe bet that Justice League's success was simply due to having both Superman and Batman. Yet Justice League's sales were *lower* than Superman and Batman-related solo books (Lois Lane etc.). So being a team was actually *hurting* sales: their solo tales sold better.

## They wanted superheroes?

The Fantastic Four were superheroes, but not Justice League-type superheroes. Justice League stories relied heavily on superpowers. Early Fantastic Four stories did not. Those Fantastic Four stories were more like Challengers-type superheroes: the main purpose of the powers was simply for Ben to be a tragic figure. All of the first eight stories could easily have taken place without any powers at all:

FF 1: the Mole Man story was apparently not a superhero story, and only had superpowers added later: they could easily be removed and the story still works.

FF 2: the Skrull crisis is solved by Reed showing photos from FF 1 (see below)

FF 3: the Miracle Man crisis is solved by dazzling the enemy. A bright flash light would have done

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<sup>154</sup> <http://www.comichron.com/yearlycomicss.../postaldata/1961.html>

FF 4: the Namor crisis is solved by explosives. A hundred kilos of TNT would have done the job, if placed correctly (a single kilo, carefully placed, is enough to destroy a car). As an ex-Army man, Kirby would know that a single soldier could carry that: the oversized bomb was just so The Thing had something to do.

FF 5: the Dr Doom crisis is solved by sneaking up on Doom when he was busy and looking the other way. So invisibility was not needed. (At this time Sue could not make other objects invisible, so Doom would have seen the ropes anyway.)

FF 6: the space crisis was solved by Namor's presence: the FF were bystanders.

FF 7: the alien crisis was solved by Reed's intelligence, not his stretching.

FF 8: the Puppet Master crisis is solved by Alicia, not the team.

The powers only become important from issue 9, when it appears that Lee demanded a lighter, more conventional book from Kirby.

FF 9: each member uses their powers to escape a danger designed to stop them. Jack is deliberately making the powers important to the plot for the first time.

FF 10: Sue defeats the pseudo-Doom with her powers, then the Torch tricks him with his powers, then the Thing stops him getting away by using his strength.

FF 11: both stories are designed to show off their powers.

FF 12: The Thing versus The Hulk

FF 13: fighting another superpowered team. And so on.

The early stories was about a team of adventurers, like the Challengers, with superpowers as an unnecessary add-on, a completely different concept from Justice League.

## Lee discussed it with Jack first

Lee wrote: "After kicking it around with Martin and Jack for a while". Note the ***"and Jack"***, This is the one part that agrees with all the evidence: Lee discussed the possibilities with Jack Kirby "for a while" before deciding anything. This explains why all the ideas that people like can be traced to Kirby.

## Sue was engaged?

Lee said, "I had the girl in the series actually be engaged to the hero". It is true that in FF 1 Stan's dialog calls her Reed's fiancée. But that is contradicted by both the art and the later story. The art shows her to be an active part of the planning team, and so she joins the crew on her own merits: rather than Lee raising the profile of women he reduces her to going into space just because she is Reed's girlfriend. Once Kirby left, Sue fainted and had to be rescued in almost every issue written by Lee.

## Lee disliked simple plots?

Lee said, "I really wanted to leave, because one edict that my publisher had was that the stories had to be geared towards young readers; or unintelligent older readers. We weren't supposed to use words of more than two syllables, and we had to have simple plots; no



continuing stories, because he felt our readers weren't smart enough to remember from month to month where they had left off. It was really boring."

If Lee disliked aiming stories at children, why did he aim the Fantastic Four at children? And if Lee disliked "simple plots" why, when given the choice of any story in the world, did he choose to create Willie Lumpkin?

Compare Lee's story with one by Kirby at around the same time. Lee disliked simple plots? Sure...







**SKY MASTERS OF THE SPACE FORCE**

I'VE GOT THE MOON JITTERS, SKY! IF BRUCE PLOTS A BAD FLIGHT COURSE, WE'LL NEVER HAVE FUEL ENOUGH TO GET HOME!

WE'VE GOT TO REACH THE NEUTRAL LINE, GUSHER...

SKY AND HIS MEN MUST ATTEMPT THEIR RETURN TO EARTH WITH A DANGEROUSLY LOW FUEL SUPPLY AFTER LEARNING THAT HELP FROM THE "WHEEL" CANNOT REACH THEM BEFORE THEIR OXYGEN IS CONSUMED...



...THE POINT BETWEEN THE GRAVITATIONAL FIELDS OF EARTH AND MOON! THEN, WE CAN COAST ON EARTH'S GRAVITY!

AND... (GULP) ...IF WE DON'T?



THEN WE'LL BE DRAWN BACK TO THE MOON... TO HIT LIKE A METEOR!

WE'RE APPROACHING BLAST OFF TIME-- IF THOSE SAMPLES OF THE MOON'S SURFACE ARE ABOARD-- RIOT CAN START THE AUTOMATIC FIRING SEQUENCER!



WE'RE OFF! BUILDING UP THRUST!

NAVIGATOR TO PILOT! STAND BY FOR SPACE BEARINGS!



OUR ARCH OF TRAJECTORY IS GOOD... MAKE COURSE CORRECTION TWO DEGREES LEFT!

KEEP US RIGHT ON THE BEAM, BRUCE, BOY-- WE HAVEN'T THE FUEL FOR DETOURS!



DI EMP

FUEL



THE THIRSTY ENGINE GULPS FUEL AT AN INCREDIBLE RATE... AND FINALLY...

THE MOTORS CUT OUT! NOTHING TO DO NOW, BUT WAIT, UNTIL WE COAST TO THE NEUTRAL LINE!



IF WE'RE ON THE RIGHT COURSE, SKY-- AND IF OUR THRUST IS STRONG ENOUGH TO GET US THERE!

## Lee disliked secret identities?

Lee said, "Instead of the typical heroes that have secret identities and nobody knows who they are, I did The Fantastic Four; where everybody knew who they were."

Then why did Lee's dialog add several references to secret hideouts?



Why, in Strange Tales 101 (published the same month as Fantastic Four 7) did Johnny Storm have a secret identity?



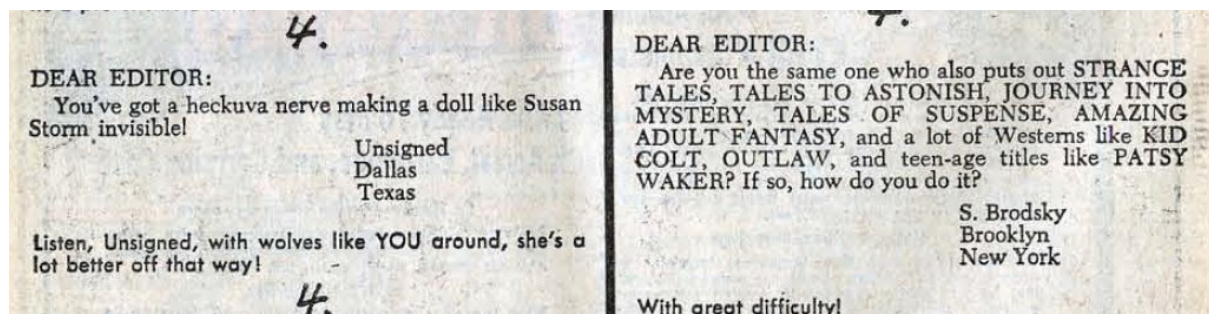
Why did Lee give (or allow) the Hulk to have a secret identity? And Thor. And Spider-Man. And pretty much everybody else? For a man who disliked secret identities he sure used a lot of them.

## Lee disliked costumes?

Lee said, "I didn't have them wear colorful costumes. I always felt that if I had super-power, I wouldn't immediately run out to the store and buy a costume." Yet by issue 3 they had costumes.

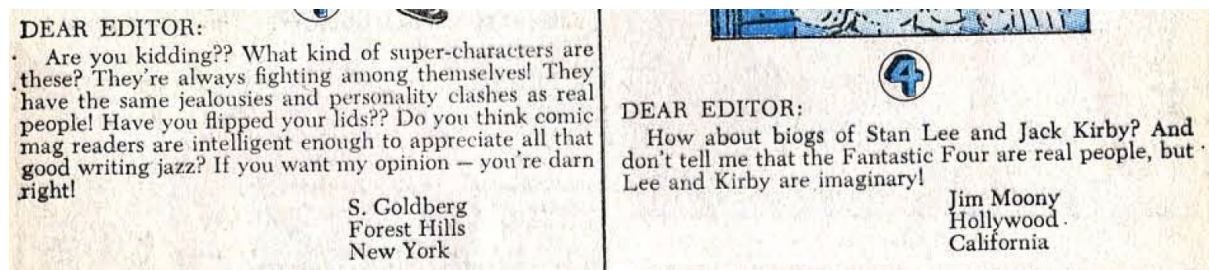
Lee's explanation for costumes is that fans demanded them. But issue 3 was too early for a large amount of fan feedback, due to the time lag between writing, printing and distributing. That issue did have the first letters page, but at least two of the letters were fake, which suggests how few real letters they had received:





("S. Brodsky" would be Sol Brodsky the production manager, who managed to list all the company's products in his letter. "Unsigned" uses "heckuva", a distinctive Lee word, and his letter is suspiciously like something Lee would write.)

Two months later, issue 4's letters page still had at least one fake letter, and possibly several. Again this indicates that there still wasn't much feedback at this point.



("S Goldberg" would be Stan Goldberg, Marvel artist and colourist. Jim Moony, Hollywood" sounds suspiciously like DC artist Jim Mooney of Hollywood who would soon come to work for Marvel.)

None of these letters asked for costumes. If Lee disliked the idea of costumes why would he go ahead with it? And why did he then give every later superhero a costume?

## Lee did it "his way"?

The core of the matter is that Lee decided to suddenly write great stories. Which is something he had never done before or since. He spent his life copying whatever kind of comic was already popular, so he was very good at writing quickly and creating passable stories. He was good at easy to read dialog and over-selling. But he had zero track record of creating anything successful, either before or since. Lee's list of original creations before 1961 includes... well, Willie Lumpkin. A gentle humour that didn't sell particularly well or for very long. And that's about it. Meanwhile Kirby had created or co-created Captain America, the entire romance genre, original titles about dreams, war, space, westerns, pretty much anything you can imagine.

And where is Lee's track record after he left Marvel? We have Stripperella, and... that's about the only memorable one. But Jack Kirby continued creating original characters that still sell today: Darkseid, OMAC, Mr Miracle, Kamandi, Eternals, and many many more. How

likely is it that Lee had a sudden and once-only flash of inspiration when he was around Kirby (or Steve Ditko) and not at any other time?

## **“The rest is history”?**

This phrase implies that these events were special, from Lee, and that led to greatness. That is a misleading partial history at best.

Lee’s efforts in 1961 were not special - that is, not unique. Seven years earlier, in 1954, Lee already tried superheroes. Between 1954 and 1955, Goodman tried to revive their top selling superheroes, Captain America, the Submariner and the Human Torch. Goodman and Lee had just as much reason to try hard, to commission or write the best possible material, because of the crisis of 1954. They desperately needed a hit! But they didn’t have Kirby then, and their superhero revival failed.<sup>155</sup>

As for the rest being history, 1954 was not the only time Lee failed at superheroes. It happened again after Kirby left in the early 1970s. Superhero sales fell, which is why Marvel began trying non-superheroes again: Conan, Jungle Action, Dracula, War of the Worlds, Night Nurse, etc. The only times Lee had a hit with superheroes were 1941 and 1961, when Jack Kirby produced the comics. When Kirby left, sales declined.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Perhaps we could blame the 1954 crisis for Lee’s earlier failed attempt, because after all, Kirby’s Mainline comics also failed soon after. But Mainline failed because it could not get distribution. Before 1967 Lee had good distribution, plus he could promote the new comics in his numerous other comics (whereas readers had little chance to hear about Mainline). Lee continued to produce other comics, so that was not the problem. Yet his 1954-55 superhero titles did not sell. So we can only attribute this to readers not wanting Lee’s superheroes.

<sup>156</sup> Superheroes sold well again in the 1980s, and had success with movies in the 2000s, but these were almost all Kirby creations. Marvel’s success is always a measure of how well it manages Kirby’s ideas.

# Appendix 3: Lee's reputation

## Before 1960

Lee's job was to copy other people's ideas. Martin Goodman would see a comics that sold well, and tell Lee to produce something based on it, as cheaply as possible. Lee would then hire writers and artists. For example:

- Kirby had a hit with "Young Romance", so Lee was told to produce "My Romance". Lee's version failed after three issues.
- EC had hits with "Weird Fantasy", "Weird Science" and "Two Fisted Tales", So Lee was told to change Captain America into "Captain America's Weird Tales". This failed after two issues.
- Dell had a hit with "Little Lulu", so Lee produced "Little Lizzie". It lasted five issues.
- Chic Young had a hit with "Blondie", so Lee produced "Rusty." It lasted almost two years.
- Harvey had a hit with "Casper The Friendly Ghost", so Lee produced "Homer the Happy Ghost". This lasted three years, which made it a hit for Lee. But a Lee "hit" typically sold 180,000 issues, whereas an average comic from another publisher would sell around 300,000.

Daniel Keyes, acclaimed author of "Flowers for Algernon", recalls working for Lee years earlier.

Stan Lee was a lanky shy young man who let his editors deal with the scriptwriters, cartoonists, and lettering crew. Writers turned in plot synopses, Stan read them, and as a matter of course, would accept one or two from each of the regulars he referred to as his "stable." As one of his front men, I would pass along comments and criticism. ... Because of my experience editing Marvel and because I'd sold a few science fiction stories by then, Stan allowed me to specialize in the horror, fantasy, suspense, and science fiction comic books. Naturally, I began submitting story ideas, getting freelance assignments, and supplementing my salary by writing scripts on my own time.<sup>157</sup>

When asked if Lee wrote comics at the time, Keyes replied

Not to my knowledge. He edited, I guess. He was a businessman, as far as I was concerned. And a shy businessman is almost an oxymoron. I've never thought of Stan as a writer at all. So that surprises me. Of course, he might have been turning in comics for a few extra bucks, doing it under pen names so that Martin Goodman wouldn't know about it. I never thought of Stan as a writer. He says that he created Spider-Man. I never thought of him as a creative person. It could be that one of the writers created it and sent in a synopsis. And it got picked up. But of course he's become a multi-millionaire for that stuff.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Keyes, "Algernon, Charlie, and I: A Writer's Journey" 2004 edition, p.79

<sup>158</sup> Keyes, interview in Alter-Ego #13, 2002.



When asked about this quote, Lee said he could not remember ever seeing Keyes. However, Lee admits to having an extremely bad memory (see appendix 2).

## After 1960

Among his fans, Lee is generally beloved. He told them that he created their favourite characters. He told readers that they were very intelligent. He used self deprecating humour. No wonder fans loved him!

Among people he paid properly, he is generally respected. If a writer is paid to write, he is happy. If an artist is paid to draw, he is happy.

But others in the industry knew him as somebody who would sign his name on other people's work. For example, when legendary artist Wally Wood worked on Daredevil, he said he received the same treatment as Kirby: he wrote and drew Daredevil, but was only paid for the art. He left Marvel after one year. He later wrote,

I resent guys like Stan Lee more than I can say! He's my one reason for living... I want to see that no-talent bum get his.<sup>159</sup>

Steve Ditko had a similar view: he was "boiling mad" for the same reason. That was why Ditko left:

Dick Giordano recalled visiting Ditko at his studio and he was "boiling mad," according to an interview with Giordano in *Comic Book Artist* #9 (August 2000, pg. 42). "The dispute was, he thought he was writing Spider-Man, but Stan was getting the credit."<sup>160</sup>

Artist Joe Orlando (who later became vice-president of DC comics) didn't mind plotting the comics for nothing. But he resented Lee then making him do extra artwork for nothing. When he complained he got no more work. Mark Evanier explained:

Orlando said that on the Daredevil issues he did, he had to draw 25-30 pages to get 20 that Stan would accept, and the page rate wasn't that wonderful for 20 in the first place. He finally refused to do redraws on a Giant-Man story without additional pay because, as he put it, "I drew what Stan told me to draw and then he demanded I erase half of it and draw something else." That was his last Marvel job.<sup>161</sup>

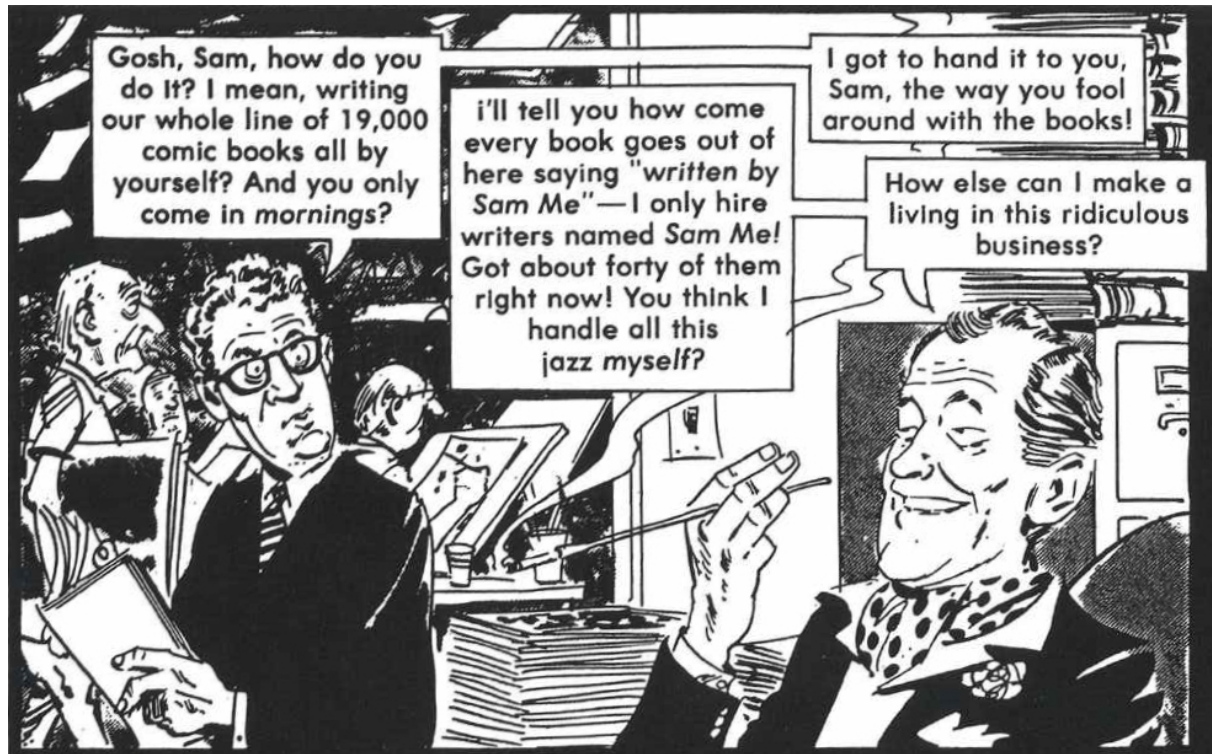
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<sup>159</sup> In a letter to John Hitchcock, a fan.

<sup>160</sup> From the Ditko FAQ at the United Fanzine Organization

<sup>161</sup> Mark Evanier (Kirby's biographer), on social media

The November 1966 issue of *Sick Magazine* (a competitor to *Mad*) contained a parody of “The Marvel Age of Comics” called “The New Age of Comics” written by Joe Simon. In it, a publisher called “Stan Me” signs every single book “written by Stan Me” even though other people write them.



The November 1968 issue of DC’s “*Angel and the Ape*” contained a character called “Stan Bragg” (he and his assistant were drawn to look like Lee and his assistant Roy Thomas, though the likenesses were reversed). Stan Bragg spoke like Stan Lee, and signed his name on other people’s work.



The February 1972 issue of Mister Miracle, by Kirby, contained “Funky Flashman” and his assistant “Houseroy”, modelled on Lee and his assistant Roy Thomas..



Again the topic was getting his money from other people’s work.



IN THE SHADOW WORLD BETWEEN SUCCESS AND FAILURE, THERE LIVES THE **DRIVEN** LITTLE MAN WHO DREAMS OF **HAVING IT ALL!!!**  
--THE OPPORTUNISTIC **SPOILER** WITHOUT CHARACTER OR VALUES, WHO PREYS ON ALL THINGS LIKE A CANNIBAL!!! ---INCLUDING **YOU!!!**  
LIKE DEATH AND TAXES, WE ALL MUST DEAL WITH HIM SOMETIME!  
THAT'S WHY, IN THIS ISSUE, WE GO WHERE HE LIVES--IN THE DECAYING ANTE-BELLUM GRANDEUR OF THE MOCKINGBIRD ESTATES!---AND "**WAIT FOR GODOT**" WITH

## **FUNKY FLASHMAN!**



Today the idea that Lee signs his name on others' work is no longer controversial. Since 1972 Marvel comics had "Stan Lee presents" even though he did not claim to be the writer.



Lee's name now appears as "executive producer" on movies that he apparently did little or nothing to produce.



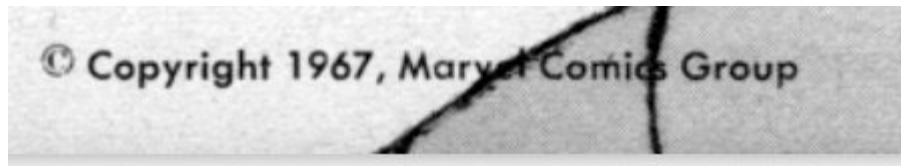
Signing his name on other people's work is just what he does.

## Appendix 4: The alleged "scripts"

Lee described how he worked with Kirby. Kirby came up with most of the ideas:

Some artists, such as Jack Kirby, need no plot at all. I mean I'll just say to Jack, "Let's let the next villain be Dr. Doom". . . or I may not even say that. He may tell me. And then he goes home and does it. He's so good at plots, I'm sure he's a thousand times better than I. He just about makes up the plots for these stories. All I do is a little editing . . . I may tell him that he's gone too far in one direction or another. Of course, occasionally I'll give him a plot, but we're practically both the writers on the things.

That interview was published in 1968,<sup>162</sup> but the copyrights indicate it may have been given in 1967.



In the same interview Lee said he would tape record these plotting meetings for someone else to type up:

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<sup>162</sup> Stan Lee Interview in "Castle of Frankenstein" 12, 1968. The images say "copyright 1967" so the interview may have taken place in that year.  
"http://kirbymuseum.org/blogs/dynamics/2012/05/08/stan-lee-interview-from-castle-of-frankenstein-12-1968/"



And we talk it out. Lately, I've had Roy Thomas come in, and he sits and makes notes while we discuss it. Then he types them up which gives us a written synopsis. originally—I have a little tape recorder—I had tried taping it, but I found that nobody on the staff has time to listen to the tape again. Later . . . so it's just too much of a waste. But this way he makes notes, types it quickly, I get a carbon, the artist, gets a carbon . . . so we don't have to worry that we'll forget what we've said.

This is normal practice in any business: a meeting with consequences should leave a paper trail.

Note that Lee found it hard to get the recordings typed. So very few early documents survive. Fans asked for them, but usually without success, as indicated in Fantastic Four 13:.

the 21 stupendous SUB-MARINER vs. THING fight panels. Which reminds me . . . I've noticed other companies give out free original art and story scripts for the best letters they receive . . . and I think *you*, who have the best of art and plot should also give us readers something we can be proud of the rest of our lives. (Besides the next issue of the fabulous quartet.) How 'bout it?

Detroit 19, Michigan

*We aren't able to give out original scripts or art at this time, but hope to sometime in the future. Ish #5 was inked by an old friend of ours. Joe*

In 1964, Jerry Bails, the most persistent fan of all (granddaddy of fandom and founder of Alter Ego) asked Lee for a "script" and Lee was eventually able to find one. But it was almost three years old. In total only three such documents have ever been found.

## Lee may have changed the documents

Lee has a history of self promotion, including making false claims<sup>163</sup> and changing historical documents<sup>164</sup> so it is possible he further tweaked these documents to make his own role look more important.

### Document 1 (issue 1)

The most famous of the three documents concerns issue 1.<sup>165</sup> It describes what is essentially the origin from Kirby's recent Challengers of the Unknown, plus the flame, invisibility, size and strength powers from Challengers issue 3, and the space race plot from Kirby's recent "Race to the Moon" and "Sky Masters" comics. It is divided into chapters, something Kirby generally did but Leedid not. This supports the previous quote, that Kirby came up with most of his plots.

The document says it covers 11 pages, but was only 5 in the final version. If this describes Lee's understanding of the issue then Kirby must have come up with the remaining 20 pages without consulting with Lee.

As Lee said, Kirby didn't need a plot, so this document would be for Lee's use when adding the final dialog. Kirby says he never saw it.

GROTH: Stan says he conceptualized virtually everything in The Fantastic Four — that he came up with all the characters. And then he said that he wrote a detailed synopsis for Jack to follow.

ROZ KIRBY: I've never seen anything.

KIRBY: I've never seen it, and of course I would say that's an outright lie.<sup>166</sup>

### Document 2 (issue 8)

The "script" for issue 8<sup>167</sup> does not include the ending, which comes from an earlier Kirby story.<sup>168</sup> The document reads like rough notes, not a polished script,<sup>169</sup> and contains plot holes that suggest Lee was making hurried notes.<sup>170</sup> There are indications that Lee did not

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<sup>163</sup> See appendix 2

<sup>164</sup> In the discussion of page 4 (on who created the monster comics) we saw how Lee or his representatives painted over the Kirby/Ayers signatures. When those signatures survived, years later Lee (or his representatives) added "art by" in the same handwriting, to make it seem that Kirby and Ayers were only claiming they did the art.

<sup>165</sup> Fantastic Four 1 Synopsis, <http://kirbymuseum.org/blogs/dynamics/2011/03/14/ff-1-synopsis/>

<sup>166</sup> Jack Kirby Interview, <http://www.tcj.com/jack-kirby-interview/6/>

<sup>167</sup> As printed in Jerry Bail's fanzine, Alter Ego" issue 2, dated November 1964. The full synopsis is reprinted half way through this blog post:

<http://galaxybeingsmavericlions.blogspot.co.uk/2008/08/true-origin-of-fantastic-four.html>

<sup>168</sup> "Voodoo on 10th Ave." from Black Magic issue 4.

<sup>169</sup> The issue 1 synopsis used complete sentences, but this one does not. As if this was written quickly. The previous synopsis has sentences that make sense. But this one contains lines like "people stare at invisible gal talking to Thing". Presumably he meant "stare at Thing" or "stare at the space where the Thing is looking" but this works as a quick summary.

<sup>170</sup> For example, the document never says how the Puppet master controls people. The person who created the plot would not miss that out! It does appear in Kirby's art but is missing from Lee's notes.

like the plot,<sup>171</sup> and did not understand it.<sup>172</sup> So this is most likely some notes that Lee made while Kirby described his story.

## Document 3 (issue 57)

The “script” for issue 57<sup>173</sup> is very brief, not even a plot. It effectively says little more than “meet the most popular villain”. This supports Lee’s earlier description of how plots were created and how Kirby did most of it.

## The newspaper interview (issue 55)

In addition to the three documents we have a newspaper article that appeared to show Lee telling Kirby what to do.<sup>174</sup> Lee first made himself sound good by making up a story about winning writing competitions (it never happened).<sup>175</sup> In contrast, Kirby was depicted as looking old and tired. The reporter apparently did not know that Kirby routinely worked through the night to create the stories, so had to come to the interview with very little sleep. Lee put on a good show, but his words indicate he did not know what was in the comic:

"The Silver Surfer has been somewhere out in space since he helped the F.F. stop Galactus from destroying Earth," begins Lee. "Why don't we bring him back?"

"Ummh," says Kirby.

"Suppose Alicia, the Thing's blind girl friend, is in some kind of trouble. And the Silver Surfer comes to help her." Lee starts pacing and gesturing as he gets warmed up. "I see," says Kirby. He has kind of a high-pitched voice. "But the Thing sees them together and he misunderstands. So he starts a big fight with the Silver Surfer. And meanwhile, the Fantastic Four is in lots of trouble. Doctor Doom has caught them again and they need the Things help." Lee is lurching around and throwing punches now. "Right," says Kirby. "The Thing finally beats the Silver Surfer. But then Alicia makes him realize he's made a terrible mistake. This is what the Thing has always feared more than anything else, that he would lose control and really clobber somebody." Kirby nods. "The Thing is brokenhearted. He wanders off by-himself. He's too ashamed to face Alicia or go back home to the Fantastic Four. He doesn't realize how he's failing for the second time.... How much the F.F. needs him."

Lee sags back on his desk, limp and spent.<sup>176</sup>

The reference to the surfer battle, and the date of the article, indicates that this was about Fantastic Four 55. But Lee begins by showing that he knows nothing about the characters. He says: "The Silver Surfer has been somewhere out in space since he helped the F.F. stop Galactus from destroying Earth," The whole point of the Surfer, the core of his character, was that he was trapped on Earth and could not go into space. Lee did not even know this basic fact. Lee's comments about Ben questioning his place in the team is also out of character: at

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<sup>171</sup> The first victim is named a congressman *three times*. So it must be important. But Lee's dialog changes it to the opposite: he explicitly says this is "an unknown nobody". There is no need for that line unless Lee really disliked the congressman idea. This is consistent with Lee's personality, being less willing to offend people in power, more conservative in his tastes, etc. Why would Lee write a script he did not like?

<sup>172</sup> The first victim is a congressman, which is necessary as the Puppet Master's goal is to rule the world. So he must show his power over existing rulers. Yet in the final version Lee changed the congressman to being "a nameless nobody". This undermines the whole point.

<sup>173</sup> A very brief description, printed in the Jack Kirby Collector 63, p.58

<sup>174</sup> A story conference recounted by Nat Freedland in his article "Super Heroes With Super Problems" published in the New York Herald Tribune in 1966.

<sup>175</sup> See appendix 2 for this and other claims.

<sup>176</sup> "Super Heroes With Super Problems", Nat Freedland, New York Herald Tribune, January 1966



this point, Ben is the only one who wants to stay! (Johnny wants to leave to be with Crystal, and Reed and Sue will soon try to leave the team to raise a child.)

Lee also showed no understanding of recent issues. There was no hint of Doom in recent comics. Instead they were in the middle of Africa, and Johnny had just started a quest to free Crystal. They were also in the middle of the Klaw saga: if anybody captured the team it would be Klaw, not Doom. Lee shows no awareness of any of this. Once issue 55 is over Kirby returned to these plots he had been developing for months.

# Appendix 5: Sales figures

Lee and Kirby raised Marvel's sales to the same level as DC's. That is, the same level we would expect from Jack Kirby on his own.

## Typical Kirby sales, pre-1960

Jack Kirby was one half of the "Simon and Kirby" studio, and Kirby was the hit maker. That is, Kirby created hits wherever he was, even on his own, whereas Simon had less success without Kirby. Simon and Kirby created hit titles that sometimes sold over a million copies per issue:

Although Captain America sold almost 1m copies per issue, surprisingly he was not Simon's biggest seller. [...] Young Romance topped 1m sales per issue, as did its companion title, Young Love.<sup>177</sup>

Sales before 1960 are not always easy to obtain, as that was the first year the US Postal Service required public records. But Kirby's Challengers sold well enough in a tryout book to be given its own title, so they must have been at least average sales for DC at the time (over 300,000) or probably better.

Kirby's sales outside of Marvel and DC are heavily skewed by problems with distribution: it's hard to sell comics when they never reach the stores! Those problems are discussed later.

## Marvel before Kirby

Here are the sales figures for 1960, the year before the Fantastic Four. After twenty years with Stan Lee at its head, Marvel typically sold around 180,000 copies.

1	Uncle Scrooge	Dell	1,040,543
2	Walt Disney's Comics & Stories	Dell	1,004,901
3	Superman	DC	810,000
4	Superboy	DC	635,000
5	Mickey Mouse	Dell	568,803
6	Batman	DC	502,000
7	Superman's Pal Jimmy Olsen	DC	498,000

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<sup>177</sup> From the Guardian's Simon obituary. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/dec/16/joe-simon>

8	World's Finest Comics	DC	476,000
9	Looney Tunes	Dell	459,344
10	Action Comics	DC	458,000
11	Superman's Girlfriend Lois Lane	DC	458,000
12	Adventure Comics	DC	438,000
13	Lone Ranger	Dell	408,711
14	Casper	Harvey	399,985
15	Turok, Son of Stone	Dell	359,013
16	Blackhawk	DC	316,000
17	Detective Comics	DC	314,000
18	Flash	DC	298,000
19	Pep Comics	Archie	269,504
20	Mystery in Space	DC	248,000
21	Challengers (without Kirby)	DC	228,000
22	Blondie	Harvey	218,344
23	Brave & Bold	DC	214,000
24	Showcase	DC	213,000
25	Wonder Woman	DC	213,000
26	Little Archie	Archie	210,089
27	Sugar & Spike	DC	209,000
28	My Greatest Adventure	DC	208,000
29	House of Mystery	DC	208,000
30	Strange Adventures	DC	207,000
31	House of Secrets	DC	194,000
32	Fox & The Crow	DC	193,000
33	Adventures into the Unknown	ACG	192,500
34	Unknown Worlds	ACG	192,000



35	Tales of the Unexpected	DC	192,000
36	Dagwood	Harvey	188,819
37	Forbidden Worlds	ACG	187,200
38	Tomahawk	DC	180,000
39	All-American Men of War	DC	176,000
40	Our Fighting Forces	DC	175,000
41	Our Army at War	DC	172,000
42	Star-Spangled Comics	DC	169,000
43	Tales to Astonish	Marvel	163,156
44	All Star Western	DC	154,000
45	Tales of Suspense	Marvel	148,929
46	Kid Colt Outlaw	Marvel	144,746
47	Felix the Cat	Dell	138,191
48	Space Adventures	Charlton	110,166

(Source: comichron.com)

Also in 1960, Mad magazine sold 1,209,000 issues. Mad began as an EC comic. EC comics were aimed at adults as well as children, and they sold well. The anti-comics crusade of the 1950s persuaded EC to drop their other comics, and rebrand Mad as a magazine (that just happened to have some comic book content). EC is proof that comics could sell to adults if they were not dumbed down.

## Marvel after Kirby

Here are the sales figures for 1969. Marvel is typically in the 300,000 range, just like DC..

1	Archie	(Archie)	515,356
2	Superman	(DC)	511,984
3	Superboy	(DC)	465,462
4	Superman's Girlfriend Lois Lane	(DC)	397,346
5	Betty and Veronica	(Archie)	384,789

6	Action Comics	(DC)	377,535
7	Amazing Spider-Man	(Marvel)	372,352
8	World's Finest Comics	(DC)	366,618
9	Batman	(DC)	355,782
10	Adventure Comics	(DC)	354,123
11	Archie and Me	(Archie)	345,869
12	Fantastic Four	(Marvel)	340,363
13	Life with Archie	Archie	326,488
14	Reggie and Me	Archie	276,275
15	Walt Disney's Comics & Stories	Gold Key	272,672
16	Archie Giant Series	Archie	271,699
17	Thor	Marvel	266,368
18	Incredible Hulk	Marvel	262,472
19	Flintstones	Gold Key	258,821
20	Archie's Pals 'n' Gals	Archie	253,206
21	Daredevil	Marvel	245,422
22	Captain America	Marvel	243,798
23	Sgt. Fury and his Howling Commandos	Marvel	242,897
24	Brave & Bold	DC	242,501
25	Avengers	Marvel	239,986
26	Uncanny X-Men	Marvel	235,811
27	Justice League of America	DC	233,000
28	Treasure Chest	Catholic Guild	231,531
29	Reggie's Wise Guy Jokes	Archie	222,732
30	Flash	DC	221,470
31	Detective Comics	DC	221,267
32	Little Dot	Harvey	213,070
33	Little Lotta	Harvey	211,039
34	Madhouse	Archie	209,897
35	Turok, Son of Stone	Gold Key	209,813
36	Rawhide Kid	Marvel	204,896
37	Phantom	Charlton	199,045
38	Beetle Bailey	Charlton	198,020
39	G.I. Combat	DC	186,264
40	Unusual Tales	Charlton	178,545
41	Adventures of Jerry Lewis	DC	174,125
42	House of Mystery	DC	173,206
43	Sugar & Spike	DC	171,227
44	Wonder Woman	DC	171,197
45	Green Lantern	DC	160,423

46	Aquaman	DC	156,307
47	Tales of the Unexpected	DC	155,110
48	Star-Spangled Comics	DC	149,170
49	Fightin' Army	Charlton	141,335
50	Strange Adventures	DC	141,179
51	Challengers of the Unknown	DC	140,238
52	Texas Rangers in Action	Charlton	136,378
53	Showcase	DC	130,219
Average for comics			252,202

(Source: comichron.com)

## Problems with sales data

There are many difficulties with comparing “Marvel” and “DC” sales:

- Actual figures are closely guarded secrets.
- Not all sales were reported (see “affidavit fraud” below).
- Do we measure individual titles, averages, or the total across all titles?
- Do we measure units sold or the dollar value (not all comics are priced the same)?
- How do we average out the wild fluctuations?
- Do we include later reprints?
- Do we include foreign editions?
- How do we remove unconscious bias? I grew up with Marvel, and Lee made me think Marvel was a huge hit. So for years I used to assume that any data set that made Marvel look good was probably more reliable than a data set that said the opposite.
- Etc.

But the consensus is that Marvel equalled DC’s sales by the early 1970s. Marvel pulled ahead in the late 1970s, helped by owning the Star Wars brand and by “The DC Implosion” where they suddenly cancelled their lower selling titles.

## Reprint sales are not included

The above sales figures are for newsstand sales when the title was first published. Most of those comics were then largely forgotten. But the more popular titles, such as the Fantastic Four (and Spider-Man) have been reprinted many times. For example, the 1960s Fantastic Four issues were reissued under the title “Marvel’s Greatest Comics”, were issued at least twice in Britain (in “The Titans” and later the Fantastic Four pocketbook), appeared in collected anthologies (Essentials, Masterworks, Epic Collections, etc), were translated for foreign language markets, and so on.

## Popularity and sales are not the same

Readers’ preference for a title (it’s popularity) is a major contributor to sales (or lack of sales). But there are other contributors, and these are sometimes more important:



- **Distribution:**  
Marvel's sales collapsed in 1957 when they lost their distributor. Archie always sold well, because they were sold at supermarkets and other places that didn't stock a full range of titles.
- **Cover price:**  
The top selling comic in 1961 was Uncle Scrooge. Yet sales collapsed soon after. Why? When other comics went up from 10c to 12c, Scrooge went up to 15c. They gambled and lost.
- **Inertia:**  
A title like Superman or Spider-Man has so many fans that they will keep buying for several months even if every issue is bad. This allows them time to improve. Newer titles don't have that luxury.
- **Hype:**  
In the 1980s comics moved to speciality shops. This allowed them to target readers more directly. The top selling single issues of all time are from over-hyped first issues from the 1990s, where comic fans were persuaded that these issues would one day be worth a lot of money. It was another trick.
- **Time of year:**  
Summer comics sold much better than winter comics. Presumably because kids were less likely to hang around near newsstands or need a portable reading to stuff in their pockets.
- **Office politics:**  
DC's "Brother Power, the Geek" was cancelled before any sales figures came in, because somebody in management hated the idea. The Fantastic Four was cancelled in 2015, despite healthy sales (for the time), because (most people believe) Marvel was angry at Fox for not giving back the movie rights.
- **Affidavit fraud:**  
This deserves its own section as it particularly affects Jack Kirby comics.

## Kirby Fourth World sales

The exact figures were a commercial secret, but Jenette Kahn, a DC insider, saw the figures that DC managers saw, and she said they "weren't all that bad" (according to Mark Evanier, Kirby's assistant at the time). However, the figures they saw were probably far less than the actual sales, due to affidavit fraud.

## Affidavit fraud

The large comic publishers allowed distributors to return unsold comics. But transport costs were expensive, so they made deals that allowed distributors to sign affidavits stating they had simply destroyed unsold comics. Of course, this created an incentive to lie: you could say "I destroyed one hundred thousand unsold comics this month" and then sell them instead. So a comic might have huge sales, but the official numbers say they hardly sold any.

Chuck Rozanski (highly respected comic dealer) reports how this fraud was run by organised crime. It ran for decades until the FBI cracked down in 1979. Just one warehouse (and there were several) could have as many as 14,000 copies of a single issue. These copies would be sold, but not show up on sales figures.

I saw many instances where there were entire unopened case lots of certain issues of comics, where the distributor obviously never even put the books out for sale. I eventually discovered that the highest number of a single issue in the warehouse was 14,000 copies of one 12 cent cover price Marvel comic.

<sup>178</sup>

Obviously the fraudsters wanted comics that would sell. Kirby's Fourth World comics were ideal. In an era when writers were still mostly anonymous, DC had full page ads saying "Kirby is coming!" and the covers said in big letters "Kirby s here!" but this was a new phenomenon DC had no idea how many more copies they would sell. Obviously they would print more, so it was trivially easy for the fraudsters to say "sorry, they just sold the normal number" and then pocket the difference.

Robert Beerbohm (another highly respected dealer) saw large numbers of these undeclared comics being traded:

"New Gods and Forever People were 'HOT' big time sellers down in the Independent Distributor system of 900 or so wholesale outlets at the time. I remember the comicons back in 1970-1973 awash with unopened cases of the Kirby books. Likewise with Adams GL/GA. The mail order guys advertising in Marvel classifieds and places like Rocket's Blast Comiccollector, The Buyers Guide etc etc had them also stocked in depth. Due to the affidavit return "honor system" fraud rampant by the 70s the NYC publishers were not seeing the sales dollars." [citation?]

Beerbohm noted that by he never saw issues of Mister Miracle stolen like that. So Mister Miracle's sales figures were probably more accurate. Mister Miracle was not cancelled, but continued after Kirby left DC.

## Captain Victory sales figures

Captain Victory was (along with Silver Star) Kirby's last major comic. By this time his critics were saying he was past it. But as usual sales were in the "upper tier" for the industry as a whole. Jim Shooter recalls:

I don't remember the exact number, but as I recall, Captain Victory sold like an upper tier Marvel book sold in the direct market, which would have been 200,000 plus. I remember that we at Marvel were impressed.<sup>179</sup>

## Conclusion

The conclusion is that Kirby always sold in the top tier of the industry as a whole. A critic might use New Gods as an exception, as proof that Kirby on his own did not sell. But even

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<sup>178</sup> <http://www.milehighcomics.com/tales/cbg70.html>

<sup>179</sup> From Shooter's blog, replying to a visitor:  
<http://jimshooter.com/2011/09/letter-column-rant-and-few-observations.html/#comment-5158>

there, its “not bad” sales probably become “good” when we allow for affidavit fraud, and “excellent” when we include the constant reprints. So Kirby always sold well. But Lee did not.

So with Kirby on board, Marvel sales rose to the normal Kirby level. No more, no less. And Lee had nothing to do with Marvel’s eventual dominance: it was pure hype. Judging by the numbers, whatever Lee did, his effect on sales was negligible.



# Appendix 6: Kirby's career in brief

This only includes Kirby's most notable books, and is intended as an introduction for new readers. For a complete year by year bibliography visit the Jack Kirby Chronology online.<sup>180</sup> For an alphabetical list of titles visit the Jack Kirby Checklist.<sup>181</sup>

- 1940: Blue Bolt:
- 1940: The Vision:
- 1941: Captain America: Kirby's breakout hit, the one that put him on the map.  
Includes many backup stories, including Tuk, the first Avenger.
- 1942: Boy Commandos  
(1943-1945: Kirby is in Europe, fighting World War II)
- 1946: Stuntman
- 1947: Various crime stories for Headline and other comics.
- 1947: Young Romance: inventing the romance comics genre.
- 1950: Black Magic: horror focused on ideas, not gore.
- 1950: Boys Ranch: the most notable of Kirby's many western stories
- 1952: Strange World of Your Dreams: inventing the psychological genre
- 1954: Fighting American: a satire on superheroes.
- 1954: Foxhole: reflecting Kirby's first hand experience of war
- 1957: "The Thing in the Box": the first of many stories about monsters attacking.
- 1957: Alarming Tales, and (1958) Race For The Moon: various sci-fi stories
- 1958: Challengers of the Unknown: the major turning point in his career.  
From here on, Kirby focuses on the question "what's out there?"
- 1958: Sky Masters: newspaper strip about the space race
- 1959: The Fly, and the Double Life of Private Strong: a return to superheroes
- 1961: The Fantastic Four: the Challengers with a superhero twist
- 1962: The Hulk: a monster comic with the same monster every issue
- 1963: The X-Men, and various other superheroes (e.g. Avengers)
- 1963: Thor: Kirby's best known god book
- 1967: (Later ideas were devised, but held back until Kirby left Marvel)
- 1971: The Forever People: Kirby's take on Hippie culture
- 1971: The New Gods:<sup>182</sup> often considered to be Kirby's defining work.
- 1971: Mister Miracle. The third of the Fourth World titles.
- 1971: In The Days of The Mob, and Spirit World:  
Kirby's only books to not attempt to be child friendly.
- 1972: The Demon
- 1972: Kamandi: the post apocalyptic future
- 1974: OMAC: future war with a one man army

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<sup>180</sup> [http://www.marvelmasterworks.com/resources/kirby\\_chronology1.html](http://www.marvelmasterworks.com/resources/kirby_chronology1.html)

<sup>181</sup> <http://kirbymuseum.org/blogs/simonandkirby/archives/592>

<sup>182</sup> They returned in the 1980s in Kirby's Hunger Dogs". Both times, Kirby wanted the series to end with characters dying, and each time DC said no. so the ending is not quite what Kirby wanted.

1974: Sandman  
1976: 2001: Though an adaptation, it is pure Kirby, and goes well beyond the movie  
1976: The Eternals  
1977: Black Panther: Kirby's unique take on the character he created  
1978: Devil Dinosaur  
1978: Machine Man: Kirby's take on the themes of "I, Robot"  
1979-81: disillusioned with publishers taking his ideas, Kirby worked for animation studios. Unlike comics they provided good pay and conditions, and crucially, health insurance.  
1981: Captain Victory: essentially, a story about the meaning of life.  
1983: Silver Star: the possible future of mankind. This can be considered as a companion to Captain Victory: both were planned as movie scripts in the mid 1970s. These were Kirby's last major works.

By now Kirby was approaching seventy years old. After a lifetime of overwork, his health was failing: his eyesight and drawing hand no longer served as they did. Much of the 1980s was spent fighting for the return of his art, and to be recognised as the author of the stories he wrote.

Kirby died in February 1994. A few months earlier Image Comics patched together the remains of an unused Kirby martial arts story from the 1970s (Phantom Force) using additional writers and multiple inkers. Possibly Kirby's original intent can be salvaged by future scholars, but essentially Captain Victory and Silver Star are Kirby's final works.

## How Kirby brought back the superhero genre

The timeline indicates that it was Kirby, more than anyone else, who created the silver age interest in more realistic superheroes:

- **1956: the Flash's failed.**  
In Showcase issue 4 (not by Kirby), The Flash came back. Comics historians see this as an important date for the return of superheroes. But the title didn't set the world on fire: the Flash was only there for two issues.
- **1956: the Challengers succeeded.**  
In Showcase issue 6, Kirby introduced Challengers of the Unknown: a team of highly skilled individuals who fought villains with superpowers. They had an initial two issue run, and were popular enough to quickly get another two issues, and then their own title.
- **1957: the Flash got a second chance.**  
After the Challengers were such a success, the Flash was given another chance in Showcase.
- **1958: the Challengers got their own book.**  
The Challengers were given their own solo book. In issue 3 one of the Challengers temporarily gained superpowers: flaming, strength, invisibility and size-changing.
- **1959: the Flash got his own book.**  
The Flash finally resumed his own title. Issue 104 had been in 1949 when the series was cancelled. It resumed with issue 105, cover dated March 1959.

- **1959: Kirby tried more superheroes**

Kirby (with Simon) created The Fly – a hero who walked on walls, and fought The Spider, a villain who created webs. Sounds familiar?<sup>183</sup> Kirby also tried a return of the superhero The Shield, in "The Double Life of Private Strong".<sup>184</sup>

- **Late 1959: Green Lantern**

In Showcase 22, dated October, DC premiered Green Lantern. Like Kirby's Fly, he gained his power from finding a ring. He later gained his own book..

- **1960: Justice League**

The Justice League of America first appeared in The Brave and The Bold issue 28. They proved popular, and superheroes were back to stay.

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<sup>183</sup> Kirby and Simon left after issue 4. The hero was originally a child who found a magic ring: this was originally going to be the premise for Spider-Man, until Ditko pointed out the similarity with The Fly, so Spider-Man went with the same power source as the Fantastic Four and Hulk: radiation. Kirby's Fly also foreshadowed Harry Potter in some regards: an orphan boy discovers he is living with wizards (in Harry's case his parents were wizards) and learns of ancient battles and becomes one of the wizards' people. When Kirby left, the publisher (Archie Comics) changed the hero to be an adult. The series survived (Kirby-less) for 30 issues.

<sup>184</sup> Kirby only produced the first issue's story. "With Private Strong and the Fly the origin story would be spread out over several stories in the first issue. As far as I know this early use of continuity, limited though it was, cannot be found in any other comics before the Marvel age." (Harry Mendryk, in the Kirby Museum: <http://kirbymuseum.org/blogs/simonandkirby/archives/2564>). The second issue's Private Strong story did not involve Kirby and showed a marked decline in quality. However, it didn't matter: DC felt the character (published by Archie Comics) was too similar to Superman, and threatened legal action. So the comic ended after two issues. See "The Short and Double Life of Private Strong" at <http://danhagen-odinsravens.blogspot.co.uk/2016/03/the-short-and-double-life-of-private.htm>



# Appendix 7: How the Challengers became the Fantastic Four

Kirby intended the Fantastic Four to be "a derivative" of the Challengers.

Q What information, if any, do you have concerning the creation of The Fantastic Four?

A In discussions with my father The Fantastic Four basically was a derivative of the, from what he told me, basically he came up with the idea just as a derivative from the Challengers of the Unknown that he had done several years earlier.<sup>185</sup>

Kirby said so himself:

GROTH: "Looking back on it, do you see the Challengers as a precursor to the Fantastic Four?"

KIRBY: "Yes, there were always precursors to the Fantastic Four"<sup>186</sup>

Kirby left after Challengers issue 8. The Fantastic Four has numerous parallels:

## The same team of four adventurers.

Later we will look at their individual similarities.

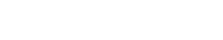
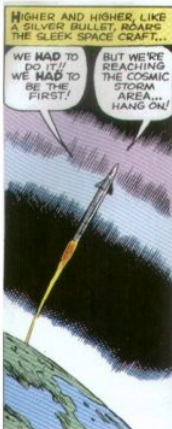
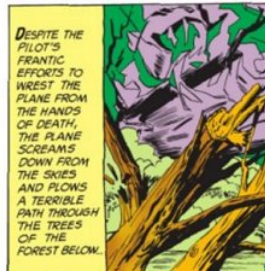
## The same origin.

They narrowly survive a plane crash and decide to devote their lives to doing good.

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<sup>185</sup> Neal Kirby, from the 2010 legal case

<sup>186</sup> Jack Kirby Interview, Gary Groth, <http://www.tcj.com/jack-kirby-interview/>





## The same powers.

In Challengers issue 3, Rocky travels to space and gains the ability to flame on, expand his body, and has super strength. The Fantastic Four merely gain those powers permanently. Any of the first eight Fantastic Four stories could have taken place without superpowers: the powers were not the focus.



## The same kinds of adventures.

Both groups challenge the unknown, reacting to dangers nobody else can handle.

## The same introduction.

Compare the yellow box on the splash page of Fantastic Four 1 with the yellow box in the original ad for the Challengers.





**The same costumes.**

Compare the final Kirby Challengers issue with Fantastic Four issue 1

Final Challengers story (by Kirby)



First FF story (by Kirby)



## Similar headquarters.

The early headquarters looks the same inside, with the four characters standing in the same poses.



## Similar enemies.

Compare Morelian and Doom: both are sorcerers who wear a hooded cloak, live in old world castles in America, with links to Merlin (Doom wanted Merlin's stones) and a goal of obtaining jewels that grant immortality. Compare the red giant in the Challengers origin issue, who disappears when you no longer believe in him, with the red giant in Fantastic Four issue 3 who only exists in their minds. Compare the vastly powerful alien child who is finally stopped by his parents, with the similar Infant Terrible.





## Similar locations.

Both visit remote oceans, outer space, ancient Egypt, etc. The first story in both cases had them travel to a remote island where they meet a monster.





## Similar technology.

Compare the rocket powered helicopters,



or the alien anti gravity transport.



## The same fighting between team members.

Something about Rocky's trip (Challengers issue 3) must have been extremely painful or distressing. When he came back he violently attacked anybody associated with taking him into space: not just "Ace" and the professor, but also the men involved in the space programme.





However, he did not attack ordinary people, or June, who was not directly involved in causing what happened.



We can explain this as a kind of madness, or of him losing his memory, but the exact cause of the anger is not given in either case. All we know for sure is that the exact same thing happened in the Fantastic Four. If we remove Lee's dialog then it seems that even Johnny lashes out in an uncontrolled fashion, setting fire to the forest.





## Even closer similarities

Kirby said he wrote stories so as to leave as much as possible to the reader.

I was presenting my views to the reader and saying 'what do YOU think?' I think that's an imperative for any writer. In other words, no writer should feel that he has the last word on any subject. Because he hasn't got the capacity. He doesn't know! I don't know, see, I'm guessing as well as you [do], except I may be a little more descriptive, that's all. [...] I put enough chinks into the story to allow the reader to interpret it his way. Because I've always respected the reader. [...] I sold the best stories I could. But I didn't present my stories as the final word.<sup>187</sup>

With that approach we can see even more parallels:

## The same explanation for their powers

The Challengers found a liquid that aliens use to gain whatever abilities they need to survive in given circumstances: if they need to do X to survive, they can do X.

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<sup>187</sup> Earth Watch radio interview.

<http://comicbookcollectorsclub.com/jack-kirby-and-stan-lee-radio-interview-earth-watch-wbai-1987/>



That explains the Fantastic Four's powers: each person gains the ability they need at that moment. That is, judging by Kirby's art alone, removing Lee's dialog. After the team was affected by the rays, Ben wanted to hit Reed, and Reed wanted to tie up Ben. So Ben gained strength, and Reed gained the ability to stretch his arms like ropes. Sue looked worried, and so she gained the ability to hide from danger. Johnny was highly agitated by the danger, so gained the ability to destroy anything that might threaten him. However, with no more access to the cause of their powers they were stuck with the first power they gained.

## The same emotional core

The Fantastic Four was notable because of the tragedy of Ben Grimm, and how he would lash out at his partners because he felt different. The same thing happened with Rocky, but Rocky was able to recover when June held him and treated him with kindness. Ben however lost Sue forever and was never able to recover. If we examine every case where Ben attacks the others, it is nearly always over losing Sue.





The only other times are when Johnny makes fun of Ben for being ugly, which amounts to the same thing - one of those times (if we trust Lee's dialog) Johnny explicitly links this to being unattractive to women. So the emotional core of the Fantastic Four comes from a love triangle. This is merely the natural development of the interest that Rocky and Ace showed in June, and exactly the sort of thing we would expect from Jack Kirby, the man who invented the romance comic genre. It's all about Sue.

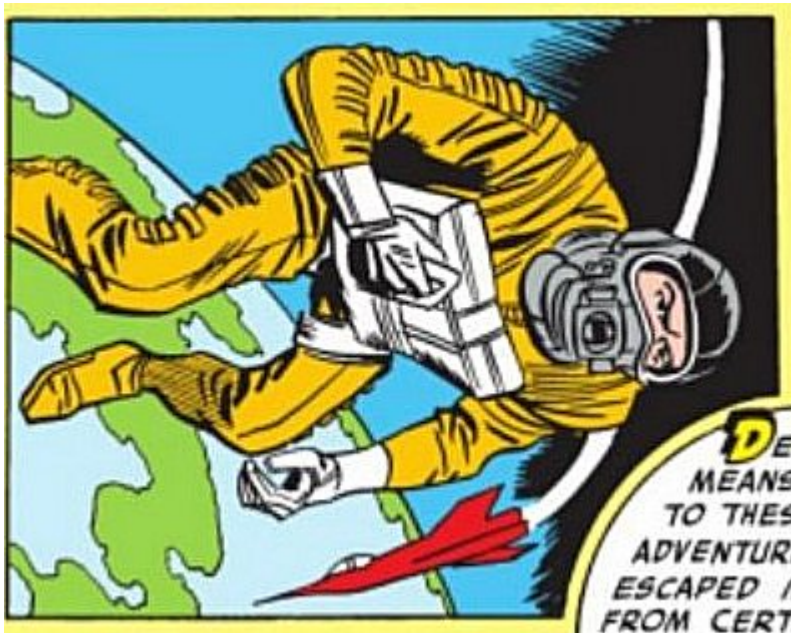
## The same reason for being together in the first place.

Many readers have questioned why Reed would take his girlfriend on a space flight. But if Sue is a computer expert and Johnny is an expert at engineering (his interest in cars, and how he later redesigns the Fantasticar) then they all earn their place, just as the Challengers are each experts in their own field.

## Reed is "Ace":

Ace is just his nickname (we learn from page 1 of their first story). It means the same as Mr Fantastic: this guy loves himself! He worked on the top secret military space program, so "Morgan" could easily be an alias to keep his real name (Richards) private. Ace's big goal is to enter space: he is twice shown in a space suit on the edge of space, and it's once mentioned that he is in the space program.





Remember, this was 1958, when "the space program" was merely the elite section of the Air Force. In *Fantastic Four* 1, Ace succeeds in his goal. "Ace" looks older and thinner in *Fantastic Four* 1, but that is easily explained by side effects of experimenting with the youth serum in the previous issue, *Challengers* 8.



## The Thing is "Rocky":

A tough fighter who calls himself Rocky ends up covered in rocks. Rocky was an olympic wrestler, but before 1972 the Olympics were strictly amateur, so Rocky needed a day job. In the *Fantastic Four* we learn he was a test pilot, like Ace. In *Fantastic Four* 15, when the Thinker tries to break up the *Fantastic Four*, he knows that wrestling is the best way to attract Ben. This suggests that Ben was once a wrestler, like Rocky.



"Ben Grimm" sounds like a wrestler's stage name, just as "Rocky" sounds like a nickname. His real name was probably Ben Davis (like the clothing brand!)

## Johnny is "Red"

"Red" is clearly a nickname, and it is normal for circus performers to have stage names, so his real name was probably Johnny Ryan or Johnny Storm. Red's distinctive hairstyle remains the same: the change from orange to yellow can easily be explained by the printing technology of the time (there would be no way to show the actual color in between). "Red", the "circus daredevil", is clearly the youngster of the Challengers: he is always shown as shorter than the others, and the others take the lead. World class circus acrobats need to be young for maximum flexibility. Possibly his age was further reduced after experiments with the youth serum from the previous issue (Challengers 8). In Fantastic Four 15 we learn that Johnny Storm comes from a circus family.





Lee's dialog implies that Johnny was new to the circus, but Kirby's art says otherwise. In the story Johnny's face is relaxed, as if this is familiar territory. As noted, the powers reflect what the individual wants, so it was natural for the "red" circus acrobat to become a flaming flying acrobat. Johnny's early stories show him still practising acrobatic skills.

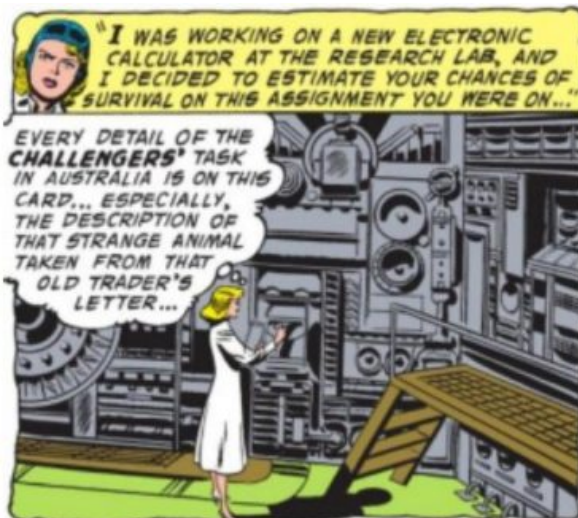
## Sue is "June"

As time went on, June Robbins' hair became more blonde and she tried different styles, and in one later issue she could easily pass for an early version of Sue Storm.



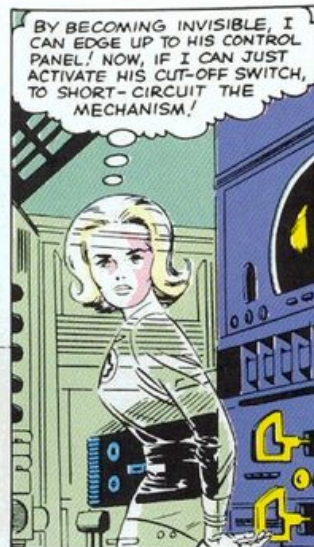
June was an expert on computers, and so was Sue, judging by the art: in Fantastic Four issue 5 Sue is able to short circuit Doom's computer in a second, with her hands tied behind her back.





Challengers  
2

FF 5



Incidentally, the name, occupation and look of "June Robbins" was probably based on the real life mathematician Julia Robinson.



Julia Robinson,  
American mathematician



June Robbins,  
computer programmer

June's surname changed from Robbins to Walker then back to Robbins again, suggesting a failed marriage. This explains why the other Challengers held back romantically, despite being clearly interested in her. By Fantastic Four 1 Sue was free to date, and both Ben and Reed competed for her affection.

## Namor stands in for Prof Haley

In the Challengers, Professor Haley never really fit in. He looked less enthusiastic, he didn't use an alias, and his real interest was in studying the oceans. He appears to have left the team after Challengers 8, and the team's connection with the oceans is now via Namor. In Namor's first story, Fantastic Four 4, we often see a character in the background who looks like Professor Haley. This is probably just coincidence, but it's fun to speculate that when Johnny found Namor it was no accident.



And so on.

The previous parallels were noted from my brief initial reading of the Challengers. No doubt a more thorough examination would uncover many more.

If the Fantastic Four are the Challengers then this solves various mysteries. For example:

1. Why did Reed take his girlfriend and her kid brother into space? Because this “girlfriend” was one of the world’s foremost computer experts, and this “kid brother” was older and more experienced than he looked. Both were part of a seasoned team and the most qualified people on Earth for this job.
2. Why were they willing to go into space without proper shielding? Because they were living on borrowed time, and their whole purpose was to take risks.
3. Why was Ben shamed by mentioning the danger? Because danger was their business.
4. Where did they get their own private airplane? The Challengers had one. And where did *they* get it? The Challengers took on work in an organised manner, so would have planned for equipment and funding before accepting their first job.
5. Etc., etc.



## Appendix 8: Responses from critics

Here are the arguments that I used to use in support of Lee, and a few more.

### **“Lee didn’t create the comics, but he created the brand”**

Then we should make that clear: stop calling him a writer, and call him what he was: an editor and promoter. .

### **“Let it go, it’s in the past”**

If this was in the past then we can learn from the past. We can learn how people take credit for others’ work. If we don’t learn from the past we are condemned to repeat it.

But this is not in the past. There are millions of people (billions) who would enjoy Kirby’s work if only they knew where to find it. Many of his stories are buried under Lee’s dialog. I argue in this book that we can uncover and reconstruct those stories. There is a gold mine of hundreds of lost Kirby stories waiting to be uncovered. This book is a plea for that work to begin!

### **Marvel settled a lawsuit “on the steps” of the Supreme Court**

There was a lawsuit, but it was not about who created the characters. In August 2009, Disney bought Marvel for \$4 billion. In September, the Kirby family served notice to Marvel to regain copyright of characters created by Jack Kirby, and after leading the family to believe negotiation was an option, the company filed suit. Disney of course has vastly more money for lawyers, and were able to make the suit into a question about “work for hire.” Judgment was handed down in July 2011. The conclusion? Marvel paid Kirby for whatever he did, therefore Marvel owned it. Just as the convent owner paid Leonardo to paint The Last Supper.

Judge Colleen McMahon, prefaced her ruling by making it clear this was only about the technical question of work for hire, and the laws in place in 1961. It says nothing about fairness or who created what:

This case is not about whether Kirby (and other freelance artists who created culturally iconic comic book characters for Marvel and other publishers) were treated ‘fairly’ by companies that grew rich off the fruit of their labor. It is about whether Kirby’s work qualifies as work-for-hire.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> The full decision: <https://handoffire.files.wordpress.com/2011/10/kirby-v-marvel-decision-28-july-20121.pdf>

## **“John Romita said... Roy Thomas said...”**

Judge McMahon allowed the testimony of John Romita and Roy Thomas, but disallowed Mark Evanier and John Morrow as witnesses. Like Evanier and Morrow, Romita and Thomas were not present at Marvel during the years covered by the suit (1958-1963). Furthermore, no one besides Lee or Kirby was ever present for one of Kirby's story conferences.

## **Kirby didn't say anything at the time?**

While employed by Marvel, Kirby spoke in guarded terms in interviews. He told the Excelsior fanzine in 1968 that he didn't write his own dialogue because that was Lee's policy. In 1969 he told The Nostalgia Journal's Mark Hebert how he created The Hulk. After he left Marvel in 1970, Kirby immediately began telling the story of his creations.[Footnotes to be added.]

## **Kirby also had a bad memory?**

In appendix 2 we saw that Lee has a bad memory, or at least, that is the charitable explanation for why he says things that are not true. Lee claimed that Kirby also had a bad memory, and gave the following example. First, what Kirby said, about walking into Lee's office in 1958:

I came in [to the Marvel offices] and they were moving out the furniture, they were taking desks out — and I needed the work! ... Stan Lee is sitting on a chair crying. He didn't know what to do, he's sitting on a chair crying — he was still just out of his adolescence.<sup>189</sup> I told him to stop crying. I says, 'Go in to Martin and tell him to stop moving the furniture out, and I'll see that the books make money'.<sup>190</sup>

Lee says he never saw furniture being carried out:

I never remember being there when people were moving out the furniture. If they ever moved the furniture, they did it during the weekend when everybody was home.<sup>191</sup>

However, the company had recently seen its titles slashed from 85 per month to just 8, and everybody but Lee had been fired from staff (any future comics relied on people working from home as freelancers). They went from several offices to just one, so furniture must have moved out at some point. Lee conceded that it could have happened, but just claims he was not here at the exact moment. The more serious charge comes next: Lee says he never cried.

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<sup>189</sup> This probably refers to Kirby's opinion of Lee's behaviour, not his age. Lee was 36 at the time, but Kirby felt he acted in a childish way and often referred to Lee as “the kid”.

<sup>190</sup> Interview reprinted in the Comics Journal collected essays, volume 1, p. 38.

<sup>191</sup> Stan the Man & Roy the Boy: A Conversation Between Stan Lee and Roy Thomas". Comic Book Artist (2). Summer 1998

Jack tended toward hyperbole, just like the time he was quoted as saying that he came in and I was crying and I said, 'Please save the company!' I'm not a crier and I would never have said that. I was very happy that Jack was there and I loved working with him, but I never cried to him. <sup>192</sup>

Kirby arrived just after artist Joe Maneely died in a tragic train accident. Maneely was Lee's favourite artist, and his sudden death at a young age affected everyone deeply. Michael Vassallo once examined the surviving records (job numbers, etc.) and worked out that Kirby arrived on the Monday after Maneely died on the Friday (Maneely's family were told on the Saturday). So Lee was not only reeling from losing almost all of his comics, and in danger of losing his job, but his good friend had just died. And Lee says he did not shed a tear?

## **Kirby also copied others work?**

If Kirby used others' work would this make him no better than Lee, taking credit where it is not due? For example, the X-Men is suspiciously like Doom Patrol that came out just before.

All artists learn from others' work. The difference is that a great artist or writer makes his version better. The X-Men is more popular than Doom Patrol. Similarly, although Captain America was clearly influenced by The Shield, Captain America was vastly more popular.

In contrast, when Kirby left the Fantastic Four and Lee simply copied old Kirby plots, Lee's versions were not as good. E.g. compare Galactus with Lee's version, the Overmind.

And on the topic of the X-Men and Doom Patrol, this is discussed in the chapter on who created the Marvel universe. In it I noted that the copied ideas probably came via Lee. and even if they didn't, Doom Patrol was itself based on Kirby's Fantastic Four, which was in turn based on Kirby's Challengers. Kirby produced so many new characters, in so many genres, and so any of them became hits, that he probably had the most original mind in comics history.

## **Lee seems like such a nice guy**

Depends what you mean by nice. Do nice guys take credit for other people's work?

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<sup>192</sup> *ibid*



# Appendix 9: Reconstructing the original book

Let us try to piece together Kirby's original version of Fantastic Four issue 1. Here is what we can conclude, based on the evidence in this book.

## Conclusion 1: the Mole Man story was heavily edited.

There are numerous places where the Mole Man story looks edited (see the analysis of page 14 for examples).

## Conclusion 2: the original story had no superpowers.

There is clear evidence that the original Mole Man story did not feature superpowers. See the analysis of page 19 for the clearest example, but there are many.

Nothing in the story required superpowers, except the two page Thing battle which appears to have been added later. In each case (except the Thing battle) the story would be more exciting without the powers. E.g. when falling down a hole: it's more exciting to see them tumbling down the slope, not being able to comfortably save themselves and fly out whenever they want. And defeating a Mole Man and monsters is not hard when you have superpowers.

## Conclusion 3: The Thing was not in the original Mole Man story

When we look closer at the likely edits, the Thing does not fit. Except in the sequence on the island where he fights the monster, a sequence that was almost certainly added later (see page 20). Elsewhere, the Thing serves no purpose in the story. Worse, he looks out of place: whenever he appears he is either squashed into a picture that is better composed without him...



...or his arms are just added to the side but he doesn't actually do anything...

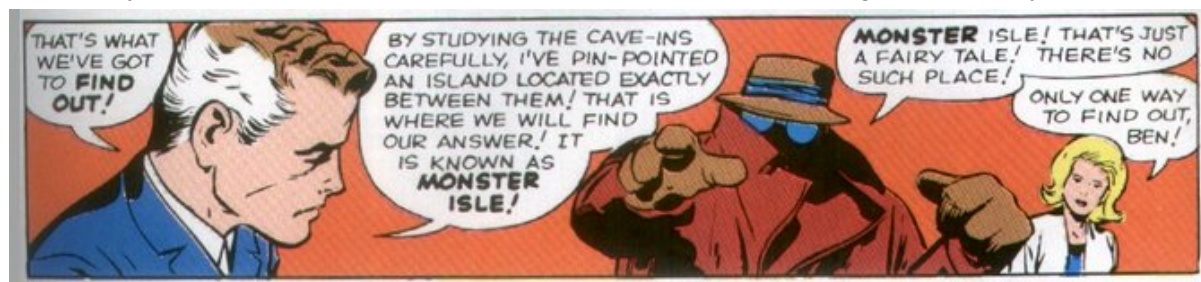


.. or he's simply absent.





The couple of times he does say or do something his words seem more appropriate for somebody else. Like here where the words would be better coming from Johnny:



And is it just me, or does the art style on *The Thing* look cleaner, more solid than on the other two? And look again at the last frames of the story: not only is Ben superfluous and badly drawn but Reed pilots the plane. While Ben sits in the back.



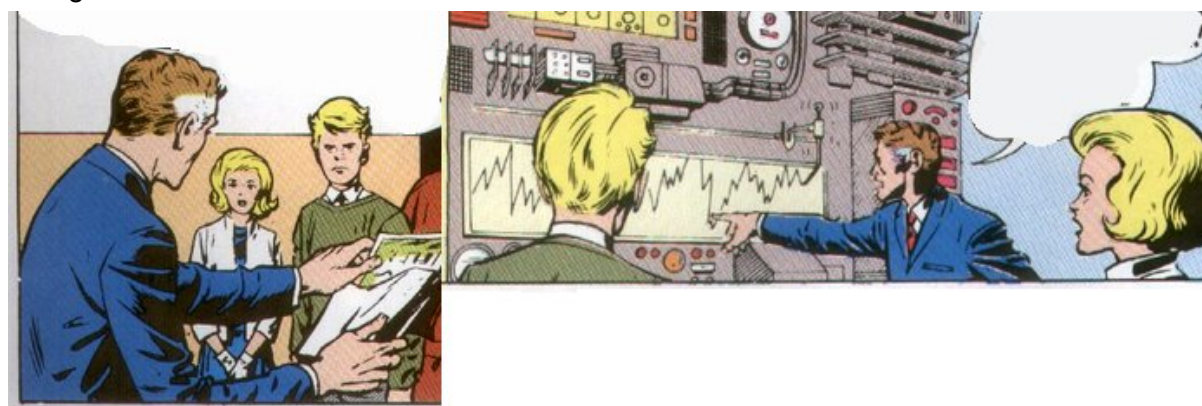


The whole point of Ben Grimm being in the origin story was that Ben was the skilled pilot. On the last page they have to escape an exploding island - if anything needed a skilled pilot this did.<sup>193</sup>

So it appears that Ben was probably not in the original Mole Man story. So the origin story is probably where we first meet Ben, perhaps on that missing splash page.

## Conclusion 4: The original story was probably of a scientist and two teenagers

Without the Thing, we next notice that Sue (in the Mole Man story) looks far too young to be dating Reed.



Susan and Johnny look more like teenagers. (A similar idea - an older scientist and his young sidekicks - was used again in the original Dr Who two years later.) In the other Sue

<sup>193</sup> We might argue that Ben's fingers are now too thick. But the controls shown are large. if the writer had gone further and thought about possible small switches in the cockpit he would also have recalled that Reed designed a rocket ship and a flare gun, so small adjustments to switches would be easy.

pictures she often wears a hood, which would make it easier to edit the picture: a child has a larger head, so the hood is a quick way to make her head look smaller and hence older. Add a couple of curves on the baggy costume, and bingo, you have fixed the character's younger-looking appearance, all in five minutes.



There is no other reason for the hood. In the previous Challengers story, which had similar locations and costumes, the women do not wear hoods.

Final Challengers story (by Kirby)



First FF story (by Kirby)





Years later, Susan Kirby (Jack's daughter), recalled seeing her father create the Fantastic Four. Here they are in 1961: Susan is at the middle at the back (the photo is from Neal Kirby's Father's Day tribute).<sup>194</sup>



Susan was a teenager at the time. She remembered this event because her father called her to show her he was naming a character after her. Susan Storm was Susan Kirby.

Q. Do you have any recollection of discussing with your father the work he was doing for Marvel?

A. Yes. I was in his office a lot, because he had a vast library of books, because he was into everything. And I used to go down there and read, so I used to read his books, and stuff, and one day I was upstairs, and mom told me to go downstairs because Dad was creating some new superheroes. So I went downstairs, and he said, "I want you to see this." He said, I named the female super hero after you, her name is Sue," Sue Storm he was talking about, it was the Fantastic Four.

Q. Do you remember what year that was?

A. Oh, gosh, I was a teenager, that is all I remember, maybe 15 or 16, so 1961, '62.

Q. And when you went downstairs did you discuss with your father what he was doing?

A. Yes.

Q. What did you say to him? What did he say to you?

A. I said it looked great. There were three characters on the board, three of the four. And I asked about who they are, and he told me who each one was. And I said, "It looks great, they look great".

Q. Do you recall anything else being said between the two of you at that time?

A. Not at that particular conversation, no.<sup>195</sup>

Note that Susan only recalls seeing three characters.

<sup>194</sup> <http://www.co2comics.com/blog/2011/06/13/father%E2%80%99s-day-tribute-to-jack-kirby-from-his-son/>

<sup>195</sup> Deposition of Susan Kirby, October 25, 2010.

[https://ohdannyboy.blogspot.co.uk/2011/04/marvel-worldwide-inc-et-al-v-kirby-et\\_11.html](https://ohdannyboy.blogspot.co.uk/2011/04/marvel-worldwide-inc-et-al-v-kirby-et_11.html)



## Reconstructing the original Mole Man story

We have enough clues now to attempt a reconstruction of the original story. In general it would be the same as now, but set when Sue and Johnny were younger, with no Thing, and with no powers. E.g. when Reed and Johnny fell down the whole they would fall just as the Mole Man did, and not drift gently in a Reed-parachute. Other major changes are discussed when we come to them, but here is a summary:

### **No Thing-monster fight:**

When Reed and Johnny first see the Mole Man, at present we jump back to the surface, and start a new chapter with Sue just sitting there. We then get a page (in two half pages) of the Thing fighting a monster. We then see a small image of the Mole Man's throne room.

The story works just as well if we remove this sequence: it is not needed. Its only purpose is to give Ben something to do. And the story flows more smoothly and naturally if it is not interrupted. So remove those two half pages. The big image, currently of Sue, would naturally be of entering the throne room, and the smaller throne room picture would then continue as now.

### **The monsters gather the materials to one place**

Reader MW Gallaher summarised the art: "monsters causing nuclear facilities to collapse underground, they loot the fuel and transport it through underground tunnels to Monster Isle where it mutates more monsters from Mole Man's army." See the analysis of page 19 for his reasoning.

### **Page 19 was originally 2 pages?**

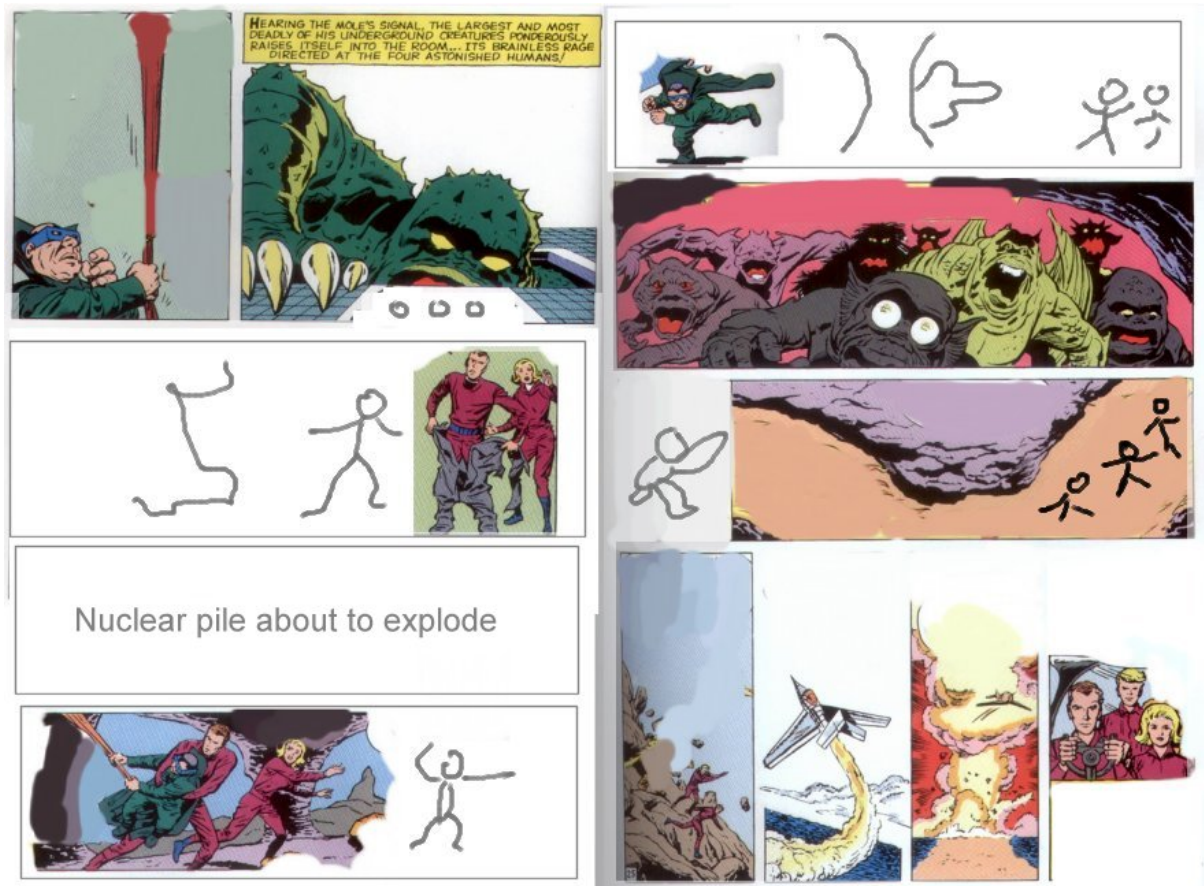
A lot happens on page 19, more than in single pages elsewhere in the story. The obvious gap is where the heroes awake in radiation suits. So this may have been another page at that point. Or, possibly, different text would have been enough to explain the suits convincingly.

### **Sue saves them at the end:**

Just before the end, we see two images with the Mole Man pulling a cord. At present we see a fight in between, but the fight achieves nothing (other than to take off the radiation suits) and the story flows better if those images are consecutive. The fight images are small and awkward - not normal Kirby standards, so were probably added later. Meanwhile the ending seems rushed, so this space was probably used (in a slightly different order) to explain how Sue found her way down, they removed their radiation suits, and the radioactive remains (replaced by the badly drawn "valley of diamonds") explode.

The panels with first pulling the cord and the large monster appearing would be at the end of that page, not the start as now. That is, the radiation suits were already off when the cord was pulled. Why would they be removed? So the heroes could move more quickly, which suggests the radioactive remains were about to explode: Sue must have realised that on her

way. She would be shouting that as she bursts into the room. This explains why Reed tries to bring the Mole Man with him after the cord is pulled, to save his life.



- Page 24, top: the same as now (Mole Man pulls cord, monster appears), but the three heroes (no Thing) are slightly larger.
- Page 24, middle: The team react in fear (because they have no superpowers). Reed removes the radiation suits (now cropped to be panel 7)
- Page 24: maybe? This would be a good time to realise the island was about to blow up: the materials that the monsters dragged from around the world are collapsing into a critical mass. Alternatively, this panel could be a larger image of monsters, and the imminent explosion could be mentioned in dialog.
- Page 24, bottom: the same as the current panel 25, top. They try to grab the Mole Man as they leave
- Page 25, panel 1: the approaching monsters cause the team to let go of the Mole Man. The running Mole Man was cropped to become page 24, last panel.
- Page 25, panel 2: as now
- Page 25, panel 3: cave as now, but contains running people and monsters. They probably talk about the imminent explosion.
- Page 25, last panels: as now, but no flaming and no Thing.

Removing those panels would make space for the superpower section we see now.

This is of course just one possible reconstruction. We are dealing with possibilities and probabilities, not certainties. One day the original art may resurface and we can see if there are signs of cutting and pasting and if so, what they imply.

## Conclusion 5: The origin story originally had a splash page

When discussing page 9 we saw that the origin story probably had its own splash page originally. But what did it contain?

In later years Kirby recalls the Fantastic Four as being focused on how Ben Grimm lost his perfect life. Yet this isn't in our current version:

The idea for the F.F. was my idea. My own anger against radiation. Radiation was the big subject at that time, because we still don't know what radiation can do to people. It can be beneficial, it can be very harmful. In the case of Ben Grimm, Ben Grimm was a college man, he was a World War II flyer. He was everything that was good in America. And radiation made a monster out of him—made an angry monster out of him, because of his own frustration.<sup>196</sup>

That description is lost from the final cut. However, Kirby's later memory shows he remembers the *earlier* version of the story, not the version that finally saw print. We can say this because he remembered the Fantastic Four origin in terms of the bomb (i.e. the theme of underground testing) and not in terms of the space flight in particular:

When people began talking about the bomb and its possible effect on human beings, they began talking about mutations because that's a distinct possibility. And I said, "That's a great idea." That's how the Fantastic Four began, with an atomic explosion and its effect on the characters. Ben Grimm who was a college man and a fine looking man suddenly became the Thing. Susan Storm became invisible because of the atomic effects on her body. Reed Richards became flexible and became a character that I could work with in various ways. And there were others — mutation effects didn't only affect heroes, it affected villains too. So I had a grand time with the atomic bomb. [Laughter.]<sup>197</sup>

## Conclusion 6: The Mole Man story had different people

Examine the faces: why do they change?

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<sup>196</sup> From 1996 or 87, interview with Leonard Pitts

<http://kirbymuseum.org/blogs/effect/2012/08/06/19867-kirby-interview/>

<sup>197</sup> Jack Kirby interview with Gary Groth, <http://www.tcj.com/jack-kirby-interview/6/>





### Origin story



### Mole Man story



Compare the first Reed with the last one. And see how different he is whenever there's a close up. And notice how few images of faces there are in the Mole Man story: this is all of them (except for the Thing battle that was added later). When I wrote the first version of this book I thought the Mole Man story must have been part of the original plan, because of the effort needed to tediously redraw all the characters. But then I checked, and it would be



trivially easy to redraw those characters. Reed's face would be redrawn twice (the two close ups) and the rest need just minor tweaks. The simplest explanation of the wildly different faces is that these were different characters and the stories were not related at all.

Possibly the radiation suits were added at the same time as Sue's hood, just to save the trouble of redrawing all those faces.

## Did the origin originally have another page?

The origin story is surprisingly short for an important story that might re-launch superheroes. Even with the missing splash page it's only six pages. The final image (where they decide to work together) is very small for a dramatic finale, and doesn't show how they got to civilisation. But the next issue has this intriguing flashback:



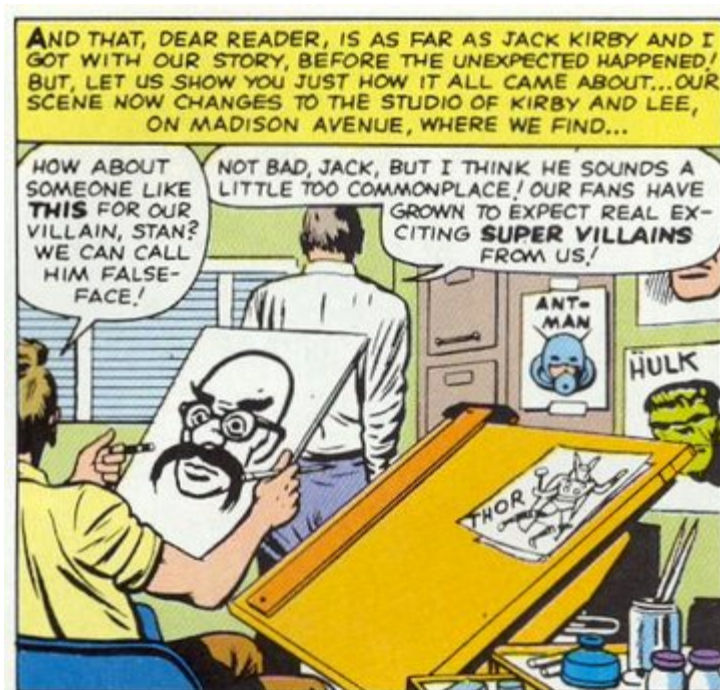
This shows scenes from the origin, plus one more: Reed flagging down a plane. Perhaps this was the final page in the original, but was cut for space reasons?

## Appendix 10: How Lee's claim evolved

In 1961, Lee was still a relatively unknown editor, whereas Kirby was the big name creator. Kirby's name appeared on the covers of numerous hit comics.



This relationship (Kirby as creator, Lee as editor) is shown as late as issue 10 of the Fantastic Four:



Lee calls this "the studio of Kirby and Lee", not "Lee and Kirby". Kirby has the idea and Lee, as editor, decides whether or not to use it. This is the same relationship we will see throughout issue 1. And a few months later Lee does use "False Face" - the Chameleon - in Spider-Man issue 1. So when did Lee begin to claim he was the sole and only writer?



## Previous monster comics: “Kirby and Ayers”

The Fantastic Four was essentially a monster comic. These were always signed by “Kirby and Ayers” or similar, and written by Kirby.<sup>198</sup> The dialog on some of the monster comics looks like it was edited by Lee or somebody else (it doesn’t have all of Kirby’s tell-tale signs). Editing dialog for children was a trivial matter compared to writing the story, so whoever edited the dialog did not sign the books.

## Fantastic Four issue 1: “Stan Lee and Jack Kirby”

For the new comic, Lee needed it to be a success, and having a very high opinion of his own abilities, he rewrote all the dialog, changed the story (e.g. removing references to underground nuclear testing<sup>199</sup>). He probably told Kirby to swap the order of the stories in order to put the superpowers first, and this led to numerous edits.<sup>200</sup> With so much involvement, Lee put his name on the book as well. So it was signed “Stan Lee and Jack Kirby”.

## Issues 2-8

In the next issue, Lee chose to minimise Jack’s signature, from “Stan Lee and Jack Kirby” to “Stan Lee and J. Kirby”. (The actual writing would be by the letterer, but Lee would have the final say. Kirby had no reason to shrink his own name.)

## Issue 3

The first letter ever printed in a modern Marvel comic was from Alan Weiss, future comics artist.<sup>201</sup> He asked who was the artist.

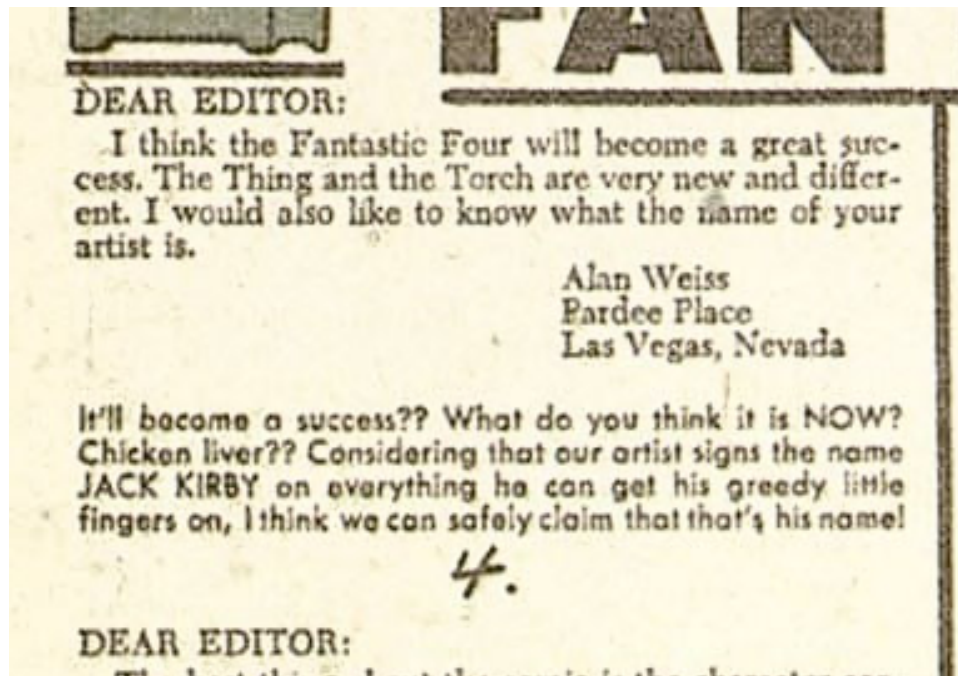
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<sup>198</sup> See the discussion of page 4

<sup>199</sup> See the discussion of page 14

<sup>200</sup> Appendix 9 has a summary of probable changes.

<sup>201</sup> Yes, this was the same Weiss. He would have been 13 at the time. See "Comic Book Artist Collection, Volume 1" by Jon B. Cooke



Yet the book was clearly signed “Stan Lee and Jack Kirby”. Maybe Weiss didn’t notice? No, it is clear from his interview<sup>202</sup> that Weiss was deeply into comics from an early age. So Weiss would have known that the artist was either Lee or Kirby. The fact that he had to ask indicates that he thought Kirby (a famous comic writer-artist) might be the writer and Lee (the relative unknown) might be the artist.

Why did Lee make this the first ever letter? Why did his humour put Kirby down? Lee’s later humour is seldom mean, and once he has established Kirby as merely the “artist” Lee feels free to praise him as “the king” of artists.

Note that Lee does not clarify “artist” with “he also comes up with many of the ideas”. Yet Lee openly admitted that was the case in issue 10. This early era, before Lee declared himself to be writer and Kirby as just the artist, shows a tension over who did what: Lee would sometimes even paint over the “Kirby & Ayers” signature.<sup>203</sup>

Another letter was from Bill Sarill, another future comics professional: as such he obviously kept a close eye on who did what. He referred to “the team of Lee-Kirby” and then Kirby supplying the art. This does not mean that Kirby did not write as well, as issue 10 reminds us he provided ideas too. But only Kirby drew. The claim that the book only had one writer did not begin until issue 9.

## Issue 9: the claim is made

Finally, more than a year after issue 1 (due to early issues being bi-monthly) we have the first credit box:

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<sup>202</sup> *ibid*

<sup>203</sup> See the discussion of page 4, about who created the monster comics.



This issue marked a major change in the book's style: it became much lighter in tone. From issue 9 there was:

1. Less alienation: from the end of issue 9 onwards the team were popular celebrities.
2. More use of superpowers
3. More crossovers with other characters
4. Fewer cosmic issues.<sup>204</sup>

These are all departures from Kirby's established interests. True, these issues still resemble previous Kirby plots - issue 9 for example had a plot that Kirby created for Fighting American issue 8 in 1955 - but issue 9 onwards has more of Lee's light-hearted style.

## Issue 10: Lee was more relaxed

As noted earlier, in issue 10 Lee was happy to show Kirby supplying the ideas, because Lee had already staked his own claim to be the main scripter.

Note that a story would be pencilled weeks (or months) before the finishing touches were made and the comic sent to the printers. So Kirby could have been drawing issue 10 before Lee decided to add the credit box to issue 9.

By the time of issue 10's letters page Lee seemed more relaxed. Until this point Lee was addressed as "editor", his role. That established his status. But the new credit box assures his status as "the writer". So he stops worrying about status and invites fans to call him by his first name. This is the start of the self-deprecating Stan that fans love.

Hi, fans and friends! Look—enough of that "Dear Editor" jazz from now on! Jack Kirby and Stan Lee (that's us!) read every letter personally, and we like to feel that we know you and that you know us! So we changed the salutations in the following letters to show you how much friendlier they sound our way! Also we have a lot of announcements to make this month—but we'll hold them off till after the next letter. . . .

DEAR STAN AND JACK:

In ish #7 on page 11 you have the Fantasti-car flying

fortunately, our supply of copies from #1 to #9 is completely exhausted. If anyone has a large supply to sell,

Note that Lee still refers to the team as "Jack Kirby and Stan Lee". But after this he makes sure to always put his name first: always "Lee and Kirby" or "Stan and Jack".

## Issue 11: reaffirming his new position

Issue 11's first story was about to the FF having fans. The issue also had the first double page letters section. What was the very first letter chosen? One about "who is the writer". Lee restated his claim and implied that everybody should know by now.

<sup>204</sup> Issues 1,2,6 and 7 and arguably 3 and 8 all feature aliens or outer space.



Dear Stan and Jack:

Do you mind telling us who wrote the story for FF #8? It was probably the greatest one we've ever seen. The only mistake was in the art department. The Puppet Master's teeth were a little too big for him. Otherwise the story was terrific! Also, we agree with Angry Artie Star that if you throw out Sue Storm tell us where you throw her because we'll make a beeline for that place, too. We also agree that the FF should be in the movies. So count this letter as a vote in favor.

James Barnhill & Larry Berry  
2813 Malta Place  
Las Vegas, Nevada

*Thanks, guys. But you must be the only two readers left who don't know that Stan Lee writes the stories and Jack Kirby draws them. As for the FF being in the movies, many, many fans have writ*

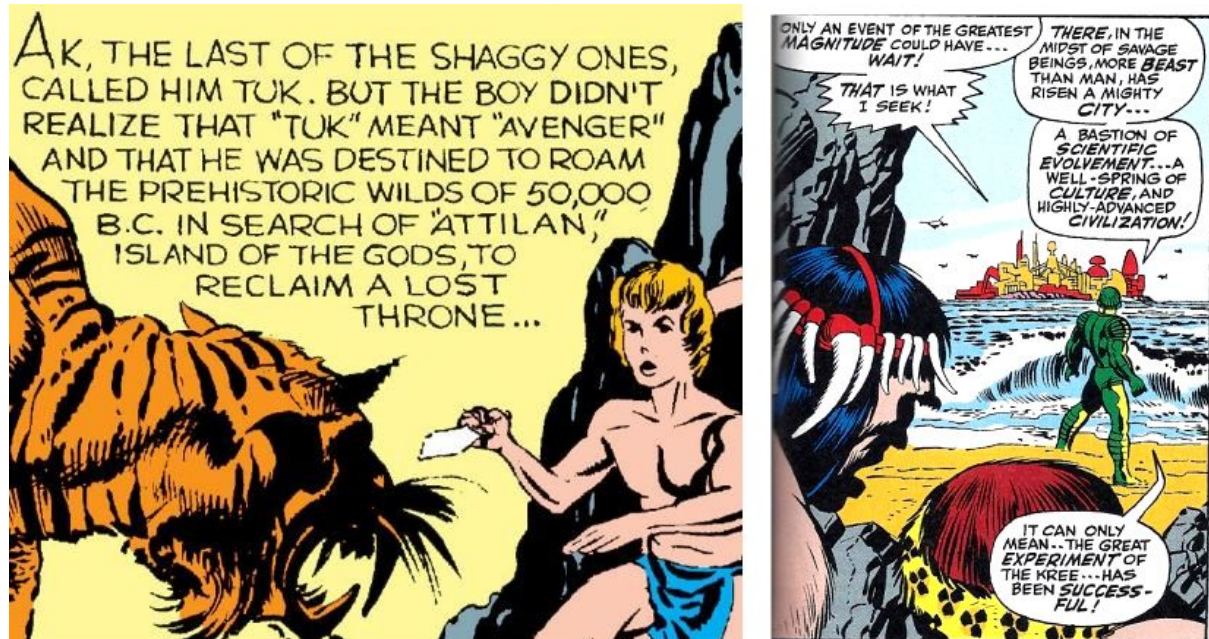
And that is how Lee established himself as "writer". The first letter in the following issue can be read as Lee praising himself and undermining Kirby, and the next few stories can be seen as metaphors for Lee defeating Kirby<sup>205</sup>, but it doesn't really matter. As the Marvel Universe expanded, Lee had his own name printed as the writer, and his position was secure.

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<sup>205</sup> Around this time Kirby was becoming identified with Ben Grimm (due to his attitude, cigar, accent, etc.) and Lee with Reed Richards (the boss). In issues 1-12, Ben was the undisputed strongest member of the team. But issues 13 and 14 can be read as Reed establishing his dominance. Reed piloted a rocket to the moon, whereas in issue 1 Ben (the official test pilot) failed. By issue 18 and annual 1 Ben sits on the floor in a defensive pose and acts like a child.

## About the author

I call myself "Tuk" after the cave boy in Jack Kirby's most famous comic (Captain America issue 1, from 1941). In the story, Tuk (the first "Avenger") heard that gods walked the earth. So he wanted to learn more.



50,000 BC Captain America 1 25,000 BC Thor 146

As a child, Lee and Kirby were like gods to me. And so, like Tuk, I wanted to learn more. I wanted to learn how these gods did their magic. This book is the result.

You may wonder, why the hate? Why not let the past be the past? Because Stan Lee is not the past. He is our future, if we're not careful.

Stan Lee destroyed stories. I document one of them in this book: the Mole man story. Kirby wrote a story based in the real world, about the atomic bomb, and about how an innocent person can be pushed too far. Lee then defaced the story: he removed the realism, removed the plot about the bomb and turned the tragic innocent Mole Man character into a one dimensional cartoon villain. In this book I also refer to issue 2, and issue 67 and others, as illustrations of how Lee did this all the time. Lee destroyed good stories.

I don't like it when people destroy good stories. Lee reminds me of the book burning of 1948, and how it almost happened again in 1954.<sup>206</sup> Book burning is bad, but at least other copies still exist. Lee destroyed the stories at their source.

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<sup>206</sup> For the full story, see the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund at <http://cbldef.org/2012/06/1948-the-year-comics-met-their-match/>, and Adam Blatner's article, "Why My Mother Threw Out My Comic Books", at <https://www.blatner.com/adam/cartoons/comicbooks/history2.html>



But destroying stories is just the beginning. Lee created a cult of personality. Today, when grown adults learn that Lee's version of events is not the whole truth, they tend to make excuses for him. I believe this is far more dangerous than people realise.

Think what this means. A person can become very rich by taking credit, and the pay, for other people's work. But as long as that person is charming, people accept it. Think about that!

Lee got rich through means we are not supposed to look at too carefully. His major occupation was in dumbing down stories that were supposed to make people think. And we are supposed to smile and approve of him?

These elements are everywhere in the world in different forms. The unethical behaviour, the way that millions of people look the other way, the anti-intellectualism, and it is all so polished, so charming, so much part of our culture. I hate it. For me, Lee is the poster child for all that is wrong with the world.

You don't have to agree with me. But that's just the conclusion I reached after a lifetime of study.

Thanks for reading.



# Acknowledgements

Thanks to Nathan Summers of “How Would You Fix...?” for pointing out the DNA problem in Fantastic Four 15, and for numerous other insights. He realised that the question “who did what?” could be answered by comparing the words and pictures in the books themselves.

Thanks to Patrick Ford and Michael Hill for their tireless work in documenting who said what, and for gently correcting errors on countless forums. Despite insults<sup>207</sup> and polite requests to shut up.<sup>208</sup> And thanks to Michael for proofreading.

Thanks to Stan Taylor, Michael Vassallo, and others whose detective work has changed everything.<sup>209</sup>

Thanks to Gary Groth for letting Kirby tell his story again.

Thanks to Mark Evanier for being the voice of calm restraint in all of this.

And thanks to Kirby for everything!

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<sup>207</sup> “Kirby Kultists”

<sup>208</sup> Forums typically do not want arguments over **that** topic. So, moderators tend to make statements like “We will just agree that Lee and Kirby were equally important” and that ends the debate.

<sup>209</sup> E.g Taylor tracked down all the known details surrounding Spider-Man’s creation. Vassallo, co-author of The Secret History of Marvel Comics, made a number of remarkable discoveries, such as why Lee was weeping when Kirby walked into his office in 1958.